

# Jim Carroll

## 1951-

American poet, autobiographer, songwriter, and musician.

### INTRODUCTION

Carroll gained critical attention for his commentaries on the sordid side of modern urban life, presented in such collections as *The Basketball Diaries* (1978), a journal Carroll wrote between the ages of twelve and fifteen; and *Forced Entries: The Downtown Diaries 1971-1973*, a follow-up to *The Basketball Diaries*. Carroll has also written several volumes of poetry, including *Living at the Movies* (1973), and *Void of Course: Poems 1994-1997* (1998). Central to almost all of his works are Carroll's experiences growing up on the streets of New York City.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Carroll was born August 1, 1951 to Thomas J. and Agnes Carroll. Raised in the poorer Irish neighborhoods of Manhattan and the Bronx, Carroll was by all accounts a gifted basketball player. At age thirteen, he began to shoot heroin, and by age fifteen, he was an addict. The allure of street life in New York prompted Carroll to squander his athletic talents, but ironically gave way to his burgeoning career as a writer and poet. Following his eighth-grade basketball season, Carroll won a scholarship to Trinity High School in Manhattan. His experiences at the Catholic school, his ordeals as a drug user, and his background as a star athlete all fuel Carroll's writings. Throughout the late 60s and early 70s, as his reputation as a poet was growing, bits of Carroll's prose began dotting the New York literary landscape, appearing occasionally in journals and poetry magazines. These stories were allegedly written by Carroll between the ages of twelve and fifteen, and described in harsh detail the beginnings of his 10-year heroin addiction. As each story leaked out, it was invariably accompanied by rumors of the imminent publication of a complete collection. That collection, published in limited edition in 1978 and then with widespread distribution in 1980, was titled *The Basketball Diaries: Age Twelve to Fifteen*. Carroll followed *The Basketball Diaries* with *Forced Entries*, several collections of poetry, and numerous music albums that he produced with The Jim Carroll Band. After only achieving a modest following with his musical efforts, Carroll returned to focusing on poetry, and reportedly is at work on several novels. According to interviews and the vignettes of *Forced Entries*, Carroll overcame his heroin habit in the early seventies and has lived primarily in California since that time. He spent several summers teach-

ing at Allen Ginsberg's Naropa Institute, and lectured and gave readings at many colleges and universities throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

### MAJOR WORKS

Though Carroll published two earlier poetry collections, *Organic Trains* (1967) and *Four Ups and One Down*, (1970) and contributed numerous poems to magazines, he did not receive widespread recognition until the publication of *Living at the Movies*. Following the tremendous critical reception of *The Basketball Diaries*, Carroll was persuaded by an old girlfriend, Patti Smith, to try his hand at music. After just two shows, The Jim Carroll Band was signed to a record deal, and in 1980 released its first album, *Catholic Boy*. Popularity among music fans waned after two successive albums in 1982 and 1983, and Carroll went back to writing poetry and prose. His first attempt to reenter the literary world was *The Book of Nods* (1985), a collection of poems. A second collection of memoirs entitled *Forced Entries* followed in 1987. This book picks up where *The Basketball Diaries* ended. Carroll, who is now twenty, is still hooked on heroin and associating with the "in" crowd that frequents Andy Warhol's Factory, which was a popular hangout for young artists and musicians in the New York City area. *Forced Entries* received mild critical acclaim, and Carroll continued to write, producing the spoken word recording *The Book of Nods*, (1992) and a collection of poetry, *Fear of Dreaming: Selected Poems* in 1993. This collection features the poems from *Living at the Movies* and from *The Book of Nods*, along with new poems and a vignette titled "Calvin's Charm." *Fear of Dreaming* was also made into a spoken word recording in 1993 as well.

### CRITICAL RECEPTION

*The Basketball Diaries* has consistently been praised for its unequivocal portrait of drug use among teens. By the time he was eighteen years old, Carroll had gained a reputation as one of the most prominent poets in the New York-based beat community. His gritty urban poetry and earnest, near-formless prose was lauded by such giants of the genre as William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, and Jack Kerouac (in an oft-reprinted quotation, Kerouac once claimed: "At thirteen years of age, Jim Carroll writes better prose than eighty-nine percent of the novelists working today"). While Carroll achieved moderate success with the publication of *Forced Entries*, his musical albums, and several of his collections of poetry, he is known primarily for *The Basketball Diaries* in which he recorded his

emotionally stirring experiences as a young heroin addict. Steven Simels calls *The Basketball Diaries*: “a scary, mordantly funny odyssey along the dark underbelly of the Sixties, a virtuoso performance that ought to be must reading for those who still tend to romanticize the counterculture.” Most critics agree with Simels’ assessment, and praise the memoirs contained in the two diary collections, while Carroll’s efforts at poetry and music continue to be less well-regarded.

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## PRINCIPAL WORKS

*Organic Trains* (poetry) 1967

*Four Ups and One Down* (poetry) 1970

*Living at the Movies*, (poetry) 1973

*The Basketball Diaries: Age Twelve to Fifteen*. 1978

*Catholic Boy* (musical recording) 1980

\**The Book of Nods* (poetry) 1985

*Forced Entries: The Downtown Diaries 1971-1973*, (short stories) 1987

†*Fear of Dreaming: Selected Poems* (poetry) 1993

*Void of Course: Poems 1994-1997* (poetry) 1998

\**The Book of Nods* was produced as a spoken word recording in 1992.

†*Fear of Dreaming: Selected Poems* was also produced as a spoken word recording with the same title in 1993.

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## CRITICISM

**Seamus Cooney (review date 1 November 1973)**

SOURCE: A review of *Living at the Movies*, in *Library Journal*, Vol. 11, No. 19, November 1, 1973, p. 3270.

[In the following brief review, Cooney faults Carroll’s poetry in *Living at the Movies*, stating that the poems are pretentious and banal.]

These imitative poems range in models from the portentous pseudo-reference of John Ashbery to the flat trivialities of Ted Berrigan—the whole gamut from A to B, in fact. Not one moves or delights, and as for teaching—well, the outlook on life conveyed is the shallowest hedonism based on dope or sex. A piece entitled “**A Fragment**” has more point than many in the book and shows fairly the pretensions to seriousness, the inertness of rhythm and language, and the utter banality of effect: “When I see a rabbit / crushed by a moving van / I have dreams of maniac computers / miscalculating serious items / pertinent to our lives.” Don’t miscalculate: avoid this book.

**Gerard Malanga (review date November 1974)**

SOURCE: A review of *Living at the Movies*, in *Poetry*, Vol. 125, No. 3, November, 1974, pp. 162-65.

[In the following review, Malanga favorably assesses Carroll’s *Living at the Movies*, commenting on the original technique and confident voice employed in the collection. Malanga also compares Carroll to well-known poet Frank O’Hara.]

The great thing about the work of a genuine poet is the atmosphere which it creates in the mind of the reader. This is as difficult to define as it is impossible to miss. It has a great deal to do with technique and with style, but only in so far as they are an integral part of the feeling and thinking that go to make up a poet’s work. But it is as equally difficult to fail to realize it, when a writer turns out to be a genuine poet. Jim Carroll at twenty-five is a genuine poet just as surely as Rod McKuen and Rod Taylor are not. In reading Jim Carroll’s first full-length book of poems *Living at the Movies* it is quite evident to me that he fully understands the nature of poetry because he perceives and follows the nature of his own life, and with that recognition of his nature, he is able to write about it.

Mr. Carroll’s poems are populated with people he has loved and crowded with those who love him. His poems are irrigated by friends, by his own kind and consanguinity. He is original without being unique. His technique, however, is in advance of his maturity. At times he is capable of spoiling a good poem by a precious or very sentimental line or phrase, like “and our life is that rusted bottle . . . pointing north”, in *The Distances*, but never of trying to make one out of any emotion that is not an integral part of his own deep feeling.

The poems seem roughly to group themselves into “general” poems, usually longer, where a subject is viewed from many different angles and states of consciousness, and the “specific,” where something is seen whole in a flash as in “**A Fragment**”:

When I see a rabbit  
crushed by a moving van  
I have dreams of maniac computers  
pertinent to our lives.

In them the vision is so strong that there is no craftiness and the medium of poetry gives way to an idea that can’t wait for doctoring-up to be born a flawless declarative sentence. That fast kind of poetry is always the best kind of writing. I think it’s spiritual without being churchy as some of the longer poems seem.

Literature is not a competition. Yet Jim Carroll will invariably be compared by some critics both with some of his contemporaries and with their predecessor Frank O’Hara. Carroll’s poems are not so perfect as O’Hara’s nor is his vision so intense. While there’s nothing extremely deep in the experimental and phenomenological sense, his range is wider than O’Hara’s; his feelings not deeper, but made general, as in “**Silver Mirrors**”:

A horse moves  
this weekend  
into our living room

he says, "Oh, quickly  
form a ring around me  
as to prevent the merciless  
insane hounds from attacking  
my weakened legs in attempt  
to drag me back to the icy  
palace in the wintry regions."

"Then you are the one they sent?"

"yes"

"Very clever, did you bring it?"

"yes"

There is not one awkward word or tacky locution disturbing the exquisite poise and flow. I'm reluctant to quote specific lines because when the poems are best they make such complete sense that to quote excerpts merely cheapens the effect.

On the whole Jim Carroll has the sure confidence of a true artist, meaning he is confident about the right things. He is steeped in his craft. He has worked as only a man of inspiration is capable of working, and his presence has added great dignity to the generation of poets of the 'seventies to which he belongs. His beginning is a triumph.

#### Bart Plantenga (essay date 1980)

SOURCE: "Jim Carroll's *Basketball Diaries*: Street Cool Huck Finn Dope Diary," in *Overthrow*, Vol. 14, No. 2, 1980, p. 19.

[In the following creative essay, written in a stream of conscious voice that mimics much of Carroll's writing, Plantenga briefly discusses the poet's life, inspiration, and his music, and ultimately praises the collection of vignettes presented in Carroll's *The Basketball Diaries*.]

"Who needs leaders? Leaders should be kicked in the ass and packaged airmail to some cornfield in Kansas . . . Maybe its time to fling a few bricks . . . Time to change the way of getting the message across."

Here's a guy barely in his teens getting right to the heart of the matter. Exasperation with regard to our feelings of selfdom and autonomy. It's a truly anarchist view stated in a clear non-euphemistic and uncompromising teenage way. With a face off between Carter and Ray Guns looming on the gloom horizon it becomes a very viable, even desirable political course.

Patti Smith said of Jim Carroll, "He has the same intellectual quality and bravado as Rimbaud." Jim has had quite a run-in with personal legend. He was the youngest ever to be nominated for a Pulitzer Prize at 22 for his book of poetry, *Living at the Movies*, which I've been un-

able to find anywhere [hint]. He caused a stir when excerpts of the *Diaries* [written between the ages 13–16] appeared in the *Paris Review*. He hung out with Ginsberg, Waldman, Lou Reed, Larry Rivers, Sam Shephard and was Patti's beau for a bit.

Now 29, married and living in Bolinas, Jim says, "I want to reach kids." His first album, *Catholic Boy*, on Rolling Stones Records is a rock and roll poetry album that is STILL to be released. That and the *Diaries* should give everyone plenty to bite into. Kids definitely need irreverent inspirations what with the paltry stable of celluloid consumer disco pimps around today. "Catholic schools are sheer shit." "Fuck dumb rules." Simple. Do something already!

His is a world of action. Bragging about action. Action becomes epiphany. Gems of illumination just fall into his lap. To see clearly one has to DO. The only way to DO is to SEE clearly. "I'm gonna DO IT soon, If I could only get my hands on one I know I could slip it out of my bag and make swiss cheese out of this place." Contemplates cutting his boring English class to ribbons with a machine gun. Maybe then someone'll see. His irreverent veracity cuts right to the smegmatized genitals of the whole adult technocratic dildo. Genuine unabashed contempt for real world recruitment—the college—suburb route. Their version just won't do. "Soon I'm gonna wake a lot of dudes off their asses and let them know what's really going down in that blind alley out there in the pretty streets with double garages. I got a tap on all your wires folks."

He proves that youthful poetic jive invested with 20/20 double edged heart is more insightful/inciteful than all the glossy academictourist yellow-journalist technological—dole whorepimps who're forever tapping the "Woodstock Nation" and the steam in the street while the youths are out there biting their nails itching to tell their story. This is one street cool Huck Finn dope diary yes.

The *Diaries* are a real Jekyll & Hyde affair. Has his public life of "great potential" he's college material by day but lowlifer by night. Loves basketball for its grace, finesse, and sweat, plus all the girls he meets through his playing. Even in the framework of Basketball and Catholic School he goes way beyond the rules, beyond winning. A zen sort of thing. Way of being. A way out of boredom. It's rock & roll basketball. Beat beyond beat and cool beyond cool. Basketball and heroin serve as ways IN as well as a way OUT. He was a dazzle charm on court and a punk druggie off. A wise ass bragge savant. Scoring buckets, dope and rich eastside girls who attend private school.

His obsessions/indulgences, sex, drugs, thrills, delinquency, larceny rise to that of political importance. As much as Burroughs, Genet, Baudelaire, Rimbaud and de Sade before. He's a victim/victimizer banging out a makeshift paradise for himself. Boredom might very well be the catalyst of *Diaries*. Its in that thrill seeking where he finds reasons to be. Chills up his spine prove he's alive. I often think of Kerauac's manic immediacy. That precocious desire to transcend ennui, move, learn and record.



Carroll's vignettes of growing up and squandering all his potential hints at personal anarchy and cuts through style and literary wit and metaphor and technique much as Henry Miller's confessions do. They are puffed up truths. Teenage bragging. He expresses all the "I'm 18" frustrations but still manages to see the source of his frustrations. I think of *400 blows* with n.y. cool. Or *Masculin Feminine*. Or Dean Moriarty's neurotic endurance. A need to take it all in. An audacious purposeful abandon.

His first person quasi-self is caught like most romantics in the youthful urgent search for romantic directness and immediacy free of cooptation. Jumping off cliffs into the Harlem River between the floating lines of raw sewage is a case in point. Rites of passage. He's looking. He's street-wise Holden Caulfield cut loose on dope. He reads Frank O'Hara at 15 and the next day he's meatrack hustling homos who get kinkier by the day or snatching purses to support his habit or he's stuck selling ice cream in winter at Yankee stadium or he's playing the Big O in basketball half-goofed like a young Burroughs in a crusty old jock. Sweaty ecstatic impish street saint swagger. Learns about Marxism which makes a lot of sense to him but the meetings are a bore. On dope with friends they master "the life of doing nothing."

I can't help but think sweet discovery. "The real culprits in the nonending rift between my old man and me is neither one of us, I realize. No doubt in my mind it's the assorted big mouthed bergs of shit that float in and out of the joint that he sweats his ass off tending bar in all day . . . cops and construction workers . . ." His experiences open him up. Even jerking off becomes a sort of liberating action. Constantly test self. Fuck girls all night, play chicken, get blown by real kinky homos, do the big H.

He sings when others shout. He cries when others whimper. He bitches when others sulk. There is a magic zen Krazy Kat feel of indestructibility. A blessed ugly duckling with Joe Dellasandro muscularity or Rimbaud shooting 30 foot hook shots at the buzzer. Riding the thin line between destruction and instruction. Lust for life being squeezed out of him by all those chasing his samson ass with barber's scissors.

"I can see the cloisters with its millions in medieval art out the bedroom window. I got to go in and puke. I just want to be pure . . ."

Maybe a new leaf, a new day, a new round after he pukes up whatever poisons the other corner's been feeding him. I guess he's made it because he's got an album and even gigs and another book co-written with Patti. It's like he's puked just enough times for us to believe him because sometimes "it's so all there that no one's seeing it anymore."

**Jamie James (review date February 1980)**

SOURCE: A review of *The Basketball Diaries*, in *American Book Review*, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1980, p. 9.

[In the following review James lauds *The Basketball Diaries* as a masterful collection of vignettes describing the formation of an artistic sensibility by a young man.]

*The Basketball Diaries* by Jim Carroll is a literary miracle; a description of the formation of an artistic sensibility written by the artist, not in retrospect, but in the process. It is a portrait of the artist not just as a young man but as a child, written by the child, and thus free of the mature artist's complicated romantic love of himself in pain. It also works engrossingly well as a narrative, *The Catcher In The Rye* for real, for bigger stakes.

*The Basketball Diaries* is an anecdotal journal kept by Carroll from the age of twelve to fifteen, more or less from the first time he shot heroin until he showed up at Ted Berrigan's poetry workshop, a basketball in one hand and his poetry in the other, when he became something of an overnight sensation. Entries from the *Diaries* have been leaked one and two at a time to various poetry magazines over the years, surrounding the work with the atmosphere of legend. Once every couple of years there would be a new rumor that it was being published *in toto*; now, at least, here it is.

It makes a difference, seeing it all together. Reading it in drips and drabs over the years, a rather precious impression was created by Carroll's sharp ear for hip street lingo and the Mark Twainish droll exaggerations. It seemed to be the charming but trivial work of a precociously gifted young writer. The catch was that anyone who had read Jimmy Carroll's poetry (such as the extraordinary collection *Living At The Movies*) knew it was charming but trivial like *Moby Dick* is charming but trivial. Seeing it all together bears out one's ongoing suspicion that there's more here than the swaggering bravado of a smart kid grown up all wrong.

The tone of the *Diaries* is an uncanny blend of almost unnerving self-possession and a gentle, fully developed sense of irony. The first entry, by the young basketball player just turned thirteen, is representative:

Today was my first Biddy League game and my first day in any organized basketball league. I'm enthused about life due to this exciting event. . . . My coach Lefty is a great guy; he picks us up for games in his station wagon and always buys us tons of food. I'm too young to understand about homosexuals but I think Left is one. . . .

In the less than three years covered by the *Diaries* Carroll progresses from the Biddy League to a start in the "very spectacular National High School All Star Basketball Game," from sniffing Carbona cleaning fluid on the Staten Island ferry to heroin addiction, from taking his girlfriend Joan to church league basketball games to S&M scenes with a middle-aged woman and hustling fags in the bathroom of a porno movie theatre, from spitting on the first graders at school to armed robbery in Fort Tryon Park to support his habit.

*The Basketball Diaries* is a blow-by-blow account of a season in Hell. By the age of fifteen, he had experienced more in the way of existential vicissitudes and worldly observation than several ordinary middle class lives combined. Despite the adolescent egoism and occasional tendency towards smart-aleckiness, the theme that reverberates through the whole, like the recurring melody of a jazz improv, is the struggle of a boy to hold on to his sense of himself. *The Basketball Diaries* is concerned with the ethics, rather than the politics, of survival.

In one telling episode, the junk-sick narrator goes in desperation to his middle-aged lover for money to procure the only medicine that will avail. She gives him the money; a friend who has come along goes out to score the heroin, leaving Carroll to sweat and shake it out till he gets back. His insatiable lover attacks him as soon as the friend leaves. He is revolted and tries to leave, although he can hardly move from the cramps. "'What about my sixty dollars, you prick!' she screamed. 'What about my innocence,' I said, going down."

Rimbaud is the name that pops up when people (Ted Berigan and Patti Smith, for instance) talk about Jim Carroll, and *The Basketball Diaries* in particular. It is a useful invocation, for a change. One especially thinks of Rimbaud's remark that "The soul has to be made monstrous." If one word describes what happens in the *Diaries*, it is monstrous. The difference is that Rimbaud is talking about a self-conscious, systematic cultivation of the monstrous with the end of becoming a visionary, "the supreme Savant." There is nothing so calculated about Jim Carroll's excursion into the inferno; if there is an organizing principle here, it is not, refreshingly, the design of an artist preparing himself for writing poetry. He is only obliquely aware that he is a writer, which is exactly the genius of it. *The Basketball Diaries* functions with the kind of unimpeded sensitivity of observation that sometimes occurs when the writer is in direct, intimate touch with himself when his writing approaches artlessness.

Make no mistake: *The Basketball Diaries* is no great work of literature. It is not literature, in the usual sense, at all. It is a great work of storytelling, in the most elemental sense—storytelling, as in Homer, the kind of storytelling that happens when two good friends on a cross-country drive find themselves on the interstate in the middle of the night, two hundred miles from nowhere. It suffers from all the faults of the genre, too: some of the stories sound made up, others are stock footage from anyone's adolescence. In a prefatory note, Carroll says that people frequently ask him, with understandable skepticism, whether it all really happened. His response is a quotation from Hassan Sabah, the founder of the cult of the Assassins: "Nothing is true; Everything is permitted." To put it another way, the question is no more pertinent here than with Homer. Even the parts that are made up are *true*.

Like any narrative of the truth, *The Basketball Diaries* is a harmonious blend of funny passages and depressing pas-

sages. When it is funny it is hilarious, reminiscent of Lenny Bruce at his best. When it hits a blue note, it is harrowing, as in the final entry:

In ten minutes it will make four days I've been nodding on this ratty mattress . . . both my forearms sore with all the little specks of caked blood covering them . . . two sets of gimmicks in the slightly bloody water . . . all the dope scraped or sniffed clean from the tiny cellophane bags . . . I get up and lean on a busted chair . . . I can see the Cloisters with its million in medieval art out the bedroom window . . . four days of temporary death . . . I just want to be pure.

#### Chet Flippo (essay date 26 January 1981)

SOURCE: "A Star is Borning," in *New York*, Vol. 14, No. 4, January 26, 1981, pp. 32-5.

[In the following essay Flippo addresses Carroll's move from poetry writer to rock musician, and interviews the poet/songwriter about his life, his former drug addiction, and his literary influences.]

Lola from Budapest is a bit of a psychic, among other things, and one afternoon not long ago, when she settled into her customary front-row seat in NBC's Studio 3A in Rockefeller Center for the taping of the *Tomorrow* show, she just naturally started divining things and reading life lines and such. Lola from Budapest—that's the way she's billed on her business cards and fliers—offered to hypnotize Tom Snyder when he strolled out to warm up his audience, and he good-naturedly declined. Lola from Budapest adjusted all her parcels and bags and turned to me to check out the old life lines and to ask who would be on the show. Lilli Palmer she knew. Maureen Reagan she knew. Jim Carroll she didn't know.

"Well," I said, "he's sort of a singing poet, a street kid alive with the rhythms of the city. He was even nominated for a Pulitzer Prize for a poetry book and. . ."

(Oddly enough, a phone call a few days later to the Pulitzer Prize committee revealed the fact that Carroll as well as his fans only *thought* that he had been nominated for a Pulitzer for his poetry book, *Living at the Movies*. When I told Carroll that I was stripping him of his so-called nomination, he said that "some lady" at Viking Press had written him a letter telling him that Viking intended to enter his book for Pulitzer competition and that he had since lost the letter. So, apparently, has Viking.)

Lola from Budapest cut me off. She was dubious. "I wait till I hear him," she said. As a skeptic, she was a definite minority member of the studio audience, about half of which was young and black-leathered-up-with-silver-chains. I recognized many of the Carroll chain gang from his show the night before at the Ritz. It was only his second New York rock-'n'-roll performance—as opposed to his poetry readings at St. Mark's and such places—but

there was no doubt he was the hottest ticket in town in a season when rock's big events, like the Plasmatics' Cadillac explosions, were causing giant yawns all over town, from Hudson all the way up to 86th Street. Jim Carroll, former teenage junkie, whiz-kid poet, basketball legend who went from Lower East Side asphalt courts to hardwood-floored gyms and prep-school uniforms at Trinity, seemed to be about two minutes away from full-fledged rock-'n'-roll stardom.

Everybody was talking about the republication of his teenage-junkie book, *The Basketball Diaries*, and about his new album, *Catholic Boy*, and that great teenage flame-out song, "People Who Died," from that album that had become an underground-radio sensation even before the album came out, and that had people in radio tip sheets, like the influential *FMQB Album Report*, saying radio things like "'People Who Died' is phono-matic sales stirring rock" and "best new candidate for hot phones."

A young poet whom Ted Berrigan called "the first truly new American poet," who was signed to Rolling Stones Records, and whose New York rock debut, last July at Trax, featured no less a guest guitarist than senior Rolling Stone Keith Richards (who has a nodding acquaintance himself with the ins and outs of junk) was one hot number indeed.

There can be little doubt that Carroll the poet is a far subtler and sharper persona than Carroll the rock-'n'-roll lyricist. Carroll the poet could write (in *Living at the Movies*), "I sleep on a tar roof / scream my songs into lazy floods of stars . . . a white powder paddles through blood and heart / and / the sounds return / pure and easy . . . this city is on my side," in the poem "**Fragment: Little N.Y. Ode.**" With "**Sure . . .**" he wrote a devastatingly funny junkie's apologia: "I got / a syringe / I use it / to baste / my tiny turkey." Carroll the rock lyricist doesn't come close to such economy of wit.

But Lola from Budapest knew none of this. Tom Snyder, who is big on bringing up his Catholic upbringing at any opportunity, picked up on *Catholic Boy* right away and decided that Carroll might pep up an otherwise moribund moment or two.

At the rehearsal before the show's taping, Carroll had been noticeably nervous and had broken out in cold sores. The four Secret Service agents who accompanied Maureen Reagan kept giving him the cold eye, and they pounced on him the first time he went into the makeup room.

Carroll, a rangy, gaunt-faced, six-foot-two character with pale-red hair, nervously paced the sound stage, lighting one cigarette after another. "I'll have a hard time," he said to me, "trying to pretend that it's Snyder and not Danny Aykroyd I'm talking to. I'll just try to steer him away from drug questions and just quote from *The Basketball Diaries*: 'Junk is just another nine-to-five gig in the end, only the hours are a bit more inclined toward shadows.'"

It turned out Snyder was easy on Carroll and went light on the drug subject and didn't even mention the *Diaries* passages where Carroll spoke of hustling gay men. Snyder talked about Catholicism and patent-leather shoes that reflect up girls' dresses. Carroll was still nervous and kept digging one too white leather jazz shoe's toe into the red carpet of Snyder's little round turntable of a set, just a couple of feet from where Snyder's brown teddy bear sits beside his chair, always just out of range of the camera.

Lola from Budapest liked Carroll at first. "He is beautiful," she leaned over and whispered to me. "He will do well in future. He has sense of humor and is ambitious. Good-looking boy."

Her smile faded a bit as Carroll talked about how he was a product of Catholicism, "redeemed through pain, not through joy," and how Christ's forced march with the Cross and subsequent crucifixion were "just like punk rock."

Snyder assumed his deep-think mantle and asked if Carroll perhaps mightn't think that some people—but certainly not Snyder—mightn't think that such a statement bordered on blasphemy.

Carroll ground his toe into the carpet: "No." He said that since he was six years old he had been looking for a vision, a sign from Christ, but had never gotten close, even that time he invited Christ home to watch the World Series with him and Christ was a no-show, and that he figured that the reason Christ put him on permanent hold was that Christ spent 24 hours a day giving a buzz to all these born-againers who seem to have a direct celestial hookup. That got a studio laugh, and it also generated several hundred unhappy letters from members of the Moral Majority around the country.

Carroll talked about how basketball had been his great equalizer when he was a disadvantaged kid and how he could go one-on-one against any rich suburban kid and whip him and how he had gotten onto heroin when he was deathly afraid of marijuana because at that time, in the early sixties, everybody said that marijuana was addictive. He squeezed in his nine-to-five quote and then got up and sang "**Wicked Gravity**," a song "about transcending."

Snyder had been refraining from smoking on camera because it was a national anti-smoking holiday or something, and he raced over to the corner of the studio and lit up a cigarette. Lola from Budapest did not respond to "**Wicked Gravity**" as enthusiastically as did the chains-and-leather gang, although, it must be said, many normally dressed people who wore cloth seemed to like hearing Carroll's rather emotionless delivery of lyrics about doing it all night without touching, and seemed to like the Jim Carroll Band's cheerful full-speed-ahead attack, very reminiscent of the Stones or Faces on a sloppy good-time night when the sound of rock 'n' roll is a slightly menacing don't-tread-on-me metallic anthem of the young and



free. The music, loose and raucous, had a commitment to the rock-'n'-roll tradition of exuberance and rebellion; the words were biting and cold and totally impersonal, as detached as a commuter who is late for the 6:23 and finds his path blocked by a blathering Moonie. Maybe Carroll planned it that way and maybe he didn't, but the combination of fire and ice—hardly new, anyway, in any kind of performance and especially so in the arena of rock poetry—provides a conveniently articulated urban sensibility for the urban inarticulate who went into cold storage after Jim Morrison died and who thought Patti Smith was a pale substitute and hid out downtown during disco and Barry Manilow. The no-morals majority of the hard-core New York rock fanatics doesn't mind at all if Jim Carroll sounds a little bit like Lou Reed or David Bowie, just so it's still the cold-steel-and-concrete sound of the city, a sound that provides a personal, alien soundtrack for those who don't fit in—or who like to think they don't fit in.

When Jim Carroll finished **"Wicked Gravity,"** Lola from Budapest's facial expressions seemed to indicate that she was working up a re-evaluation of Jim Carroll. "What is your opinion?" she asked me. I said I thought that the jury was still out and that I liked some of what he did. Lola from Budapest grasped my hand and shook her head: "He has no emotions. He is schizophrenic. Maybe drug addict. Maybe homosexual." I couldn't bring myself to tell her that those were precisely the qualities required to become a rock-'n'-roll star circa 1981 in this town. The requirements are stricter than the college boards.

"I was vulnerable, but they said I was mesmerizing," Jim Carroll was telling me as we walked east on 54th and crossed Broadway after his band rehearsed one afternoon. *"Mesmerizing.* That was the word. That's what got me into rock 'n' roll."

I remembered a chilling moment from his Ritz show. I was sitting at a balcony table, 30 feet above the true-grit fans packed in front of the stage, where Carroll was half-chanting and half-singing "Nothing is true" ("everything is permitted"), which strikes me as half-baked Nietzsche, but you never know how many people actually chart their lives according to pop-music lyrics. I felt a sudden pressure on my shoulder and turned to see a pale young man climbing up on my table. "Excuse me," he said, "I need to jump off your table here." "Well, why?" I asked, trying to stall him before he or someone he might land on got hurt badly. "That's what he wants me to do," the young man said, gesturing toward the stage. "Well," I said, grabbing his ankle, "he told *me* he doesn't want you to kill yourself." The young man smiled vacantly and climbed down off the table and patted me on the head: "You're a good man." He wandered off, singing "Everything is permitted."

I didn't even mention that to Carroll as we walked along 54th, the main reason being that he was already nervous enough about even existing as a semi-public person without taking on the burden of the psychos who turn up

in the wake of any known face. He'd been visibly shaken by the press of autograph hounds who had trapped him in the NBC lobby after the Snyder show. He's still getting his street-smarts back, he laughed. One of the first things that happened to him when he moved back to New York from California, where he'd gone to kick smack and methadone, was that he got mugged right outside Radio City and the mugger wasn't satisfied with Carroll's \$300 and came back and broke his nose for him.

He's not quite the same cocky young poet who was published as a teenager in *The Paris Review* and had people like Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs cheering from his corner and had Allen Ginsberg and Anne Waldman as friends. And he had been one of the best basketball players in the city and had been a poor Irish kid who got a scholarship to Trinity and had been a pioneer long-hair-doper-cool-guy-athlete who excited some people because he could dunk a ball backward and excited other people because he could dunk a ball backward while stoned and then write about it. Even though he was a "scholarship guy," a poor kid thrown in with New York's rich, he fit in well at Trinity. He was a certified star basketball player and he was quick-witted enough to bluff his way through classes and he had a street swagger and he took out glamour girls who went to the Professional Children's School, little foxes who were already in show business. Some of his classmates remember that he was as swift a bullshit artist as there was. They still recall that he once wore a fake arm cast to school to get out of baseball or football practice—especially football, because everybody could tell right off that he detested physical contact. And while it says in *The Basketball Diaries* that the book was written between his twelfth and fifteenth years, some of his classmates say it was more or less rewritten and polished between Carroll's fourteenth and eighteenth birthdays, and closer to the eighteenth than the fourteenth.

Jim Carroll and I turned up Sixth Avenue and stopped in O'Neals' for a Coke for him and a beer for me. He is off drugs and drinks only an occasional shot of tequila. He still has a rancid memory of the time he had his stomach pumped out after chugging most of a fifth of scotch and then passing out in the snow up in Inwood Park and almost losing parts of his fingers from the frostbite. What a drag for a young romantic. To this day, the smell of scotch turns his stomach, he said as we slid into a booth at O'Neals'. He lit a cigarette with jerky movements and talked in nervous spurts, looking around the room at nothing in particular.

Why, I asked, has he not identified Trinity in the *Diaries*, calling it instead a "posh private school."

"I thought I'd get sued," he laughed, and he loosened up a little. "As it is, they're all thrilled by it at Trinity. I still go up and see Frank Smith, my Latin teacher."

After Trinity—Carroll didn't bother to attend his graduation ceremonies—he did a month of college before dropping out to be a star teenage poet and druggie. Artist Larry

Rivers hired him as an assistant, and Carroll stretched canvases and sharpened pencils at Rivers's 14th Street studio and lived in Rivers's 91st Street apartment. "I was only getting off three or four times a day [on heroin]," Carroll said, "just to stay high. I wasn't into doing it for a lifestyle, just to write and to nod. At night, I'd go out and hustle, make some money. I wound up just staying up there and baby-sitting Larry's kids. Which was great. I'd walk them down to the zoo and meet my connection at the fountain on 72nd near the boathouse. On a rainy day, I'd meet him at the Museum of Natural History, because he loved those big panoramas. I think heroin makes you like things like that, miniature little landscapes. Junkies tidy up always. So, if you kept a system like I did—I didn't have a partner or old lady to hassle with—I kept everything very neat.

"I loved Larry," he said after a sip of his Coke and a fresh cigarette. "If there was anybody from around that art scene who had an influence on me, it was Larry. This was a real cool dude. I even started to imitate his walk. He's the only guy who ever had that effect on me in the art world. Frank O'Hara might have—if I'd known him. I *followed* Frank O'Hara one day when I was first into poetry, followed him home from the Museum of Modern Art, because I knew he worked there. This was like two months before he died. I followed him in a taxi and he got off at Astor Place and I followed him up to 10th Street and Broadway, right across from Grace Church—you know Poe's poem 'The Bells' was written when he was living near there, about the bells in that steeple. But, to me, it's the place where Frank O'Hara's last apartment was. I followed him to his house. I'm sure he didn't notice me. But of course I always got told by poets that 'Frank would have loved you.' He seduced every guy on the scene—all the straight guys too. I made it a point never to sleep with any guys in the poetry scene, except, you know, the gay guys, which were plentiful, you know, in the older-generation school of New York poets. But I'm sure with Frank I would have wound up in bed. He was an idol."

Carroll cupped his cigarette in his hand and sipped at his Coke and looked off at nothing. "I was the young protégé," he finally continued. "They really took me in the way they didn't take in younger poets who came along later. I came along at the right time."

What happened, I wondered, that made him flee New York for Northern California in 1974 when he thought he was nominated for a Pulitzer?

Carroll looked me straight in the eye. "I knew I was gonna kill myself if I stayed in New York. I was f—king around too much. See, I was on methadone then and I was starting to buy extra bottles because when you're on a certain dose you can shoot as much heroin as you want and not feel it. The theory of methadone in New York is to keep them on as high a dose as allowed 'cause then you can't feel junk even when you shoot it and you can work; it just gets you straight. You feel it when you're first on the

program, but after a month you don't even feel it. But the methadone program in Marin County was like a college dormitory; they really helped you get off junk. It was still real tough. Methadone's an insidious drug, infinitely harder to get off than junk. I kicked junk cold fifteen times; the withdrawal symptoms peak after about three days and last about eight days.

"But methadone is a month of physical torment at the very least. You can't get any sleep to escape it. I hate even thinking about it. But at any rate, I came out of it. And then I just became a recluse. I'd take my twelve-mile hike with my dogs up along the coast."

Carroll jumped up to get a fresh pack of smokes. I suddenly noticed that the happy-hour crowd around us was leaning in very close to listen.

When Carroll got back I asked why he thought he should go into rock 'n' roll.

He smiled. "When I'd do readings, people would say, 'Mick Jagger reading poetry—you should do rock 'n' roll.' I said, 'No way, man.' I respected people's singing voices then. Forget it. Even when Patti [Smith] did it. Her lyrics were better than her poems, to me. But Patti wasn't as accepted and didn't have a reputation in the poetry scene like I did. I was supposed to read with her the first night she did it with music, with Lenny [Kaye] playing guitar behind her, but I got busted in Rye, New York, because I was visiting a friend who had some hash. So I was in jail.

"But my connection with New York in my recluse period was reading about CBGB and punk rock and Television and Blondie and Talking Heads, and one by one they all got signed up by record companies and came out to San Francisco to play the Old Waldorf. I checked them all out. Then Patti came out, and I did that show down in San Diego with her. I got this band together. Rosemary [his next-door neighbor, whom he married] put it in my head about doing this. First, just writing songs, and then thinking, 'Well, what the hell, I don't need vocal proficiency. I could write songs to my own vocal limitations.'

"So I started to think, 'Rock'n' roll!' When I did the shows with Patti, I saw that it could be done. It was incredible fun, and it was so intense and scary and beautiful at the same time. It was remarkable. What a feeling. It's *still* that way, you know. I think it's just a natural extension of my work, of the images. By making images just obscure enough to be made personal, I have the street imagery, but you have to have that kind of mythology built into it, because that's what kids understand. I don't like to deal with any subject matter straight out, you know. So, I'm pretty talked out."

He turned away silently to the wall while I dealt with the check.

"Henry Miller," he said. "Henry Miller's study of Rimbaud, which is really a study of Henry Miller, was the big factor for me going into rock—that was *it*. That whole



thing about getting a heart quality out of work rather than just the intellectual quality. A good poet works on both. Miller spoke about the inner register and how a good poet has to affect virtual illiterates as well as affecting people through the intellect, and I figured so many poets are just writing for other poets today. It's all intellectual concrete minimal poetry. There's a school of poets in San Francisco called Language Poets. What the f - - k does that mean?"

#### Publishers Weekly (review date 4 April 1986)

SOURCE: A review of *The Book of Nods*, in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 229, No. 14, April 4, 1986, pp. 57-8.

[In the following negative review, the critic chastises Carroll and the collection of prose and poetry *Living at the Movies*, due to the waste of talent and lack of self-discipline evidenced in the book.]

Carroll would like to be poetry's renegade stepchild, an avant-gardist, the forerunner of a new art form. These poems and prose pieces show exposure to Borges, Kafka, particularly Rimbaud—the romantic, drug-taking exception to all rules who has stymied many scholars and led many bright children astray. The original attraction of Carroll was a sort of jejune decadence, which he has, since his *Living at the Movies* (1973), pretty much outworn. This collection, about the poet's deepest emotional experiences in California and New York over the last 10 years, is wincingly embarrassing. It is especially painful because Carroll's real talent often peeps through the dross. This is a bad example of serious talent destroyed over the years by negligence and disregard for self-discipline.

#### Daniel L. Guillory (review date 15 April 1986)

SOURCE: A review of *The Book of Nods*, in *Library Journal*, Vol. 111, No. 7, April 15, 1986, p.84.

[In the following brief review, Guillory praises Carroll's ability to shock readers with incongruous images, but he feels that the more conventional lyric poems are stronger than the unconventional and shocking poems in *The Book of Nods*.]

Carroll's prose poems (or "nods") are like verbal equivalents of Dali's paintings: a man vomits the hands of a clock (in "Silent Money") and a cat jumps into a mirror (in "Watching the School-yard"). But these incongruities quickly lose their shock value, and Carroll sometimes fails to create a meaningful context for his images. More successful are his conventional lyric poems. In "A Night Outing," for example, the poet admires "the way still grey water / Throws the moon / . . . right back at itself." "New York Variations" and "California Variations" amount to interlocking meditations on urban landscapes "where diesel trains pass at noon every day." The *Book of Nods* is always interesting if sometimes uneven.

#### Christopher Lehmann Haupt (review date 9 July 1987)

SOURCE: A review of *The Basketball Diaries* and *Forced Entries*, in *New York Times*, July 9, 1987, p. C23.

[In the following review, Lehmann Haupt discusses *The Basketball Diaries* and its sequel, *Forced Entries*, and the evolution of Carroll's voice and storytelling abilities.]

Jim Carroll is a poet and rock musician in his mid-30's who grew up in several poor sections of Manhattan, the son and grandson of Irish Catholic bartenders. In the fall of 1963, when he was all of 13 years old, he began keeping a diary: "Today was my first Biddy League game and my first day in any organized basketball league. I'm enthused about life due to this exciting event. The Biddy League is a league for anyone 12 yrs. old or under. I'm actually 13 but my coach Lefty gave me a fake birth certificate."

The diary project proved successful. He kept at it for at least three years, later published excerpts of it in *The Paris Review* and other magazines, and eventually brought out a version of it in book form, *The Basketball Diaries* (1978), which created something of a sensation for its hair-raising portrait of adolescent street life in New York.

It was not a book that seemed likely to produce a sequel. Filled with a kind of vitality, though clearly exaggerated in its boastful accounts of drinking, drugs, sex and every sort of crime from stealing cars to hustling homosexuals in Times Square, the diary's final entry leaves its author on the brink of the abyss:

"Totally zonked, and all the dope scraped or sniffed clean from the tiny cellophane bags. Four days of temporary death gone by, no more bread, with its hundreds of nods and casual theories, soaky nostalgia (I could have got that for free walking along Fifth Avenue at noon), at any rate, a thousand goofs, some still hazy in my noodle . . . Nice June day out today, lots of people probably graduating. I can see the Cloisters with its million in medieval art out the bedroom window. I got to go in and puke. I just want to be pure."

But behold, a sequel has now been published, *Forced Entries: The Downtown Diaries, 1971-1973*, which appears along with a new edition of *The Basketball Diaries*. Jim Carroll is 20 as it opens. He regrets having thrown away his basketball career—"I'm sitting here watching the N.B.A. All-Star Game on TV and I'm watching guys I used to seriously abuse on the court scoring in double figures now against the best in the game."

But he's embraced the life he's leading—hanging out at Max's Kansas City, working for Andy Warhol at the Factory, publishing occasional poems, socializing with the likes of Allen Ginsberg, Bob Dylan, George Balanchine and William S. Burroughs, and doing drugs even more intensely, if possible.

The voice is grown up now. There are occasional vestiges of its origins ("That was it for Anne and Ted and I . . .," but the whine and the adolescent strutting are gone. The author now admits that the entries are "embellished and fictionalized to some extent . . . mainly for the sake of humor," which, he has found, "has an uncanny ability to create its own energy and push on a writer against his will."

He is reaching for something deeper now. Instead of hip talk, he's trying for poetry. Of a stately Times Square prostitute he writes, "The whole effect . . . was as if someone had placed a Rubens portrait at the bottom of a cesspool, and after centuries of strangeness and decay among the stillness of vile things and vile notions, some chance lightning hit . . . and out of it she was risen . . . delivered onto these streets in a pink Cadillac."

Instead of teen-age bravado, he writes of violent suicide, of "evil as a pervasive entity," and of the emptiness of adolescent fantasies. "And what is it you want?" he asks of his desire for a fashion model he sees on an elevator. "It is not sexual, though you do want her. You want her because, in some unfathomed way, she is the proof, the proof of those things you always knew existed but could not define. Yet you've had women like this in the past, and in the end they proved nothing. They solved nothing. They were usually not too bright and were terribly self-indulgent. They were, as this one is, only another emblem of your own vanity, and the vanity of your Art."

Despite the maturing voice of *Forced Entries*, the two diaries remain similar in their quest for extreme sensations and their eagerness to shock the reader. One is aware almost throughout that the author is more intelligent than he appears and that he takes a certain pride in dissipating his gifts.

And yet the diarist finally gains control of himself. The image with which he dramatizes his victory over drugs will disgust many readers, just as many of his effects will seem excessively overwrought. But readers who can stomach the ending of *Forced Entries* will find it both effective and convincing. And beside the description of his cure there is the external evidence of the poetry collections he has published since 1973—*Living at the Movies* (1973) and *The Book of Nods* (1986)—as well as the three music albums he has released—*Catholic Boy*, *Dry Dreams* and *I Write Your Name*.

But whether or not one believes Jim Carroll's redemption, his two diaries constitute a remarkable account of New York City's lower depths. At the very least, they should serve further to demystify the usefulness of drugs to writers. Finally, the main reason that Mr. Carroll decides to kick his habit is for the sake of his art. "It's my only choice for my work. I need a consistency of my moods if there is to be any consistency in my style. I can't attempt to write always in the hollow flux of desperation and incipient terror. I try to cover this up, cower behind some

facade of humor, hoping that old Aristotle was right—that humor will act as a catalyst to purify the tragic. But it can't go on. My body is broke." He has to mend himself, unpleasant though the purging proves to be.

#### Peter Delacorte (review date 12 July 1987)

SOURCE: "A Follow-Through beyond the Hoop," in *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 12, 1987, p. 3.

[In the following review, Delacorte lauds Carroll's ability to create witty one-liners and clever vignettes in *Forced Entries*, but the critic disparages the lack of substance and the unfulfilling conclusion of the book.]

Jim Carroll's *The Basketball Diaries* was an extraordinary piece of work—an account of four years, more or less, in the life of a kid growing up in New York City.

The kid happened to be a basketball star, a thief, a male prostitute and an incipient junkie, so there was plenty of action and things got pretty lurid. But still the most impressive thing about the book was the smooth sophistication of its prose. To be sure, *Basketball Diaries* didn't appear in book form until 1978, when Carroll was in his late 20s, and various anachronisms suggest that its text had been altered or augmented well after its 1963–66 time frame. But enough of *Basketball Diaries* had been published contemporarily, notably in *The Paris Review*, to provide ample proof that most of this cool, nihilistic, terrific stuff really was composed by a kid no older than 16.

In *Forced Entries: The Downtown Diaries 1971–73* the author is now an adult, already something of a celebrity in New York poetry circles and a heroin addict of several years' standing. His life is nowhere near as interesting as it was back in the mid-'60s, but it's still consistently weird, and when he's not nodding off or trying to kick the habit, he tends to be in the presence of lots of famous people. Most of these people, of course, are not the sort you run across on *Entertainment Tonight*.

Carroll serves as Edwin Denby's escort at Lincoln Center; he baby-sits for Allen Ginsberg; he works at Andy Warhol's factory; he swaps anecdotes with William Burroughs at a party; he goes out to dinner with Bob Dylan; he has a taxi brazenly rustled from him by Salvador Dali; he spends a bizarre Christmas Day speeding around Manhattan with a famous painter (easily guessed as Larry Rivers) until they get arrested because the artist can't prove he owns his brand new Cadillac; they get sprung from jail by Jacob Javits.

If *Basketball Diaries* was *Oliver Twist* projected into the late 20th century, then *Downtown Diaries* is a sort of rococo and very hip Liz Smith column, with Carroll as both gossip columnist and central character. Does this mean it's a bad book? No. Not by any means. It zips along,

most of the time; it's full of great stories, and occasionally it steps out and says something that makes us wish it hadn't been treated as (to use a favorite Carroll word) such a goof.

Toward the book's beginning, Carroll finds himself watching the NBA All-Star game on television, "watching guys I used to seriously abuse on the court scoring in double figures now against the best in the game. . . . I should have stayed an athlete, body well-tuned, cruising around with my accountant in a Porsche, maroon and chrome." In basketball, Carroll says, "there's always only one direction: to the cylinder on the fiberglass rectangle. And you don't have to aim. If you do, you're off."

Instead he's chosen poetry, which is "like looking too closely and too long into a mirror; soon your features distort, then erupt. You look too closely into your poems, or listen too closely to them as they arrive in whispers, and the features inside you—call it heart, call it mind, call it soul—accelerate out of control . . . . You realize, then, that you can't attempt breaking down too many barriers in too short a time, because there are as many horrors waiting to get in at you as there are parts of yourself pushing to break out."

Writing about writing, writers generally can't get too far beyond the most pedestrian observations. Here, between anecdotes, Carroll casually tosses off an epiphany and earns great respect. But does he deserve it, really?

I'm still trying to figure that out. In *Basketball Diaries*, intentionally or not, he did a marvelous job of establishing his character—pulling no punches and holding nothing back. There were moments, particularly excursions into petty crime and not-so-petty sexual violence, when my gut reaction was that Carroll was drifting into fantasy or fiction, or repeating stories he'd heard, perhaps from other kids who actually had experienced them. Then I'd catch myself, and I'd wonder whether my disbelief was based entirely on my wanting to like, to identify with the Carroll character. Was I saying, logically, hey—this kid wouldn't have stooped that low? Or was I saying, emotionally—I hope he didn't do those things, because I sure wouldn't?

Of course, from the author's point of view the reader's confusion on such a point is absolutely irrelevant, as long as the reader stays interested. And through "Basketball Diaries" the reader was likely to stay riveted for any number of reasons—the most striking of which were that it was so well written, and that we were rooting for Carroll, for this kid. Given the circumstances, what exactly were we rooting for? For a happy ending, I suppose, and that's precisely what Carroll, what the kid, wasn't about to give us.

*Basketball Diaries* ends with 15-year-old Carroll "nodding on this ratty mattress . . . both my forearms sore as s—t with all the little specks of caked blood covering them." *Downtown Diaries* begins with Carroll turning 20, as he

uses his aunt's birthday present, \$20, to score some heroin. Five years under the bridge and not much has changed, evidently. But then how many junkies would report: "The dope was as good as Hector said. On the way back over to my room at the Chelsea I saw an owl on Seventh Avenue. It was doing a little gymnastic routine on a lamppost."

*Downtown Diaries* is stuffed with little throw-aways like that, with vivid little moments, and with terrific stories. And yet. . . .

And yet I kept expecting something, some substance, that never arrived. *Basketball Diaries* was a sort of perverse bildungsroman; we may not have been pleased by its developments, but they did occur. Here, there is rather languid movement in no particular direction until, a few months in, Carroll starts talking about moving out to a little town in Northern California to kick his habit. There is a reference here, a reference there, and then all of a sudden on page 125 he arrives in . . . Bolinas!

And for the next 30 pages the book is incessantly boring, because Carroll is a fish out of water. In its meandering way, the book has been leading to this: the rite of purification, the great battle against the "small pink simian" that holds Carroll captive. But nothing happens. Carroll makes vapid observations about California. He gets a dog. He has teeth extracted. He makes his big attempt to kick drugs; little regard is paid to the major event. He returns to New York.

And he never really regains momentum. Back in Manhattan there is a strange and awful party, there is the Dali anecdote, and there is a final, nice bit regarding the exorcism of an abscess, an ultimate cleansing. Ironically, the happy ending that didn't come in *Basketball Diaries* has thus sneaked into the final pages of *Downtown Diaries*. It's good news, but unfortunately we don't care nearly as much for the 1973 Jim Carroll as we had about the kid he'd been.

#### Mark Stevens (review date 2 August 1987)

SOURCE: A review of *Forced Entries*, in *New York Times Book Review*, August 2, 1987, p. 8.

[In the following review, Stevens summarizes several of the high and low points in *Forced Entries*, and berates the glamorization of the "walk on the wild side" that Carroll practices in this collection of stories.]

IN the 1960's, Andy Warhol helped establish a downtown scene that may surpass Bloomsbury as a provider of the higher gossip. The supply of memoirs, biographies and oral histories—these last a substitute for the book of letters, now that letter writing has yielded to the telephone—is steadily increasing. New York's downtown scene offers tales of scandal and excess, the romance of burnout and



early death among the well-off, and enough minor figures of note to fill a library. Better still, it's got art. This lends a high tone to the low doings, helping tinsel pass for taste.

Jim Carroll's *Forced Entries: The Downtown Diaries 1971–1973*—the follow-up to his "Basketball Diaries," an account of growing up on New York's mean streets—provides plenty of diverting tinsel. Mr. Carroll, a poet, rock singer and former addict, worked at odd jobs for the Factory, Warhol's center of operations; he also frequented Max's Kansas City, the watering hole where the Velvet Underground played. This milieu yields many of the drug-heightened adventures and brief encounters with the famous that fill his diary. Mr. Carroll also aspires to something weightier, however—a story of struggle and redemption. Disgusted by his heroin addiction and the decadent New York life, he began taking methadone and fled to the hippie enclave of Bolinas, Calif. By the end of the diary, having liberated himself from heroin, methadone and New York, he has returned to face the city—a wiser man.

The tinsel is better. In a chatty 60's style, peppered with the customary profanity, Mr. Carroll jokes around, cuts up, takes a wry view and is quick with the quip. Cocaine is "just methedrine with a better alibi," and speed freaks are "exclamation points with shoes." A succession of beautiful women makes men's heads turn "with that urgency usually reserved for auto accidents." Bob Dylan "had a slumping, camouflaged way of moving, like an aged and wise chameleon, perfected by years of ducking out of joints inconspicuously." William Burroughs, a hero of the author's, has a voice "like a low-key carnival barker. It's like freshly split wood, clear, clean, but loaded with splinters."

Mr. Carroll's adventures, in turn, reflect the funky mixture of high and low characteristic of the period. Loaded up with speed prescribed by a fashionable "Dr. Feelgood," he and a famous (unidentified) artist are arrested on Christmas for peculiar behavior. No problem. The artist calls a man who collects his work—Senator Jacob Javits. There's much ado about bugs. Mr. Carroll vows an art gathering by releasing a cockroach and then killing it with a can of Raid. Not taking this "performance" seriously, he is amazed when *The East Village Other* and *The Village Voice* refer to the "keen, trenchant commentary which the piece made on urban decay" and praise its "non-verbal demonstration on the horrors of Vietnam."

Mr. Carroll often criticizes the superficial lives of the dilettantes, "Eurotrash" and other star-crossed riffraff who mingle in New York. He dislikes the Factory ("boring as an empty bag") and acknowledges Warhol's vacuity. He uses words like "wisdom" and "evil" and "vision" and refers to churches as well as cockroaches. Eventually, having learned something of himself, he says, "I have moved closer to my heart." But his writing cannot sustain this more serious tone. There is, to begin with, a failure of craft. In the first paragraph, for example, he observes that

the Russians detonated an atom bomb on the day he was born. "They detonated it, in fact, only a few hours after I was pulled from my mother's womb, and the radiation, fear, and the fire's desperate heat have been there ever since." An impressive opening chord—but one cannot help thinking, "Poor Mom." Often the prose is heated to an adolescent purple. In musing on a model's beauty, he writes: "I imagine her public hair clipped in the shape of some lost continent, its edges littered with shells and pink and blue anemones. There is the salt-sharp smell of a civilization there, ruined by heat and flood at its glory, many times over, yet destined, always, to rise again." A large abscess on his needle-scarred arm becomes, during the course of the diary, a symbol of his relation to drugs. He caresses the abscess with religious fervor while sleeping; in the diary's culminating scene he pinches it until it explodes in a suitably disgusting fashion. He writes: "I didn't see pus; I saw the petty demons marching out. I saw purification, with new fresh air being sucked into that cavity, like the cat. The idol was in ruins. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

Too well. The walk on the wild side—understood as a spiritual passage—is a commonplace of modern writing. So is the assumption that being down and out and anxious is a fascinating, even superior condition. Because he asks no questions of these clichés, Mr. Carroll cannot restore them to life. For a diarist in search of wisdom, moreover, he likes himself too much. His addiction usually comes across as hip, and he cannot resist the easy joke at another's expense. In one adventure, for example, a "peculiar-looking girl" picks him up at Max's and takes him to her loft. He is shocked to discover she's a hunchback. While she's bathing, he shoots up, nods off and mistakenly sets her loft on fire. She's upset and he runs away. It's a wild and woolly time. In drawing closer to his own heart, however, he might have spared a thought for hers.

#### Kirkus Reviews (review date 15 May 1987)

SOURCE: A review of *Forced Entries*, in *Kirkus Reviews*, Vol. 55, No. 9, May 15, 1987, p. 767.

[In the following review, the critic pans *Forced Entries* for its lack of substance. While acknowledging the occasional flashes of intense humor and wit, the critic derides Carroll for providing too much debauchery and not enough intellectual or literary content.]

A slice of the debauched life of poet Carroll at the tail end of the 60's, before he embarked on a second, dual career as a rock singer.

Carroll achieved recognition early in his 20s with the publication of *Living at the Movies*, his first collection of poetry, and *The Basketball Diaries*, a record of New York youth steeped in sports, dope, and urban iconography.

Here, he picks up the story as he's living at the Chelsea Hotel in New York, addicted to heroin, and spending nights at Max's Kansas City consorting with other dubious luminaries of the late-night celebrity scene. Girlfriends come and go; figures the likes of Ginsberg, Warhol, Leary, Morrissey, and Dylan make routine and generally uninteresting appearances; there's a variety of truly peculiar jobs—including an assignment at Andy Warhol's Factory and a rare opportunity at managing a porno theater—before Carroll has a chance to cool his heels and detox in California. For readers hellbent on self-destruction, there are a lot of handy tips here—the proper procedure for shooting heroin, the etiquette of hop parties, directions for pharmaceutical mixes that eliminate the necessity of sleep (always an annoyance when trying to keep up with the busy jet set), and a judicious rundown of various bodily diseases.

Carroll's sense of humor occasionally makes a welcome intrusion into the sleazy grandeur of street scenes and 60's clichés, and his prose often flashes with genuine intensity and wit; but there's surprisingly little said here about poetry, poets, or what Carroll might disdainfully refer to as the intellectual or literary, Shame.

**William Hochswender (review date 18 October 1987)**

SOURCE: "The Way They Were in Greenwich Village," in *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, October 18, 1987, p. 10.

[In the following review, Clark praises the "ornate and harrowingly stark" writing collected in *Forced Entries*. Despite the fact that the stories in the collection are often self-indulgent and full of jargon and slang, Hochswender feels Carroll's energetic language and creative descriptions give his memoirs an authenticity that plain documentaries lack.]

In this country we now have a permanent counterculture. The symbols of rebellion may change with the generations, but the dialectical swing has become constant. To the gray flannel suit and attache case, the 1950s counterposed the beret and the black turtleneck. To long hair, leisure suits and peace medallions, we more recently added shaved heads, studded leather and swastikas. Now, of course, we have the return of the gray flannel suit. It's hip to be square.

For most of us, cultural trends come and go, fashions rise and fall. They touch us and amuse us—they're fun. We take on the plumage of a colorful age, then shed it when it's time to grow and move on. From bop to Boesky, as individuals we somehow continue to molt and re-feather with the seasons of life and history. But we all know people so captivated by their era that they become captives of it. In the two books at hand, we see how the cultural moment can have a catalytic influence on society while exercising its own peculiar drag on individuals.

In *Down and In: Life in the Underground* by Ronald Sukenick, we get a solemn and sometimes vainglorious account of the rise of bohemianism in postwar America. Against the '50s cult of gray flannel and success, Sukenick celebrates the seedy, beer-splashed splendor of the American demimonde, as it emerged in Greenwich Village and environs. His story is peopled with familiar heroes—Jack Kerouac, Jackson Pollock, Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, Miles Davis, Charlie Parker, Lenny Bruce, Allen Ginsberg, Dylan Thomas, Norman Mailer—drinking, brawling and creating with barbaric intensity. But it's about mere dropouts as well as those who made a handsome living out of dropping out. And it is very much about the bars they dropped into: the San Remo, the Cedar Tavern, the White Horse and Max's Kansas City.

Indeed, Sukenick's tale is a real elbow-bender, a bar story—smoke-filled, sawdusty and mythic—with the kind of boozy garrulousness and emphasis on fellow-feeling that one tends to associate with first the beatnik age and later the age of Aquarius. It all goes to show that the so-called "underground" was just as violent, insecure and preening as any fraternity house scene of that period or this—but with a different set of rules and expectations.

Both a creature and an observer of this raucous milieu, Sukenick carefully traces the evolution of the underground in music, poetry and art, from the Village jazz scene of Ornette Coleman, Charles Mingus et al. at the Five Spot and other venues, through the formation of the Fugs, the Velvet Underground and Andy Warhol's back-room court at Max's Kansas City, where downtown cool cats encountered uptown cash. Here the underground elite discovered that the avant-garde could be a vehicle for "making it"—the title of a well-known book by Norman Podhoretz (a whole '60s-'80s epic in himself) and the ultimate no-no in Sukenick's moral spectrum.

Is it possible to be hip and successful at the same time? This is the question that obsesses the author. He informs us that "The myth of Bohemia . . . can be devastating for hangers-on who have no strong artistic vocation providing a purpose for that kind of life." But then he hammers away relentlessly at "middle-class values," whatever they are. An artful polemicist first makes his target formidable and worthy of attack, then tears it to pieces. Sukenick's middle class is simply a bogey, a faceless evil characterized at best by a style of dress ("seersucker") or a profession (anything other than poet, jazz musician or bar owner seems to constitute "selling out"). You begin to wonder what he's really driving at.

An interesting footnote to his larger concerns can be found in an interview with the self-described real-life model for the Jade Butter-field character in the novel *Endless Love* (played by Brooke Shields in the film). According to this woman, Jill Littlewood, the product, in the story and in real life, of an ultraliberated 1960s Chicago household, her parents abet and encourage her torrid sexual relationship with a 17-year-old boyfriend, even buying her a double

bed so he can sleep over comfortably. Eventually, Littlewood revolts against the permissiveness. At 16, she buys herself an expensive briefcase and a “secretary suit” and decides she is “gonna do well in high school.” As her parents were “getting kinkier and kinkier,” she was “getting straighter and straighter.” To make her rebellion complete, she is now married to a doctor and living in the Los Angeles area.

To a large extent, the book consists of such interviews with scenemakers from the times. You can almost see them now, salt-and-pepper beards, a bit of a belly, that burnt-out well-tripped acid look in the eyes, as they reminisce about the good old days. And romanticize. Some of these anecdotal passages, too many of them, lead nowhere. Frequently it’s difficult to tell who’s speaking. Between the ongoing egotism, the grimy settings and cliquish squabbles of the great talents, *Down and In* manages to become, like a serious romance that leaves its audience in stitches, a persuasive argument for holding down a regular job.

One can relive the ’60s, for example, so much more vividly simply by sitting in the middle of the park listening to a tape by The Doors. It just wasn’t much of a literary experience. It was musical and tribal. As the song goes, “When the music’s over, turn out the lights.”

\* \* \*

Another denizen of the back room at Max’s Kansas City was Jim Carroll, poet, rock star and heroin addict. His junk-induced dreams and downtown adventures have inspired writings—beautiful ravings, actually—that are ornate and harrowingly stark. His most recent book, *Forced Entries: The Downtown Diaries 1971–1973* picks up where *The Basketball Diaries* left off—with the author living from one fix to the next.

This time he’s graduated from the uptown teen smack scene to Manhattan’s chic and artsy downtown. He spends his days working for Andy Warhol at The Factory, which, he tells us, is “boring as an empty bag. . . . Even the boredom has no depth.” And he spends his nights at the ballet sitting with Balanchine and the critic Edwin Denby. Carroll moves from swish to swank with ease.

On a little side trip to Times Square, “Forty-Deuce” Street, his description, like the bathroom scene at Grand Central Terminal from the earlier *Basketball Diaries*, gives an idea of his radiant sense of depravity:

“I still recall, vividly recall, the first night I spent alone in Times Square. I followed this one whore through the late hours as she moved like a trowler through the currents of deals denied for short green . . . She was enormous, over six feet easily, including, naturally, her four-inch heels, which I thought inviolate . . . never to be removed. Her breasts were crawling, like some sea life from an unchartable depth, out of a black bra . . . the bra beneath a dress

which was so short that, as I faked lacing my sneakers, crouching on one knee, I could clearly see revealed the connection of her black-seamed stockings and her red garters, like two deadly circuits fused to activate a device of total annihilation. A vial of mascara must have been emptied on those eyes. The whole effect . . . the body . . . the dress . . . the makeup . . . was as if someone had placed a Rubens portrait at the bottom of a cesspool, and after centuries of strangeness and decay among the stillness of vile things and vile notions, some chance lightning hit . . . and out of it she was risen . . . delivered onto those streets in a pink Cacillac. And she walks and walks because there is nobody who can make her price.”

This is the ’70s, and Carroll’s very existence turns the ’80s notion of “work hard and play hard” on its ear. His theme is “play hard and take hard drugs.” His memoir has some documentary value—meetings with remarkable men, everyone from Bob Dylan, Allen Ginsberg and Ted Berrigan to Terry Southern, W. H. Auden and the KGB, are humorous and sharply drawn. He also establishes interesting links between the “happenings” of the ’60s and the performance art that remains influential today. But the real attraction of Carroll is the energy of his language, whether applied to fantastically baroque nods or to mundane urban realities, like defrosting the refrigerator or murdering a roach.

As with any diary, at times the author seems quite full of himself, and, as a consequence, full of something else. For the poet, “not dying young can be a dilemma,” he tells us. And he’s a frenetic name-dropper. For example, the section entitled “*Hello, Dali*” consists of nothing more than a chance encounter on 57th Street, where Salvador Dali commandeers his cab. But somehow Carroll has the slick slang to carry it off. He’s a collector of fancy words, and at one point he makes a note to himself to use the words *serpentine* and *abattoir* in his poetry. Sure enough, both appear inconspicuously later in the book.

When, ultimately, Carroll finds his redemption in California, detoxing in the bucolic confines of Bolinas, we sense the enormity of the underground experience, as lived, in ways a documentary history can only grope for.

**John Clark (review date 26 February 1995)**

SOURCE: A review of *The Downtown Diaries*, in *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, February 26, 1995, p. 10.

[In the following review, Clark discusses the strengths of Carroll’s *The Downtown Diaries*, and the problems associated with adapting the book into film.]

Jim Carroll’s *The Basketball Diaries* is a hip and happening *Catcher in the Rye*. Originally published in 1978, it details the author’s coming of age on the streets of New York during the 1960s. Carroll was a onetime basketball star, compulsive diarist, longhaired hippie, poster boy for



teen sex, periodic truant and precocious substance abuser, starting with cleaning fluid and working his way through beer, grass, codeine, uppers and downers and, finally, junk. The junk, of course, eventually necessitated a radical lifestyle change, alienating him from his family, his friends and his school and compelling him to knock over old ladies, steal cars and hustle men to support his habit.

## PAGE TO SCREEN

The book is both appalling and appallingly funny. It works because Carroll is as interested in the world around him—in New York—as he is in himself.

It is not, however, an easy book to adapt for the big screen (the movie is being released April 21, with Leonardo Di Caprio as Carroll). It's loaded with incident, but it's episodic and doesn't go anywhere but down. For director Scott Kalvert and screenwriter Bryan Goluboff, one of the biggest problems is that there are no sympathetic authority figures. Carroll doesn't have much to say to his parents or his teachers or his coaches or his priests. So one of the first things the filmmakers did was create a fictitious character, Reggie, who tries to help Carroll out. The irony, says Goluboff, is that "people who love the book come up to me and say, 'Yeah, Reggie was my favorite character in the book. You really got Reggie right.'"

The members of Carroll's posse aren't exactly real either. They are composites. And the one member who is authentic. Bobby, is given much more weight than in the book. His death of leukemia is depicted as one of the defining moments of Carroll's life, setting him on the road to nowhere. Kalvert scoured the book with an eye toward such a moment and found it with the help of his own experiences growing up.

"I had a friend when I was 8 years old," he says "and we were 'skitching,' holding on to the bottom of a car, and he slipped and the wheel rolled over his head and he died. It messed me up and changed the way I thought."

Carroll agreed with Kalvert's intuitive take on Bobby's death and on the script in general—which is not surprising, since Kalvert had internalized much of the book even before coming to the project. He says that reading it when he was a troubled kid saved him from making the same mistakes Carroll did. In fact, the point of the movie is Just Say No, without the Reagan-esque platitudes and moralizing, though this emphasis makes it an all too familiar—if brilliantly acted and uncompromising—exercise in cold turkey.

Some of the other changes, however, couldn't be helped. As often happens when characters are set in motion, these achieved a life of their own, pulling the story away from the original material. This explains why the movie most closely adheres to the book at the beginning. As Goluboff laughingly says of the whole process. "We adapted our [tails] off."

## Thomas Gladysz with Jim Carroll (interview date 1987)

SOURCE: "Verbal Entries: An Interview with Jim Carroll," in *The Booksmith Reader*, www.booksmith.com.

[In the following interview, Gladysz and Carroll discuss Carroll's writing career, his methods of writing *Forced Entries* and *The Basketball Diaries*, his literary influences, and his rehabilitation from heroin use.]

Perhaps best known as a rock musician, Jim Carroll is also an accomplished poet and writer. His best lyrics, such as "People Who Died," are themselves a kind of poetry. Recently, a film based on his best-selling book, *The Basketball Diaries*, was released to general acclaim. His first commercially published book of poems, *Living at the Movies* (1973), was issued when he was just twenty-two. That was followed by *The Basketball Diaries* (diaries, 1978), *The Book of Nods* (poems, 1986), *Forced Entries* (memoirs, 1987) and a selected poems, *Fear of Dreaming* (1993), which also includes uncollected and newer works. A spoken word recording, *Praying Mantis* (1991), was released as a compact disc on the Giant Records label—and a two cassette recording of *The Basketball Diaries* (read by the author with musical accompaniment by guitarist Lenny Kaye) was released by Audio Literature (1994). Other spoken word recordings can be found on various *Giorno Poetry System* anthologies.

[Thomas Gladysz:] **Forced Entries** was your last book of prose. How did that book—a kind of sequel to *The Basketball Diaries*—come about?

[Jim Carroll:] I had made a deal for two books. I hadn't been keeping a diary during the period of *Forced Entries*, though I had about fifteen pages from then. That was enough to give me a voice. Then, I just threw myself back into that period. *Forced Entries* is a triple or quadruple entendre, it has all these different meanings. Some keep coming to me. A lot of them were "forced" in the sense that they were painful to write. In that period of my life, I was being pulled in different directions. The effect it had was on my style, on my writing. The thing I needed was stability.

I was living in this hollow flux of desperation, as I describe it at its low point—and at other times it was high hi-jinx. The drug situation was there, though a bit more in moderation. I could work with it while I was on heroin. I never liked the notion that you needed drugs to write or that drugs helped you, except that heroin makes you very neat ! It gives you a sense of control. I like control—in the sense of losing control when you have control. The other type of losing control is when you don't have control in the first place. That's not a creative type of lost control.

I gave Lou Reed a bound copy of the galley proofs. I said to him, "I think the years are wrong. Wasn't it 1970 that you broke up [the Velvet Underground], that summer—the

gigs at Max's. 'No' he said, 'it was 1969.' Actually, he might be wrong! This girl told me she distinctly remembers it was the summer of 1970. Lou told me it doesn't matter, that we would all be better off if 1969 was 1971. So actually, *Forced Entries* is 1970 to 1972, a two year period. I gave them the title. Of course the publisher wanted—and it was O.K. with me—to have the sense of continuity with "diaries." They wanted diaries [in the title] since *The Basketball Diaries* had done so well, and they wanted years, so there was the two year time span. It's irrelevant in a sense, it is not a historical document.

*Then Forced Entries are recollections, rather than diaries?*

Yes. I was not keeping a daily diary, in the sense in which *The Basketball Diaries* were written. When I started that book [*The Basketball Diaries*] I wanted to be a writer—in the sense of being like a sports writer, a journalist.

I was a sports writer for the school newspaper in grammar school. The only good thing I got out of grammar school was this Brother who taught me writing through cutting out the sports columns of Red Smith and Arthur Daley from the *New York Times* and *Sports Illustrated*. Underlining metaphors and similes, showing me certain techniques, explaining allegories, sustaining a metaphor—he really taught me a lot. When that summer was over—the summer I was twelve just turning thirteen—I realized I wanted to write. But I didn't have assignments anymore. I thought about writing a novel. I could deal with dialogue and imagery and voice, but I couldn't deal with sustaining a plot.

So, I decided I would write in a diary—not a "dear diary" type of thing, but one where I was writing on days where something anecdotally interesting happened so that each entry could stand by itself. When I got a scholarship to a private school, I got more erudite in my tastes. I wanted to become a poet then. I saw that was what I wanted to do. Poetry wasn't just sissy stuff. In the neighborhood where I grew up, that was the take you had—I thought the same thing. But when I read Frank O'Hara and Allen Ginsberg, I thought that contemporary poets had the strength of rock and roll. It [writing] was natural for me, which was strange because I had no family history of artists. My family was totally against it.

The strength of that [*The Basketball Diaries*] is its voice, the street rap voice—I could have changed that to something more aloof and made the book more introspective, which would have made it dreadful. With *Forced Entries*, I needed to establish a voice. I had about fifteen pages of the book. They were usually shorter entries, three pages at the most; and on other days, I just had made notes to remember. When I was writing *Forced Entries*—stylistically—I really wanted to get back and continue that voice, make it honest, because that is where the strength is in a book of diaries. I still only wanted to write on days when each would stand as a separate piece. By the nature

of that time in my life, I had to be more introspective. I had the capabilities as a writer to be more introspective. From when I was 19 on I knew how to write well enough and express myself in terms I couldn't have done during *The Basketball Diaries*.

A lot of these [entries] are very funny. I believe in counterpoint as the strength of all art—in the formal contrapuntal sense of music, in the classical sense. Counterpoint, like the guitar line running against the rhythm; in pop music, against the hook. I had to offset the funny things with something more introspective, not something necessarily sad, but a coming to terms with a bad situation. It was strange writing it. Looking back, that's what was painful. I started to remember from the notes—which were just surface notes—which would remind me of certain days. I had to go deep into myself, it was like therapy in a sense. It was painful. Someone said to me that it must have changed your life in the present. It didn't, because I purged all that pain by actually creating the work of art.

*One theme in Forced Entries is your desire to gain control, both of yourself and of your life.*

I wanted control in the sense that I could have it so I could lose it. I always wanted to know the classical rules of poetry, so I would be able to break them. I didn't think there were any rules that couldn't be broken. But, I wanted to know those rules first. As far as control is concerned, in the first section of the book, I had this obsession with making the scene—which was part of being young. My body could take it, I was resilient, I was strong and it had a thrill to it. But living at different people's houses affected my writing, and that's what bothered me. I couldn't go back and forth without losing some mental control. I didn't know if I was up or down.

*Would you say that it was your writing that spurred you to take control of your life?*

Well, yes, I felt like I had to make some move. Most people felt that I went to California to get off drugs, but that was only one part of it. Also, it was to gain a sense of control. When I went to California and had some kind of stability—more stability than control—I was able to transform knowledge into wisdom. That was all important aside from getting off drugs. That's what I needed in my life then. That was a period in my life when I felt very lost.

*Do you feel then that your desire to be a writer gave you the motivation to quit drugs?*

Well, it's hard to really say. I've seen people in every walk of life and people who seem not to have much incentive get off drugs. Guys who came back from Vietnam who never did drugs got back and would do all this junk, like take ten seconalls. That was just a waste of the junk because they would just knock themselves out. Ten reds

would knock you unconscious or else you would just be stumbling around and falling on your face. It was obvious they changed over there and they just wanted to die. They probably didn't want to come back in the first place—and when they did, they were going to off themselves as quickly as possible. The guys I am thinking of—three guys in particular, all died at different times. They found all three in the river.

I saw other guys who were in 'Nam who were out of work and strung out. Or who were on methadone and without much incentive—they had a much stronger will than I did. They just decided they wanted to get their shit together, because their lives were nowhere, and they were going to make it better. Being a writer, I don't think, gives you an incentive.

*Something you write about in both **The Basketball Diaries** and **Forced Entries** is your fear of nuclear holocaust. I suppose it's the one thing beyond our control. Do you still think about it today?*

If there were a real crisis I would. I have a fear of it inbred in me as much as the rituals of Catholicism. [Nuclear holocaust] was a religion. As I write in my book, the Russians exploded their first H-bomb the day I was born. That was a new god. Anything with that much power has to be called a god, or a demon. It has too much strength to be called anything else. For me, there's a quality to it as if I were one of the early members of the Church, one of the apostles.

I grew up in this generation where, as in *Atomic Cafe*, you duck and cover. You go out into the hall or put your coat on your head. Once a week we would have air raid drills. We would go into the hall and get into a certain position and tuck your head between your legs. I remember my brother egging me on the night of the Cuban missile crisis—him saying how the missiles were aimed at us and how the Russian diplomats were leaving town that night and how they were going to bomb us. I also remember this Christian Brother at grammar school said "if those sirens start ringing" (and I didn't like that cause I thought that sirens wail, they don't ring, I noticed that mixed metaphor and it bothered me)—he didn't say, "and I don't think it will," he just said "if it does we have enough food stored down in the gymnasium to last us four months." I can remember every detail of that day. I was walking around scared shitless.

Then a generation passed when the idea of nuclear deterrent idea was really bought and mothers started to assure their kids that it really can't happen. A whole generation didn't worry about it. Then all of a sudden, kids who would sneak back stage or wait in the parking lot after a show would talk about how they could understand those fears. It was pretty scary to them, and to me. That runs pretty deep.

*You knew Edwin Denby, the New York poet and dance critic, and he figures considerably in **Forced Entries**—your book of diaries. How did you come to meet him?*

I remember the time I came to know him, at a poetry reading. I had hung around St. Marks since I was fifteen. Nobody really knew who I was, since I was too shy to introduce myself. Then I had a book of poems published when I was fifteen and a half, called *Organic Trains*. I gave it to Ted Berrigan—who was a kind of leader of the second generation of the New York School of poets, to give to other people. Ted said "oh, I always wondered who you were." And Anne Waldman, I gave her some copies. She said, "We always wondered who this young red headed guy was."

After a reading, I remember Denby going "now I'm making my way over to Mr. Carroll" and saying "how do you do, I'm Edwin Denby." Someone had given him a copy of my book! He took a certain interest in me as this kid—this street kid, whom he was going to give some culture to in the form of dance. I took him to a basketball game once, thinking "wait till you see the moves these guys make." He was really quite fascinated. It wasn't all ballet.

There is a scene in the book where he takes me to sit near Ballanchine. That was amazing, as well as meeting all my favorite dancers. I remember going to the Carnegie Deli with Paul Taylor after Edwin had taken me to see Taylor dance for the first time with those beautiful sets by Alex Katz. Edwin had a real influence. He taught me a lot. He had such a generous intellect and was such an interesting man.

*In **Forced Entries** you also tell of the time you trailed Frank O'Hara a few weeks before he was killed. Did you ever get a chance to meet him?*

Never. I followed him around a number of times. The first poem I ever read by him was "To the Harbormaster" (from *Meditations in an Emergency*) on a friend's bulletin board. I got *Lunch Poems* and I was totally enthralled and followed him around. What was strange was the TV show that came out after he died. It was announced he had died two weeks after it was shot. In it he read a passage from a screenplay he was writing for a film by Al Leslie, the painter and filmmaker. One of the lines that stuck out was "I feel like going out in the middle of 14th street and lying down in the middle of traffic." Well, that would come soon since he got run over by a beach buggy on Fire Island.

*With Ted Berrigan, you had gone to meet Jack Kerouac, after Kerouac had read parts of **The Basketball Diaries**.*

It was hard to get past Kerouac's wife, you know. Guys would come to visit him all the time. He didn't like hippies, and he was real conservative toward the end of his life. His wife kept anyone away from the door who came to make this pilgrimage type of thing with a copy of *On the Road*. If she did let you in, he might wind up getting high and go on a three day drunk, and she wanted to prevent that at all cost. Ted had trouble getting in the first time he went up there. This was with Aram Saroyan and Duncan McNaughton, I think, to do *The Paris Review* interview.



Coming back from Maine—where we were staying with this guy from the Fugs, Lee Crabtree—Ted and I were hitchhiking down the coast to Cambridge to do a reading. We were not too far from Lowell, so Berrigan said, "Let's stop off and see Jack." We got there and his wife was very nice and let us in. But he was in bad shape and very crotchety. It really didn't go well except that he had read *The World*, this mimeographed magazine from St. Marks. It was a poetry magazine, except that they had this prose issue. The story usually goes that he read them (*The Basketball Diaries*) in *The Paris Review*, but that didn't come out until after he died. What I did was send him the manuscript.

He liked me in a certain way—maybe because I wasn't too hippie-ish. This was a time in his life when he was advocating William F. Buckley for president—so you can't really trust the things he was saying. Politics was one thing with him, he was on surer ground with his writing.

I got to see him again in New York, between six and eight months before he died. He had to come into New York once in a while to see his agent. He was at Larry Rivers' house, and of course he was surrounded by all his old friends. I went up to him, and he said he had gotten the manuscript. He said he would write me a letter of introduction. I didn't want to publish the book then. I wanted to establish myself not as a street writer, but as a poet. What he was essentially doing was giving me a blurb. When I did decide to publish *The Basketball Diaries*, Anne Waldman solicited a blurb from Burroughs for the jacket of the original edition.

Kerouac sent me this letter, and said, if your publisher wants a blurb, here. I feel funny about blurbs. Myself, I don't like to use them. But now, I get sent books from people who want blurbs, and I feel like I should reciprocate. Maybe it is bad for me not to, but I usually don't do it. I try to avoid it. Certainly, that quote from Kerouac has been wonderful for me. I feel he was being very generous. I know he wouldn't have written it if he hadn't liked the work; I think he felt I was carrying on a certain spirit that was influenced by him. He thought I was carrying a torch, and in a spiritual sense, I was.

I hadn't in fact read Kerouac when I wrote *The Basketball Diaries*. I didn't read *On the Road* or even *Dharma Bums*. I read *The Town and The City* first, which was his first novel and pretty straightforward in form. I hadn't read him and I hadn't read Burroughs—but I had read Ginsberg by the time I got to the middle part of the book as well as Frank O'Hara and John Ashberry and all the poets in the Donald Allen anthology.

*There is one final thing about which I am curious. There is a mysteriously named character in **Forced Entries** called "D.M.Z." Who is it?*

Larry Rivers.

### Jason Knowles with Jim Carroll (interview date 20 February 1996)

SOURCE: "Jim Carroll: Interview for BG24 News," in [www.catholicboy.com](http://www.catholicboy.com).

*[In the following interview preceding a Carroll reading at Bowling Green State University, Knowles questions Carroll on his poetry, his career in music, his relationship to audiences, and the poet's feelings about basketball.]*

Jason Knowles interviewed Carroll on Tuesday, February 20, 1996, in Bowling Green State University's Lenhart Ballroom for about half an hour before Carroll's spoken-word performance there. Most of the 800 people who attended the show had already arrived and filled the 400 chairs on the floor as well as the 250 seat balcony; more chairs were being brought in while Carroll spoke with Jason. A crowd of fans stood around the table throughout the interview.

A few of Carroll's remarks appeared on BG24's news program the following evening, but aside from those clips, this interview makes its first and only appearance here on the Jim Carroll web site. In transcribing the interview, I chose not to edit it at all. In fact, because I want this interview to reflect the way Carroll actually talks, I made a point of including all of his "you knows," "ums," and shifts in thought. The tricky part was deciding how to punctuate Carroll's comments . . .

*What would you consider your best work to be?*

What I'm working on now. It's gotta be.

*What's that? What are you working on now?*

Well, I'm working on novels, two novels, actually, I mean I'm working on one specific one, but two came to me at the same time, the ideas, so I went through the process of having to write them all out in my notebooks, and now I'm in the process of like doing the first draft of the one. I had to pick which one. One's a straight narrative, the other's a more fragmented book. I chose the more fragmented book. I chose the more fragmented one against my publisher's wishes—the other one's more of a . . . money book I guess [laughs].

*What are the names of the two books?*

I just have working titles: *The Petting Zoo* and *Stigma*.

*What do you do the most of: writing, or poetry, or music? What do you consider yourself?*

I consider myself a poet. That's what I was, that's what I decided I was gonna be when I was, you know, 15 years old, and I, you know, and I was. I mean, I got into rock 'n' roll. It was kind of a strange thing. Punk rock made the possibilities possible for my vocal limitations. Then again, I had a lot . . . from being a poet I understood phrasing

better than most singers, so um, in that sense . . . and I got better technically so that I could sing. Actually, I can sing better now than I could when I was really doing albums. I could do harmonies like with Lenny Kaye when we'd like work on songs with other people, but um . . . But I like the period with music and stuff, and obviously people know me best for my prose, from *Basketball Diaries* and *Forced Entries*. But, you know, basically I've always thought of myself, and I established myself early as [a poet], you know, before *The Basketball Diaries*. That's why I didn't publish them earlier. I wanted to publish my first big book of poems, and so I waited until *Living at the Movies*, and that came out when I was like 22. And then I waited another . . . I went into a recluse period in California, and then I came back to New York with *The Basketball Diaries* and the band. I was glad, I mean, it was much more suited for the kind of punk ethos. The Ramones were writing songs about sniffing glue, and that's what I was writing about in the book; it wasn't about a hippie thing.

*What do you want the audience to get out of your work? Is there a general message that you have?*

Um . . . I want them to . . . you know . . . um . . . realize that their spirit's connected with, um, every other spirit in the universe [laughs]. And that I want my images to be evocative enough so that people can put them to their own . . . Either my lyrics or poems. I mean, with prose it's a little different, it's more subjective, but I mean I want to make images just obscure enough so that people can make them their own, relate them to their own life and change them in a spiritual sense. I don't write many political poems because I don't think . . . We're in such a screwed up world, in global terms. Everything's so screwed up that some kind of spiritual renaissance has to happen. Politics can't solve what it's fucked up for so long. [Corrects himself:] What it's *messed* up for so long [laughs].

*Speaking of images, do you think that your portrayal in Basketball Diaries was accurate?*

Well, I thought that Leonardo's portrayal was fantastic, you know. I thought the director had no idea what the book was about, you know, um . . . but um . . . You know, he was a techno-freak. Before we started shooting, the screenplay was good on paper. It had all those voice-overs straight from the book. But, you know. I just um . . . I made a lot of changes, I inserted a lot of things, and then he just um . . . And that was all fine in pre-production, um, and they kept those changes, most of them. But then when I saw a possibility to use Ernie Hudson's character—the Reggie character, who wasn't really in the book, they added him . . . And since he was new, I figured we could use him as a vehicle to help. Because he obviously knows—he's interested in his writing, you know, his diaries—and we could have used him to educate Leonardo about writing, you know. Like when Leonardo wises off to him about "get me a bag" after he's kicked, you know, he should say . . . I said to the direc-

tor, let Ernie come back saying, "Listen, man, if you wanna speak with that wise-ass junkie voice all your life, then you'll be a junkie. But if you wanna be a writer, like I think you do, then you've gotta learn your own voice. 'Cause a voice is what a writer—that is all a writer has, and finding your true voice is the hardest thing you have to do, and that's a journey you gotta set out for. If you wanna do that wise-ass, you know, quick-shot comeback, then um . . . you're just gonna be a smart junkie." So . . . And Leo loved it, and Leo and I, when . . . Scott couldn't hear us, he's so techno-freaked, you know, settin' up the shots. So . . . we walked off the set. It didn't matter if I walked off the set, but when Leo walked off the set, it meant something [laughs]. But he came back and, you know, they shot it. And then they re-shot the ending. The original ending was much more ambiguous. 'Cause I don't think . . . All of a sudden this kid is radiant in apotheosis. You know, I mean, if he was gonna read at the end, they should have had some build-up. I mean, you see him writing and these voice-overs and stuff from it . . . But I like the film a lot, I mean, you know, 'cause the performances were so great, and Leonardo was like fantastic. Um . . . I thought Marky was fantastic. I thought James Madio—Pedro—and Anton, um . . . I thought Lorraine Bracco and I thought Bruno Kirby was great—what a hard part to play, man [laughs]! But, I mean, I dunno. It's doing great in video, actually, so . . . But it just doesn't in the end really have, you know . . . I just couldn't understand what the source of this guy's passion—this director's passion—to do this was, because he was so passionate about getting the project.

*Can you tell me a little about your spoken-word readings about Kurt Cobain? And what do you think about Kurt Cobain?*

Well, I wrote that poem . . . um . . . it was . . . I mean, I didn't write it for the *MTV Unplugged* thing, but it um happened that . . . I gave them—for Standards and Practices a week before the show—I gave them a different piece. It was a long piece, you know, 'cause I was supposed to like be the main guy and have half the show. Instead, I said, listen, I wrote—See, you gotta understand, though, the show aired about four months later; it was, you know, it was like shot on the Monday after Kurt killed himself on like Friday, you know. And I found out about it from . . . I found out about it from a rock 'n' roll friend who called me . . . uh . . . from a . . . uh [seems to be debating about whether to reveal his source] . . . Eddie Vedder, it was, actually. He thought, I was sure, I knew. 'Cause my ex-wife was Kurt's lawyer and the godmother of their kid, you know, and is Courtney's lawyer too, and um . . . And I knew that he tried to commit suicide in Par—in Rome; I knew that wasn't some prescription drug thing. So um it didn't surprise me, but it surprised me, you know, and um . . . the main thing was Eddie was freaked out, so I was talking to him. They were touring, he's in Washington. I mean, it's really nothing to do with that, but um . . . I started to scribble down these different lines as we were talking, you know, kind of out of what we were

saying. And then I looked at them a couple of days later, on Sunday, and then I wrote down a bunch more, and then on Monday morning I looked at them and it was pretty good. So I wrote out as much more as I could, and then just put it together. It wasn't even typed until we got down to MTV and I said in the run-through, I'd like to read this poem instead, you know. Which was—all the other poets on the show, it was fine with them 'cause that gave them, you know, like much more time to read themselves, 'cause it was only about four-and-a-half minutes, and the piece I was gonna read was like 15.

*So you don't know what you read a lot of times, I heard, when you go up on stage?*

Well, it's just like rock 'n' roll with the set list. You know, we had a set list of course, especially if we were playing, like, the bigger the venue, you have to have the set list. But it's like the quarterback calling the [play] when he gets to the line of scrimmage and sees the defense, you know. You check out the audience, and you just get a certain feel. I mean, with rock 'n' roll, you know that you might have just done a mid-tempo song, but you can't do that ballad that's next on it; you need a rocker to get the audience back up, you know. Like that. So I'd just change it, which, you know, meant that I'd have to go around and—'Cause, you know, if one guy doesn't get it—it's usually the drummer—then you're screwed, you know [laughs]. Um . . . you got the beat for a ballad and power chords [laughs]. I mean, um, so you gotta go back and like scream to each of them over the din, um, like, "We're gonna do 'Lorraine!'" "Okay, Lorraine?" "Lorraine." "Lorraine?" "Yeah." "Okay." [Laughs.] And um . . . No, um, I'd decide, but it'd depend on, you know, whether they you know—sometimes the guitar roadies would have to go get different guitars for different songs and stuff, you know, like, "Ya need another guitar?" But I dunno, um, with poetry readings it's not as complicated as that; it's just that—I mean, I have a basic sense of what I'm gonna do, but from the audience, you know, I get a feeling of where I should go as I'm going along. You know.

*What do you think about this audience tonight?*

I have no idea! [Laughs, looking around at the crowd.] I mean, the audiences I've been doing lately at colleges have been enormous. You know, I mean, it's—I'm sure it's because of the movie and stuff, you know. And the book went back on the *New York Times* Best Seller list and stuff, which really amazed me and my publisher, you know. Um . . . but . . . Seems like a nice audience. So . . . um . . . I'm not even sure what the first piece I am gonna read tonight is. I think I have an idea. I think I want to read one fairly long prose piece and then poems, you know, so I'll see.

*I know you have to be going, but one more question. Tell me about, in Basketball Diaries, about the drugs and heroin. Tell me about drugs and kicking drugs.*

Well [laughs], kicking drugs is not anything you wanna do while you're on your vacation. It basically sucks. You know, I mean . . . This is why Leonardo was so good. He

never had any experience like that, but you saw when he's kicking in Reggie or Ernie's apartment, that gracefulness he had from walking down the street and playing basketball—even though I was a much better ball player than that! [Laughs]—but that gracefulness with which he carried himself, all of a sudden he took it away from himself. 'Cause there's no position—you try every position to get comfortable and you can't, you know. There's something—these cells are screaming inside of you for something, you know, cells that you've created, you know, and only want one thing. And so um it's really . . . So that was really his most amazing thing to me, that he got that. But um . . . I dunno . . . um . . . I mean, there's not much to say about it, you know.

*We know it's tough.*

It's terrible.

*What's your favorite part about basketball?*

My favorite part about basketball?

*What's your love for basketball?*

Well, I say this in um whatchamacallit, um . . . in *Forced Entries* there's a line—um where, it's one excerpt where I'm talking about—I'm watching the NBA All Star game, and there's guys playing like Tiny Archibald and stuff that I used to play against, you know, and Kareem Abdul Jabbar, who was Lew Alcindor then, you know, 'cause he was older than me but we grew up in the same neighborhood, you know. And um I thought, ah, I screwed up. I shoulda stayed into basketball; I coulda been playing now, you know. I mean, it was a fantasy, and um . . . Because I was as good as Tiny in high school, but I just wasn't progressing at the rate that he was progressing, you know. Um, and I had started a lot earlier, too, so I thought, you know [laughs]. At any rate, I was talking about that, but then I kinda got this epiphany about poetry which I write about there, about demons coming in and stuff, and it woulda been easier to just deal with basketball. You gotta read the piece. But the last line is, in basketball, the thing about basketball that's great, is that you can . . . um . . . you can resolve all your mistakes immediately and beautiful in midair.

#### New York (essay date 28 September 1998)

SOURCE: "Lord Jim," in *New York*, Vol. 24, April, 1995, pp. 64–66.

*[In the following essay, the critic summarizes Carroll's life and writing career, and updates readers on current events in the poet's life. The essay intersperses humorous quotes and anecdotes from Carroll himself in a pseudo-interview style.]*

"I could get my shooting eye back," says Jim Carroll in a voice from the Borough of Lost Souls. "But that first step, man, that's the first thing to go." Carroll, at 44, still has



the wounded-fawn cheekbones and red hair of the immortal adolescent. Thirty years ago, he was already a god in his small New York universe, a basketball star, literary prodigy, and fledgling heroin addict. That boy has been mummified in celluloid in the film version of his memoir, *The Basketball Diaries*, with Leonardo Di Caprio playing the stoned angel in a blazer and rep tie. The actual Jim sits today in a Madison Avenue coffee shop, over rice pudding and apple-cinnamon tea, and looks back on his glory days with toneless eyes of battleship gray, eyes that look like they have seen three lifetimes.

"I was always such a fuckin' gunner," he says. "Y'know, if they had a three-point line back then, I woulda scored, like, seven more points a game. But see, I wasn't a natural one-step leaper. I didn't have spring. But I worked really hard with, like, weighted spats and stuff. So by my sophomore year, I could dunk a ball, like, backwards, take off from the foul line. After a while, they'd have a guy just sitting there for me. Y'know?"

That was in 1966. Carroll was an all-city guard for Trinity, sparring with legends like Vaughan Harper—the Felipe Lopez of his day—and "the Goat," Earl Manigault, on the playgrounds of Harlem. By night, he was traversing the city in a hormonal search for significance, pulling off wild stunts and minor crimes with pals like Pedro and Herbie, and using his basketball-star status to score with girls from Park Avenue to the Grand Concourse. And, amazingly, he was getting it all down on paper. Jack Kerouac said that at 13, he wrote better prose than 89 percent of the novelists in America ("I'm so sick of that fuckin' quote, man," says Carroll). It was a world without gravity.

Carroll is on his second coffee shop and it's only 10 A.M. He's just met with a few friends from Drugs Anonymous and is stopping off before continuing an epic walk to the Fifth Avenue office of his lawyer, ex-wife, and friend Rosemary Carroll. A few minutes ago, he was walking down Lexington Avenue when a guy in Chuck Taylors, maybe 25, stalked him for a block before interrupting, reverentially: "You're Jim Carroll! I just heard this voice.. . ."

"It's, like, I call up stores, and the person on the other end of the line says, 'Is this Jim Carroll?'" Carroll says in his characteristic pinched whine, equal parts Edith Bunker and William Burroughs.

He wears a denim work shirt, blue watch cap, and black sunglasses. Flecks of gray have pushed into his thin, incongruous beard. Tiny folds of skin gather under the eyes, though no one can see past his black-framed sunglasses. And he's talking incessantly, allowing each story the freedom to ramble.

Carroll is talking ball again, wagging his wrist in a dribble motion. "So it was the day we were auditioning Patrick [McGaw], who plays Neutron in the film, and they were short a guy for three-on-three. It was freezing, y'know,

down on Thompson Street, with ice all over the side of the court, like where your hands get all cracked, like, when you're a kid, playin' outdoors in winter? It was me and Marky [Wahlberg] and James Madio versus Patrick, Leo [Di Caprio], and Bryan [Goluboff], the screenwriter. And I was *pa-thet-ic*. I go up for this little jump shot, with Leo guarding me, and he's got no leaps at all, and he comes in and *blocks my shot!*" He shakes his head. "I hate them for making me do that."

"That's the thing about this project, the biggest downer," Carroll says. "I had that moment. I'm not going back to try to re-capture it. I had that one chance.. . ."

A world without gravity. Twenty-five years ago, *The Paris Review* published his teenage diaries over his strong reservations; he saw himself as a poet. But the diaries themselves are poetry of a sort: *He's down dealing on the hottest corner in the city, like a furnace that street, can feel narco heat waves through your sneakers.*

"I think they saw the diaries in *The World* magazine, published by the Poetry Project. They told me Plimpton wanted to see them," Carroll says. He says that Truman Capote's editor at Random House, Joe Fox, wanted to publish the diaries as a book, but Carroll was adamant about doing a poetry collection. He finally sold the rights to Bantam in 1979, insisting on paperbacks only. "It was the perfect book for the time, the punk scene, but I thought it would be out-to-lunch to publish it as this \$19.95 hardcover." Carroll estimates the book has sold around 500,000 copies, and Bantam did a study that showed six people read it for every one who bought it.

*The Basketball Diaries*, which Carroll wrote between the ages of 13 and 15, is a panorama of winos, preppies, hustlers, and fools. It's New York picaresque—Oliver Twist with a habit. Carroll published poems in *Poetry* when he was still shooting jumpers against Riverdale High. In the seventies and early eighties, he played rock and roll and almost made it big.

Now, with the arrival of the long-awaited film, comes Carroll's unsolicited midlife retrospective. Carroll sighs, a little weary: "With the records and everything. I've *had* my time above-ground. Y'know?"

Jim Carroll was an idea fifteen years in the making for his parents, Tom and Agnes Carroll. They had tried to have kids well before Tom's wartime tours of Iwo Jima and Saipan. They'd given up when Thomas Joseph Jr. was born in 1949; James Dennis ("from Dionysius") followed a year later.

Carroll spent his early years in the East Twenties, a tough neighborhood at the time; at 13, his family moved to the more middle-class Irish enclave of Inwood in upper Manhattan. That was the first year he shot up. "I think the main reason I started using heroin was that everyone else was always going out drinking, and I hated drinking," he

says innocently. He hated Catholic school, though, and as a freshman used basketball and good grades as a ticket to the affluent Trinity School on the Upper West Side.

His father was a hard-assed war vet whose own father had run a Harlem speakeasy for Dutch Schultz. "My old man would listen to the music I was playing, Phil Ochs, and say, 'What the fuck is this *Phil Ouchs* guy? What is this goddamned Communist shit I'm hearing?'" Carroll says. "Y'know, his bar was this real cops-and-construction-workers redneck bar, and he'd have to listen to them go, 'What the hell is with your son with his long hair? You know, I used to read about him in the sports pages, scored 40 points; now he's got hair down to here.' And then Smitty, the postman from our building, the loudmouthed bastard, starts saying, y'know, 'Your son gets all this poetry stuff in the mail; I mean, what in the hell is that?' Because that's the take in any neighborhood, in the Jimmy Breslin sense. Poetry is sissy stuff. Anybody who writes poetry is a fag." Carroll laughs. "Which I found out is absolutely true when I got out on the scene."

By the time he was a junior in high school, Carroll was traveling down to open poetry readings at St. Mark's Church, swallowing his fear, and turning heads. He impressed poet Ted Berrigan as well as influential literary editors.

He tried college, attending Wagner in Staten Island "for a year, as far as the draft was concerned." He adds, with disbelief, "My dorm roommates, like, they thought the biggest thrill was to go down and see the Johnny Carson show." He was gone within weeks, and spent even less time at his next school, Columbia.

In 1973, Carroll published his first poetry collection, *Living at the Movies*, and moved to San Francisco with a girlfriend and his methadone. From there it was up the coast to the art colony of Bolinas, where he met Rosemary. "I learned to like being by myself. Maybe too much. But that was the first time I discovered a writing routine."

He might have stayed on that path had it not been for a night in San Diego in 1978. Jim was hanging out with Patti Smith, an old girlfriend, before a gig. There was a scuffle involving roadies, and Smith booted the opening act from the bill. In a pinch, she suggested Jim open the show, just get up and speak-sing some poems, as he had done for her before. Her band would back him, just riff. "I was like, 'Uhhh. . .'" says Carroll, eyes wide with mock terror. "I didn't even like rock and roll that much." The gig lasted seven minutes. But the Jim Carroll Band was born.

"When I came back to New York, it was such a joke, because I was always referred to as the pure young poet who wasn't in it for what he could get out of it; and all of a sudden, the pure young poet comes back, and I've got this deal for the paperback of *The Basketball Diaries*, and I'm *hanging out with the Rolling Stones*."

The single "People Who Died" was his rock-and-roll master-work, a Ramones-style guitar grind molded around a terse catalogue of the victims he knew in his New York adolescence. "There was that line, *G-berg and Georgie let the gimmicks go rotten / died of hepatitis in upper Manhattan*. It was actually five of us that shared that needle, and three of us died from it. I just say 'G-berg and Georgie' because of the scan," he says. "G-berg, yeah, like Goldberg. The guy's name wasn't Goldberg; he was a Puerto Rican guy, but everyone said he looked Jewish."

Carroll's album *Catholic Boy*, which came out in 1980, put him on the commercial radar. Within two years, Carroll's group was opening for the J. Geils Band in hockey arenas. "There were always these girls pushing to the front to sock their tongues into your mouth," he recalls.

The fact that the next two records didn't move was no great tragedy. "These guys were always saying, 'The minute you get onstage, it's great, no matter how much you're hurting.' But that didn't work for me. There were some nights I did *not* want to get out there," he says.

He moved back to New York in 1986, and split amicably with Rosemary (two years later, she married Danny Goldberg, who is now chairman of Warner Bros. Records). He published a collection of poems, *The Book of Nods* which even Carroll admits wasn't totally successful. "Rock and roll kind of screwed up my voice, poetically. I found myself having this 'Beat' voice in my poems. It was like this self-fulfilled prophecy, because everybody was calling me this rock poet, this Beat poet."

Carroll moved back to Inwood, two blocks from his old building. His mother had died, and he had made peace with his father, who was reduced to visiting her grave every day. He also wrote a sequel to *The Basketball Diaries*, which he called *Forced Entries*. The book was a journal of tawdry, Warholian downtown New York in the early seventies.

Carroll arrives at Rosemary's office. He's there to view a short film by a worshipful NYU student based on the final, cathartic passage of *Forced Entries*. Carroll's got a headache, so he asks a secretary for some Tylenol. He takes four, then wanders into a nearby conference room.

Cyril Connolly once said, "Whom the gods wish to destroy, they first call promising." Carroll sums it up a little differently: "I was always the young guy. And when you're successful when you're young, it leads to an arrested adolescence or something, y'know. And there's that ecstasy period in your life as an artist. Every artist goes through this. I tried to get it back at first with music, and got, y'know, that adrenaline. But," he says cautiously, "there's a time when you switch into a more sober period."

Carroll knows that after the film hype fades, he'll finally have time to work on two novels that he says "just came to me three or four years ago. Like a gift." One is about a

miracle, two priests, and an investigation by the Vatican. (He's been brushing up on the Gnostics.) The other is about a young star painter who walks away from art in a spiritual crisis. There are no drugs, and the painter is a virgin. "These are straight, linear novels in the third person. My editor was shocked. He was like, 'Jim! These are money books.' But if I don't get to work on these things, boy, I am betraying a gift; I mean, that's what *I* would define as a sin."

It helps that Carroll has finally achieved a quiet writer's ritual. "It's like I've been so jubilant, I just eliminated that need." Carroll rises every morning around 4:30 A.M., when he does his best writing. And he's shaken a nasty TV habit: "After that afternoon nap, it was always *Oprah* time. . . . So I got rid of cable and my VCR, but I found I was watching, like, infomercials instead of movies. But these days—" He pauses, indignant. "To me, late-night movies are old black-and-white movies with Cagney and Bogart, but today, old movies are like *The Sting II* with Jackie Gleason."

During the summer, he often teaches at Allen Ginsberg's Naropa Institute. He lectures and reads at colleges, maintaining little contact with the downtown New York he helped define, although he recently went to a viewing of *Diaries* at Rosemary's place with Lou Reed and Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore and Kim Gordon. "It moves well," he says. "It's hard for me to really register on it because of the personal attachment."

Carroll has been clean of heroin since the early seventies. He still has an occasional margarita, although he has never liked drinking. "I can't go for that complete-abstinence thing. I mean, I obviously have an addictive personality, especially for heroin. But I haven't smoked grass in like eight or nine years. I mean, I *wish* I could still smoke grass. But New York is just so speedy, it's so fast-paced. I mean, the phone's going to ring any minute and someone's going to lay a big trip on me, and I'll spend the first hour paranoid."

#### Publishers Weekly (review date 28 September 1998)

A review of *Void of Course*, in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 245, September 28, 1998, p. 96.

[In the following brief review, the critic discusses the collection of poems in *Void of Course*, emphasizing Carroll's rock-star-like status.]

An alternately self-exposing and swaggering Bukowskian diarist, Carroll reinforces his rock-star-like pop culture niche with his latest volume of poetry, which somewhat resembles a compilation of power ballads. Given that Carroll's fame was established by the beloved 1970's memoir of drug addiction *The Basketball Diaries*, it makes sense that his poetry works to further the author's forever young and ostensibly hip public image, as in this ode to

the late Kurt Cobain: "You should have talked more with the monkey! He's always waiting to negotiate! I'm still paying him off . . . But Kurt . . . ! Didn't the thought you'd never write! another song! Another feverish line or riff! Make you think twice?" Carroll runs through a whole gamut of classic rock-star stances in this volume, from the maudlin lover of beauty and love ("You squeeze out the life and poison! Tightly your pale thin thighs your thick hare lips! last night, our mouths meeting,! it was all we ever wanted to know about the truth") to the dancefloor ("all the young boys were gyrating") to the cocksure hombre who can face down even death. While he references writers Frank O'Hara, Jean Genet and Rimbaud throughout, it may be Carroll's own precarious presence on the scene that gives star power to his pathos, no less winning for its slack charm: "It could be a smudge from the inky thumb! Of a slack X-ray technician! It could be the radiant image! of a tumor on my lung . . . Monday, I'll learn! I think I should stick around, you know?"

#### Booklist (review date 15 October 1998)

SOURCE: A review of *Void of Course*, in *Booklist*, Vol. 95, No. 4, October 15, 1998, p. 389.

[In the following brief review, the critic lauds Carroll's ability to shift gears in the poetry in *Void of Course*, as he moves from dirges to the comical with ease.]

Carroll, experienced with heroin himself, offers belated advice to the corpse of Kurt Cobain in the volume-opening "**8 Fragments for Kurt Cobain**": the price of genius mixed with that of fame makes a fatal cocktail, "which starts out as a kiss / And follows like a curse." Desperation and desire emanate from Carroll's verse, but with a certain poignancy, as if these words just have to be said. Carroll exhumes his life and loves, and his candor at times startles. He can shift gears, from a dirge like the Cobain piece to a comical, though no less serious, aside on the avant-garde, Buddha, or his father's last words ("Promise me that you'll never eat / Any of that Japanese food. Promise"). funky, amphetamine rhythm propels the collection and conjures the city, with its tenements, rushing crowds, flickering televisions, and park benches. As Carroll ages and matures, he acknowledges that "I've spent too much time / Expended angelic energy / On my own disintegration to hand the contract over / To another now."

#### Marlene Goldman (interview date 8 January 1999)

SOURCE: "Mercury Rising: Jim Carroll Can't Escape Rock & Roll," in *Rolling Stone Magazine*, January 8, 1999.

[In the following interview, Goldman queries Carroll about his newer spoken word recording *Void of Course*, and the relationships between his music and poetry.]



Nevermind that his most famous literary body of work, *The Basketball Diaries*, was penned between the ages of twelve and sixteen. Jim Carroll, now 48, is at a prolific peak. His new book of poems, *Void of Course*, mixes his wry sense of humor with his dark acumen. He is working on two novels simultaneously, and one has movie production potential. And for the first time in fourteen years, Carroll has returned to the rock sphere, where he left his imprint in 1980 with the Jim Carroll Band's *People Who Died*. His latest album, *Pools of Mercury*, is an amalgam of his crafts, part spoken word, part rock & roll.

*The Basketball Diaries* film may have brought snippets of Jim Carroll's heroin-addled youth to the masses, but the New York-based author has amassed more of a following over the years as a cult figure. He pattered on the periphery of the New York Beat poets (though Carroll considers himself more a protege than a member), and he dabbled in the New York punk scene, befriending the likes of Patti Smith. With the passing of Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs last year, Carroll remains one of last survivors spanning both those realms.

The *Rolling Stone* Network spoke with Carroll by telephone from New York before he headed out on a spoken word tour. Though Carroll tends toward tangents and anecdotes that make any conversation twice as long as you expected, his insights and humor make you want him to keep going. Carroll talked candidly about his songwriting, his new books and Kurt Cobain.

*What was your inspiration for getting back in the music?*

Actually, when I started doing the record, it was mainly going to be a spoken word record with music. I had one song I had written a few years ago for the *Basketball Diaries* movie. I figured I'd just play it for [Anton Sanko], the producer. He had these terrific musicians and stuff, so we just re-recorded it and decided we'd use it. And then it was just this sudden rock & roll energy there. Once I let in one song it started to become more and more like a rock & roll record. You know, it was bad in a certain way. There were certain guys at record companies who had been asking me for years to do a rock & roll record. It's the last thing I really wanted to do. Now I've had to call them up and apologize for doing this because, I mean, it just kind of happened. Rock & roll, it's that electrical-like energy. Once you start doing it there are still these shards of it that pull you into it.

*Are you more comfortable as a singer now than back then?*

When I first started I just relied strictly on passion because I wasn't technically a good singer. I'm still not technically a very good singer, but I think I'm a better singer now than I was when I first started. I have kind of a different sound on every song, and some of it is through effects, but not really that much. The engineer asked me if I ever hurt myself when I sing because I just get so tight when I do it. It's harder for me to relax when I sing.

*How is it different writing with music in front of you rather than a blank piece of paper?*

There's a big difference between writing a song lyric when you have music in mind and writing a poem which has to stand up on the page as well, you know. A real good poem that's worth its salt has to work on the page and can't just work on a spoken word album. I suppose that's my objection to poetry slams and things like that. Most of the poems, on the page, don't work that well.

*In the past year William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg passed away. How did that affect you?*

It's still hard to think that Ginsberg isn't around. I keep thinking I'm going to go to some benefit reading and he's going to be there like he always was. That's difficult. People would rely on Allen to get other poets to do benefits for other things and there's no one really to fill that void. I was much more influenced when I was young by Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery and the so-called New York school of poets. But as I got older I learned more and more from Ginsberg. He was like a mentor to me. Burroughs, on the other hand, I always thought, well, that he was kind of uneven in his works. But I thought *Naked Lunch* and *Junkie*, those books had huge effects on me when I was young.

*New York has a presence in a lot of your poems. What's your view of Mayor Giuliani's cleaned-up version?*

The New York that's in my poems is the New York that's in my head, and it doesn't have much to do with Giuliani. I walked past Times Square the other night and it was just like being in Vegas or something. But it wasn't the sleazy Vegas. I can remember when I was a kid going up to Times Square and it was this breathtaking sense of depravity, which I think every kid should go through and be exposed to. Now, it's more like Disneyland or something.

*You wrote "8 Fragments for Kurt Cobain" right after he died. Did you feel a connection with his heroin experience?*

I only met Kurt Cobain twice, and he was certainly not a people person. It would be very hard to get to know him. I don't know if you could compare his experience and mine. I mean, he was a big rock star when he was into that, really. I was still a kid on the streets. But I think that when I was doing rock & roll and that same thing happened, and it did happen, people offered me heroin all the time. They offered me glue to sniff. They thought that the *Basketball Diaries*, my life just froze after the last page of it and I was still into all that stuff, you know. But if I had gotten into doing rock & roll and had that following and had all these people offering me stuff, it would be very difficult to have lived.

**Frank DiCostanzo and Michael Workman with Jim Carroll (interview date 8 May 1999)**

SOURCE: "Jim Carroll: Caught in a Trap," in *Lumpen Times*, May 8, 1999.

[In the following interview, DiCostanzo and Workman query Carroll on his methods of writing, the creative process, death, the differences between poetry and musical lyrics, and the state of poetry.]

On Saturday, May 8, diarist, musician and poet Jim Carroll made a rare appearance at Chicago night spot the Hothouse, 31 East Balbo, a spacious setting filled with Brazilian rhythms and flavor. He read from his newest collection, *Void Of Course* (published by Penguin Poets, New York), to many well-dressed admirers seated among dozens of roundtop tables. Before the show got underway, I managed to innocuously eat my Philly and fries from an opportune stage left vantage, but not without having to fend off a phalanx of pushy waitresses.

Entering the stage wearing a black leather jacket and blue-jeans, Jim Carroll was smoking a cigarette and carrying bottled water and several books. The din of the audience dissipated as Mr. Carroll approached the microphone. He spent the first minute slowly and methodically removing his jacket while gazing emptily out into the audience, then giving a brief account, in that protean Noo Yawk accent, of his recent *Today Show* interview. He explained how the questions were purposefully ham-fisted and meant to disturb, describing the sound stage as "surreal." This opening narrative helped to paint the image of a 70's poet displaced.

Shifting his focus anecdotally, Mr. Carroll went on to tell of his extended Amtrak journey from Milwaukee and of his conversation with a 300-pound redneck. The first coroner on the scene of Jayne Mansfield's decapitation, the man was carrying a French book on Satanism titled *La Ba*, which compares Anton La Vey with L. Ron Hubbard. Mr. Carroll quipped, to snickers from the audience, that both authors "knew the real money was in religion." The redneck subsequently related how he and his partner Shorty referred to the head as "she" and to the rest of Ms. Mansfield's lifeless body as "that." Mr. Carroll went to some depth in his reflections upon the religious and philosophical implications of such particular labels. At this point, Mr. Carroll's proselytizing ignited the conservative disposition of an unruly fan who rudely belted forth with fuzzy headed fervor, "What the fuck are you talking about!?" Apparently, the aspiring poet could not fully digest the metaphysical nature of this preliminary dialogue. However, Mr. Carroll was able to somewhat skillfully subdue the young brute, who finally shut up after threatening to physically abuse several impatient audience members.

After this colorful interruption, Mr. Carroll proceeded to read several poems, including "A Day At The Races" from *Forced Entries*, "I Am Not Kurt Schwitters" from *Fear Of Dreaming* and, from *Void Of Course*, "Facts," "Sick Bird" (in which he left out the word "urine") and "8 Fragments For Kurt Cobain." He concluded with some song lyrics off his newest album, *Pools of Mercury*, giving sprechstimme performances of "Falling Down Laughing" and "the Beast Within."

After the show I followed Jim backstage, where, after a brief introduction, during which he was trying to rouse up a cup of coffee, we settled into a discussion of Orpheus, death, the creative process, and Mr. Carroll's unique perspective on the current state of poetry. We focused initially on how Mr. Carroll saw himself within a heritage thousands of years old, and on the Greek myth of Orpheus—a Thracian poet whose music moved even inanimate objects. He was able to charm Pluto, god of the Underworld, into releasing his dead wife Eurydice on the condition that he would not look back during his return journey to the surface world. Orpheus, in a moment of thoughtlessness, looked back and, consequently, lost once more his love. Mr. Carroll shook his head in puzzlement at this comparison, and then gibed stone-facedly:

Uhm . . . I've never thought about it [the relationship of his career to the mythology], in relationship to my myth, or to my work . . . well, Orpheus, it was great that there were hummingbirds around him all the time.

The reimagined story of Orpheus and his journey to the underworld is the subject of Salman Rushdie's newest work, *The Ground Beneath Her Feet*. During a recent speaking engagement with the Chicago Historical Society, the author spoke about his writing process, and, while discussing the division of sense and intellect, of inside and outside, brought up the example of a Warhol exhibit he had been to. One piece consisted of a "learn to dance" floor arrangement, framed beneath glass which people were being encouraged to walk over. Halfway through the dance pattern, it became impossible to do. Rushdie went through it himself and also found it impossible. A little girl behind him got to the point where everybody else stumbled through the diagram and she said, "Oh, I see. You've got to step off it." Stepping off the glass and then back on, she was able to complete the pattern. Mr. Carroll fixed his eye, carefully digesting the indirect approach I was taking to his work, and then summed up the analogy:

Uhm, she found, uhm, she knew that she had to go beneath the surface voice.

Mr. Carroll was perceptibly resolving the seemingly disparate elements of my preliminary questions into a conversant, and therefore more personable, means of expressing what I was struggling to get at, namely, how he uniquely perceives the world in which he must exist. His thoughts appeared to coagulate as he settled back and, listening intently, sipped his coffee while we turned to his notions of poetry and music, as performance, and of the possibilities for the further integration of these two mediums. In typical Jim Carroll fashion, he managed to respond with skillful abstraction:

Uhm, I always found my own songs and poems to be two quite different mediums, you know. Aesthetically they'd be the same, but technically they're quite different, you know. I didn't like it when people would write that I wrote poems with music, you know, cuz they weren't . . . and as for the future, I . . . you know, uhm with the *Pools Of Mercury* album I decided, well

with *Praying Mantis* I just, it was kind of defiant, I just needed to do no music at all. You know, and uhm, you didn't need music to you know, to have poetry just like have its own rhythm, you know, the way it should work on the page but, with the *Pools Of Mercury* album, I wanted to, you know, like, uhm I mean you could just do so many things with music and stuff, and of course it goes back to the Meistersingers and the troubadours and the whole Provençal tradition and stuff, and uhm, I think that with computers, digitally, you can do so much, you know, you can move stuff around and stuff, technically, you know, to fit a drum beat you can change the phrasing of the writer—that's a problem. You know, I think it should always be done low-tech, you know, cuz at times we just change my phrasing . . . I didn't have to read it over, you know, if you could draw out a word, you know, or put more of a pause between two words, you know, and that's a kind of dangerous thing, but uhm, fucking computer programs are going to ruin art in one way or another until we realize we're doing that, and then we'll revolt against them, . . . uhm, so I think until then, until we decide to, you know, stop using digital technology and just go back to an analog technology where you participate with the person's technology—or with the other person's consciousness and they participate with yours, you know. It's not such a broad thing, techno-oriented. Then, you know, rock 'n roll's gonna be rock 'n roll and spoken word'll be spoken word. And if you unite the two together, it'll sound interesting as a music and the musicians you work with and stuff, you know. Otherwise you're going to have to write words that are meant to be, you know, done with music, uhm, which is somewhere between a song and a poem, because any poem worth its salt has to work on the page, you know. And so uhm, I don't think that way . . . I mean, I read the poems which I knew were lyrical and read well—from this new book, from *Void Of Course*—but I knew that I had read some of them already, so it was a book that uhm, reading the poems that I knew read well, and then put music to them. And if you're going to do that, you might as well just write songs themselves you know, and sing them. No matter how limited your technical voice is, you know, you could always sing them in one state or another. But uhm, somebody'll probably come along and find some way to make, you know, one thing. I think it's going to happen by, you know, one person will do one spoken word piece with music that'll bust out and floor everybody, you know. But to sustain a whole album of it, I doubt if it'll happen. You know, I don't think people are ready for that.

Pausing momentarily to take in this delightfully circuitous reply, I then refocused and, picking up the reference to *Void Of Course*, piped in: "I find it interesting you just said that you had written it pretty fast, and yet the period spanned about four years, is that right?"

"Well, it spanned about four years—according to the book—but that's only because, uhm, the Kurt Cobain poem was written in 1994 and maybe two other poems. The Cobain poem was written after he died in 1994, you know, and that was really the oldest poem in it, uhm . . . the rest of them I had . . . all written like in the year and a half before I, uhm, handed in the manuscript. And actually, when after I handed in the

manuscript to my editor, there's probably ten other poems in there that I gave him that I was working on, uhm, finishing second drafts of, while we were editing it. There was like fifty pages of stuff we took out; it was just a very prodigious period of writing poems for me, for the first time. I'm mainly working on these novels. But . . . when poems came, you might as well just go with them, so I did. You know, it was a life situation, a personal situation that kind of, uhm, made all this happen . . . and it was my most . . . profligate period of writing poetry since I was, you know, a young poet at St. Mark's.

Touching upon his days as a young poet fittingly led to a parallel between his experienced view of a creative process uniquely his own, and the lingering influence exerted by his early contemporaries. "Speaking of the word poem . . . why the frequency of that generic title throughout the book? Is it an attempt to demonstrate any overarching lack of significance?"

No . . . it wasn't meant to demonstrate anything, you know. I mean, I realized afterwards that there's a lot of poems, say, that Frank O'Hara wrote . . . if you look at his collected or selected poems even, that are just called 'Poem,' and they just refer to them through the first line. Like the poem that are on the album that are called 'Poem' in the book, most of them, fortunately, that we chose had titles, but we just use the first line as a title, you know . . . 'Female as thunder, the air filled with thought, felony, drainage . . . ' Well, that was just the way to go in that sense, and that's the usual way you do it—you go by the first line. I remember friends of mine telling me I was always good at doing titles for poems, you know. With this book, I wrote it so fast that I was writing notes or 'Poem,' you know, and that was it. And some poems are titled '**Lines**,' and that's because I didn't even, you know, even think about it when I got, uhm, galleys back, you know, 'Lines.' Originally I was going to go further with it or rewrite it or something, but I decided OK, that's OK, but I forgot to really write a title or even change '**Lines**' to 'Poems.' So it was just the first time I was writing on a computer you know and I liked that a lot. You could move the spacing around—you use the spacing to define how a poem should be read for the people that haven't heard you read it. You know, a short line, it slows down the poem. A long line speeds it up. You hang out a certain word to give it like a double entendre from the end of one paragraph—or is it the beginning of the next? Or stanza—I'm in a prose frame of mind here. At any rate, that's what you're able to do so easily with a computer. So, writing on a computer, I actually really started to like it . . . you know, poetry in that sense—you know, being able to move things and cut and paste them around so easily. Otherwise, uhm, I always liked the idea of writing titles and stuff. John Ashbury once told me he wrote titles—when I was really young—that he always titled the poem before he wrote it, you know, he wrote from a title, which is very hard to imagine when you read his poems—they have nothing to do with the title. But he comes up with a title, then writes the poem. It's usually the opposite for me, unless it's very specific. You know,



I spent a lot of time investing thought in titles. But, you know, the poems stand how they are—if I want to just call them ‘**Poem**,’ then it’s OK.

“I just got one more question for you, Jim,” I said, lifting my glasses straight up on my face. “just kind of an overall . . . it’s a soul question: is death the ultimate reward for a lifetime of achievement? And what is your advice, if any, for people who aspire to use poetry for their own ends?”

Well, uhm, I don’t see how you could use . . . well, yes, you could use poetry for your own ends, I suppose. The question is: what would it get you? And then, as far as death being a reward for a lifetime of achievement . . . Ahh!! No, death . . . death sucks, man, you know. I mean, there are times I might think “Great,” you know, if I think I want to die, you know, I don’t give a fuck about a lifetime of achievement, or a lifetime of failure or anything . . . I just want to get the fuck away, see what’s happening over there. But most of the time I think, you know . . . Ahh! I don’t want death being a reward for a lifetime of achievement. Death is just, you know, you die man. If you thought that way, I would have coordinated everything to have . . . but see, I always think, you know, my next work is going to be my best and stuff. That’s kind of what I’m saying in that Kurt Cobain poem, in that one section . . . which is kind of an impudent way to think. You know, I remember a review in *Creem Magazine* once, a fantastic review of the *Catholic Boy* album that they kind of glommed in—cuz the *Basketball Diaries* had just come out in paperback, mass-market paperback from Bantam. With the two of them together, they saw it as a whole renaissance and stuff. And they said in the interview if this guy died now, his work would be, you know, his legacy would be done . . . I don’t believe that, but if I did die, . . . I would have died a lot prettier and I would have died with a lot more mystique happening to me, especially the way I died . . . the example for that is Jim Morrison, you know. I mean, did he want to do it by design? I love Jim Morrison’s singing and stuff, and he’s written some good lyrics. But basically I always thought he was really a terrific singer, and he had a great sense of . . . he had a poet’s sense of phrasing, certainly. But, if that was the case, you know, you got to pick the right time to die in your career, and that’s a stupid thing to do. Like Frank O’Hara said, “You should die for love, not for poetry.”

#### Suzan Alteri (interview date 13–19 January 2000)

SOURCE: “Unspoken Genius,” in *Real Detroit Weekly*, January 13–19, 2000.

[In the following interview, Alteri questions Carroll about his spoken word recordings, his feelings about poetry, his drug addiction, and the conflict between his musical career and his literary aspirations.]

[*Real Detroit*:] Why did you start doing spoken word performances?

[Jim Carroll:] Well readings is just another name for spoken word performance I guess. When the whole spoken word thing happened, you know new things came along like slams and people doing more amalgamating performance art with spoken word pieces. Usually in the old days, performance art happenings, the best ones, were wordless and so it’s just like a combination of both. I come from the old school where I think any poem worth its salt has to work on the page. But I also think it has to have a natural lyrical quality to it and of course it’s much better if you can hear the person read it but I still believe that you have to delineate on the page by the line. It’s just a matter of technique, short lines slow it up and it just defines how it should be read. I have made concessions from what poetry readings used to be.

In the old days there were certain poets whose poems I really liked on the page who were really dreadful readers, which is true to this day. I think John Ashbery is the best poet alive and he’s a really boring reader. At the same time there are other poets whose poems I didn’t like on the page and they were just fantastic when they read. Like Ginsberg, well I liked Allen’s poems on the page, but he was a fantastic reader too. Other beats, more obscure beat poets like Ray Brahm or somebody like that, whose poems I didn’t like on the page but when he read he had that jazz thing happening, but that’s kind of an old school thing.

I’ve made certain concessions. I did this spoken word record in ’93 with no music, *Praying Mantis*. I put a couple of pieces on that which worked when I read them but I didn’t put in my next book because they didn’t seem to work on the page. I was doing a lot of readings so I thought, I guess I am writing certain pieces for the ear rather than for the page or for the eye. I’m more aware of it and I guess through rock and roll I learned to perform better.

The other thing I started to get into doing monologues. I’d start out with a germ of an idea that wasn’t written down and it’s more like telling a story. It’s difficult because you’re working without a net, you don’t have any page to resort to; if you go off it’s really bad. You really need energy from the audience for something like that. And a lot of them, each time you do them, some new character comes or you get something different and after a while some of them turn into short stories. You write them out and put (them) through the literary machine. Sometimes they work as short stories, I’m working on some of them now and I’ve done that in the past. Others don’t and you just kind of discard those and it’s just as well. That’s more of a spoken word aspect that I wouldn’t do at a poetry reading when I was young.

But aside from that, the other thing is since I write prose and poems I always usually start with prose pieces, whether it’s a monologue or a piece from a book. The problem is I’ve been working on these novels and it’s much different than from taking things like in *Forced*

*Entries* that are short diary entries and they read very well it's hard to read from these books because you could go twenty pages and still not hit the germane parts. There are some parts where I can take little fragments. There's no real plot or anything, there's just an image that works as a slice. For the most part I find it hard to read from those. I usually like to read prose pieces and have most of them be kind of funny and then the second part of the reading I'll read poems which are usually more serious but I've noticed it depends what poems I read. It seemed at the last reading the poems were pretty funny too.

Most of the poems I read now are from *Void of Course*, my most recent book. With poems, it's like with songs, people have certain favorite ones they want to hear and then don't mind hearing those over and over again, you're just reading one time a year. But with prose, people want to hear a different piece than they heard the year before. I don't know exactly what prose pieces I read last year, but I'll find out and I won't read the same pieces this time. I don't know what the difference is, that's just my way of going about it. The main difference between spoken word and poetry readings, (spoken word) has opened more doors. I'm not really into poetry slams and stuff. Usually the poems that win, and people will even admit it, are their weakest poems they're just funny, shocking. . .

*Entertaining.*

Yeah. But it brings more people into it and it makes poetry more accessible in different forms and people can just get into it and then once they're there they can neutralize it from their own taste. In that sense it's a good thing and all those things are welcome.

The whole thing of spoken word being some phenomenon that's going to be there with rock and roll is total bullshit. That's never going to happen, people want a backbeat. I just know from doing both, I could feel the difference from the audience. But there are certain similarities and certain tricks you can bring from rock and roll. Writing a lyric and writing a poem are two different things technically.

It always angered me when critics would refer to the lyrics as poems because they're very different (even if) in the aesthetic sense you try and do the same thing. But I don't think that spoken word is going to eclipse music in any sense. I see people incorporating it at different times in a useful way and that's good. Someone will come along and put it all together in some unique way but I don't know who that's going to be.

*Do you think that poetry has become more accessible to the public?*

Yeah. I think so, I mean poetry as spoken word. I think rap has helped do that. In New York there's a lot of rap guys who go to spoken word venues like the Nuyorican Cafe and they've been taken in. At first they was a separation and some antagonism but now a lot of rap guys are just reading their pieces without any music.

I think it makes it all more accessible because poetry readings (are) not something that everybody is going to get into. That's why I'll start off with a prose piece that's funny and more accessible to people who are not used to it (poetry readings) because it's an acquired taste. I see it with all these kids.

I have this new audience of kids who bought *The Basketball Diaries* after the movie came out, which surprised me because I thought they'd just see it because of Leonardo or Marky or something. When it went back on the *New York Times* Bestseller List my publisher and I couldn't figure out who was buying all these books and it turned out to be all these kids. I soon started to get all these letters from these kids like between 12 and 18 and they would show up at readings. That was great because I always liked kids who were the age when I wrote the book reading it. It certainly brought up some problems for me in the past couple years. Most of the letters I get from kids, they've read *The Basketball Diaries* and then they actually did go out and buy my books of poems and they hadn't really read poems before and they dig'em. That's good from another direction. I think it is more accessible now and it is bigger. I just mean not on the level of rock or anything.

*When you wrote The Basketball Diaries and when they were subsequently published, did you have any idea the impact they would have?*

No When I wrote them I had no idea but you have to remember when I wrote them I didn't think about publishing them. I didn't write them as a dear diary, I did write them for an audience really even if I didn't know it at the time. I was addressing an audience. I say it right in the book sometimes. But I didn't think about publishing it because then I got into poetry and pushed that aside.

Then they had a prose issue of this poetry magazine and they asked me if I had any prose, this was when I was about 17 or 18, and I said, "Well I have these diaries I wrote and they'd be kind of camp in a certain way." I remember Ted Berrigan, a poet who was like a big mentor of mine, a big brother, he said, "This is a money book, man."

Then the people at the *Paris Review* read them and said, "You should send us about thirty pages." So when they were published there I got all these letters from publishers who wanted to do it, but I didn't publish it then, this was in 1970. I just didn't think it was a good time to publish it because it wasn't really a hippie book.

When I started to do music I looked at the diaries, I had been in the recluse period in California for years and I hadn't thought about publishing anything really. I had to go to New York and I brought *The Basketball Diaries* with me because I thought that if The Ramones are writing songs about guys sniffing glue and there's all these pieces about sniffing glue and cleaning fluid in the *Diaries*. I think it's much closer to the punk audience. So I waited until then. I guess it was just a thing of timing at that point.

The way its gone on through other generations since then has been interesting to me. The whole thing of the shit in Kentucky and Columbine is weird and I don't know what that's about. I can't account for the impact, the only thing I can think that separates it from other books like that is it was written at the time when I was that age. It wasn't a book about youth looking back. I mean they are great books like *Catcher In The Rye* that are written looking back and that's just coming from another angle. That book certainly has spawned a lot of havoc too. It also may be because they're in diary form but still read like a novel in a certain way. It lets kids read them (by) skipping around at first.

I remember when I first published it and I sent a copy to Sam Shepperd. He sent me this letter, because he'd read them in magazines over the years. I was living near him in California and I said, "I finally published the fuckin' thing." He said "send me a copy." When he first read it he read them just skipping around and he thought he read them all and then he'd find one he hadn't read and it was like a bonus. But then he read it cover to cover and he said it had a completely different effect. I thought that was really terrific.

I know when Bantam first published it they did some kind of study on how many people had read different Bantam books for each copy sold and *The Basketball Diaries* had the most people who read it for each copy sold because it was borrowed from so many people.

Whenever I do booksignings people are always saying, "Could you make this out to so and so because I stole his copy and this is the only way I can become friends again, if I get a signed copy." You know you can pick it up and just read two excerpts and stick it in your pocket and leave. (You can) read it that way and then get a different take reading it cover to cover.

It's also one of the most stolen books apparently. The guy at Barnes and Noble told me. In a lot of bookstores, with Charles Bukowski and (William) Burroughs and (Jack) Kerouac I think, it's in the information section because it's stolen a lot.

*Wow, that's cool.*

Yeah it's kind of cool.

*Does it bother you that the **Basketball Diaries** is your most well-known work?*

Yes. That's why I'm working on these books now. These novels, the one I'm working on now, is in the third person, it's not autobiographical at all. Of course it bothers me, I mean my first album was the most successful album by far too. I mean that happens. It happened with *On The Road*, well *On The Road* wasn't Kerouac's first book but the *Town and City* didn't sell at all. It happened with Patti's (Smith) first album, well at least it was more successful

commercially. I mean it's her fans favorite album. I don't know what that has to do with it, but it pisses me off at times, you know? What are you going to do though?

*Do you think of yourself more as a poet rather than a diarist or a novelist?*

Yeah I always thought of myself as a poet. That's what I made up my mind I was going to be when I was like 15 or 16. And you know I had success very early, I was kind of the token prodigy at St. Mark's (Poetry Project) which is a good thing and a bad thing. Early success can lead to an arrested adolescence in a way which is not good. But I've always basically thought of myself as a poet.

With rock and roll it was a complete fluke how I got into that. I was writing some songs for other groups and then, since with punk you really didn't have to have a good voice or anything, there was a local band all ready-made when I was on the West coast who wanted to do something with me. It just went over really well and then we started to work together. I came to New York and got a record deal. I never would have imagined I would have been doing that.

With prose, I have a sense of prose that brings me enjoyment. Since I'm working in total fiction, the characters are entertaining to me and they're like real people whereas poetry I'm dealing with taking myself out of my day to day life in a much different way. But actually in *Void of Course* the poems are much more about dealing with myself than in my earlier poems where they were more erudite in a certain sense. (There's a lot of) angst, betrayal—it's not a happy book. (A poet) is just always been what I thought I was and was meant to be. These other things just seem to come up you know?

I think if I was starting all over now being a writer, I'd probably be dealing with film. All the young writers I know who are really talented in New York are all into film. They either write screenplays or [are] directing. Actually I'm kind of working on this screenplay myself now you know, but I can't throw myself into it like these guys can. Also being around film now I see that any half-ass can direct, you just need a good director of photography, a good cinematographer and you're fine. So that's not such a big deal.

When Harmony Korine first sent me a copy of the screenplay for *KIDS* I read it through and it was like a fucking novel to me I never read a screenplay like that. I read it cover to cover in one sitting. He'd been trying to get in touch with me for years and I called him up immediately and said, "This is fucking great." He's incredibly well-read but he doesn't really have much interest in writing novels or anything like that. He published a book of little short surreal pieces but I think that was just because he was doing them and he was hot and they gave him a lot of money for it (laughs). I mean even guys who started out writing books like Sherman Alexie, he's totally more into film now it seems to me.



Richie Price, who's a big screenwriter, he's a contemporary of mine, and he always said when he went out to Hollywood, "You should come out here, man. There's a fucking fortune just for writing a three page outline." And it's true, but he could write rewrites really fast and I'm not really that good at that. So it's a different thing for me. I just feel like if I went out there, I'd just be stuck there so I try to avoid it at all costs.

*You worked with and hung out with a lot of seminal people in the art/literary/punk scene, did that influence your work at all?*

Well not really. I mean when people started to make it or deciding what their best medium was, I left New York (in '73 when *Living At The Movies* came out) and went to California. (I) was kind of away from that whole scene. I mean it depends on the people. Do you mean the older people like Allen (Ginsberg) or are you talking about people like Patti Smith from the punk scene?

*Both, I mean you were sort of in both weren't you?*

Well yeah. Poetry-wise I liked Allen's poems and I was influenced by his mind. I talked to him a lot about politics and stuff but I wasn't into the Beats so much poetry-wise. I was more into the New York School guys. *The Basketball Diaries* kind of has that Beat writing thing, but I wrote that so young.

In poetry I wanted to get away from that. I was a little snoot. I wanted to be more erudite and I was more influenced by Frank O'Hara and (John) Ashbery and the New York School who were coming from the French and German poets. But in a way I definitely learned a lot from Allen. Burroughs, out of all those writers, I think I learned a lot reading his books.

But with Patti when I first knew her she had just left art school and she was mainly doing drawings. Then she started to write poems and she would show them to me. She was just starting to put a band together when I left New York. I saw her first couple of shows and I thought, well this is the medium for her. I always knew Patti, just from being with her, had this vacillation from this sweetness to this total rage and magic thing happening so I always knew she was a great performer just from her first poetry reading.

Her poems to me were much better, the words to me, were much better set to music than they were at the page. I think she's written some good poems and they're really unique. I could see, this was when she just had Lenny (Kaye) playing guitar and Richard Sole playing keyboards, she didn't have a drummer or anything.

My only connection when I was in California was reading the *Village Voice*. In about three years the whole thing was happening at CBGB's and the Mercer Arts Center and

Patti was just a huge star, I mean it surprised me on that level but it didn't surprise me. She was made for rock and roll and it was made for her.

Then people like Richard Hell, who was Richard Meyers when I left, just hanging around the poetry scene and stuff. I wonder a lot what would have happened if I stayed in New York. If I would have gotten into music too. I don't know if I would have. My little snoot-nosed tendencies (laughs) might have made me say, "No, I'm not going to do that." I think that it was just the right thing for me to do at that time, to get away. That was the best influence for me and just being by myself alone and in the country for the first time in my life and having a dog. My dog was my biggest influence on my work (laughs).

Of course all the poets like Ted Berrigan and Anne Waldman who were around St. Mark's were I guess the biggest influences on me, I learned a lot. But (when) the whole burgeoning of the punk scene (happened), the highlight of my day was going to the post office in this little town in California while everybody was being wild at CBGB's. I kind of miss it, the fact that I wasn't there.

All those people were influences on my life and since my life was pretty much so connected to my work, it was kind of the same thing. Just from being with Patti, I had this Apollonian craft thing and she was completely dionysian just let it all blow out. A lot of that rubbed off of me as much as it could, so in that sense it was a big influence just in a personal sense from all those people. But then I was away, so I can't say it was a huge influence like in a direct literary sense.

*When you got started in rock and roll, how did you keep that persona different from Jim Carroll the writer?*

I had to put the writer thing aside. I can't stand doing things in any dilettantish sense and I thought the first thing people were going to look for was, "This is just some fucking pretentious shit" or something. I was really conscious of that and I just thought if I was going to do rock and roll, I just got to throw myself into it completely.

The thing I really always liked best, and maybe that's why I did side projects often in different mediums, was I liked to learn new things. It was just great learning about music. I always could play the guitar in a limited sense but not well at all, enough to write music to songs. Music always influenced my writing a lot, inspired it and I listened to a song and it would inspire me to write a poem more than it would if I had read a poem when I was a young poet.

But when I started to actually do rock and roll, and certainly when I started to do rock and roll I think the freedom for that was just given to me by what people were doing in New York at CBGB's. I just felt that I had put aside the writing aspect and just write songs and, like I said, there's a difference in the craft, but that's just a technical thing.

It wasn't really that hard. It was just trying to get the most out of the tension between the music and the lyrics, counterpoint was always really important to me in any art form, either by opposites or cross currents with chords and stuff. I was just learning a lot and put myself into it completely when I was doing it.

And then by my third album and when we were finished touring, I didn't want to do it anymore. I wanted to get back to writing. I didn't regret it at all, it was a really great time. I felt like I was a musician during that whole period, but I didn't have a musician's attitude. The guys in my band they would have toured 360 days in a year. I like performing a lot, but I didn't like being on the road and all the psychological paraphernalia. It was a lucky thing I started relatively late because all the drugs and things that were available, I would have killed myself when I was younger.

There were certain nights I just didn't want to be in front of an audience. I didn't have that feeling (of) no matter how sick you are, when you get on stage you'll feel great. If I felt shitty physically or mentally . . . certainly at the beginning songs would take me out of myself but after a while, doing it night after night, you'd just be performing and you'd have to learn how to be an entertainer. That was a difficult thing to do and I felt uncomfortable doing it. And after a while there were nights that I just didn't want to be in front of people performing, it wasn't fun. For the guys in the band it was great. That's when writing books started to come back into my mind.

*Recently you've collaborated with younger musicians like Rancid, do you see any difference between the generations?*

Not really. They were completely professional and when I did a reading out in Seattle a couple of months ago, I did some songs, these guys from different bands had rehearsed some of my old songs and some new songs from *Pools of Mercury*, and it was great.

I don't know, it's a Seattle thing. I think it's a real communal thing with musicians there, they don't backbite. I think that's the way it was in New York from talking to Lenny Kaye. When I was starting music, it was in San Francisco and most of the bands would really bad mouth other bands and hated each other. And if you got a record deal, they really hated you. It was just this whole jealous backbiting thing. I couldn't get that because at the poetry scene at St. Mark's it was always everybody supporting everyone in this real communal way. So it seemed like bullshit to me.

I didn't really know Rancid's music when they asked me to do this and I couldn't believe the guitar playing, it could have been Joe Strummer singing the vocals for all I knew, but that's just where they were coming from.

The only thing about, and it doesn't have anything to do with musicians it's just the technology, I can't stand digital recording. I just like recording on real tape. I just think

that you really lose a lot with all these binary pixels and stuff. It's just a physical fact that drums and bass just stick on magnetic tape and compress and you just don't that sound digitally. When I was doing *Pools of Mercury* it was all digital. Everything going through a computer, it was amazing the stuff you could do. You know in '83 vocoders and stuff were amazing to me too, it really doesn't matter. I don't like the whole digital thing. I'm much more of an analog person.

*It's more natural that way.*

Yeah. Just as far as the musicians, collaborating with them. I collaborated with Boz Scaggs, how weird is that? I just admire people who are really good at their craft. And, like I said, I like to learn new things and if there's nothing to learn (laughs) there then you don't learn anything. You just throw it away, but you usually do if you're looking for it.

*A lot of great art whether it be writing, music or painting has been made under the influence of alcohol or drugs. Why do you think that is?*

(laughs) I guess because it's a very lonely thing and because it drives you crazy after a while. I never liked coke when I was growing up. We had a perverse amount of big cocaine dealers who were fans of the band, for some reason. It was a different drug, it was so much purer out in San Francisco. The fact was everyone was doing cocaine then and it was a real musician's drug. It was a real insidious drug. I got to see pretty soon (that) it was kind of demonic in a certain way, real selfish. It didn't have any warmth to it, it's a real cold drug. Boy you got me going (laughs).

When I was doing a lot of hard drugs when I was young, that's when I typed things up. I'd get really neat and I actually didn't really write that much on heroin. Boredom is the best high to me and that's when I write best.

I can't drink at all. I cannot understand like when Kerouac would say, "If you get stuck when you're writing, just have another shot or something." If I got stuck when I was writing and had another shot, by the second one or maybe one and a half I'd just might be underneath the typewriter (laughs). My metabolism doesn't work that way, it just knocks me out. So I can't understand the alcohol syndrome with writing.

I see it with certain writers where they can work for days by drinking and it just keeps them level in a certain way. That's a genetic thing (laughs). Just like the way with heroin, people always think of it as naughty now. With me, if I did enough I'd nod out or eventually I would after a few hours but (usually) it would give me bunches of energy and, like I said, most of the stuff I wrote then was rewritten later, but it was good for typing up things I had already written and it made me very precise in a certain way and it gave me energy to do this shit work. In the

sense of making me precise it would make me see that I was wasting words so it would be good for editing and just getting rid of a lot of crap. But ideas and stuff did not come to me, there was no Kubla Khan thing happening.

Artists are always going to look for some kind of way to break through some other door and you have to move around your consciousness now and then to see things from different angles. Unless you want to go off and be a yogi for 80 years and write maybe one book and it probably won't be too interesting, then the easiest way to do it just take drugs. Well actually I was thinking of writers I liked that didn't take drugs, but they were total drunks and that's certainly a drug.

I can't smoke grass in New York, I wish I could. I get too paranoid, the grass is too strong. I wish I had crappy grass or something. I could never write on grass either. I wrote one good piece on grass once I think. I loved smoking grass to be able to not write though and just put it out of my head and watch movies and be entertained. In that sense I kind of miss that. Maybe I'll move somewhere where there's crappy grass. If this applies to Detroit I don't know.

*There's crappy grass in Detroit.*

Well, that's what I want! (laughs)

*You've been called the "Keith Richards" of poets, is that a fair comparison?*

I never heard anybody call me that. C'mon (laughs). I don't know if that's a good thing. I can't imagine what Keith's poems would be like and I'm sure Keith can't imagine, well he can imagine what my guitar playing's like—it's terrible. I'm sure it's probably coming from a certain presence on stage at times. I take exception to this, well maybe it's not true, maybe I don't take exception to it. I don't know the way I carry myself on stage, you know I don't think about it consciously, but I remember someone once commenting that I was all over the place. And then I remember someone writing about a benefit for a musician who hurt himself here in New York City and Lenny Kaye organized it and Patti played at it and the Dictators and Marshall Crenshaw. The guy wrote that he'd seen me read a lot but he'd never seen me with my band. But he said that I came off looking so healthy and together and that I was really straight up and I looked really good. So I think I've overcome the Keith Richards analogy there.

*Well I think this guy was getting at when you started you were the rebellious poet, you weren't in the classical school maybe because you were so young.*

I don't really see that, that doesn't just point to Keith. The thing about Keith is completely not giving a shit—well yeah so in that sense it's like that in a certain way, but I was little snot. I was rebellious in the sense that I wouldn't show up to readings when I supposed to because I was

stoned and shit. Yeah I was a fuck-up too, I was little snotty fuck-up. Yeah in that sense I'll accept any comparison to Keith. Even flopping around like a fish on stage, I don't care (laughs). But I was pleased when I saw that review that I looked very healthy and had it together.

*Almost as if you had put that past to rest in a way.*

Yeah, I was dancing around like Mick (Jagger) instead of falling down to my boots.

*Growing up Catholic is there any spiritual aspect that you put in your work?*

Yeah absolutely I think my work is very Catholic oriented. I can't stand the politics of the Church but I've always been fascinated by the mythology of the church and the rituals of the church. I once said on some talk show once, I got a lot of shit for it, (that) Catholicism and punk rock were very much alike. What could be more punk rock than the stations of the cross where this guy's getting whipped and has to wear a crown of thorns and weeps into a veil and leaves his image behind and then gets crucified and rises up? I meant it in a really good way. I just thought the analogy was valid and all these idiots called about it.

But I do think that whole blood as a metaphor for life, Christ's blood as a metaphor for this kind of homeopathic balm of redemption is just something that's always fascinated me from when I was young. And also, especially with Catholicism, the feminine side, the whole cult of the Virgin which is not in the other Protestant churches, not just with the Virgin Mary but with Mary Magdalene too. That feminine side, I find it very sweet and it's also reassuring.

But the hideous part, I mean I liked most of the stuff that came out of Vatican II, but getting rid of Latin was the worst thing that you could possibly do. You can't have a valid ritual without some kind of mysterious language. I can remember saying the mass in Latin and it was just so fantastic. I wanted to know what these words meant, it still sticks with me. It made me take Latin for six years in school.

I thought that was a big mistake. I think that the Church would be a lot better off with (Latin). It just seemed like some cheap ecumenical conciliation and I thought that it just takes away from the ritual of it and any real sense of ritual.

All these things are ingrained in my work, especially in my poems. There's a lot of religious imagery either overt or a somewhat more subtle sense. It's a big part of me. The whole aspect of the Church as politics is a whole other thing. As far as my own sense of faith and belief, I would love to have to have absolute faith but I can't say that I do. I admire that in a certain way from certain people. I'm going to go into my own sense of faith or anything but yeah just the whole ritualistic aspect of it.



I've learned a lot from Buddhism, but I can't really understand people like Ginsberg going off and becoming Buddhists even though Tibetan Buddhism is really fascinating. I think it's almost like language. If you're trained in a certain religion by a certain age you kind of have to walk that path no matter what. It's just put on you, unless you have some complete epiphany or seizure on the road to Damascus. It would have to be something of that magnitude to really change it around in the sense of it being really integral to your heart. That's another thing about Catholicism, it has that heart sense to it especially through the cult of the Virgin. It's not just an intellectual thing.

*New York City is also really important to your work and influences a lot of your writing, how do you feel about the sterilized New York of late?*

Well it's terrible. Guiliani's really out to lunch but I can't blame it all on Guiliani, I mean the whole cleaning up is all Guiliani, it's just almost impossible for people to live in Manhattan anymore. It's just ridiculous. I have friends living in two story houses in L.A. who are paying half what I'm paying for my fucking apartment in New York. And fortunately I make a living from writing. There's so many writers who are friends of mine who can't afford to live in Manhattan unless they've been living in a rent subsidized place.

Even the outer Boroughs, after Tribeca and Soho got filled up with artists living in lofts then it moved to Williamsburg in Brooklyn and now the prices there are outrageous. I mean Staten Island's next.

San Francisco's kind of the same way but even though you're paying the same amount you get more bang for your buck there.

I felt really blessed to always have grown up in New York but I also felt one of the best times in my life was when I lived by myself in California and I just was able to filter all this learned trivia into some kind of wisdom. Actually, I can write better about New York when I'm outside of New York than I can when I'm here in a certain way, not poetry-wise but prose-wise. So it doesn't really matter to me where I live as a writer and I don't make the scene anymore. I don't really go out. I keep telling myself I should. I was in a real hermetic period for a while but now I've moved back downtown. I feel like I should be going out more. Actually I went out last night so that should take care of a month or something.

*Do you miss that community of artists that used to exist in New York?*

Well I think it still does at St. Mark's. St. Mark's had their big New Year's Day marathon reading like they always do. I did the one last year and it was so packed. It was like playing with a band at some theater somewhere. It was really scary, people were sitting on the stage. This year I missed it because I had the fucking flu. So I felt bad about that.

But that sense of community is still there at St. Mark's and I do miss it in a certain way and I feel like I should be, in some ways, a part of it but it's not just a matter of place to go, it's a matter of intersection of time and place in your life. There was a time when it was the right time and place for me to be in that recluse period in California or to be hanging around St. Mark's. I don't feel like this is the time for me now. I go out and I just get worn very quick by things and I just want to split. I'm turning into this boring person.

*If there was fire and you only had time to grab three things, what would they be?*

Actually I was in an apartment that had a fire about five years ago. I know I grabbed this stash of cash that I had in this place because I had some money that I hadn't put in the bank. I know I got that (laughs) that was pretty pragmatic. I took these, they're made by Zen monks in Japan, they're kind of like Zen rosaries and they're carved meticulously, they're so realistic. They're these little skulls and you use them every year to say a prayer for each monk or friend of yours that died.

Somebody played to the Dalai Lama "People Who Died" at this Zen retreat and he thought it was a funny song (laughs) and he gave me these things as a present. So I grabbed those, you know you got to take something from the Dalai Lama. And then I took a flashlight too because the power went out.

If I had to take a third thing looking around my apartment, shit. I'd take those prayer beads. I'd take this drawing I have that's hanging up near the door actually (laughs) maybe in case there is a fire. I guess I'd have to take the manuscript to the book I'm working on. I'd have to take that and hopefully be able to get the notes to the other book too.

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## FURTHER READING

**Additional coverage of Carroll's life and career is available in the following sources published by the Gale Group: *Contemporary Authors*, Vols. ; *Contemporary Authors New Revision Series*, Vols. ; .**

# David Cronenberg

## 1943-

Canadian filmmaker.

The following entry provides an overview of Cronenberg's career through 1999.

### INTRODUCTION

Cronenberg is a successful screenwriter, director, actor, cameraman, editor, and producer. During the flourishing 1970s horror film renaissance, Cronenberg found himself at the hub among such auteurs as George Romero, Larry Cohen, John Carpenter, Wes Craven, and Tobe Hooper. Cronenberg's films, which graphically portray both physical and mental degeneration, are unique in the horror and science fiction genres. In his films, Cronenberg consistently addresses the relationship between technology and human physicality, and the often chaotic effects that result when man tampers with a carnal and amoral Nature. Many of Cronenberg's films depict a penchant for psychic violence, and equally liberal doses of visceral gore, which has earned him nicknames such as the "Baron of Blood."

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Cronenberg was born in Toronto, Ontario, in 1943. Raised in a creatively stimulating environment, Cronenberg was encouraged early to pursue various intellectual and imaginative endeavours. It was during his childhood that Cronenberg developed a fascination with insects, science fiction novels, the cinema, and horror comics; many of these childhood interests manifest themselves in his films. As a teenager, Cronenberg lived in Copenhagen, Germany, where he attempted for a time to write novels. At the University of Toronto, Cronenberg abandoned his course work in science, opting instead for an English curriculum after winning a writing contest during his freshman year. Cronenberg was impressed with the creative impulses and experimentation he witnessed among the 1960s liberal arts majors. After watching a group of several students create a film themselves, Cronenberg decided to devote himself entirely to filmmaking.

### MAJOR WORKS

Cronenberg's first "short" (a short film of about ten to twenty minutes) *Transfer* (1966), set a thematic pattern that he would revisit numerous times in later work. *Transfer* is about the relationship between a psychologist and one of his patients, which alludes to Cronenberg's

burgeoning preoccupation with the mind. *Stereo* (1969), Cronenberg's first full-length feature, depicts sexual experimentation among a camp of telepaths. In this picture, the viewer is first introduced to a now familiar Cronenberg concept: the presence of an unfeeling, vaguely evil organization that controls or manipulates the film's characters. With *Crimes of the Future* (1970), Cronenberg imagined a North America void of most of its female population due to poisoned cosmetics. This is the first movie in which Cronenberg addresses his pet theme of biological mutation, employing terms such as "creative cancers" and "new organs;" themes that Cronenberg would further develop in later films. These first few films were essential in creating a small cult following for Cronenberg and helped him to secure a deal with Cinepix, a Canadian production house. *They Came from Within*, (19??) Cronenberg's first project for Cinepix, focuses on a mad scientist who creates a parasite that infects people with a combination of venereal disease and uncontrollable sexual urges. The phallic parasite is set free in a post-modern luxury apartment complex where the inhabitants are ultimately destroyed by their own boundless libidos. *They Came from Within* has been compared to George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* and Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, as all three films portray a society internally collapsing upon itself. Cronenberg's *Rabid* (1976) continues the subject of sexual horror; starring porn-film star Marilyn Chambers, *Rabid* tells a story of experimentation and mutation, with typical Cronenberg features such as sex-crazed carnality, blood, and phallus imagery. Cronenberg's next films were *The Brood* (1978), a family melodrama about child abuse and a mother who gives birth to physical manifestations of her rage, and *Scanners* (1979), a commercial breakthrough focusing on a group of telepaths (scanners) who plan to take over the world. Cronenberg attracted his largest audience yet with this film, attracting many viewers because of its gore, but also due to its psychological preoccupations. Commercially and critically, *Scanners* fared better than Cronenberg's earlier efforts, and Hollywood studios sought him out to direct the film adaptation of Stephen King's novel *The Dead Zone* (1983), the only film for which he did not also write the script. *The Dead Zone* was received favorably, but after its success, Cronenberg released *Videodrome*, a dark exploration of voyeurism and transformation in the video-age, starring James Woods and Debbie Harry; this film did not do as well as the previous one. Cronenberg's next feature was *The Fly* (1986), a remake of the 1958 B-movie classic. Cronenberg chose to pare down the original narrative to its most basic premise and create a new narrative which deals with an anti-social scientist who accidentally merges himself with a housefly while attempt-

ing teleportation. *Dead Ringers* (1988), based on the true story of identical twin gynecologists, is a film that examines both the mental horrors of the mind and horror in reality. The twins, both played by Jeremy Irons, each become sexually involved with their patients. But one twin, the more reclusive of the two, falls in love with an actress who is a patient and lover to both brothers. When she learns of the brothers' subterfuge, she angrily confronts them; a confrontation that crushes the sensitive twin who has fallen in love with her. The film follows the ultimate disintegration of both twins which occurs during a haze of narcotic use, gynecological experimentation, obsession, and insanity. *Naked Lunch* (1991), based on William S. Burroughs' 1959 semi-autobiographical novel, explores a world of irrationality filled with talking beetle-typewriters, giant centipedes, and other hallucinatory creatures. *M. Butterfly* (1993), is based on the Broadway play by David Henry Hwang who co-wrote the screenplay with Cronenberg. In this film, a Frenchman conducts a seventeen-year affair with a Chinese opera singer who turns out to be a male spy. Although this appears to be a profound departure for Cronenberg from his affinity for blood-and-guts material in his past films, many of his favorite themes are included in *M. Butterfly*. Along with the literal sexual transformation that occurs during the story, there are subtexts present such as an examination of the fusion of reality and fantasy; a subtle statement concerning colonialism; and a study of gender relations. In *Crash* (1996), a film based on the J. G. Ballard novel, the idea of sexual relations as a cause of death is examined. The masochistic main characters exhibit a fascination with bodily wounds, sex and violence, and set out to enact car crashes to satisfy their lust. The film *eXistenZ* (1999) addresses technology, the human body, and alternative realities through its portrayal of the virtual reality/video game world. The film's title is derived from an actual video game created by Allegra Geller, a noted game designer. The game, which one must "plug" into by using bioports located at the base of the spine, allows players to become part of an alternate reality. The movie follows the exploits of Geller through a world of political intrigue, biological gore, bodily evolutions, and electronic media satire.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

Cronenberg once stated that "the only meaning that there is in the universe comes from the human brain." This belief informs all of Cronenberg's films to date, each of which depicts the impact of the cerebral world on the physical one—and vice versa. Some critics feel that Cronenberg is a misogynist; in his films, women often act as mere tools that male characters employ in order to achieve their ends, or as creatures who exhibit a destructive carnality. Others claim that Cronenberg's repeated portrayal of men who are inept, inefficient, and incapable, or who invariably commit suicide, serves as a refutation against charges of misogyny. Critics generally complain that Cronenberg's films—in addition to their shocking visual elements—rely too heavily on showy special effects, and contain simple plots and minimal character

development. Sources such as *Motion Picture Guide* (a reference text? Journal?) describe Cronenberg's early work—especially *They Came From Within* and *Rabid*—as overly voyeuristic due to lack of characterization, and devoid of sufficient plot development. In the U. S. and Britain attempts have been made to censor Cronenberg's work, as many viewers are likely to judge it as sensationalistic and unnecessarily gory. The limitations of the horror genre force Cronenberg to limit the amount of graphic material in his films. However, a desire to depart from the well-trodden ground of his science fiction work and to focus on the more complex, psychological underpinnings of the human mind makes serious horror a genre that suits Cronenberg well. As Cronenberg's themes become more intellectual and intricate, and greater attention is given to characterization, the description of his oeuvre as "the thinking person's horror" becomes all the more appropriate.

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## PRINCIPAL WORKS

- \**Transfer* [also director] (short) 1966
- \**From the Drain* [also director] (short) 1967
- †*Stereo* [also director] (screenplay) 1969
- ‡*Crimes of the Future* [also director] (screenplay) 1970
- They Came from Within* [director; also known as *The Parasite Murders, Shivers, and Frissons*] (screenplay) 1975
- Rabid* [director; also known as *Rage*] (screenplay) 1976
- The Brood* [also director] (screenplay) 1978
- Fast Company* [also director] (screenplay) 1978
- Scanners* [also director] (screenplay) 1979
- Videodrome* [also director] (screenplay) 1983
- The Dead Zone* [only director] 1983
- The Fly* [with Charles Edward Pogue; also director] (screenplay) 1986
- Dead Ringers* [with Norman Snider; also director] (screenplay) 1988
- Naked Lunch* [also director] (screenplay) 1991
- Cronenberg on Cronenberg* [edited by Chris Rodley] (memoir) 1992
- M. Butterfly* [with David Henry Hwang; also director] (screenplay) 1993
- Crash* [also director] (screenplay) 1996
- eXistenZ* [also director] (screenplay) 1999

\*Also cinematographer and editor.

†Also cinematographer, editor, and producer.

‡Also cinematographer and producer.

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## CRITICISM

Owen Gleiberman (essay date October 1988)

SOURCE: "Cronenberg's Double Meanings," in *American Film*, Vol. 14, No. 5, October, 1988, pp. 38–43.



[In the following essay, Gleiberman discusses how Cronenberg interprets the "bodily horror" genre less literally by making *Dead Ringers* a portrayal of a personality split rather than a mind/body split.]

One doesn't expect to see David Cronenberg shooting a love scene, yet that's what he's doing—and damned if he doesn't recall one of those legendary directors from the silent-film days, staring raptly at the set before him and murmuring commands into the air. His two leads, Jeremy Irons and Genevieve Bujold, are kissing in bed, and, as Cronenberg gazes into his video monitor a few feet away, he shapes the action as it happens. "Kiss his neck, Genevieve," he says. "Move down, slowly, away from his shirt button. Now you sit up. You see something! You're terrified! Now slowly move back . . ."

Okay, so it isn't just a love scene. In a few moments, other stuff is going to happen—Cronenbergian stuff. Yet it's telling to see this master of psychobiological horror choreographing a bedroom embrace down to the last delicate swoon. The film, David Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers*, a naturalistic thriller about the relationship of identical-twin gynecologists (both played by Irons), is one Cronenberg has wanted to make for years, and after such supernatural creep-shows as *They Came from Within*, *The Brood*, *Scanners*, *Videodrome*, *The Dead Zone* and his 1986 mainstream breakthrough *The Fly*, it's a departure for him, perhaps a pivotal one.

"I think it's a departure in the way it's perceived and the way I'm perceived. It's like doing a more intricate dance on the high wire but it doesn't feel like so much of a departure to me creatively, because I feel I'm dealing with the same themes I've always dealt with," Cronenberg says. "But it's conceivable that tomorrow I would get very excited about something that's absolutely, definitely a horror film."

Horror films have always dealt with the fear (and fascination) surrounding bodily transformation. Just think of *The Wolf Man*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, or the shrinking-man/colossal-woman protagonists of fifties sci-fi. These characters touch on a range of primal organic terrors, everything from sexuality to aging to the peculiarly contemporary anxiety of being mutated by the environment (i.e., radiation). In a sense, what Cronenberg has done is bring the genre of bodily horror into the post-Freudian age. His most prominent innovation (it's linked to the gooey verisimilitude of his special effects) making the sexual and fear-of-disease subtexts of studio horror films explicit, self-conscious, stripped of the reassuring distance of fantasy. Thus, his version of *The Fly* isn't really about a man turning into an insect—it's about a man degenerating before his (and our) own eyes, like a cancer patient, and growing weirdly fixated on his own metamorphosis.

Cronenberg is fixated too. His obsession with disease might be too much to take if it weren't suffused with a perverse sense of wonder; his heroes aren't merely hunks

of dissolving flesh but tragic figures, at once gifted and cursed. And perhaps that's really the link to *Dead Ringers*: the wonder Cronenberg feels for his double protagonists and the soul-searching torment the two characters share. If just about every other Cronenberg film has hinged on the proverbial split between mind and body, with the body taking on a hideous life of its own, in *Dead Ringers* a human personality is itself divided into warring parts. "People have a tendency to immediately label everything I do as horror," says Cronenberg. "This is not a horror film. This is a relatively straight drama. I don't have a lot of trickery to hide behind." Indeed, even Cronenberg's most trick-free film until now, *The Dead Zone*, hinged on a sci-fi phenomenon—the power of second sight—that allowed you to excuse his occasional lapses into genre-film klutziness. *Dead Ringers*, on the other hand, will test his dramatic skills as never before.

There's an eye-of-the-storm serenity to Cronenberg. Interviewers almost always remark on how oddly "normal" he seems, and while that's true, what also strikes one about him—at least, in contrast to his films—is how wry, good-humored, and gentle he is. Between set-ups, sauntering around the set in a black-leather work vest, he's a compulsive, low-key joker, the polar opposite of a megalomaniac director.

"David has a terrific sense of humor and a fabulous brain," says his friend and co-producer Marc-Ami Boyman. "His movies are in some way a reflection of what he truly spends time thinking about that most of us don't. I mean, if you saw a beautiful woman, you wouldn't spend a whole lot of time thinking about why her breasts are a wonderful thing but the inside of her thoracic cavity would induce revulsion. David does."

Certainly, Cronenberg appears to be a man in control of his demons, rather than vice versa. He has the straight-arrow handsomeness of a boyish college jock, but his ebullient, wise-guy smile also gives him a sidelong resemblance to George Segal. And that fits, somehow. Who would have guessed that the man who once described his ideas for films as "tumors growing in my brain" is actually . . . a *mensch*? Despite a few wisps of gray, he looks much younger than his forty-five years, and he maintains a family atmosphere on the set that recalls the descriptions you always read of Ingmar Bergman's sets. Cronenberg lets everyone in the cast and crew know they can count on him as a pal. His fun-loving charisma is the key to his authority. He's shot every one of his projects in his hometown Toronto, and his approach remains indelibly Canadian—removed from the glitziness of moviemaking on either of the American coasts. (One wonders if this will change now that so many American features are being shot there.)

Even his success is a Canadian phenomenon: his first feature, *They Came from Within* (known in Canada as *Shivers*), quickly became one of the country's top ten all-time hits. And though he could easily have parlayed that

success into a Hollywood career, he preferred to stay in Toronto and work quietly, with technicians he knows—the people he calls his “film family.” Not even *Scanners*, his first bona fide hit, drew him away. One could argue that it would be beneficial for Cronenberg to take a break from Toronto. His films suffer from a vague sense of location. They all seem set in the same chilly-gray Every-city, and he’s never begun to take creative advantage of a locale the way that, say, Nicolas Roeg did in *Don’t Look Now* (Venice) or Hitchcock in *Vertigo* (San Francisco). Yet working in Toronto seems to stimulate Cronenberg’s creative juices in a different way; it gives him the peace of mind to get intimate with his nightmares.

It’s been quipped that Cronenberg “looks like a Beverly Hills gynecologist,” and Cronenberg may or may not have been thinking of that remark when he made his brief appearance in *The Fly* as the doctor who delivers Geena Davis’s nightmare fetus—a huge, writhing maggot. For anyone who recognized him behind his surgical mask, it had to rank as one of the most perverse directorial cameos in movie history. His presence lent the scene a queasy, assaultive edge, as though he’d popped up in his own movie to play voyeur, to get a closer look at how richly demented his imagination could be. Of course, Cronenberg’s films have always featured over-the-top images of organic horror. Still, in that monstrous maggot scene, he seemed to be pushing himself onto newly blasphemous terrain, violating the purity of the birth process itself. (You might say what he “delivered” was the horror the last scene of *Rosemary’s Baby* only promised.)

Now, in *Dead Ringers*, he pushes further. Certainly, the story taps into basic female fears in a way few movies have; it may end up doing for the gynecological stirrup chair what Laurence Olivier in *Marathon Man* did for a trip to the dentist’s office. For Cronenberg, though, *Dead Ringers* is also a chance to treat his malignant obsessions in a more complex and refined way. And that’s an exciting prospect, since his nightmares have at times been too literal-minded, the gross-out imagery announcing itself as “metaphor.”

Cronenberg claims he was interested in going far beyond the mythical good-twin/bad-twin models of the past. What attracted him to the story, he says, “was the sense of it being about a relationship in which personalities and identities and even experiences become confused with each other, and that little shell of identity is melted down. At the start, I didn’t really know why being twins would be anything but interesting, or even entertaining. And yet I knew intuitively that it was a very dangerous thing to be. Now I think I know why.”

This is heady stuff, and what’s more bizarre is that it actually happened. The movie (which is officially based on Bari Wood and Jack Geasland’s pulp best-seller of 1977) is a fictionalized account of the case of the Marcus twins, the highly successful New York gynecologists who, on July 17, 1975, were found dead in one brother’s garbage-

strewn Upper East Side apartment. Though the cause of their deaths was never definitively determined (in all likelihood, it hinged on their mutual drug dependencies), the investigation turned up a case study sicker than fiction. The Marcuses had specialized in the treatment of infertile women, and their success rate was so remarkable that women from all over the East made sojourns to their private clinic, where the doctors were regarded as miracle-workers. That the Marcuses were tall, dark, and handsome—the epitome of glamorous, upscale physicians—only added to their aura.

As it turned out, they were also psycho. Though technically fraternal, Cyril and Stewart Marcus looked so much alike that one could actually pass for the other, and that’s what they sometimes did; one of them would walk out in the middle of an examination, and a moment later, the other—dressed identically—would come in as though nothing had happened. The two had been inseparable from childhood, sharing the sort of insular dependency that, according to some psychiatrists, prevents certain twins from achieving a full sense of selfhood. In their final years, their professional quirks blossomed into full-fledged deviance. Together, they descended into drug addiction and schizophrenic withdrawal; they’d lash out at patients in anger, they refused to sign insurance forms (often claiming in defense that, say, the mailbox had caught fire), and, in a legendary incident, one of them reportedly walked into an operating room, ripped the anaesthesia mask off the patient being operated on, and started breathing into it. Yet their clinic continued to run, in part because of the reluctance of most physicians to make ethical claims against their fellows.

The prospect of these dangerously unstable clone brothers poking around in women’s vaginas and being revered as modern-day, clinical fertility gods is queasy enough. Then, too, there’s an essential way they *weren’t* alike, and this is perhaps the key to their story: Of the two, Stewart was the go-getter, the ladies’ man, the extrovert, and Cyril the introverted drone. It was Cyril who began to fall apart first, and the evidence indicates that Stewart followed his brother’s downward spiral out of a compulsive, lifelong need the two had to “share” their experiences.

Cronenberg says he was drawn to the story the moment it hit the headlines. “I saw everything that everyone else did,” he says, taking a break in his office on the outskirts of Toronto. “You know, Twin Docs Found Dead in Posh Pad. When I read that stuff I thought, ‘God, this is too perfect. I mean, it’s got to be made into a movie. I’m sure someone’ll do it.’ And no one ever did. But I didn’t really want to do the Marcus twins, and I didn’t want the Ross twins, who are the twins in the novel. I really wanted the freedom to invent my own guys and see where they would take me.”

The basic premise is derived from the novel: The twins here, Elliot and Beverly Mantle, encounter a famous actress (played by Bujold) and carry on an affair with her.

That is, Elliot seduces her, both switch off sleeping with her (pretending that they're the same person), and Beverly ends up falling in love. But Cronenberg has added some lurid flourishes. The Mantle Clinic gives him a chance to invent yet another of his ominous biotechnical research facilities; inside the operating theater there, the doctors and nurses wear blood-red surgical masks and gowns, a fabulously lurid touch. His greatest liberty, though, may have been the decision to cast British actor Jeremy Irons, and to forgo the tabloid-sleazy, dark-side-of-America perversity inherent in the original story. Cronenberg needed an actor who'd be technically adept at switching back and forth between two subtly different personalities. But one wonders whether Irons, with his sullen reserve and his way of rendering every line with perfect "Masterpiece Theatre" fortitude, is really the actor to bring this eerie double role to life. It could be the prize part of his career—or he could end up muzzling the picture.

The challenge of filming one actor in two roles was immense, especially since the film uses computerized camera techniques (and, in some scenes, a double) that go far beyond the usual split-screen gimmicks. "Jeremy is playing the two characters together in about thirty or forty percent of the movie," explains Cronenberg, "and so I could never forget that. It was something that was constantly in my face. But that's not to say I would have used real twins even if I could have found a pair of twins who could act. Real twins don't look exactly alike, and people would have spent a lot of time looking at them, seeing if they're really identical. Whereas if they know it's the same actor, the audience will simply accept that they look identical, and that's laid to rest."

Despite their fixation on disease, Cronenberg's films have dealt explicitly with sexuality as far back as *They Came From Within*. "It was very important that my twins are gynecologists. Somehow, it was the idea of two men forming a perfect unit that excluded everybody else. The twins share not only one woman in particular sexually, but they share their understanding of women and their study of women. . . . It was obvious to me that my friends at school who were drawn to gynecology very often had serious trouble with women. The thing about being a gynecologist is that your whole relationship to women—certainly your patients—becomes very ritualized, very definite." Does Cronenberg identify with this? "Oh, sure. I identify with all my scientists and my doctors, because I think what they are and what they do is very similar to what I do. And then I've always been very fascinated with how abstract elements, whether it's spirituality or sexuality, relate to the physical elements of our life, which is to say, genitalia and brains and things like that. We haven't come to terms with any of that stuff, really, integrating it together."

He's a paradoxical figure, to be sure—a family man who seems to siphon off his subversive side into these sicko extravaganzas. On the *Dead Ringers* set, his wife and three-year-old daughter show up for the afternoon's shoot-

ing and there's something faintly absurd about seeing Cronenberg cradle his little girl in his arms during a break and then go off to shoot a scene with Jeremy Irons in the midst of psychic breakdown. More than one person on the set describes Cronenberg as being extremely "centered," and the director himself concurs. "I don't take any credit for it. I just think I'm lucky, whether it's by heredity or environment. I wouldn't have thought there was anything unusual, except that when you work with lots of twisted, neurotic people, which I try not to do, you begin to realize that it's considered something unusual. I've actually always been that way. It's metabolism or something."

You get the feeling Cronenberg continues to make the films he does—and to keep himself balanced—by refusing to regard his work as sensationalist. "I think [*Dead Ringers*] really relates to all intense relationships in which things happen that have the potential to become liberating on one level but suffocating on the other level. And I think at that point you're talking about marriage, you're talking about parents and children. The twins become a metaphor for all those things."

#### Marcie Frank (essay date May 1991)

SOURCE: "The Camara and the Speculum: David Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers*," in *PMLA*, Vol. 106, No. 3, May, 1991, pp. 459–70.

[In the following essay Frank compares the Mantle twins' Freudian desire to separate from their mother, (and from each other,) with the structure of *D.R.* and its use of technological innovations.]

*I expected somebody who looked like a combination of Arthur Bremmer and Dwight Frye as Renfield in Dracula, slobbering for juicy flies. The man who showed up in my apartment in New York looked like a gynecologist from Beverly Hills.*

Martin Scorsese, describing David Cronenberg

In the domain of film, the problem of looking alike is often presented as the problem of being alike, for film techniques can create resemblances where none exists. For example, crosscutting can establish parallels between different scenes or locales, and camera angles can make different compositions look similar. Likewise, the camera can depict one actor in two roles. In this sense it functions like a mirror. The classification of a subgenre of films that cast one actor in two roles—the twin movie—might prove useful for discussing the intersection of film technology with concepts, such as the mirror stage, that are central to a Lacanian account of the subject.<sup>1</sup> Instead of delineating the boundaries of such a subgenre, however, this paper focuses on a single twin film whose subject matter and technique provide the basis for reflecting on the acquisition of male identity and on the consequent danger to women as they are represented (or elided) by the camera.



In *Dead Ringers*, David Cronenberg, the filmmaker whom Martin Scorsese describes as “look[ing] like a gynecologist from Beverly Hills” (46), raises questions about the relation between the camera as a gynecological instrument and the camera as a speculum in the sense of a mirror. His film, the story of twin brothers who are gynecologists, is structured to display the relation between these two specula. Their workings have implications for spectatorship, its gendering, and its relation to violence.

Feminist film theory has raised these issues by applying psychoanalytic terms to film analysis, but the interpretive force of psychoanalytic theory in this context rests on the analogy between the spectator's insertion into the screening room and the subject's insertion into language.<sup>2</sup> In the feminist critique of psychoanalysis offered in the significantly titled *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Luce Irigaray provides a provocative way of formulating the metaphors of the speculum as they inform “any theory of the ‘subject.’” Her discussion supplements the feminist film theorists' approach to spectatorship, with which it otherwise shares important insights: accounting for the instrumentality of psychoanalytic theory, Irigaray notices the specularity of male theory that simultaneously penetrates, views, and constructs the female body as other, thereby negating woman's “real” otherness. In Cronenberg's film, however, the equation offered between gynecological and film instruments points out a need for feminist psychoanalytic film criticism to be further supplemented by attention to film technology. What is the difference between the instrumentality of theory and the instruments of film? The question needs to be decided if Irigaray's observations are to be fully integrated into film analysis. Are film and psychoanalysis both media in which subjects are represented? Or are they both theories of the subject?<sup>3</sup>

Instead of tackling these questions head on, my paper takes the trajectory of detailing the relations between the gynecological implements and the technical instruments of film as they are represented in *Dead Ringers*. Examining the status given to each set of instruments puts us in a better position to reformulate the relation of psychoanalysis to film, because it allows us to ask, What in psychoanalysis corresponds to the technology of the camera?<sup>4</sup>

In *Dead Ringers* the camera-speculum parallel is reinforced by other types of doubleness: not only is the film about twins, both played by the same actor, Jeremy Irons, but its structure is twofold. It is split roughly in half, with the first part concentrating on the relationship of the twins to a woman, Claire Niveau, and the second focusing exclusively on the twins. Insofar as the film traces the brothers' attempts and ultimate failure to create separate identities, it suggests that their relation is contradictory and therefore impossible: the twins are at once separate and unified, different and the same. Further, the loss entailed by their contradictory status is described in the vocabulary of gynecology, which is the Mantle twins' profession (they run a fertility clinic) as well as the genesis

of their problem (they were born double). Cronenberg construes their separation paradigmatically as the separation of mother and infant and equates cinematic and gynecological instruments because both are devices for achieving separation.

Feminist film theory also links the two sets of instruments, seeing them both as tools for examining women, but *Dead Ringers* relates them in a different register, completely subordinating the examination of women to the examination of the relationship between the twin gynecologists. Cronenberg's emphasis is a reason to interpret the film, not to ignore the work or to castigate the filmmaker. While it would be easy at this point to apply Irigaray's insight that male theory can never really discuss women but can only appear to, we must resist this temptation until the question of the relation between film and psychoanalysis is decided. *Dead Ringers* minimizes its attention to women in order to focus on the absent separation from the mother. As Teresa de Lauretis points out, “[T]he image and what the image hides (the elided woman), one visible and the other invisible, sound very much like a binary set” (58). The important thing to recognize is that the film is not so much suffused by the twins' profession as it is governed by the logic of gynecological instruments. Since the twins impeccably pursue the logic of the instrument to their separation from each other in death, we are left with questions about Cronenberg's camera.

By presenting the separation of the twins from each other as analogous to the separation of mother from child, Cronenberg gives the film an intensity different from that of either the splatter movie, for example, or the evil-twin film. The stress on instruments and instrumentality enables the viewer to share the twins' experience of separation on two levels: the twins are themselves concerned with developing the instruments for separation, from the Mantle retractor they invent in medical school to the gynecological instruments for “mutant women” they ultimately use for the job we witness; and the film's technical innovations, by calling attention to the camera's complicity in the separation of the twins, forces the viewer to separate from the film. In other words, the way that Cronenberg's camera records the brutal separation of the twins distances the viewer from the viewing experience. Elements present in psycho-analytic accounts of violent separations are reconfigured in Cronenberg's film by the additional element of the camera.

The film presents the gynecologists Beverly and Elliot Mantle working, living, and generally functioning together in ways that are called into question when they meet Claire Niveau (Geneviève Bujold). She offers them the possibility of separating from each other, a prospect that interests Bev more than it does Elliot—Bev claims he is in love with her. The twins have thus far differentiated themselves in their duties but have worked together as one person; substituting for each other has even brought them sexual pleasure. But transforming their differentiation into a separation fails; Claire Niveau departs, leaving in her wake

a drug problem. Drugs, which initially appear to provide a new set of instruments for separating the twins, in fact supply a new possibility for fusion. The twins jointly explore this potential until, in a gesture that conflates the desire for separation with the desire for identity, Bev disembowels Elliot and then dies.<sup>5</sup> Thus the first half of the film gives life to the second half—but a life that is gruesome and doomed.

Midway in the film, the twins are recognized for their outstanding clinical and research practices as gynecologists. The scene in which they accept the award repeats an earlier scene at Harvard but with a difference. Whereas only one twin attends the Harvard ceremony—though the other, when told he “ought to have been there,” replies, “I was”—both show up on the second occasion. Elliot, the “outgoing” one, accepts the award, establishing retrospectively that it was also he who accepted at Harvard, but Beverly, the “quiet” one, interrupts him. Recalling the on-stage mind-reading scene in Cronenberg’s *Scanners* that results in an exploding head, this scene in *Dead Ringers* also makes a public display of a private matter. When Elliot accepts, saying that the honor was made possible by “the women who have provided that most precious thing, the gift of life,” Beverly arrives, completely drunk, and takes the podium to invert his brother’s comments. Bev’s outburst at once raises questions about the twins’ collaboration and reveals the terrible misogyny that will only become more apparent in his behavior. “There’s been a fraud! In case you were wondering how we divide up the work,” he spews out, “Elliot makes the speeches while I slave over the hot snatches.” By flaunting the division of labor between them in this fashion, Bev makes public the social terms for their differentiation that are already in place for the viewer: Elliot, the public relations man who does the teaching and the research, sexually pursues the women they see at the clinic as patients, while Beverly, the clinician, who says of himself, “I don’t get out much,” substitutes for his brother undetected in these women’s beds.

As in the scene in *Scanners* where exposure involves literally turning the body inside out, Bev initiates the behavior that will culminate in his dis-embowelment of his brother: he exposes the fraudulence of distinguishing between the twins on the basis of this division of labor. He not only flagrantly announces his dissatisfaction with the arrangement, which could be construed as exploiting him (he complains about it elsewhere in the film), he also makes viewers recognize its inadequacy. Despite the tonal opposition between Elliot’s reverent “women who give the gift of life” and Bev’s misogynistic view of women as “bimbos,” each twin reduces women to their reproductive functions. Dismantling the social differences between the Mantle brothers even more decisively is that they share the name Beverly during their affair with Claire Niveau, the affair that precipitates their attempts to separate in an unprecedented way—Elliot is the one they do not want her to meet. The social bifurcation that can be said to distinguish between the twins even as it allows them to

proceed as if they were one person has in fact been disintegrating from the beginning of the film; furthermore, it has been inscribed, from the beginning, as a structural doubleness. What Elliot describes to Bev as “uncharted territory” corresponds to the film’s division.

*Dead Ringers* begins with two symmetrical sequences, each introduced by a black screen with time and place spelled out in white letters. In the first—Toronto, 1954—twin nine-year-old boys walk down a street, discussing sex. With their glasses and British accents, the children are virtually indistinguishable. They try, unsuccessfully, to get the neighboring little girl to have sex with them, but despite their curiosity, they seem averse to physical contact: for them, the sexuality of human beings compares unfavorably with that of fish. In the second—Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1967—the same twins are training in gynecology, and whereas it seems as if the instrument they have invented is going to be rejected by old-boy conservatism, their triumph is recognized and rewarded. The ultra-normal appearance of these two sequences functions inside the parameters of the classic horror movie, juxtaposing the mundane with the creepy, as if to say, “It could happen to you.”

But Cronenberg’s introductory sequences are more than a generic tic to set a tone: they offer a thematic overture to the film. For example, it is appropriate, if not crucial, that the Mantle twins be not just parentless, appearing, as they do, out of the blue, but motherless. Although the childhood sequence is presented as an explanatory or genetic moment, at no time are we informed where they come from, why they have different accents from everyone else in the movie, or why, as Claire asks Bev, their mother gave them girls’ names. Cronenberg is not merely refusing the verisimilar, he is establishing a relation of compensation in the two sequences: in the earlier one, the little girl rejects the twins, humiliating them by her certainty that they do not even know what “fuck” means. When she turns away from them, deliberately drawing attention to her preference for playing with her toy stroller, the twins complain, “They’re so different from us,” and go home to dissect a doll-size female anatomy model, whose diagnosis, “interovular surgery,” predicts their professional choice. The later sequence uses the same composition except that the twins now bend over not a small doll but the cadaver of an adult female. Their childhood defenses are sustained into maturity; together, they open up and operate on women, developing the instruments they will ultimately turn on themselves.

In addition to establishing the film’s thematic connections among twinship, gynecology, and misogyny, the two-part overture offers a microcosm of the film’s structure. Roughly the first half of the film centers on the twins’ relations to each other through their relations to Claire Niveau, whereas the second half focuses exclusively and directly on the relationship between the two brothers. As in the short introductory sequences, rejection by a woman prompts the twins to turn inward, toward each other. But

the drugs that replace the woman as the mediation between them are not a perfect alternative: the shift changes the basis for separation and connection from an external one, outside the body, to an internal one, inside the body. It measures the regression the twins undergo after they fail to achieve separate identities through their relationship with Claire. Heterosexual intercourse offers them the possibility of metaphorically merging with each other as they each penetrate the same female body, but they seek the internal merger that drugs offer. The injection of narcotics enables them to “get synchronized,” as Elliot calls the experience, allowing them to incorporate their mother by artificially inducing an oceanic state.<sup>6</sup> The substitution of drugs for Claire divides the film in half and makes both parts as symmetrical as the two opening sequences.

As gynecologists at work in a fertility clinic, the “Fabulous Mantle Twins” work in unison to turn women into mothers. They specialize in female fertility; they do not deliver babies and they “don’t do husbands.” The thrust of their research, as we see in the second of the two introductory sequences, is the development of increasingly sophisticated tools that open the female body in order to make it fertile. The Mantle retractor, the early invention that makes their careers, is their first step in developing the technology to work themselves out of the womb. Significantly, in what may be the most uncomfortable scene in the film, the increasingly psychotic Bev attempts to perform an internal gynecological examination with the gold retractor they are awarded in the second introductory sequence. This misuse establishes both his confusion of the inside of the body with the outside and his displacement of the vagina and uterus onto the abdominal region, foreshadowing Elliot’s gruesome death. In surgery a retractor is used to separate tissue to expose the area that will be operated on; the instrument replaces the need for assistants to hold back the tissue. For the twins, instruments facilitate the substitution of one region of the body for another, one type of body (male) for another (female); for Cronenberg, the instruments of film not only facilitate the substitution of one body for another, one Jeremy Irons for another, but, like the retractor, ultimately replace the two bodies altogether.

The film proper begins with Claire Niveau in gynecological stirrups. She is immediately fascinating to both twins, though apparently for different reasons. She appeals to Elliot because she is a movie star and he is, as he says, “into glamour”; she appeals to Bev because she is anatomically deformed. Claire’s sterility, caused by her trifurcated cervix, attracts Bev for a number of reasons: first, her quasi-maternal behavior toward him in their scenes of affection is not threatened by the possibility of actual maternity; second, Bev can imagine that she could “go them one better” in her fantasy of having triplets; and third, her deformity confirms his sense that something is wrong with women, that they are mutants. But if Claire provides Bev with the opportunity to conflate his two misogynistic convictions, that women are deformed freaks and that mothers are threatening, she is also the victim of Elliot’s antagonistic comments about her sexual avail-

ability as a “show-biz lady” and of his insinuation that she, rather than Bev, is the drug addict. She threatens the equilibrium between the brothers; significantly, her name translates as the “clear level” of separation that they ambivalently seek. She is disruptive because she points up the possibility that their separating from each other might entail separating from their mother. She undoes the twins completely when she insists on seeing them together.

Claire’s challenge is based on her expectation as a movie star—and on ours as movie viewers—that the film cannot show the twins together in a single frame and maintain the aesthetic sophistication and the aesthetic of sophistication established in the stylized set designs. But, as Elliot Mantle says, and as the film has thus far demonstrated, “we have the technology.” Jeremy Irons has been shown standing beside himself, playing two roles, without any interruption in the flow of the movie and without the screen’s being split down the middle.<sup>7</sup> Even though we have already witnessed this technical achievement, we experience Claire’s challenge as a challenge to the film itself. We do so because Cronenberg is not content merely to use technical innovations; instead, he introduces them into the plot.

Until this point in the film, the twins have counted on their indistinguishability, each substituting for the other in Claire’s bed. But in the confrontation scene between Bujold and the two Jeremy Ironses, Claire learns to tell the twins apart; indeed, she claims it is easy. Watching this scene, we are forced to distinguish not only between Elliot and Bev but also between Jeremy Irons and Jeremy Irons. Although this is psychically possible, it is physically impossible; and in being forced to acknowledge this contradiction, we are forced to adopt a technical perspective to which we subordinate our experience of viewing the film. With the twins played by Jeremy Irons, a recognizable star, instead of by unknowns—who might actually be, or whom we might believe to be, twins—Cronenberg uses technology not to produce verisimilar effects but to extend the concerns of the film to the medium itself. He self-referentially highlights the film as technology. Like the twins, we as viewers are separated from something by instruments: they are separated from each other, and we are separated from our experience of the movie. Our alignment with them is reinforced because their doubleness is an effect of the film.

Significantly, the next time we see the twins together in a “single” frame, Cronenberg draws attention to both the new technique and its limitations. We see the twins walking down the hallway of their clinic, discussing Claire—Elliot dressed in a suit and tie and Bev, who is just coming from the operating room, dressed in “reds,” the movie’s bizarre rendering of surgical gear. Bev, the one in love with Claire, walks slightly behind Elliot. This scene has an uncanny impact for several reasons: the two Jeremy Ironses approach the camera together, even though the one slightly behind appears slightly smaller and slightly higher up; the birdlike way the twins look at each other as they speak recalls the shot of the two nine-year-olds in the



film's first sequence. As the children, who are actually twins, walk side by side, they make an exaggerated attempt to prevent their bodies from appearing to overlap. By visually referring to this scene, Cronenberg foregrounds the limitations of the soft-matte composite editing in order to establish the differences between the actual twins and the singular actor. But the seamed scene that exposes the singularity of the actor, thereby also revealing the illusory elements of the film, does not enable us to dismiss the shot as "just a trick." In alluding to the real twins, the later scene literalizes the doubleness of the twins Irons plays. Cronenberg orchestrates our perceptions: when we can see that a film technique is responsible for making one actor appear to be separate characters, then we can also see that the film is about their not being separate (or separable) at all.

Unlike twin movies that ultimately disclose twinship because it is either associated with a criminal secret, as in Brian de Palma's *Sisters*, or mythologically or structurally required for the film's symmetry, as in Peter Greenaway's *Zed and Two Noughts*, *Dead Ringers* takes twinship as its point of departure, its first premise, its subject. It can then explore a set of related problems: differentiating the inside from the outside of the body, regression, separation, and the fusion of identities. In a strange way, twinship itself becomes irrelevant in the movie; or rather, it becomes a way of explaining (and, by doubling, of emphasizing) a bond between two characters, a bond that could exist between siblings, friends, or lovers.

For the focus of the film to shift to the twins, Claire Niveau must be turned into a pretext. Having made the twins separate and inserted herself between them, she leaves to make her own movie. Her bequest is drug addiction, figured in the piece of flesh that attaches the twins to each other in Bev's nightmare of separation. In the nightmare Claire bites through the tissue connecting the conjoined brothers and extracts from it between her teeth a bloody babylike object. Significantly, Bev takes Seconal, the preventive medicine Claire vouches for, in order not to "dream that dream again." After her departure, the twins' drug addiction makes their separation impossible. It is in their "getting synchronized" that the story of the first Siamese twins is mentioned, and after this moment, the Mantles seem to have decided to treat each other as if they shared a bloodstream.

But the shift from an external to an internal mediation has been figured from the beginning. Examining Claire Niveau and elaborating what turns out to be more than a pun on inner beauty, Elly says to her, "I've often thought there should be beauty contests for the inside of the body. You know, best spleen. Why don't we have standards of beauty for the entire human body, inside and out?" Claire murmurs, "I believe you do." The standards for inner beauty are, of course, what the rest of the movie elaborates. Elly's insides prove irresistibly attractive. In the scene in which Bev awakens to find his brother dead, the camera pans around the room, coyly avoiding a head-on look at

the exposed intestines even as it moves inexorably toward them. One senses that only the directorial decision to keep Bev in the frame with Elly's body (and Bev keeps his distance from it) restrains the camera from zooming in.

The substitution of drugs for female mediation between the twins is most clearly dramatized during the scene in which Elliot literally gets a woman to stand between him and Bev. In this visualized instance of what Eve Sedgwick calls the "homosocial," all three dance, and the two brothers caress each other through and over the body of the woman between them. But the effectiveness of the homosocial scenario has reached the end point for the Mantle twins. A woman can no longer mediate between them, allowing them to maintain their dyad within a triadic structure, because the inside of the body has replaced the outside as the grounds for connectedness or separation. After dancing with Elliot at his request, Bev collapses, and Elliot shoves the woman out of the way to resuscitate his brother mouth to mouth.

Turning to the inside of the body follows a logic that culminates in turning the body inside out at the end of the film. Drug addiction is the transitional phase. Once the question of "inner beauty" is raised, the movie can address it through the twins' transformation of gynecological tools into instruments "for separating Siamese twins." The twins' descent into drug abuse may at first seem to have more to do with Claire Niveau than with anything inherent in their relationship. But as Elliot calmly crams pills into his mouth in order to stay awake to make sure that Bev stays drug-free, they exchange the places of addict and detoxifier. The distinction that Claire's presence has allowed us to draw between them vanishes. Drugs make them once again undifferentiable, and their attempts to share each other's experiences by monitoring exactly what goes into the bloodstream become an extension of their desire to control the inside of the body, the mysterious (because separate) house of identity. Their escalating drug use is of a piece with their obsession with discovering the difference between the inside and the outside of the body. What goes in and what comes out and how these processes are controlled—these elements are common to gynecology and drug addiction. Indeed, drugs become the film's realization of the brothers' folie à deux.

In the second half of the film, with the virtual disappearance of women, the withdrawal of the twins into their private world of drug addiction, and the violence one finally inflicts on the other, two psychoanalytic narratives seem relevant: Freud's discussion of paranoia in "The Case of Schreber" (12: 3–82) and Lacan's analysis of the crimes of the Papin sisters ("Motifs").<sup>8</sup> I introduce them here not because they provide the interpretive leverage to decode *Dead Ringers* but because they tell parallel tales. As narratives, Freud's account of Schreber, Lacan's of the Papin sisters, and Cronenberg's of the Mantle twins all share elements of narcissism, paranoia, projection, and violence against vision. These curious correspondences suggest that homosexuality and aggression against the

maternal, elements that are present in the psychoanalytic stories, may be implicit in Cronenberg's film as well.

In "The Case of Schreber," Freud draws connections among narcissism, homosexuality, and paranoia. Tracing paranoia to a "weak spot in the development [of the ego] . . . somewhere between the stages of auto-eroticism, narcissism and homosexuality" (12:62), he suggests that a disturbance during the narcissistic stage leads to a fixation that results in homosexual fantasies. These in turn are projected outward and experienced as fantasies of persecution: "I love him" becomes "he hates me and wants to harm me." For our purposes, the developmental, or causal, account is less compelling than Freud's association of narcissism, projection, and the paranoid violence Schreber calls "soul-murder."

Narcissism and projection also accompany paranoia in Jacques Lacan's account of lesbian incest. The Papin sisters brutally murdered the mother and daughter of the house in which they were servants. According to Lacan, they were motivated by mutual incestuous homosexual desire, which they projected onto their victims, whom they mutilated. Lacan reports that the elder sister, who suffered delusional episodes in prison while she awaited execution, asserted, "Je crois bien que dans une autre vie, je devrais être le mari de ma sœur" 'I really think that in another life, I ought to be my sister's husband' ("Motifs" 397; my trans.).<sup>9</sup> Significantly, the desire for incest that Christine Papin articulates in her delusion is not altogether absent from Schreber's. Freud remarks that in depicting his relationship to God, Schreber gives the Persian name "Ahriman" to part of God; Schreber himself notes that this name derives from Byron's play about sibling incest, *Manfred* (12:44). If Christine Papin speaks for the real-life twins on whose story *Dead Ringers* is based, Stewart and Cyril Marcus, who apparently were incestuous homosexuals, her desire also reveals an aspect of the Mantle twins, who, apart from their incestuous longings, are not depicted as homosexuals in Cronenberg's film: they desire not only to be each other's lover but to attack the lady of the house, who can only be understood as a maternal figure. By eliminating the homosexuality of the twins, Cronenberg transposes sibling incest from an essentially nonhierarchical plane onto a vertical, parent-child axis, thereby reinforcing the mother-child relation as the paradigm of separation. Since there is no mother to suffer the aggression or violence that might accomplish separation, Cronenberg's twins use each other. They develop gynecological instruments into tools to cut them apart, implements that Bev calls tools to separate Siamese twins. By having Bev carve open Elly's abdomen with these instruments, Cronenberg visualizes the twins acting out their separation from each other as a separation of the child from the mother's body.

In an article called "Paranoia and the Film System," Jacqueline Rose develops the connections

between the paranoia described in psychoanalytic accounts and the mother-child relationship that, she claims, is the paradigm for all the relationships in Hitchcock's film *The*

*Birds*. She notes that the film directs aggression against the female protagonist, Melanie Daniels, and against the viewer as a way of enacting closure. It hardly matters that Hitchcock's movie centers on a female character while Cronenberg's does not, for as Rose points out, female is a position in this dynamic. "The woman is centered in the clinical manifestation of paranoia as position. . . . In the case of Schreber, the attack actually transforms his body into that of a woman" (156). The French psychoanalyst Sami-Ali restates the connections among narcissism, homosexuality, and paranoia to emphasize the ways Schreber transforms the visual into the tactile:

Il est vrai cependant que l'expérience du corps chez Schreber reste dominée par la vision, non au sens ordinaire du terme où voir est distinct de l'objet vu, mais à cet autre sens où la vision, amplifiée à l'excès, portée par le délire jusqu'aux confins du réel, ne fait plus qu'un avec l'œil et avec le visible. . . . L'œil est ce qu'il voit et il est vu par ce qu'il voit: telle est la structure d'inclusions réciproques qui définit la vision dans le système schrébérien.

(56)

It is true nonetheless that Schreber's bodily experience remains dominated by vision, not in the ordinary sense of the term, in which seeing is distinct from the object seen, but rather in another sense, in which vision, amplified beyond the norm, transported by delirium to the boundaries of the real, is one with the eye and the visible. . . . The eye is what it sees and is seen by what it sees: this is the structure of reciprocal inclusions that defines vision in the Schreberian system.

(my trans.)

Freud is also concerned with visuality in "The Case of Schreber," in that he connects narcissism, homosexuality, paranoia, and "projection," a term with felicitous applications to film (12:66). And in Lacan's account the Papin sisters gouge out the eyes of their victims, a brutal detail that Lacan dwells on in offering this concluding interpretation of their crime:

Au soir fatidique, dans l'anxiété d'une punition imminente, les sœurs mêlent à l'image de leurs maîtresses le mirage de leur mal. C'est leur détresse qu'elles détestent dans le couple qu'elles entraînent dans un atroce quadrille. Elles arrachent les yeux comme châtraient les Bacchantes.

(398)

That fateful evening, anxious about their impending punishment, the sisters mix their mistresses' image with the mirage of their own evil. It is their own distress that they hate in the pair whom they are leading into a hideous quadrille. They gouge out eyes the way the Bacchantes castrated.

(my trans.)

Whereas the Papin sisters see themselves in their victims and therefore destroy the mother's and daughter's eyes, Cronenberg makes us see the Mantle twins in a mother-child relationship and registers the one's destruction of the

other by another instrument of vision, the camera. By eliding the twins' possible homosexuality and thereby transferring incest from the horizontal, intersibling plane to the vertical, parent-child plane, Cronenberg relocates the destructive energy against the visual into the camera's and the viewer's passive recording of destructive violence. The impetus of the film is toward Bev's exposing the inside of his brother's body. The psychoanalytic elements—narcissism (incest) and projection (violence)—are all present in the film but positioned differently. And the incompleteness of the analogy between psychoanalytic discourse and the film medium opens up the possibility of relocation. The relation between psychoanalysis and film can, of course, be expressed in other ways, but nothing in psychoanalysis corresponds to the technology of the camera. From this perspective, Cronenberg's film points to one consequence of treating the separation of mother and child as paradigmatic: recording this separation, Cronenberg's camera both keeps the viewer (i.e., the subject) passive and acquits itself of any aggression beyond recording.

In her essay "Imaging," Teresa de Lauretis finds fault with the notion that "alternative cinema" should aim at destroying visual pleasure oppressive to women (the concept of visual pleasure is Mulvey's; see n2). Such a goal, she argues, would involve the destruction of all cinema. Peter Greenaway's *Zed and Two Noughts*, a film that shares subject matter with *Dead Ringers*, is a good example of the Brechtian technique de Lauretis associates with this goal, which she uses Mulvey's words to characterize as the attempt to "free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics, passionate detachment" (de Lauretis 60). Greenaway has his twins set up a time-lapse camera to record their joint suicide by intravenous injection. By incorporating the camera into the film, Greenaway locates the viewer at one remove, watching a camera record rather than watching the twins decay. By contrast, Cronenberg uses technology to force the issues of visibility, paranoia, and the violence of separation that are conjoined for the twins in the vision of the viewer. Foregrounding the film's instruments by letting the viewer see their effects and also their effectiveness rather than by having them appear, Cronenberg can be said to "represent the play of contradictory precepts and meanings usually elided in representation, and so to enact the contradictions of women as social subjects, to perform the terms of the specific division of the female subject in language, in imaging, in the social" (de Lauretis 69).

If, in *Dead Ringers*, the quest for standards of beauty for the inside of the body is on a continuum with the artist's pursuit (the archaic-looking gynecological instruments are exhibited by their sculptor in an art gallery), it also leads directly to the claim Bev makes that there is nothing wrong with the instruments he has crafted and to his corollary insistence that there must be something wrong with the women's bodies on which he has used them. The scientific reliance on the precision of instruments is as desirable in a doctor as is the imagination of the grotesque in an artist.

In this scene, Cronenberg reveals that the basis of reliance on instruments, whether the gynecologist's speculum, the sculptor's chisel, or the filmmaker's camera, is panic about what the body actually is like. For this reason Cronenberg unflinchingly pursues the twins' hostility toward the female body to its inexorable conclusion, the disembowelment of one male body to make visible its separability from the brother's and to expose the difference between it and a female body.

Cronenberg's other films seem to a large degree preoccupied with fantasies about the female body and its ability to give birth: *The Brood* and *Scanners* deal with the consequences of birth defects; in *Videodrome*, James Woods's body develops a vaginal slit in the abdominal region; and in *The Fly*, Cronenberg himself, like the Mantles, appears as a gynecologist.<sup>10</sup> In the credit sequences that open and close *Dead Ringers*, Cronenberg shows a series of Renaissance anatomical illustrations of the female body that depict the inside of the womb as if the abdomen had been opened up. At the end of the film the body of Jeremy Irons is offered as an updated version of these plates, testimonials to the filmmaker as gynecologist or to the camera as speculum.

For Irigaray, women can never really be represented by male discourse even if they appear; for de Lauretis, women are always represented, even when they do not appear. The interpenetration of subject matter and technique in *Dead Ringers* enacts the contradictory position of women that de Lauretis outlines. The film reflects a powerful male fantasy and its impossibility: the ability for a man to give birth to himself without the mediation of a maternal body. The acquisition of male identity in this fantasy requires that the female body be excluded and that violence be done to its substitute. Like the fantasy, the film fails to represent women as anything other than mothers (though they may remain infertile). Even if this failure is regarded as an (Irigarayan) failure in principle, the power of *Dead Ringers* is that it records the cost to the male body.<sup>11</sup>

#### Notes

1. Jacques Lacan, whose originary essay "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I" outlines the simultaneous acquisition of language and subjectivity (*Ecrits* 1–7), has particularly influenced film theorists such as Christian Metz, Jean-Louis Baudry, and Kaja Silverman. Carol Clover's "Her Body, Himself: Gender in the Slasher Film" illustrates that film analysis interested in deploying psychoanalytic categories can benefit from formulating generic and subgeneric boundaries.
2. Starting with Laura Mulvey's now famous article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," feminist film theory has concerned itself both with representations of women and with the female spectator. Mulvey explicitly appropriates psychoanalytic theory to film analysis as a "political weapon [to] demonstrate the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has



structured film form" (57). Her interest in classic Hollywood productions stems from her observation that the cinema, "[a]s an advanced representation system, . . . poses questions of the ways the unconscious (formed by the dominant order) structures ways of seeing and pleasure in looking" (58). In "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Inspired by *Duel in the Sun*," she offers some modifications to account for the pleasures of the female spectator.

By contrast, Jacqueline Rose characterizes "female" as a position, so that the concept applies to both the spectator and the filmed object of view ("Paranoia"). Whereas this formulation is a welcome complication of the issue of the viewer's or character's gender, it still ignores the ways in which an instrument—the camera—structures the spectator's relation to the film. In other essays, specifically "The Imaginary" and "The Cinematic Apparatus—Problems in Current Theory" (*Sexuality*), Rose discusses the applicability of Lacanian theory to film and some modifications each might have to undergo.

Linda Williams provides a useful outline of various strands of feminist film theory ("Power"). From a perspective informed by Foucault's understanding of the power-pleasure intersection, she interrogates the interpretive power of the language-screening room analogy in promoting both criteria of realism and certain representations of women ("Film Body," "Power").

3. One might begin discussing the differences between the instrumentality of theory and the instruments of film technology by examining Irigaray's account of male theory, particularly Platonism, as it relates to women and comparing it with Baudry's operational analogy of the cinematic apparatus and Plato's cave. In the section of *Speculum of the Other Woman* called "Any Theory of the 'Subject' Has Always Been Appropriated by the 'Masculine,'" which is also called "Speculum," Irigaray makes clear the ways in which male theory projects a female other that precludes "the specificity of [woman's] own relationship to the imaginary" (133).

The status of the unrepresentable that Irigaray claims for women makes clear the male stakes in representation per se, but as Judith Butler points out in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, this way of thinking about gender identity has political consequences since it preserves a pretheoretical notion of female identity.

4. In other words, we need to accommodate the differences between a discourse (psychoanalysis) whose theory and practice use the same means of representation (technologies of language) and a medium (film) whose theory and practice use different means of representation (e.g., technologies of language, psychoanalysis, technical accounts of shot and counter-shot, the technology of the camera, the film reels, the lights, and the acting).

5. This ending is entirely Cronenberg's invention. Bari Wood and Jack Geasland's novelized version of the story—which, like the film, is based on the real-life twins Stewart and Cyril Marcus—gives the brothers' deaths an antihomosexual twist. In the book, Michael Ross (the character corresponding to Bev), who is married and identified as straight, is seduced by his gay brother into homosexual sex. Their last months are spent together in a degenerative debauch of sex and drugs that culminates in Michael's agreeing to give his brother an overdose of barbiturates by injection into a hemorrhoid (340). Considering that the authors wholly imagine the site of the injection, one can hardly ignore their equation of anal penetration and murder-suicide.

6. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Sigmund Freud elaborates the concept of the "oceanic feeling" through the image of the infant at the breast "who does not as yet distinguish his ego from the external world as the source of the sensations flowing in upon him" (21: 66–67). The use of narcotics reproduces this perceptual state; from this point of view, we can regard the twins' drug addiction as regressive.

7. Computer programming allows the camera to be much more fluid than in the days of Hayley Mills in *The Parent Trap*; now that the camera can be guaranteed to pan and dolly the same way twice, the screen can be spliced more precisely. As Michael Peyser, the producer of *Big Business*, explains the technique, "After the 'A' and 'B' sides of a scene are shot, they are subtly composited using a soft-edged matte so that the splicing point is virtually invisible" (Kearney).

8. Jean Genet took the real-life Papin sisters as the subjects for his play *The Maids*, but whereas Genet depicts their crimes as class-inspired, Lacan sees their actions as psychotic manifestations of incestuous lesbian desires.

9. Janet Flanner discusses the case at length. She translates Christine Papin's remark as "Sometimes I think in former lives that I was my sister's husband." She also quotes a question Christine asked in court that has some relevance in this context: "Where was I before I was in the belly of my mother?" (102).

10. David Cronenberg's movies supply Tania Modleski with most of her examples of how the contemporary horror film confounds the distinction between mass culture and high culture. Arguing persuasively that there is a widespread, though hidden, adoption of an adversarial attitude toward mass culture, Modleski points out the falseness of the opposition between the two forms. She shows that the downgrading of mass art often manifests itself in the punishments allotted to pleasure, which is embodied as a woman and considered debased. The example of Cronenberg should in no way be taken as the first step in an argument elevating him from mass- to high-art status; rather, his representations of the intersections among

pleasure, fear, and gender should be taken as indicating male fantasy with as much accuracy as we can get.

11. Thanks are due to Rick Trembles for alerting me to the merits of Cronenberg and to the quotation from Scorsese that serves as my epigraph. I also want to thank Balsmeyer and Everett and David Cronenberg Productions for the illustrations. Discussions with Beth Pittenger provoked me to write this paper. It gives me pleasure to acknowledge her suggestions, as well as those of Bonnie Honig, Kim Ganoudis, Tim Dean, Michael Moon, and Jonathan Goldberg. They helped give the paper its shape.

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#### Donald Lyons (review date January 1992)

SOURCE: "Lubricating the Muse," in *Film Comment*, Vol. 28, No. 1, January, 1992, pp. 14–6.

[In the following review, Lyons writes about the typewriter and the bug it turns into in *Naked Lunch*.]

The typewriter is a lonely place. The typewriter is also a doorway into a crowded theater of beings from the Id that, if the writer is not very careful, or especially if he is, will destroy him. The typewriter is a major fetish in some

recent films. Why? From a materialist view, the typewriter is obsolescent, a talisman of late-bourgeois literariness now increasingly replaced by the instant, disembodied community of the modem. So these meditations on the dying implement are elegiac, like Ford on the cavalry. From a biographical viewpoint, many filmmakers now do their own writing and thus have a feel for the cavalry of verbal composition. They at least sense the metaphoric possibilities of typewriter-as-camera. Many of today's auteurs, also, are products of a Sixties Romanticism, either at first hand through coming of age then, or at second hand through a prolonged nostalgia for the decade. The Romanticism of the Sixties was intensely, if narrowly, literary, with a pantheon of *écrivains maudits*: Blake, Rimbaud, Huxley, Ginsberg, Kerouac, Burroughs, Genet. It is incense to such idols that perfumes the recent air.

Case in point: a modest, harmless little film called *Where Sleeping Dogs Lie*, directed by Charles Finch and written by Finch and Yolande Turner, who are the son and widow of the actor Peter Finch. It tells the story of a highbrow young writer in Hollywood (Dylan McDermott in a finely judged performance) unable to sell his work and temping as a real-estate agent. He moves into an empty mansion where, years back, a family was sadistically slain by an unfound killer; he begins writing a very commercial true-crime thriller about that. A creepy lodger turns up, offering surprisingly detailed help with the MS. and soon taking over the actual writing. The setup recapitulates the Faustian bargain (and in almost the very terrain) in *Sunset Boulevard*, but this Joe Gillis writes not *Salome* but *Fatal Vision*. *Dogs* is an enjoyable, if predictable, movie that minds its Ps and Qs genrewise until the very end, when the writer must dash off to save his happily married, perfect-family sister whose address he's let slip to his tenant. In general, though, hints of doppelgänger and perversity bubble unseen in the subtext.

*Dogs* seems at times (quite coincidentally, no doubt) a whole-grain, Spago take on *Barton Fink* (Karl Mundt, it will be remembered, has perhaps visited Fink's Brooklyn family, whose telephone does not answer). Barton Fink (John Turturro) finds typewriter to be vortex, a swirling toilet taking him through blood to the sea. Back in New York, he had written a hit prole play, improbably called *Bare Ruined Choirs* from a Shakespeare sonnet; but this was a phony idealization of the common man, a commodity unknown to Fink. Systematic belittling of literature runs through the Coen brothers' film. Since Fink has no being other than emblematic writerliness, and since his writerliness is that of Clifford Odets, it is fair to observe—not complain, just observe—that Odetsian naturalism in NY and Odetsian melodrama in LA were both far richer than the Coens' clever reductions.

The Coens play the typewriter like a grandmaster forcing thirty rookies to resign; they annihilate one by one the possibilities of creativity. The "Barton Fink touch" turns out to be bloody; the Common Man turns out to be Hitler; the Wallace Beery wrestling picture turns out to be a Char-

ley Meadows (Manson?) slasher. Faulkner, the century's best American writer, is whittled to a mean, drunken fraud (John Mahoney) abusing his muse-cum-ghost Audrey (Judy Davis), who is the real author of his magnum opus, *Nebuchadnezzar* (the Hitlerian, megalomaniacal destroyer of Jerusalem, be it noted, replaces the tormented Absalom as biblical eponym).

The room where Fink types is a sweaty Venus fly-trap, or is it a vagina? Audrey arrives late one night to talk story, but some male—"Faulkner" or Fink or Meadows (John Goodman)—resents her sharing of Muse-ness and flushes her generosity. After the crudely symbolic fire at film's climax, Fink sits by the ocean and chats up a pretty girl who's come to life from a kitschy mezzotint. The Maenads cut off the head of Orpheus, inventor of poetry, and threw it into the sea; Fink carries his Muse's head in a neat box by the sea. Will he need more boxes, say one per script? Typewriters are thirsty for blood. In its freewheeling nihilism, *Barton Fink* finds no target it can resist pulverizing. Its slaphappy satirical scratching results in an SCTV version of *In a Lonely Place*. And so, perhaps inevitably in the light of its ambitions, *Fink* fudges artistic tact, lurching wildly back and forth from text to subtext.

But it is the incarnation of tact compared to *Kafka*, directed by Steven Soderbergh from a Lem Dobbs script. The setting is a 1919 Prague, lushly filmed in black and white by Walt Lloyd. The dismal conceit is this: A man called Kafka (Jeremy Irons, phoning it in), who works in a rigidly bureaucratized insurance office by day and writes weird stories ("I'm working on a story about a man who turns into a giant insect") and an endless letter to his father by night, gets caught up in investigating the mysterious disappearance of a coworker. He hooks up with a gang of anarchists who assure him that "a coverup of monumental proportions" exists. "Coverup" in 1919?? He is told he must penetrate the looming Castle, locus of evil. He enters various narrow chambers (files, marble slabs, elevators, tunnels underneath cemeteries) to emerge into a red-tinged Castle where a wicked Dr. Murnau (a typically sophomoric and pointless allusion) is experimenting with live people in order to create "a more efficient person," a race of supinely obedient and identical helots. Cackles Murnau (Ian Holm): "The modern: you write it . . . I embrace it" Ripostes Kafka: "I write nightmares—you build them." Taking a leaf from Indiana "Nazis . . . I hate 'em!" Jones, Kafka blows up the lab real good, though the scandal will all be covered up by the cops. He is last seen coughing blood onto his typewriter as he sends out his alarming intuitions of the future to his father and the world.

Lloyd's distinguished camerawork is wasted on this embarrassingly reductivist nonsense, which tries to visualize a literal adventure at the source of Kafka's literary vision. It is a task that might have suited the creamily purulent imaginings of a William Burroughs, but Dobbs's imagination of evil is wholly beholden to the comic-book mentality of Fu Manchu and Ming the Merciless. Nor does *Kafka* seem in control of its Freudian subtext, for it has its hero crawling



back into the womb and exploding it—which was not Kafka's problem. For its subterranean delvings the filmmakers credit the influence of *The Third Man*, filmed in nearby Vienna. Well yeah, if you can picture *The Third Man* delicately remade by Oliver Stone. Soderbergh was much more coherent and charming about post-typewriter technology (*sex, lies & videotape*).

David Cronenberg is a generation older than Soderbergh. His *Naked Lunch*, a film he wrote and directed, is infectious self-confidence, very sure of its idiom, and assured about what it wants to and can do. It is, first of all, not really a film of *Naked Lunch*, the 1959 Burroughs work whose form involved wanton repetition and aleatory arrangement and whose content consisted of cadenzas of excretions, many at the instant of death. Plus drug pathology to the max. "Unfilmable" is much too mild a word. So instead, using *Naked Lunch* and other Burroughsiana like *Exterminator* and *Junkie* and biographies and gossip, Cronenberg has made a fantasy about Burroughs's relation to writing—and, very specifically, to typewriters. As the director says, it is "a combination of Burroughsian material, but put into a structure that's not very Burroughsian." And all the better for that.

Things start in New York with Bill Lee (Peter Weller), the Burroughs surrogate, working as an exterminator to support his odd writing. He has two pals not unlike Kerouac and Ginsberg. He has a wife, Joan, addicted to shooting up roach powder cut with baby laxative; "It's a Kafka high," she says, "you feel like a bug. Try some." Soon, the Cronenberg tics kick in: insects, paranoia, conspiracy, doubles. A big talking bug inducts Lee into secret-agentry and addiction. It is only the first of a gallery of great chattering blobs from the Id (they correspond to no known species)—all of whom, by the way, are much wittier than the roughly equivalent De Niro character in *Cape Fear*. Their shapes work visual riffs on vaginas and penises; they are Lee's controls in the secret spy conspiracy; they are, pointedly, the very typewriters that type up the spy reports and that wind up typing *Naked Lunch* all on their own.

Lee flees NY after shooting Joan in the head while doing their "William Tell routine." He heads for Interzone, his own private Tangiers. (Happily, Cronenberg was prevented by the Gulf War from shooting in the real Tangiers, and had to come up, à la von Sternberg, with a better one in Toronto.) The first thing he's asked there is, "You a faggot?" "Not by nature" is the answer, but that's soon changed—although one never loses a sense that Cronenberg is a bit squirmy with the seeping homosexuality.

The first order of business in the new place is to buy a typewriter to type a report on Joan's death. When Lee nods off, the machine metamorphoses into a palpy but sarcastic bug drawling, "This is no time to doze off like a freckle-faced boy on a fishing raft." No Huck, Lee listens when the typebug advises that "homosexuality is the best cover an agent ever had." Saying this, the typebug orgasms.

Lee then meets Tom and Joan Frost (read Paul and Jane Bowles). In a hilarious scene, Tom's Id voices hatred of Joan while his lips talk of typewriter makes—that governing obsession of the film's many writers. Bugs and drugs multiply, all nonliteral creations of Cronenberg's. Lee's control typebug pressures him to seduce Joan, who, however, writes in longhand, can use an Arabic typewriter, and is sexual thrall to her Arab housekeeper, a lesbian dominatrix witch (and much else, if the truth be known. . .). "Kerouac" and "Ginsberg" pop up to try to take Lee back to the U.S., but he resists, saying, "America is not a young land; it is old and dirty and evil"—a characteristic Burroughsian paradox. He is tied to his typewriter, now become his supplier, too; it "dispenses two kinds of intoxicating fluids when it likes what you've written."

Secret controls are everywhere. So is metamorphosis: Lee's Arab minion is buggered and buggified by a decadent queen (Julian Sands). After some bizarre climactic metamorphoses, Lee gets hooked on "mugwump gissom," a bug excretion (and also typewriter fluid?), and takes off with Joan Frost in a van from Interzone for Annexia (= USSR). Forced at Annexia customs to "write something," he shoots Joan in the head and is at once let in. What he has done, however, doesn't count, for the machine has assured him that "you were programmed to shoot your wife—it was not an act of free will—she was a centipede."

Peter Weller is an articulate, dry, ironic Lee, an *agent* as well as a Fink-like recipient of horror. The haunting Judy Davis plays both Muse-like Joans; Ian Holm gets Tom Frost well. *Naked Lunch* is, among other things, the real *Sheltering Sky*. That is, it puts the inertly oddball Bowleses in a context of (perverse, of course) wit and irony, something denied them among Bertolucci's irritating sandscapes and sexually correct Tuaregs. Cronenberg's dazzling iconic repertoire, as proficient an accomplishment as the invention of a new language, works; it fleshes out (or rubbers out) and dramatizes the Burroughsian Id and Ego and Superego. Cronenberg imparts a Sternbergian savagery to the dialogue, and a darkly barreling energy to the narrative, that manages to echo *Kiss Me Deadly*. I found it, along with *My Own Private Idaho* (product of another Burroughs fan), the funniest film of the year.

The measure of distance between the Apollonian control of Cronenberg and the Dionysian wallow of Burroughs is a nice question. Whatever its intent, the film is totally depoliticized by the hallucinatory solipsism of the central figure. If *this guy* thinks it's all a gigantic conspiracy, then it probably isn't. And the drugs and the sex come out looking like mere functions of some deep prior psychic disturbance. About the only thing that doesn't dissolve into something else is the writing—the *act* of writing and the *product* of writing—and even that has the smell of infantile wilfulness, justifying anything. The misogyny of the thing is thoroughgoing and coldblooded. Once again, the male typewriter is nourished by woman's blood. Joan Frost writes with a mere pen, like Jane Austen. Is she

above or beneath the machine? Is the typewriter necessarily an iconically patriarchal, uxoricidal instrument? So it would seem—at any rate, until some Eurydice fingers the keys to unlock her own map of the journey into art.

**Robert Palmer (essay date January/February 1992)**

SOURCE: "The Novelist, the Director, and the Mugwumps," in *American Film*, Vol. 17, No. 1, January/February, 1992, pp. 32–7.

[In the following essay, Palmer writes about the making of *Naked Lunch*, including a discussion of how Cronenberg reproduced the setting, characters, and themes evident in the William S. Burroughs novel on which it is based.]

*It was winter in Toronto; windy, chill and gray. I was strolling up a sloping cobblestone street in the Casbah of old Tangier, jostled by men in rough woolen djellabas, veiled women, donkeys braying under their bulging saddlebags, chickens squawking and pecking at the ground in search of edible morsels. The whitewashed walls of Arab houses loomed on either side of the alley-narrow street, their monotony relieved periodically by shops selling Berber handicrafts and low-ceilinged cafes where men sat on cushions at low tables, drinking Morocco's traditional mint tea.*

*As I rounded a corner, the arched door of one of the blank-walled houses opened and a young man—American or European perhaps, almost certainly a tourist—called my name. "Mr. Burroughs has arrived," he said. I followed him through the doorway and found myself on a New York street corner. The styling of the shiniest cars parked along the curb told me it was 1953.*

*"Let's hurry," the young man said. "Mr. Burroughs is going to meet the mugwumps."*

Really, officer I can explain everything. I'm not on drugs, and I think I'm relatively sane . . . or at least, I was relatively sane. Anyway, none of this is real. We're actually in this humongous, hangarlike warehouse in Toronto where David Cronenberg is directing his adaptation of William S. Burroughs' novel *Naked Lunch*. The anomalies of time and space are only apparent; this is 1991.

OK, I'll go to the station and answer your questions. But are you sure it's *this* way? I can't see a thing; it's pitch-black . . . except for that window over there.

What window? Can't you see it? There's a young man in there having sex with another man who seems to be metamorphosing into a large black centipede. Centipede flesh—"the black meat," they call it—is supposed to be the most powerful drug here in Interzone. I'm sure Mr. Burroughs and the mugwumps will be able to explain everything.

WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS, WHOSE *Naked Lunch* was highly controversial when it was first published in 1959, has waited a long time to see the creatures, transforma-

tions and other imagery of his fevered imagination made flesh. Burroughs is in his 70s now. His angular, hawklike face and rail-thin build still make him instantly recognizable, but there's also something genteel, almost patrician, about his demeanor. Everything about him suggests that he has made peace with the inner demons that drove him to heroin addiction and stoked the fires of his apocalyptic early writings. And in the mugwump room, part of the extensive domain of Chris Walas, Stephan Dupuis, Jim Isaac and their special-effects team, William S. Burroughs is going to fall in love.

The objects of his affection are the humanoid, man-size mugwumps, blue-skinned, scaly, vaguely reptilian. They are hairless, but atop their heads are ruffs or combs shaped something like punk rockers' mohawks. On closer inspection, the tubelike ruffs prove to be straws through which the marginally more human denizens of Interzone sip another of the local intoxicants, mugwump juice. The mugwump room is full of the things. They lean in clumps against the walls; and they hang from the ceiling, secured by heavy-metal chains, their wrists and ankles bound with thick leather straps.

Burroughs, his customary stone face betraying a gleam of something that might be glee, inspects several of the creatures methodically and minutely. In his long, shiny black coat and dark hat, Burroughs looks a bit reptilian himself. He recomposes his great stone face and sits in a chair among the mugwumps, uncharacteristically responsive to the demands of a photo opportunity. He sits patiently as any president on Mount Rushmore while cameras click and flashbulbs strobe, a fleshy, pink, slightly scorpionlike creature that the crew calls a "sex blob" at his feet. When the cameras stop clicking and he gets up, Burroughs allows himself a broad smile.

Cronenberg appears, wearing a black sweatshirt with an Interzone immigration stamp on the front and the words *Mutatis Mutandis* superimposed over the larger, black-on-black letters that spell out *Naked Lunch* on the back. His lightly graying, longish hair marks him as "a child of the '60s"—at a press conference for *Naked Lunch*, he called himself that. But behind his professorial black-rimmed glasses lurk incisively probing eyes and a no-nonsense clarity. As he sits in the chair recently vacated by Burroughs, he seems curiously Burroughsian—the same composed, bluff demeanor, the same hint of delight. Before the cameras start clicking again, he picks up the sex blob and puts it in his lap, a let's-see-if-we-can-freak-'em-out expression crossing his features like a cloud on a windy day. Burroughs is watching, lips pressed in a tight but mirthful grin, eyes sparkling.

Burroughs and Cronenberg seem to be having a very good time.

*Naked Lunch*, AFTER ITS INITIAL storiny reception, has come to be regarded as a classic, though perhaps a still-controversial one. It has had a broad and deep influence

on the arts, evident in the work of filmmakers (Nicholas Roeg, Ridley Scott, Donald Cammell) and rock musicians (David Bowie, Patti Smith and Steely Dan—a band named after a dildo in *Naked Lunch*) as well as in a broad range of fiction (from Thomas Pynchon to cyberpunk), and on an international scale. The book has a montagelike structure, with fragmented scenes viewed through distorted perceptions, linked by abrupt, jump cut—style transitions. Sometimes the reader's only cue that the scene is shifting is Burroughs' terse instruction "cut to. . . ." These and other devices help make *Naked Lunch* one of the most cinematic of all novels.

Nevertheless, several previous attempts to bring the novel to the screen foundered at the screenwriting stage. Cronenberg says flatly that a "literal translation from the page to the screen would be impossible." Burroughs provides little or no plot in the conventional sense, and the book's quick cuts veer unpredictably from episodes more or less naturalistic in tone to surreal, disorienting scenes to passages in which the links that bind words to meanings break down entirely. And for the most part, character is as fluid as narrative. Certain characters, such as the addict-writer William Lee and the callously flamboyant Dr. Benway, appear and reappear, threading through reiterated themes of control and addiction, authority and sexuality, perception and individuation like lines in a Bach fugue.

Among the episodes in *Naked Lunch* that some readers have found abhorrent are extreme, sexually triggered transformations in which men turn into giant centipedes and individuals blend and fuse. On the set in Toronto, I watch the filming of one such scene. The crew employs complex prosthetic devices and life-size replicas of the film's characters to render the transformation more or less literally from the novel. (The scene might not survive the final cut; Cronenberg must deliver an R-rated picture.)

In his adaptation, Cronenberg has extrapolated scenes from material outside of the novel and has focused the recurring themes into tighter clusters of concern. He has also made the William Lee character's point of view more consistently central, offering viewers a degree of orientation in space and time that the book deliberately withholds. "There are a lot of transitions," Cronenberg says, "but there are always some small indicators for the audience. Because audiences always end up saying, Is this real?—as if the movie itself had a reality."

During his Adolescence, Cronenberg thought of himself as a budding novelist; he spent some time living as an expatriate in Copenhagen, giving it a try. His principal inspirations were Burroughs and Vladimir Nabokov. But on their turf, Cronenberg felt like a poacher, writing in a mutant style that combined but could not transcend the influence of his literary heroes. Unwilling to spend a lifetime thinking himself a derivative artist, Cronenberg switched to filmmaking, a field in which he has developed a sensibility and a voice that are unmistakably his own.

He broke into the field as the writer-director of a string of horror films that were short on budget but long on original

ideas and highly personal iconography. Working in Toronto, far from the commercial pressures of Hollywood, he began with a series of unsettling, claustrophobic pictures some critics have labeled "venereal horror." In *They Came From Within* and *Rabid*, there are aliens but no spaceships or ray guns. The invaders are human-tailored micro-organisms that spread bizarre plagues or attack humans from within their own bodies. The concepts are explicitly Burroughsian, and subsequent films by Cronenberg further betrayed the novelist's influence. After capping his "invaders from within" cycle with the popular success and critical acclaim accorded *The Brood* and *Scanners*, he made *Videodrome*. The enemy still comes from within—the main character's hand metamorphoses into a pistol and his abdomen becomes the loading slot for a VCR. But there is also a concern with subjective reality versus media reality, a conflict that implicitly addresses the issue of freedom and control, a major theme throughout the Burroughs canon.

Addressing Burroughs work head-on seemed inevitable for Cronenberg, given his themes and obsessions, but he found himself limited by his association with the horror genre. Finally, the enormous success of his cult-classic remake *The Fly* enabled him to shift gears with *Dead Ringers*, the story of twin-brother gynecologists (both played by Jeremy Irons) whose psychological bonding leads them into drugs, disaster and death. Cronenberg's horror movies had addressed substantive issues from an intensely personal point of view; and there were horrors in *Dead Ringers*, but the movie was naturalistic in tone, with hardly any fantastic, supernatural or occult imagery. Still, Cronenberg had to finance the picture himself when DEG, the company backing it, collapsed.

"The whole question of genre, for me, is a marketing question," Cronenberg says during a break from the complex live-action and special-effects shooting on the *Naked Lunch* set. "And it's a critic's question. For me, creatively, it's not a question at all. I would have made *Dead Ringers* 10 years before I did make it if I'd been able to get the financing together for it. Then I would have had this non-genre movie early in my career instead of later. Often, I think, people's perceptions of imagery define what is a genre film and what isn't."

Like *Dead Ringers*, Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch* has had a long and sometimes tortuous gestation period. He was already at work on what eventually became his screenplay in 1980, when he met producer Jeremy Thomas (*The Last Emperor*, *The Sheltering Sky*) at Toronto's Festival of Festivals. "David's films and Burroughs' writing always fascinated me," says Thomas. "When I heard David wanted to do a film of *Naked Lunch*, I wanted to produce it, and I told him so." Cronenberg got in touch with Burroughs and, in 1985, the three principals traveled to Tangier together. Burroughs hadn't been back to the ancient Moroccan city across the straits from the Rock of Gibraltar since the early '60s. Much of *Naked Lunch* was written there during the '50s, while Burroughs struggled with his



heroin addiction. At the time, Tangier was a free port, under no national jurisdiction. Smuggling, deviance and art flourished freely there. Interzone, the phantasmagoric setting for much of Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*, was a contraction of "international zone."

When Thomas and Cronenberg had box-office hits with *The Last Emperor* and *The Fly*, respectively, they decided it was time to make their move. Cronenberg finished the first draft of his screenplay while in England to play the villain in Clive Barker's *Nightbreed*. He and Thomas began recruiting a cast and crew, and planning an extended stay in Tangier. The casting, both men agree, went very well indeed.

Peter Weller heard about the project while making *RoboCop 2*. "I grew up in the '60s, went to North Texas State to study jazz trumpet and read *Naked Lunch*," Weller recalls. "That book was the manual of disobedience for my whole generation. I was sitting in this clunky, incredibly heavy *RoboCop* suit between takes when someone mentioned David's *Naked Lunch* project to me. I got up—with some difficulty—and clumped into the trailer to dash off a letter to David. I felt that somehow I was *destined* to play William Lee in *Naked Lunch*. This isn't just another role for me, it's the dream of a lifetime."

As casting continued, a diverse collection of actors was assembled. Roy Scheider is playing the book's unforgettable Dr. Benway, who approaches surgery the way matadors approach bullfights. Ian Holm, Julian Sands and Judy Davis also have leading roles. Cronenberg and Thomas had planned to make the city of Tangier a kind of character as well, but George Bush and Saddam Hussein went to war and, at the last minute, Morocco was no longer an option.

"We had to scramble," Cronenberg recalls with an ironic smile, "because flying the cast and crew into a potential war zone was just not going to happen. And nobody would have insured the production. The war actually started just three days before we were going to start shooting and, for a day or so, everybody panicked. But when I looked back over my screenplay, the revisions I had to make took less than a day, and I think the situation ended up working to our benefit."

"I never wanted the film to be a travelogue. I think we were sort of seduced by the fact that Burroughs had written so much of the book there. But in the end, only one or two shots would have been different if we'd filmed there, because Tangier as you see it now is not the same as the Tangier of the '50s when Burroughs was there, the international zone. I honestly felt that we were on the wrong track, thinking *Tangier* when we should have been thinking *Interzone*, which is another matter entirely—a kind of weird, eternal limbo land."

"Having to cancel the trip to Morocco forced us to come to terms with that. Because my conception was that the writer, William Lee, never really leaves New York. My

screenplay is very concerned with writing and the molding, or education, of a writer in a way the book is not. I was particularly interested in writing as a creative act in which we create our own realities and felt that Interzone was one of those realities. Canceling the trip to Tangier brought this into focus. Also, the crew responded to all of this as a challenge."

How well that challenge has been met is evident from walking around the set. Strolling through the Casbah-in-a-warehouse is especially strange, almost a hallucinatory experience, for old Tangier hands. Even without the framing and distancing of the camera lens, one becomes absorbed in the virtual reality of the set, which is wrapped around the entire inside wall of the building. The apparent authenticity brings to mind another comment of Cronenberg's concerning writers. Their task, he says, is to "mold reality into shape and then deal with it."

This country-in-the-head seems to have delighted the man whose head originally nurtured it. A friend of Burroughs' had early on called the screenplay, "two parts Cronenberg to one part William, but great." Burroughs himself is quick to praise Cronenberg's adaptation and gives the writer-director credit for "coming up with things I would never have dreamed of."

"He's been very kind, saying so much of this was my own imagination," Cronenberg responds. "And, of course, it makes me feel great. But I would never have thought of these things if it was something I was writing on my own. It's only because I was writing after having suffused myself with Burroughs' stuff that this happened. What I wanted was this bizarre fusion of me and Burroughs that neither of us would have done alone. And it seems to have worked that way. Everyone who's seen it in its various stages and knows the book has said it really *feels* like *Naked Lunch*. And that makes me feel just *ecstatic*."

Over dinner, Burroughs himself is positively glowing. Earlier, he'd sat at a table with Cronenberg and Weller to answer the questions of a roomful of Canadian journalists. His answers were considered and direct, coming out slowly in his still-pronounced Midwestern drawl. And he was unfailingly polite. Between the press conference and dinner he had dutifully attended a cocktail party thrown by the production team and had been convivial even in the face of banal importunings by various sorts who looked at him as a celebrity but evidently had never read his work. Burroughs has been known to give such people short shrift, but not on this occasion.

Now he asks me what my first reaction had been to the news that Cronenberg was at work on *Naked Lunch*. I tell him I'd thought that if anyone had the vision to do it, and the determination to get it done, it was Cronenberg. At this, Burroughs lets his guard down completely, breaking into the widest, most joyously childlike smile I've seen from him in our 20 years' acquaintance. "Oh yes," he says, nodding his head vigorously, and I imagine mug-

wumps and sex blobs and even old Doc Benway dancing inside that head. "Oh yes, that's what *I* thought. And after seeing what they're doing here, I think it's going to be great."

Despite the apparent realization of the "bizarre Burroughs/Cronenberg fusion" the writer-director says he was hoping for, one also detects an element of homage. Cronenberg seems to be repaying his indebtedness to a book and writer that gave him keys to accessing his own creative imagination. Cronenberg says of Burroughs, "He borrowed a lot of his imagery from science fiction and horror but used it in a way that nobody had ever used it before. I guess, in a way, he's created his own genre."

### David Breskin (interview date 6 February 1992)

SOURCE: "David Cronenberg: The Rolling Stone Interview," in *Rolling Stone*, No. 623, February 6, 1992, pp. 66–70, 96.

[In the following interview, Breskin questions Cronenberg on "cinematic evil," on suicide, on domination and aggression in sexuality, on whether his films provide an emotional catharsis, and on the artist's role in society.]

When you enter the world of David Cronenberg, there are no slashers in the closet. No one pops up out of the bathtub after a certain drowning. The wind doesn't rattle the windows or make the curtains billow like death shrouds. No. The horror in the world of David Cronenberg is not the easy, external horror of the slasher, but the far creepier, insidious horror of the self, of self-consciousness. I think, therefore I might not be.

It's out of such a disturbing state of mind (and body) that Cronenberg has fashioned his remarkable body of work. Following two "underground" films—*Stereo* and *Crimes of the Future*—in the late Sixties, Cronenberg released his first feature, *They Came From Within* (also known as *Shivers*), in 1975, in which the repressed residents of a sterile high-rise become infected with parasites that sex them up in unusual ways. Marilyn Chambers, sporting an underarm phallic spike, starred in his next picture, *Rabid*, after which Cronenberg made a skidding detour onto the drag strip for the forgettable *Fast Company*.

It wasn't until the Eighties that he really hit stride. *The Brood* was a mini-masterpiece about the horror of the fraying family; *Scanners* brought Cronenberg his drive-in audience, with its famous exploding head and sci-fi subtext; *Videodrome* was a complicated, polyoptic exploration of the connection between image, power and flesh, starring James Woods and Debbie Harry. *The Dead Zone* found Cronenberg boiling down the Stephen King best-seller and extracting the best performance of Christopher Walken's career. And then *The Fly* put him squarely over the top. Featuring Jeff Goldblum and Geena Davis,

Cronenberg's reworking of the laughable little Fifties original was masterful: Taut, vicious, disgusting, metaphorically rich and intellectually rigorous, it was slamming yet subtle, like the best of all his work. After *The Fly*, he turned down the temperature with *Dead Ringers*, a stainless-steel-on-skin story of self-destructive, identical-twin gynecologists (both played brilliantly by Jeremy Irons) that scraped to the core of the problem of identity—how we separate self from other. Indeed, considering these six films, an argument can be made that Cronenberg was the most consistently interesting filmmaker of the Eighties.

And now comes the unfilmable film *Naked Lunch*, Cronenberg's long-wished-for fusion of his vision with that of William Burroughs. It's quite a strange film, hardly the free-for-all that the Burroughs novel of the same name promises. Rather, the film is dry as dust, bristly in its intelligence and unsettling in its aura—it's like a visit to the mental dentist. It's also one of the few pictures that generously rewards a second viewing.

I met with Cronenberg in his native Toronto, where he lives quietly—when he's not racing cars—with his second wife and his three children. We talked in his small, Spartan office as the snow swirled outside.

David Breskin In the past you've mentioned that you are afflicted with the curse of balance.

David Cronenberg Maybe this is what people mean when they say my films are conservative. Theatrically, it's wonderful to see someone who's unbalanced. In the sense that actors would always prefer to play a villain, because it allows them to express that obsessive craziness which, despite the danger of it, is still rather admired in our culture.

David Breskin Evil is more interesting, cinematically, than good.

But I'm not even thinking in terms of evil. Evil is a whole other thing. The minute you say evil, I think Christianity. I don't throw that word around, and it may not be something I even believe in. But let's say cinematic evil, okay, I'm willing to go that far. Yeah, it's more interesting. Because it illuminates things, partly, and partly because it's cathartic. A villain in a bizarre, twisted way is always a Christlike figure: You know he's going to die, and he's dying for your sins, for your rage, for your craziness; he's doing it for you so you don't have to do it.

But your movies never give us an easy evil. They always present both sides of every situation. And it almost leads to a kind of analysis paralysis. . . .

I do think it's a Canadian thing, this balance. Up to a point it's a virtue, and beyond that it's neurotic. I do know people who are so self-obsessed and so self-analytical and so self-critical that they could sit in a room talking to themselves for years and never allow themselves to act.

Because they would anticipate the exfoliation, the elaboration of the situation. Anticipating an affair, for example. A simple thing. They would think: I could call her, but then this could happen. I could arrange an accidental meeting: I could bump into her at the cafeteria, but then this could happen. And on and on. To the point where no action would be taken.

*And thus they personify—Canada!*

And thus, they would, to me. To a certain extent. At its worst, not at its best.

*While the United States of America is already contemplating date rape!*

[Laughs] Yes, exactly. That's right. No, not contemplating. Doing it.

*Thus the attraction of Canadians to things American, but also the repulsion?*

That's right. It's definitely a love-hate relationship.

*And where do you find yourself in that nexus as a Canadian filmmaker whose largest audience is American?*

Right in the middle. It's a very interesting place to be. It's a Canadian place to be.

*You've said that all horror springs from the Latin phrase 'Timor mortis conturbat mea'—the fear of death disturbs me. Was there any way for you to resolve your fear of death other than by making movies about it, or have you not resolved it even with the movies?*

I don't know if it's really resolvable for me, but we'll see. I think it would have to be through art, and I think in one sense that is what all art is. I don't mean to be reductive, but I don't think that's so reductive, because the question of death is not a simple question. It's not just fear of death, it's meaning of life—it's the same question. If you're religious, you talk about what God might be like, what the nature of God is. The question of human mortality is not a simple question.

*Are you positing "art against death"?*

I'm positing art as a means of coming to terms with death. Yes. I'm putting art in opposition to religion—or as a replacement for religion, in the sense that if religion is used to allow you to come to terms with death, and also to guide you in how to live your life, then I think that art can do the same thing. But in a much less schematic way, in a much less rigid and absolute way. Which is why it appeals to me and religion doesn't.

*Your particular kind of horror has never been situational horror (the-man-in-the-basement-with-the-knife) as much as existential, philosophical horror. Where does that come from?*

I really think it comes from what I need art for. I don't need the story around the campfire; there's a couple of great campfire-type horror stories. But they are basically the-man-in-the-basement-with-the-knife. To the extent that that can be cathartic and entertaining, fine. But it's not enough for me. I want, I need more from what I do: I need more complexity, I need more philosophy, and I need more of a struggle in my art than that. More of a struggle with myself.

*If there's a horror in confronting the inevitability of death—and we all carry our little mini-horror film around with us in the shape of our own deaths—wouldn't eternal life be an even greater horror?*

Oh, yeah. There's no way out, that's one of the problems. No one *really* wants to live forever, not really. But on a theoretical level, by apposition, you don't want to die, so you really are saying you want to live forever—even though you know that's not really going to work. Now, I've had moments where the inevitability of death is an absolute strength—it's an escape, it's a freedom. And certainly people who find themselves in a hideous situation, like the concentration camps, there's a point where death is truly a release. So, the idea that death is merciful, that's not only a schematic concept to me, I can feel it as an emotional reality as well.

At the beginning of *Naked Lunch* is the quote "Nothing is true, everything is permitted." Although I don't think it was originally conceived by Hassan I. Sabbah as an existentialist statement, in a way it is. It's saying: Because death is inevitable, we are free to invent our own reality. We are part of a culture, we are part of an ethical and moral system, but all we have to do is take one step outside it and we see that none of that is absolute. Nothing is true. It's not an absolute. It's only a human construct, very definitely able to change and susceptible to change and rethinking. And you can then be free. Free to be unethical, immoral, out of society and agent for some other power, never belonging. Ultimately, if you are an existentialist and you don't believe in God and the judgment after death, then you can do anything you want: You can kill, you can do whatever society considers the most taboo thing.

*Including suicide?*

*Including suicide.*

*The Dead Zone essentially ends with a suicide; Max Renn kills himself at the end of Videodrome; Brundlefly at the end of The Fly asks for a mercy killing; and the Mantle twins end Dead Ringers with what is basically a double-suicide. Your last four pictures all end with suicide, so it's obviously something you've given a lot of thought to.*

Yeah. It's probably the only way we can give our death a meaning. Because otherwise it's completely arbitrary. It comes because of some small bodily malfunction or some accident—a safe falls on your head. You're Crazy Kat and



a safe falls on your head and it doesn't mean anything! It means fuck-all. And so you say, I don't like this, I don't like the fact that death, which is a pretty important moment in my life, I don't like this to have no meaning. The only way you can do anything about that is to control the moment and the means of your death. And that means suicide, basically.

In opposition to this, you have an inbuilt, genetically programmed desire to survive and stay alive at all costs, no matter how hideous the circumstances. To survive and to live no matter what. In the West, suicide is basically considered a cowardly thing that comes out of despair or hopelessness and is something you should have therapy or take pills for so that you won't do it. I think I've had to find my own way through that.

I was shocked when Hemingway committed suicide, because he obviously could have lived a lot longer. But he made his very Hemingwayesque statement that all that mattered to him was fucking and writing and hunting and fishing, and that he couldn't do any of them worth a damn anymore, so why be alive? And as you get older you say, he has a point, he really does. If your life has meaning, then it can also cease to have meaning. And if you're still alive after that point, what are you? And I also believe, really, that the only meaning that there is in the universe comes from the human brain. I don't think that there is a God or that there is an external system of meaning out there that exists apart from human beings. So, from that point of view, it's even more cogent, the possibility that suicide is an elegant and properly structured way out of life—that it could be, anyway. And whether I could ever do that, under certain circumstances, or could overcome the will to be alive, which is strong, I don't know.

When I heard that Hemingway had died, I *became* Hemingway. I imagined him taking the shotgun, I imagined him the way he did it, and the feel. Did the barrel cling on his teeth? How did it feel? I imagined the moment of death. Whenever I read about a suicide, I do that. And, in a sense, whenever I'm having a character in my films die, I'm rehearsing my own death.

*I want to touch on catharsis. You routinely insist on catharsis in your films as a benefit and a raison d'être for horror as a genre, and yet I've rarely consumed the work of an artist that leaves me feeling less catharsis than yours.*

Yeah. Yeah. Well, it's the catharsis of the ambivalent. Maybe that's what I'm selling to you here. If you're simplistic, or your work is simplistic, or you choose to make it simple, then there can be a simple catharsis; and you get that in soap operas, you get it in the traditional comedy, where things are tied up in the end and everything feels all right after you've gone through some perilous moments. And maybe, the catharsis in my films is more complex, in that it is my reconfirming that things are not simple, not easily—perhaps not ever—resolvable. When

I'm feeling . . . when I need a book, I don't want a book in which everything is sweet and neat and nice. What book do you take to the island with you? What really *consoles* you? Is it something that tells you everything is all right? Is that really consolation? I feel that it's not.

*But even with the intellectual ramifications of doubt, which your work provides, it seems like one could have those and still provide the audience more release and recovery.*

It sounds like trout fishing [laughs]. You catch them, say hi! and throw them back.

*You've caught them in the theater—the audience as trout!*

And maybe I don't want to let them go. Maybe catharsis is, literally, letting them off the hook too easily!

I'm not insisting that catharsis is the be-all and end-all, I'm just pointing out that it's a mechanism that seems to be there. And obviously, it can vary hugely from work to work. But certainly when you begin to mix your blood with the characters in the film, or if it's a scary film, you're mixing your own anxieties with the anxieties that are being played out in the film, the catharsis does not purge, it makes clear. I suppose my version of it is not totally classical. It's like the frame isolating things out of the chaos on the set. It's sort of saying: For the moment we're going to concentrate on this. I'm not saying this is the whole world, but for the next two hours it's going to be your world, it's going to be our world together, we're really going to dive in deep, and we're going to explore all the aspects of it. To me, *that* is cathartic, right there. It doesn't have anything to do with whether there is a happy ending.

*Because your work is certainly less classically cathartic than, let's say, a filmmaker like Oliver Stone's, to make maybe the boldest, capital-letter example: Platoon, where at the end of the film, if it works, there's a wash of emotion—you've really bathed in that bath of feelings.*

[Laughs] Are you saying his films are bathetic?

*Or you may be very upset in Born on the Fourth of July that Tom Cruise has a terrible experience in the VA hospital, but by the end, you've recovered, because in the grand—*

Well, that's because Oliver Stone is afraid to say the truth. For all the shouting, he's still not quite able to deliver the final blow, which is that Cruise had these horrible experiences in the VA hospital and it didn't *mean anything*. And it didn't have to happen. And it really has fucked the guy's life, and nothing can be done about it! That's the truth that maybe is not speakable for Oliver Stone, I don't know. It's hard truth. And the truth does not really lend itself to the dramatic structures that are immediately available to the Hollywood filmmaker. I'm not saying absolute truth, because I don't think there is absolute truth, but in the particular construct which you are dealing with for two hours, there can be relative truths that mean something. To

the extent that you are a Hollywood filmmaker, you have to buy the several suits that are on the rack. And you have to expand or contract to fit them.

*The transformational aspects of love, relationship and the body itself—the mutating possibilities—is something that you verbally have endorsed as exciting, inventive, attractive; and yet your films, in a very different way, always show those sorts of mutations and transformations in a quite horrific light.*

Hmmm. Dramatically, of course, something that goes wrong is always more interesting than something that goes right. I have to confess to being part of that structure. It's Shavian: Conflict is the essence of drama. I mean, if a guy transforms into a fly and it's really nice and everybody likes it, you know, what have you got? You've got a comedy on TV. But you don't have heavy-duty dramatic stuff. So that's part of it.

And the other part is that I'm perhaps admitting in the films what might be potentially positive in theory is maybe quite difficult to manipulate to the point where it's positive in practice. I'm trying to say: Well, what happens when we put this theory into practice? That's the extent to which my films are my little lab experiments. I say: Let's try it out. Here's a guy who's transforming into *this*, and uh-oh, I see a problem, it's not turning out so nice, what's he going to do? In a way, it's play. It's the way children play to try things out.

*Do you ever feel trapped by your own reputation of going further than other people will go? That people carry with them a certain expectation when they see a Cronenberg film?*

No, I love disappointing people's expectations. I really do. It's perverse power trip for me. So, in fact, no, I don't feel the slightest bit trapped. I'm very stubborn. And I really just do what I fucking well want.

*So you don't still feel any kind of compulsion to show the unshowable and speak the unspeakable that you did earlier?*

Not if I don't feel like it that day. And I might feel like it tomorrow. But today I don't. The artist's duty to himself is a culmination of immense responsibility and immense irresponsibility. I think those two interlock.

*Does the artist have any moral or social responsibility?*

No. No. Still doesn't, after all these years. Still irresponsible, after all these years. As a citizen, of course. As a parent, of course. But as an artist, that's where the paradox is, your responsibility is to be irresponsible. As soon as you talk about social or political responsibility, you've amputated the best limbs you've got as an artist. You are plugging into a very restrictive system that is going to push and pull and mold you and is going to make your art totally useless and ineffective.

*Formally, your art is more willing to stick with a tight controlled frame—more willing to show “talking heads” than a lot of other auteurs are?*

Yeah. Yeah. To me, the “talking head” is the *essence* of cinema. The most fascinating thing to a baby is the human face. The baby will look at your face and watch your face move and want to touch it, it gives you a whole other insight into what a face is. We get very used to them, but in fact, if it's a fantastic head, and what it's talking about is fantastic, then you can't have anything better. It's the best! So I'm not afraid of it. I'm not afraid to sit on a close-up and let it happen. If you've got the right face saying the right things at the right moment, you've got everything cinema can offer.

*Let's get into one of your very favorite subjects—sexual politics. You've been asked before about the “sexual humiliation” of women in your films, and I'll just read you one of your responses, which is maybe the best way into this discussion: “I think it certainly has to do with the fact that I am male, and my fantasies and my unconscious are male. I think I give a reasonable amount of expression to the female part of me, but I still think that I'm basically heterosexual male. . . . I have no reason to think that I have to give equal time to all sexual fantasies whether they're my own or not. Let those people make their own movies—leave me alone to make mine. . . . If I'm going to get into scenes of bondage and torture, I'll show a female instead of a male. . . . Fantasies are sexual, not sexist.”*

I say, “basically heterosexual.” I was recently talking to a journalist who was making a very cogent point, of the gayness that goes through all my work. And I say, “Well, you know, I'm interested in sexuality, and in my normal fashion I don't want to limit myself to what I might *live* out of.” One of the reasons you do art is to live other people's lives and to plug into other modalities. One of the reasons actors act is to be other people. So I'm not afraid of homosexuality, and I'm not afraid of exploring those things. And I have explored those things in the films. There are a few men I sort of whip and torture in the movies, too.

*You have a kind of—I don't know if we want to say—“repressed” homosexuality in a lot of your work. The first two films you did—Stereo and Crimes of the Future—your lead actor certainly had a gay presence; then you gave Marilyn Chambers an underarm phallus in Rabid—*

But I gave her a vagina; I gave her a currit, too! First there's the cunt, and then the phallus—it's both, you got everything! I gave her everything!

*And you gave Max Renn [James Woods] a vagina in his stomach in Videodrome, and vagina dentata as well. So there's a sort of bisexual play through the work. Has this always been part of your consciousness?*

Yeah. I think it has been. I think we start off with what Freud called a polymorphous perverseness. Which is not a negative thing. It's a children's sexuality before it becomes

specific and genitalized and acculturized and all that. We have what I called an omni-sexuality. Which does not recognize the sorts of normal barriers and liaisons and taboos. And to the extent that I'm interested in exploring stuff that's beyond taboo, I would explore not just bisexuality but any kind of sexuality. Dog sexuality. Animal sexuality. Insect sexuality. Whatever. The sexuality of food or touch or words. So I don't think I'm limiting myself to bisexuality. That's just the most obvious to people. They might not see some of the other things I do as sexual, and I do.

*Have you experienced any of these things in your life, or only in the world of the image?*

Unfortunately not. Well, I won't say I haven't, but not in the sensationalist way that any journalist would of course want to discover. Now, however—within the act of normal, quote, heterosexual sex—you do have these Dionysian moments. And that I have experienced, definitely. Without the aid of drugs, I will add, because I really don't do that. Moments when you are not male or female, you are just sexual. And you don't know whether you are being fucked or you are fucking, and it doesn't make any difference. I really feel that I have felt that. And at the best moments, that's the way it always is. You lose, to a huge extent, your individuality. And yet, it's the individuality that heightens the sexuality—you *know* who you're having sex with.

*Why are you so attracted to images of sexual violence?*

I don't think I am. Am I? I'm not. I'm definitely not.

*I think you are.*

How many *minutes* of my films are devoted to that as opposed to, say, discussion.

*In 1983 you said,*

*"That isn't to say that I haven't noticed that I can be attracted to images of sexual violence and wonder what that means about myself."*

*I'm just asking you the same question you ask yourself: What do you think it means about yourself?*

Sure, I guess that was at the point of *Videodrome*, where I was actually creating some images of sexual violence so I could be attracted to my own movie maybe. Well, sexuality is, as we've been discussing, a complex thing. As it becomes connected with various cultural dynamics, it can start to express itself in various ways that we might call perverse, unnatural or unacceptable, or politically incorrect is what we'd say today. And yet they seem very *forceful*, these images or concepts. There are a lot of people who do play bondage in sex—*play* bondage. Of course, you're not supposed to talk about this. And yet I remember my cat. In cat sex, the male cat seizes the female cat by the neck, he bites her neck to hold her down, and she's strug-

gling with him like she doesn't want to have any part of it. And then when she finally manages to get away, she sort of rolls around on the ground in a very flirtatious fashion and waits for him to come to her again.

*That's the way lions are doing it in Africa.*

They are doing it at this very moment, thank God, whatever few lions there are left. And you say, that comes from survival of the fittest: The most aggressive male is the one who is going to survive, so the female's got to make it difficult for him to get to her and so on. And maybe there is still a holdover of that in human sexuality. And maybe there is something in female sexuality still that comes from that very primitive beginning, which wants a man to dominate, which wants a man to defeat other men in order to have this woman, and then she herself makes it a little difficult just to make sure that he's really serious and really the most aggressive, dominant one—and has to pin her down or to tie a sash cord around her arm or wrist or just hold her down with force when they're having sex, and that's more satisfying. And you will not find any feminists who will admit that this is a possibility.

However, we have now taken our evolution into our own hands, we have done it long ago, we have mucked about with our environment, so that all of those factors that might have made survival of the fittest work don't necessarily work in our society, because we have dephysicalized our society. It's now no longer necessarily the guy who's *physically* strongest—it might be the guy who's the best at manipulating stocks on Wall Street who is the dominant one. But how does he express this dominance that is no longer physical?

*By having the biggest house or having the fastest car—*

That's exactly right. Or having the most mistresses. And we haven't sorted it out yet, because half the time we're denying that it's all true. But underneath it all, there might still be the desire in men to physically dominate women and the desire in women to be physically submissive to men through a bit of a struggle. A bit of a shadow struggle even then. With my cat . . . she was going to get fucked, and she knew it and he knew it, but they still had to go through the whole thing. Why is it so horrible if that is still a vestige that we have to deal with? It's only horrible because of political implications and cultural problems, and it becomes a political/cultural football. And it makes these people, who still must do these things, these poor men and women, all of us maybe, sublimate it or change it or shift it or jigger it around somehow in our mind so that we don't have to feel ashamed of our sexual politics in bed and all that kind of stuff. It's interesting. And I am interested in exploring it. I think that may well be the reason why—hmm, a naked woman tied up? Do men respond to that sexually? Well, I think they do. I really do. Now it might vary from culture to culture. Certainly in Japan it's more accepted as a sort of ritual of sexuality embedded in the culture than here. But I say, yeah, I do



respond to that. And I think I've begun to figure out why, and it's not *deadly*—and it doesn't mean that I hate women and want to kill them. I think it comes from someplace else.

*There's a possibility that we're hard-wired for a lot of stuff.*

There's no doubt that we're hardwired. That's not just a pun, it's a good metaphor. It's only sane to look at it as it is and not futz the issue and cover it up with so much politicking. It's not the same thing that a man and a woman should want to play bondage and that someone shoots seventeen women in Montreal.

*But the image police would have us—*

The image police must make it the same thing, and the image police must make policy based on this. I think it's very destructive. And if my films shake things up and make people shake their fists at each other over that, then I say fine, because I think things need shaking up. I myself have been accused by a writer in Toronto, in a *Toronto Star* article, of being a direct contributor to that massacre in Montreal, where a man shot seventeen young women and said, "The feminists made me do it." She said, in her article, that we have a misogynistic culture, and it is constantly being fueled and created by video games and a whole list of things with no names attached, and then she said, "and the films of David Cronenberg." And the only other name mentioned in the article, other than the name of this killer, was Adolf Hitler. She was comparing women to Jews and men to Nazis. I find *that* irresponsible.

*There's another theme I'd like to examine—the Cronenberg hero; Dr. St. Luc in Shivers, Hart in Rabid, Frank in The Brood, John in The Dead Zone, Max in Videodrome, Brundle in The Fly, the Mantles in Dead Ringers and Bill Lee in Naked Lunch. There's a certain—*

[*Surprised*] They're all fucking repressed! Just as you give me this litany, I think, these are all really repressed guys. Which is maybe where some of the misunderstanding of the movies comes in. If this is the Cronenberg hero, in the sense that Cronenberg posits this as the correct kind of human being to be, then you've immediately warped all of the films.

*That's a terrible misreading of the function of narrative art—to think that you are positing your hero as an example of humanity refined and perfected.*

But it happens all the time. I have an ironic distance on these characters. I'm saying, there's always a part of me that's repressed or undiscovered, and that's why I keep forcing myself to look and discover. Maybe these characters are a projection of that part of me. But they are not necessarily my model of ideal behavior. But a lot of people assume that. So many people identify you with your main character, it's scary.

*Not only are they repressed, but there's a kind of passivity in your heroes—one could say, the passive-reactive Cronenberg hero, as opposed to active. They are often very ineffective and always on the defensive, all the way through Bill Lee.*

I'd say you're absolutely right. Those are my guys, my boys . . . my *team*! They're my team. My soccer team.

*Your team—they all got picked last on the playground!*

[*Laughs*] They came in first in the *last* division. We won, we won, we got a trophy! Yeah, but it's the last division, and there's only one team in that division.

*And a fragile bunch, too. You present masculinity as a fragile proposition.*

I think that's true. I'm not actually presenting these guys as the embodiment of masculinity—they're male people, it's not quite the same thing. But if you want to reduce everything to sexual politics, I'd say, yes, my vision of masculinity as revealed in the movies is not at all the sort of macho-insensitive-rapist that all those feminist critiques present.

*Or the in-control manipulator or the powerful technocrat or any of those models. None of them work in your pictures.*

That's true. I like this, I like this line of reasoning. It's so obvious, I've never quite talked about it this way before. I think I find that kind of character a very good basis for a film in which one explores human nature. Rather than a guy who's very opinionated, very secure, very strong, very aggressive, very focused, very active. Certainly, there are any number of writers who start from *that* vantage point—Shakespeare did okay. But obviously, it works best for me to have a character much more like the ones we've been talking about. It's not conscious.

*They're almost recessive. Just as Brundle recedes—*

Like a hairline.

*Or a budget. Just as Brundle recedes from life as a man into an insect, and the Mantles recede into the chrome work of their practice, and Bill Lee—who's recessive to begin with—recedes into a kind of complicated wallpaper, there's a sense of the watching man, the man who sits and watches and is too late. I wonder, do you identify with that?*

[*Pause*] I think there's some truth in that. It's true that I have a real *horror* of passivity, in one sense. I don't like fantasy in my life. I have an incredible abhorrence of that, and a real drive into reality. I suppose I'm putting my characters in that difficult, passive position deliberately. To see what it takes to provoke them to action. I'm interested

in that mechanism. It is an *issue* with me, and it's interesting to notice that I give my characters the deficit at the beginning and see what happens.

*You have an oddly romantic disposition.*

Yeah. I've never denied that there's a romanticism in any of my films. I haven't talked about it much, in fact.

*A certain astringent romanticism, perhaps.*

Yes. The best kind. [Laughs] We don't want to get too messy.

*Acerbic romanticism.*

Acerbic, yes. "Astringent" I like because it's more medical.

*Let's talk about your take on Naked Lunch. The book is very much about control and the body, the algebra of need, addictions of all kinds. The film is really not about that. It's about writing. Why focus on that? When all the other concerns of the book, which are fundamentally Cronenbergian concerns—*

No, wrong, Wrong. Wrong. This is a very Cronenbergian concern, and here's what it is. In a way, in coming to grips with writing, with being creative, I think I'm coming *closer* to the basics. And coming closer to the flame by dealing directly with it. Because what is writing but trying to order reality? Trying to make order out of chaos? To come to understand phenomena that are not really susceptible to understanding. To creating your own reality. To coming to terms with your own reality. I deal with this in all my films. All of my characters do this sort of thing. And here I'm coming to a distilled version of it, i.e., a writer. And the fact that it's a *dangerous* thing to do cinematically—because it's difficult to do it well—is part of the thrill. Just like the difficulty in doing Burroughs because it's an impossible book to film is part of the thrill.

*People would expect a lot of flesh in this movie, and there's basically none.*

Like I said, I love to disappoint people.

*Why make the typewriters embody the characters' strange sexuality instead of the characters' embodying their strange sexuality themselves?*

Because I'm probably giving you the same sort of avoidance, the same sort of avoidance-denial level cinematically that I'm saying Lee is doing psycho-emotionally. That's what's happening. I'm saying Lee is denying and avoiding certain realities about himself. And to the extent that he is controlling his fantasies, they are also avoiding, denying fantasies. So that if he is squeezing mugwump jism into a glass, he is not allowing himself to see that he is really sucking a boy's cock. I think it works. I think it's a structure that has never been used before. I've never seen

it. I made some inroads in that direction in *Videodrome*, where it's the character's point-of-view fantasy that is now controlling the reality.

*It's a relentlessly first-person movie in the same way.*

Now, why did I choose that structure? Partly, I wanted to deny people their most ordinary expectations. Because I want to surprise them and confound them and intrigue them and jar them out of their expectations. That's one reason. I guess it's the anti-entertainment part of me. An entertainer wants to give you exactly what you want. An entertainer gives you those good old songs that you want to hear. An artist wants to give you what you *don't know* you want. Something you might know you want the next time, but you never knew you wanted before.

### Terrence Rafferty (review date 10 February 1992)

SOURCE: "Unnatural Acts," in *New Yorker*, Vol. 67, No. 51, February 10, 1992, pp. 81–4.

[In the following review, Rafferty argues that Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch*, which is based on William S. Burroughs' novel of the same name, makes "too much sense" of the book.]

David Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch* isn't really an adaptation of William S. Burroughs' famous novel of that name. It is, rather, a brisk and well-organized tour of Burroughs Country: the nightmarish terrain of the writer's imagination, in which all the landmarks are distorted, disorienting, grotesque. The movie's primary setting is a place called Interzone, a kind of fever-dream rendering of Tangier, where Burroughs, in the fifties, wrote much of the material that was eventually assembled in the form of *Naked Lunch*. The novel is essentially a collage of intense hallucinatory fragments, arranged in a willfully haphazard way; it's book of visions, most of them violently paranoid fantasies related in the detached manner of a diarist. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* is many things at once: a fierce anti-authoritarian satire; a shockingly funny description of the life and thoughts of a drug addict; an experiment in language and fictional structure; a scabrous free-form comedy routine. It's perhaps best understood as a report on the consciousness of someone whose brain has exploded; the prose is like a torch playing over pieces of the wreckage. Cronenberg doesn't try to re-create the novel's headlong rush of imagery, or to imitate the spurring energy of Burroughs' style. The movie is content to be an intelligent and affectionate homage to the novel; Cronenberg's screenplay is an attempt to imagine where this bizarre, unaccountable work of genius might have come from, to get inside the mind of a writer caught in the unnatural act of making literature.

The hero of Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch* is a gaunt, ghostly-looking man called William Lee (Peter Weller)—a name that turns up in several of Burroughs' books and

always designates the writer's fictional alter ego. Lee works as an exterminator (as Burroughs once did) and lives, with his wife, Joan (Judy Davis), in a seedy New York apartment. It's 1953; the Lees' social circle consists of a couple of Beat-generation literary types named Martin (Michael Zelniker) and Hank (Nicholas Campbell), who are clearly modelled on Burroughs' close friends Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac. First Joan and then Bill start shooting up the contents of the extermination company's canisters; soon they're both hooked on bug powder. (This is, of course, an invention of Cronenberg's; Burroughs was, more mundanely, addicted to heroin.) The powder doesn't have a soothing effect on Bill: under its influence, a giant talking bug appears, tells him that his wife is the agent of a hostile power, and orders him to kill her. One day, he does. After doing some powder, Bill takes out a gun, Joan puts a glass on top of her head, and they demonstrate for Martin their "William Tell routine"; the bullet makes a neat hole in her forehead. (Burroughs did kill his wife, Joan Vollmer, and in exactly that way.) Horrified at what he has done, Lee goes on the lam mentally, transporting himself—by means of a syringe of bug powder and another imaginary drug called black meat—to Interzone. He holes up in a room with a typewriter that sometimes turns into the articulate insect of his earlier powder visions. The bug, which speaks in the language of pulp-thriller intrigue, dictates "reports" to him; these messages, we're given to understand, are the beginnings of *Naked Lunch*.

Interzone, where Lee bangs away at his typewriter like a man possessed (or programmed), is a treacherous place, full of dangerous characters with evil motives. In the junkie writer's weirded-out state of mind, no one can be trusted, and everything seems to conspire against him. He lives in a world of jealous writers, unscrupulous drug peddlers, sinister Arabs, depraved European aristocrats, and alien creatures known as Mugwumps. (The Mugwumps, who also occasionally mutate into typewriters, secrete a narcotic liquid of semenlike consistency from tubes that grow out of their heads—the very juice of creation, straight from the source.) As in a lurid spy novel, the air of Interzone is thick with betrayal and the hero moves warily through the labyrinthine streets: he feels as if he were being manipulated, but he can't tell by whom or to what purpose. At one point, he finds himself back in his New York apartment, where Martin and Hank are reading—awestruck—the jumble of pages he has brought back from Interzone; he can't remember writing any of them. His friends exhort him to "finish the book," and, courageously, he returns to Interzone and remains there to fulfill his destiny.

What all this amounts to is an ingeniously constructed myth of literary inspiration. Cronenberg picks up on the idea—a popular one among Burroughs critics and biographers—that the death of Joan Vollmer somehow provided the impetus for Burroughs' career as a writer. Cronenberg adds to this biographical hypothesis a skewed notion of artistic creation as divine transcription—the image of the

artist as the helpless medium of an obscure higher power. The movie's William Lee allows himself, heroically, to become a vessel of literary grace; in his trancelike condition, the junk of inspiration flows through him and onto the page. The neutral, ascetic, disembodied quality that Weller gives the character is perfectly suited to this conception; his Lee is a dazed automaton and a kind of mystic. The movie is often extremely funny, and it flirts with daring subjects, but it's based on a hokey, mystified, and entirely unsubversive idea of the writer's activity: Cronenberg accounts for the birth of Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* by turning its author into a strung-out St. John of the Cross.

The movie *Naked Lunch*, is an amazingly tight, coherent piece of work. Everything in the script adds up; Cronenberg makes sense of Burroughs. Too much sense, actually. The picture's argument is tidy, hermetic. It has the quality of a brilliant performance by a university lecturer; Cronenberg's reading of Burroughs is so impeccably worked out that you begin to feel trapped—even while you're enjoying his clever discourse, with its superbly timed jokes, you're looking forward to escaping the classroom so you can start to think for yourself again. The striking images and peculiar sensibility of this movie are surprisingly easy to shrug off. Ultimately, Cronenberg's *Naked Lunch* is no more than a weird comedy about writing—a narrow, limited subject. It doesn't get into your system, change your perceptions, derange your sense of reality in any serious way. Cronenberg may like the idea of spontaneous, unwilled artistic creation, but he doesn't practice what he preaches. His *Naked Lunch* is a control freak's portrait of a wild man.

#### Amy Taubin (review date March 1992)

SOURCE: "The Wrong Body," in *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 1, No. 11, March, 1992, pp. 8–10.

[In the following review, Taubin argues that Cronenberg's adaptation of *Naked Lunch* does not sufficiently recreate the homoerotic elements in the book.]

*Naked Lunch* is less an adaption of William Burroughs' novel than David Cronenberg's fantasy about how it came to be written. The young Cronenberg wanted to be a writer: Burroughs and Nabokov were his models. He claims that he turned to film-making when he realised he'd never write as well as either of them.

Affronts to the 'I married Joan' sit-com consciousness of the Eisenhower era, Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* and Nabokov's *Lolita* each presented a radically different version of subversive male sexuality, modernist reflexivity and expatriate alienation, not to mention a fascination with insect life connected in part to a certain queasiness about the female body. The obscenity trials which surrounded the publication of both novels in the US marked the begin-



ning of the end of the repressive 50s. Today, the stuff the authorities claimed was pornographic—homosexuality in *Naked Lunch*, paedophilia in *Lolita*—is the staple of television talk shows. Nevertheless, the context in which these subjects are placed is as poisonously puritanical as it was forty years ago. “I’m afraid that 1993 is going to be like 1953”, Cronenberg commented. 1953 is the year in which the film *Naked Lunch* is set.

Between 1984, when Cronenberg and producer Jeremy Thomas acquired the rights to the novel, and the film’s Christmas 1991 release (just in time for it to win both a New York Film Critics and a National Film Critics award), Burroughs’ devotees questioned whether Cronenberg was the right man for the job. There were obvious similarities in the Burroughs and the Cronenberg oeuvres: the sci-fi paranoia, the fascination with control and addiction, the definition of subjectivity as unstable, biochemical and hallucinatory, the connection between sex and vampires, sex and disease, sex and mutation, sex and death.

Yet while sexuality is polymorphous and definitely perverse in the work of both Burroughs and Cronenberg, the trajectory of desire and the specifics of representation is homosexual in the former and heterosexual in the latter. Thus *The Advocate*, a major American gay weekly, cautioned against expecting much from “the heterosexual Cronenberg”. The irony is that the gay critics who’ve attacked the film would have great difficulty recuperating much of Burroughs—the terroristic goings-on in ‘Hassan’s Rumpus Room’, for example, which are among the pages of *Naked Lunch* most vividly inscribed in the collective cultural memory—within their politics of essentialism and positive imagery.

Cronenberg responds to the criticism as follows: “It wasn’t as if there were a dozen directors vying for the rights and they gave it to the heterosexual”. Indeed, when Cronenberg acquired *Naked Lunch*, no one else was interested. “If *Naked Lunch* were a gay book and that’s all, you would have an argument. I wouldn’t do *The Wild Boys* [the Burroughs novel that’s high on Gus Van San’s agenda]. But the sex in *Naked Lunch* is beyond gay. It’s sci-fi sex; it has metaphorical meaning every way”. Yet when I ask Cronenberg what he thinks of Kubrick’s *Lolita* (1961), an adaptation fraught with similar problems, he answers that although James Mason’s performance is perfect, he didn’t like the film very much when he first saw it. “The actress who played *Lolita* was too old. She’s supposed to be a child, not a teenager. To shift that shifts everything”.

The shift that Cronenberg makes in *Naked Lunch* is to wind it around the body of a woman. He takes as his premise Burroughs’ statement in the introduction to *Queer* that if he hadn’t killed his wife Joan, he would never have become a writer. Burroughs, however, goes on to say that he put up a writer’s block around her death; women barely exist in his work. Cronenberg, on the other hand, structures *Naked Lunch* as a bare-bones, but not unconventional, *noir* narrative. The film is driven by the repetition-compulsion of its protagonist William Lee—his need to save and destroy his wife Joan over and over again.

To lift a metaphor from *The Fly* (1986), *Naked Lunch* is less a case of Cronenberg adapting than absorbing Burroughs. That the experiment is not totally successful is proof of Burroughs’ stature both as a writer and counter-culture myth. Nevertheless, the first half of the film is nearly as intellectually inventive, mordantly witty and visually stunning as Cronenberg’s *Dead Ringers* (1988). Pristine and putrid, the decor encompasses every shade of shit and glows as if it were radioactive. Erupting from this controlled, though repellent, visual surface is a diarrhoeic flow of language, thick with puns, threats and obscenities.

The film opens with Lee trying to live the ‘straight life’. He’s married and has a job as an exterminator. Lee and Joan get addicted to the poison he uses to kill roaches. (For heroin and hashish, Cronenberg substitutes sci-fi drugs—bug powder and the meat of the black centipede. The drugs are not merely agents of hallucination, they are hallucinatory in and of themselves.)

High on bug powder, Lee is contacted by a giant roach whose wings spread open to reveal a talking, all-too-human-looking asshole. The roach tells Lee that his wife Joan is an alien and instructs him to kill her. Lee invites Joan to play a game of William Tell. He aims for the glass she’s placed on her head, but the roach takes control and the bullet blasts her brain. Lee flees to Interzone with the bug, which now has the body of an old-fashioned Smith-Corona typewriter grafted on to its head.

The film’s central image is of Lee alone in his wretched hotel room sitting in front of this insect writing machine, which functions as a combination id and super-ego. “I’m your case worker”, it tells him, “your contact to Control”. Control wants Lee to write reports about the death of Joan Lee. The game of William Tell has made it possible for William to tell all, that is, to write *Naked Lunch*.

Lee gets involved with two other American expatriate writers, Tom and Joan Frost (modelled on Paul and Jane Bowles). In an extremely sinister scene, Lee reads Tom’s mind and discovers that just as he destroyed Joan Lee, Tom is destroying Joan Frost. Departing from both the Burroughs biography and the homoerotics of *Naked Lunch*, Lee becomes obsessed with saving Joan. She invites him to try Tom’s favourite typewriter. Messing around in the back of the machine, her hand penetrates a kind of uterine cavity—red, raw and pulsating. The scene is terrifyingly erotic, and given the anal-retentive quality of the rest of the film, flagrantly transgressive. The effect is to stop the film long before it’s over. The potentially chilling scenes that follow—Lee selling out Kiki, his boy lover, to the cannibalistic Yves Cloquet; his discovery of the factory farm where the Mugwamps are milked by human sex slaves addicted to their jissom; the revelation of the hermaphroditic identity of the controlling Dr Benway; Lee’s shooting of the second Joan in order to prove to the border guards of Annexia that he’s really a writer—happen as if by rote.

Brilliant as it is, Cronenberg’s *Naked Lunch* never resolves the incompatibility between the heterosexual drive

of its narrative and the remnants of Burroughs' homoerotic fantasy. The amazing insect typewriter, which collapses desire for buggery with paranoia about being bugged, could never have produced the encounter between William Lee and Joan Frost. "It's not the instruments that are wrong; it's the women's bodies" cries one of *Dead Ringer's* twin gynaecologists as he descends into madness. In terms of *Naked Lunch*, he might just have a point.

#### Mark Kermode (interview date March 1992)

SOURCE: Interview in *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 1, No. 11, March, 1992, pp. 11–3.

[In the following interview, Cronenberg discusses the similarities between his and Burroughs' creative work; his own use of visual imagery to reproduce metaphors on-screen, and his own creative process.]

"I think that the body of a person living now is substantially different from one which was alive even ten years ago", says David Cronenberg, master of mutation and champion of viral change. "We've altered the earth, the magnetic waves in the air, and we've altered ourselves. I think that change itself is fairly neutral, but it contains the potential to be either positive or negative. I'm not a Victorian or a Romantic who believes that we are evolving in an inevitably positive way. Nor am I a Marxist who sees the March of History leading us to something grand and glorious. I really believe that we create our own reality, and it's only in the human mind that any kind of moral judgment exists. We are the source of all judgment and thus it really will depend on us. It's up to us to say 'Yes I like this better', and if enough of us say that, then by God it *is* better. To me there is no outside judgment".

Although the writer/director David Cronenberg is renowned for presenting in his films startlingly visceral portrayals of physical aberration, it is his staunch refusal to characterise this mutation as necessarily negative which has given his work its radical, shocking edge. From the cancerous rebellion of the body depicted in *The Brood* (1979) to the genetic transmutation of *The Fly* (1986), Cronenberg's films have all gazed sympathetically at the myriad diseases which beset his lonely heroes. "I seem to have contracted a disease with a purpose", observes scientist Seth Brundle in *The Fly* as his fragile flesh falls away to reveal the exoskeleton of a tough, insect. The 'purpose', although far from pleasant, is also far from fatal.

This unshakeable belief in the unavoidable nature of change (it is neither good nor bad, it simply *is*) lies at the centre of Cronenberg's cinema. Together, his films constitute a perversely polemical body of work which has grown in strange and wondrous ways while retaining an immutable thematic heart. The rebellion of the body; the unconscious redefinition of the self; the shock of the

flesh—each of these themes has been employed by Cronenberg to address his recurrent central thesis: the acceptance and celebration of mutation.

Although Cronenberg has often used the work of other writers as a starting point for his films (neither *Dead Ringers* nor *The Fly* were his own original conceptions), only *The Dead Zone* (1983) smacks of outside influences, alien strains which interrupt the flow of his recurrent personal preoccupations. Working as a hired gun for Dino De Laurentiis on this big-budget Stephen King adaptation, Cronenberg seemed for once uncharacteristically unable (or unwilling) to twist the material to his own designs. The end result is a Cronenberg movie for those people who don't like Cronenberg, riddled not with cancerous charm but more with Kingly camp.

Now, with *Naked Lunch*, Cronenberg has once again allowed the stream of his work to be infected by an external agent. As before, that agent is a powerful writer with a mythology all his own. Unlike his earlier dalliance with King, however, Cronenberg's mating with William Burroughs has revealed a striking similarity of artistic purpose. Both Cronenberg and Burroughs are obsessed by transition, by characters becoming other characters, and each has developed a personal motif with which to explore this theme. For the director, viruses or cancers are the agent of change; for the writer, drugs hold the key.

"It was understood by me (because I had no choice) and by Burroughs (because he's smart) that this movie was going to be a creature on its own", Cronenberg asserts forcefully. "It would be a kind of fusion of Burroughs and me, as if we'd gotten into the telepod from *The Fly* together and come out of the other telepod as some creature which would not have existed separately. The movie of *Naked Lunch* is not something that Burroughs would have done, and it's also something that I would never have done—we did it together. That it should be different from my other films and from what Burroughs writes is only appropriate.

"Burroughs was one of the major influences on me when I thought I was going to become a novelist. There was an incredible recognition when I started to read Burroughs, like 'My God, this is in me too!' I think both Burroughs and I are very interested in metamorphosis or transformation, and that naturally leads us to attempt to have some understanding of the nature of disease and the relationship of the human condition and disease.

"I agree that you could see the drugs in Burroughs' writing and the viruses in my films being used by us metaphorically in the same way. They are both something that is potentially dangerous but also attractive, a very powerful agent of transformation. In a way, you give up your soul to either one of them, but in return you get another soul that may or may not be the soul that you're looking for . . . we're not sure".

Cronenberg first entered the body of mainstream cinema through the taboo orifices of the horror and soft-core porn genres. Having failed an audition as a porno director for

Canadian skin-flicks company Cinepix, Cronenberg interested producer John Dunning in a script for a “serious horror film” entitled *Orgy of the Blood Parasites*. Seen by Dunning as a chance to break into the US mainstream market, Cronenberg’s feature debut was shot using financing raised by Cinepix from the Canadian Film Development Corporation, under the new title *The Parasite Murders*. This less lurid moniker was subsequently changed to *Shivers* for worldwide release, except in the US, where the film was dubbed *They Came From Within*.

Decried by Canadian critic Marshall Delaney as “the most perverse disgusting film” he had ever seen, *Shivers* incurred the wrath of the US censors and set new cinematic standards of shocking visual imagery. Audiences reeled at scenes of bloodied, phallic parasites emerging from the gaping mouths of their aroused human hosts and worming their intimate way into the bodies of new victims. To horror fans, Cronenberg was a major new voice; a talented renegade who blended the explicit sexuality of porn with the taboo-breaking shocks of traditional horror. To others, he was an outlandish visual pervert.

A stumbling block to Cronenberg’s mainstream acceptance was surely his experimentation with ‘plastic realities’; using latex moulds and special effects technology pioneered in the horror genre, Cronenberg developed powerful visual metaphors which were misinterpreted by many as simply the trademarks of gore cinema. For those receptive to such startling stimulation, however, Cronenberg became the master of the visual metaphor, using the plasticity of special effects to lend fleshy form to his conceptual scripts. In *The Brood*, bloated fetus-bags hanging from the body of Samantha Eggar spew forth murderous dwarfs, representing her uncontrollable rage and desire to destroy her stifling surroundings. Similarly in *Videodrome* (1982), as Max Renn (James Woods) becomes the slave of televisual imagery, so his stomach develops a suppurating vaginal VCR slot-wound and his television set french-kisses him into a netherworld of sado-masochistic delirium.

“It’s appropriate that the movie of *Naked Lunch*, which is very much about writing and new realities that are made through the creative process, should present me again with this problem of metaphor”, Cronenberg reflects. “This is something I struggle with all the time. The use of metaphor in literature is crucial, and there is no direct screen equivalent. Eisenstein tried a direct equivalent; when the script says ‘The crowd roars like a lion’, you cut to a lion roaring. Does that work? No. It’s silly, everybody laughs, it takes you out of the movie, and I’m glad Eisenstein did it so I don’t have to! But what *do* you do when you want to deliver a concept that requires some kind of metaphor and you can’t do it the way it’s done on paper?”

“Often I end up using special effects for just this purpose. There’s very specific example of this in *Naked Lunch* where we have a creature which evolves out of a typewriter that is all-sexual, a polymorphously perverse thing which leaps on the two people who have created it and partici-

pates in sex with them. That creature is really an allegorical being that you would probably call lust if you were writing in the fourteenth century. It would be the embodiment of the lust of these two people. So I’m doing something very literary there, but in a very cinematic way.

“However, I have to say that I’m not obsessed with special effects, and I believe that if I had conceived of a film like this or like *Videodrome* in the 50s, there would have been another way to do it that would have worked. I think that there would have been a way to deliver the metaphorical imagery that I’ve got in *Videodrome* without modern technology: it’s the conceptual stuff which is hard, not the techno stuff. As far as *Naked Lunch* is concerned, I think the effects are pretty old fashioned—it’s really just advanced puppetry. There are no computer-generated morphs the way there are in *T2*, for example. It’s just foam-latex creatures operated with little springs and levers. *Naked Lunch* is set in 1953 and I think there’s something very 50s about the effects. They have a very physical, right-there-on-the-set feel, which is exactly what they were. There was no post-production optical work, unlike *Dead Ringers*, which had much more sophisticated optical post-production”.

The physicalisation of metaphor which Cronenberg describes is indeed the most powerful recurrent motif within his films. When writer Piers Handling stole the title of Dr Raglan’s fictional text book, *The Shape of Rage*, for his 1983 collection of essays on Cronenberg, he rightly pin-pointed the director’s greatest achievement—to give physical form to shapeless anxieties. Yet his depiction of physical aberration and change is always metaphorical, never realistic. So how does this metaphorical use of viruses marry with Burroughs’ very real and practical use of drugs to encourage psychic (and perhaps even physical) transformation?

“I don’t think that Burroughs’ drug-taking *produces* his creativity or indeed allows him to create”, Cronenberg states assuredly. “I know that he could do it without drugs and indeed he often *does* do it without drugs or alcohol or anything else. Also, Burroughs’ fascination with drug-taking precedes his writing by many years. I think really his drug-taking had to do with a dissatisfaction with the reality in which he found himself living, including what he himself was. He wanted to transform himself. He wanted to become something else. Drug-taking was one way to do that, and it also put him in touch with outsiders in society whom he found more interesting than the middle classes from which he came.

“The state that I prefer is stone cold sober. When I get drunk, or on the rare occasions that I’ve been stoned, I just sit around waiting for it to go away. It’s like a fever that I want to get over. I don’t have trouble when I’m sober or straight tapping into the dream/fantasy part of myself. I don’t need anything to liberate me. Even when dealing with hallucinatory states, as I do in *Naked Lunch*, I am always striving for a kind of clarity. Anything that muddies the clarity and makes it more difficult to synthesise things is something I’d rather not have.



"Burroughs is not like that; he enjoys smoking dope and he likes the connections he makes when he's stoned, and he uses them in his work. I don't make any connections I think are valuable. I just get very paranoid and wait for it to go away. At that point you're really dealing with your own personal metabolism and nervous system.

"When I'm writing I *do* go into a trance-like state which I can be in and out of in an instant. However, one thing about this altered state is that it's *not* physical. It's a kind of out-of-body thing which everybody experiences. People think of it as mysterious, but I've often got to the point where I have to check the toothbrush to see if it's wet because I can't remember whether I've brushed my teeth or not. My body has been functioning on its own, while my mind is somewhere else.

"So I guess I don't think of that creative process at the moment as needing or involving bodily change. But having said that, I think it would be interesting to attach electrodes to your head and find out what's actually going on when you're writing. Because you *are* experiencing these things as a kind of reality . . . albeit at a distance".

#### Anne Billson (review date 24 April 1992)

SOURCE: "A Meal in the Best of Taste," in *New Statesman and Society*, Vol. 5, No. 199, April 24, 1992, pp. 34–5.

[In the following review, Billson writes that despite the good acting in *Naked Lunch*, the film contains "an excess of refinement."]

David Cronenberg loves gloop. Some critics have interpreted this as evidence that he finds the human body disgusting, but the opposite is true. Cronenberg loves the human body in all its permutations: surgically altered or diseased, insideout, mutated into radical new forms. His films explore the effect physical changes have on the mind, and vice versa. The psychosomatic killer midgets of *The Brood*, the exploding head in *Scanners*. Jen Goldblum's detached observation of his own genetic mutation in *The Fly* are all instances of Mind and Body meeting in a welter of goo.

When Martin Scorsese tackled *The Last Temptation of Christ*, the result was a formality. He had told the story so often that such a literal-minded version seemed unnecessary. Now Cronenberg has finally realised his long-cherished project of making a movie out of *The Naked Lunch* (London cinemas from 24 April)—but he has already been filming William Burroughs for years. *Video-drome*, in which sleazy TV programmer James Woods developed a VCR slot in his stomach, was about as Burroughsian as you can get.

But *Naked Lunch* bid fair to be the ultimate amalgamation of mind and body, the gloopfest of the century. Cronenberg maintains that a literal visualisation would have cost

US\$400 million and been banned in every country in the world. But the most problematic aspect of the novel, from an adaptor's viewpoint, seems to have been the absence of a coherent story.

Cronenberg's way of filming the unfilmable has been to arrange his material in a *pulp noir* formal, laced with hallucinations, corrupt characters, and local colour (local being studio-recreated Tangier). There are also biographical details from the author's life, especially the accidental shooting of his own wife in 1951, for which he spent 13 days in a Mexican jail. Burroughs fans discuss this incident as though it enhances the writer's mythical status. I bet you they wouldn't find it quite so glamorous if, instead of getting drunk and shooting her, he'd got drunk and accidentally beaten her to death.

There are some scary production photos showing Burroughs, Cronenberg and leading actor Peter Weller staring, bespectacled and unblinking, into the camera, as though they were three different generations of the same person. Weller plays the Burroughs character, a roach-exterminator whose wife, played by Judy Davis, turns him on to his own insecticide. "It's a Kafka high," she says, "You feel like a bug." Then their William Tell game goes wrong, he flees to Interzone, and reality gets very virtual indeed.

He gets hooked on giant centipede meat and encounters rubber monsters called "mugwumps". His typewriter unfurls metallic insectoid wings and talks to him through a sphincter-like aperture. He is in the instrument's thrall, instructed to compile "reports" that turn into a novel called *The Naked Lunch*. These act-of-creation in-jokes make the film a worthy addition to the writers-at-work sub-genre, to be placed alongside *The Shining*, *Misery* and *Barton Fink*.

Julian Sands plays a dissipated Swiss; Ian Holm an American writer; and Judy Davis pops up in the second leg of her dual role as Holm's wife, with whom Weller has incredibly kinky rubber-monster sex. Davis is deliberately made up to resemble Debra Winger/Jane Bowles/Kit Moresby in *The Sheltering Sky*—a reminder that one of the guiding lights behind this literary adaptation was that film's producer, Jeremy Thomas.

Thomas has taken the outré directors Oshima and Bertolucci in hand, and presented them in a more "respectable" form. Now, one gets the feeling that some of Cronenberg's gloopy vigour has been wiped away to provide acceptable international art-house fodder. It may seem odd to complain of an excess of refinement in a film that features talking anuses and rubber monsters shaped like bottoms, but it does all seem to have been done in the best possible taste.

*Naked Lunch* is the first Cronenberg film I have sat through without being reduced to a state of rigid terror. I almost dozed off once or twice, lulled by the sounds of the *souk*. It's a film that appeals more to the intellect than to the gut—definitely a Kafka high.

But there is enough to suggest one could be hailing it as a masterpiece in future. The performances are all good, but Weller's is one to take home and treasure forever. I will race out to buy the video, because I think it may be more digestible chopped into bite-size pieces and perused in terminally sleazy surroundings when one is tanked up on Sol and takeaway Chinese. Yes, already I can hear the sound of *Naked Lunch* parties taking place in my head. And I wouldn't mind getting my hands on one of those typewriters that does all the work for you.

### Karen Jaehne (interview date Spring 1992)

SOURCE: "Dead Ringers Do *Naked Lunch*," in *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 45, No. 3, Spring, 1992, pp. 2–6.

[In the following interview, Jaehne talks with Cronenberg about the making of *Naked Lunch*, particularly how the film tackled the difficult, then-taboo subject matter found in William S. Burroughs' 1959 novel.]

It is hard to imagine two people more allied by phantasmagoric visions than David Cronenberg and William Burroughs. Both men are attracted to the shiny metallic but mercurial intellectual vein in their subject matter, even though at first blush their imagery is often grotesque, visceral, and unnerving. Plot is always secondary. In *Naked Lunch*, Cronenberg uses Burroughs' life and art as a reason to explore the writer as addict. The film is a nightmare set in Interzone (the International Zone of Tangier, a sort of Berlin of North Africa), where typewriters talk when they're not turning into giant insects, and life, like writing, is boring or repulsive.

#### INTERVIEW

*Karen Jaehne: Let's start with the critical crux: Is this a David Cronenberg film, the subject of which happens to be William Burroughs, or is this the film about Burroughs and his novel *Naked Lunch* that was inevitable and only happened to be made by Cronenberg?*

David Cronenberg: It probably has more of me in it than of William Burroughs, because he had very little to do with the process. I never set out to make an historical or quasi-historical account, or to be faithful to the source. I think of it as the product of a dream I would have about Burroughs and his book, a dream to which I bring all my particular obsessions and idiosyncrasies.

*What impact did William Burroughs have on the film-making?*

Bill had nothing to do with the writing or the directing or the film. He told me that he had once tried to write a script—the memoirs of Dutch Schultz, I believe—and he said this is an entirely different art form, you can save it for the professionals.

And perhaps because the film is about writing and, very specifically, about Burroughs as a writer and an intellect, he had the good grace to stay out of the process. He was very liberal, very intelligent about it and basically told me to go make my movie. As it happens, he likes the result, which pleases me, but that was not my aim either. I wanted to be as honest and interesting as I could about the intellectual makeup of "Bill Lee," the alter ego of William Burroughs during the time he wrote *Naked Lunch*.

*Were you ever worried about going too far out on a limb about his experiences or experiments?*

Would they come to me if they wanted the kind of discretion you're suggesting? Many of the issues raised by *Naked Lunch*—homosexuality, misogyny, drug use, obscenity and censorship—are still controversial in America today. You have no choice but to face them head on, as bluntly and as crudely as you find in his writing, if you want this film to have any credibility whatsoever. And I'm not sure an American director could approach it in the same way. American culture is not introspective. It's at a white heat and boiling, and I like it, but as a Canadian I'm also in exile from American culture. I can't help but consume it, but I have choices that Americans might not have.

I think in some way it took a Canadian director and an English producer to deal with Burroughs and his world. Not because we are superior, but only because we share an arm's length perspective on the really controversial elements that needs to be preserved. The misogyny alone. . .

*What about Burroughs', or Bill Lee's, relationship with the representational woman in this picture—who is played by Judy Davis first as Joan, Burroughs' wife whom he murdered in Mexico, then as Jane Bowles, whom he knew when he was living in Tangier?*

Murder is not an appropriate term here. I don't think it was a murder, legally speaking, although he did kill her and felt pain and guilt about it. There were undoubtedly a lot of things at work—jealousy, which I try to allude to in the scene in which he walks in on her with another man. . .

*But that is a famous incident usually portrayed as a paradigm of "Beat" hipness—the lack of jealousy, the idea of tolerance of people acting out their desires despite bourgeois norms.*

Maybe, but jealousy is a very important emotion, even when it is repressed. Burroughs loved Joan, admired her, and thought of her as an equal. There is nothing misogynistic about Burroughs' work, and I realize that it's a twisted element of his psychological makeup, but you have to get beyond the surface. His work represents the essence of struggling with misogyny without fear of the dark side. The incident represented in the film as the occasion of Joan's death is the central experience of his life, you see.

"Let's do our William Tell routine." They were out of their minds, and he says he doesn't know why he did it. He also worries about something in her that was self-destructive.. . .

*He has said he suspected her brain pulled the bullet to it.*

Which is another way of expressing his awareness of her self-destructive state. You see, Burroughs believes in things like possession in a medieval sense and in things that I don't endorse.

*Yes, he thought at one time that women were from another planet.*

No, he thought they were a different species—a very different thing from being alien. This is not scientific thinking; this is mythological or a kind of primitive poetry. That women and men are "other" is a commonplace, but Bill extended that to an extreme I may find interesting but cannot take literally.

*How are we to take Bill's killing Joan in the film—twice?*

It was the central event of his life, and everything began from that point, again and again. There was no way to erase it or forget it or pay for it. He has to relive that trauma repeatedly, and it's meant to be about his suffering, not about him getting rid of the woman in his life so he could be creative. It was only after he came to terms with her loss that he began to write seriously again.

*Burroughs was very much obsessed with Allen Ginsberg during the time he was in Tangier—long, passionate letters and confessions of depending upon him as a writer are part of the record. You don't seem to want to make much of their relationship, and in your film Kerouac and Ginsberg seem to be more like Tweedledum and Tweedledee than like the two comrades with whom Burroughs had launched the Beat era.*

Admittedly, I didn't want to get into the history of Ginsberg or Kerouac, and I didn't want to have to take them on as well, because this is only secondarily a film about the Beats. For me, they worked well in that way, because that's how Bill Lee saw them. You see, Burroughs had been their mentor. He was older and they looked up to him, but he was also this guru who required care, and in looking after him they fulfilled their bond. They saw it as their duty to pull together what spewed out of Bill's creative genius.

*Why do you shy away from Burroughs' homosexuality—a Hollywood taboo or just too kinky?*

His friend Kiki is portrayed as his lover, but it was something that I just didn't feel that I could delve into. I was sort of damned if I did and damned if I didn't. I myself am not homosexual and do not feel prepared to create a character as extreme in his homosexuality as in *Naked*

*Lunch*. Believe me, I struggled with it aesthetically and morally, because it seemed a kind of transgression, but I finally decided to let go of it.

I approached Bill about it to inform him of my decision because it felt like the fair thing to do. He just said, don't worry, it's your movie, do whatever you want. He likes to invoke the famous line of Raymond Chandler, when people asked him if he liked what Hollywood had done to all his books: "They haven't done a thing to my books. They're all right up there on the shelf."

*What does Burroughs think of the film?*

He's told countless people it's a great film. He's also said that he doesn't recognize any of the people up there. And why should he? There is this *act* that occurs between the life of the person creating and the work of art that transforms and separates the two of them. That's what this movie is about.

*Did Ginsberg have anything to say?*

Through a friend, he let me know that he liked it very much and found it funny and true to the spirit of Burroughs—because, I believe, the film is an inquiry into the particular kind of intelligence they had which does not depend upon homosexuality.

*A lot of the gay press would disagree.*

Well, I did have this contretemps with *The Advocate*, because they refused to believe or to print my statement that Burroughs had actually renounced his homosexuality at one stage.. . .

*Yes, it seems that after finishing *Naked Lunch*, Burroughs claimed that writing it had exorcized some of his devils and that it had provided a resolution to the sexual conflicts he suffered.<sup>1</sup> Of course, he also regularly gave up drugs!*

I did so much research for this that I cannot remember all the sources, and when somebody challenges you in that way, you think, why bother? My film is about creativity—its anxieties, its lifestyle, its dangers.

*What do you mean by that?*

It's interesting that Jane Bowles once spoke to Burroughs about her fear of the danger of writing—of exposing yourself and your ideas to things entirely beyond your control.

*Is that the point of the Mugwump ordering Bill to the Interzone to file reports on enemy agents—or of typewriters turning into threatening bugs and heads? They're not so much threatening as funny.*

I haven't thought about it in exactly that way, but we did want that surreal aspect of the film to carry an absurd humor. Think about it! The talking asshole is a very literal



image of the serious social taboo against expressing anything with, through, or about human orifices. That was one of Burroughs' more infamous contributions to literature, which somehow strikes a chord, you know? It breaks through the organization of our bodies and our lives into proper, acceptable forms of presentation.

Likewise, the bugs have escaped from the conscious mind, through the architecture of ideas, through the cracks that release creative ideas. To have mechanical devices transformed into bugs is a way of showing how they are really subservient to the organic flow of the imagination.

*The second typewriter he borrows turns into a head; he has to stick his hands in its mouth to type.*

That's surreal, isn't it? I don't have an explanation for choosing a head in that case, but I do believe it must go back to the dangerous aspect of writing. To stick your hands into the maw of the beast is dangerous, and it's also like trying to perform brain surgery through the mouth.

*What about the hand that also thrusts into a surprisingly vaginal orifice?*

The fear's the same: the implications of a vagina dentata have been built up through previous imagery. I want to emphasize my reasons for such sexual imagery, because it is so commonly misunderstood. It is not sexist. It's the visual life of this particular story, and it's not a pronouncement on women. This is the story of one Bill Lee, who is not even William Burroughs, but rather a man who must write himself out of a nightmare.

*Is that the nightmare of drug addiction? I recall that Burroughs was supposedly not addicted during the time he was writing *Naked Lunch*.*

Well, the trouble is Burroughs was an addict, and he wrote out of addiction. There's no getting around it, even if he was not an addict during the act of creating his novel. There is something about the addictive personality that is more compelling than the fact that he satisfies it with narcotics. For example, Burroughs' wife Joan had a really vile habit and took drugs throughout the time she carried their child; people saw her wasting away right in front of them. She couldn't survive her own addiction, but Bill could. I'm not sure why, but his addiction rose out of exploration rather than escape. He figured out a way to go back and forth from the straight world to the world of the addict. Literati view him as a translator from that world.

*Theories Burroughs has proposed or notions threaded through his work make him sound like a crackpot, but in his public appearances he always seems coherent and very controlled. He has a kind of glacial monumentality.*

He does, but personally he is a very sweet and surprisingly gentle person. When I first met him—the day before his 70th birthday and arranged by our producer, Jeremy Thomas—what struck me was his shyness and gentle

nature. We established a kind of trust, and I felt almost protective of him, which provided even stronger incentives to develop the character away from the man Burroughs and make of him a fictional hero caught between Tangier and the completion of *Naked Lunch*.

*Were you ever tempted to put Burroughs in the film, even in a cameo?*

Never. It would have been a total betrayal of what the film is about. I might put him in another film, because I like his presence and self-possession in something like *Drugstore Cowboy*. Here, it would point in a self-conscious way to the source. The use of a writer in that way can become exploitative and confuse an audience as to your purpose.

*The acting styles of Weller as Bill Lee and the guys riffing on the personalities of other characters drawn from the days in Tangier as well as from Burroughs' book form a very rich jumble. Dr. Benway is from sci-fi, Bill Lee from *Pilgrim's Progress*. . .*

What you're getting at is interesting, because the characters have the quality of apparitions and a symbolic force which rises from an extreme presentation by that particular actor that is, in addition, appropriate to the character's position in the overall odyssey. It's a gallery, not a society.

*You spent some time in North Africa yourself in preproduction before the Gulf War broke out. . .*

God, yes. We had done our homework and toured Tangier "in the footsteps of the master" with Jeremy and Bill, trying to trace the atmosphere, influences. The landscape has such a strong pull that it's hard to resist attempting to put it on screen. It's remarkably stark and has a magical or maybe mystical sensibility that is completely at one with Burroughs' sensibility.

But then the war broke out and there was no way we could insure the film or actors, and we had no choice but to pack up and go back to Toronto and rewrite it as an interior tale of a man's mind rather than of his environment being peopled by monsters. I think it was a blessing in disguise and forced the film into a claustrophobic feeling that is perfectly appropriate.

*How much control did you have over the music for *Naked Lunch*?*

Actually, that was very exciting. Howard Shore came up with the idea of using jazz, and of course everybody agreed that it was the right idea, the right tone, the right mood. But then that simply opens up a wide choice. Then someone came up with Ornette Coleman and he liked the idea. You see, he'd known Burroughs in Tangier back in 1973, when Coleman went to a village called Joujouka to take part in certain rituals and play with the musicians who had been studying ancient techniques. Burroughs had been there to see Coleman participate in the annual ritual,

so the reunion of Coleman doing a sound track for the experiences that Burroughs had formulated out of Tangier was . . . kismet. Coleman worked out a score that is so sensitive, it provides a kind of pulse for Bill Lee's emotions. It's a perfect sound track—subtle, a little spooky, full of mystical implications—like the film.

#### Notes

1. See Ted Morgan, *Literary Outlaw* (New York: Henry Holt, 1988).

#### William Beard (essay date Winter 1992–93)

SOURCE: "An Anatomy of Melancholy: Cronenberg's *Dead Zone*," in *Journal of Canadian Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 4, Winter, 1992–93, pp. 169–79.

[In the following essay, Beard analyzes the "movie about a psychic," which is based on the Stephen King novel, by pinpointing how the film's use of landscape reveals the psychic state of protagonist Johnny Smith. Beard also decodes the clues about Johnny's "inner drama" that are embedded in his visions.]

With the exception of some discomfort experienced by those speaking for high culture, scarcely anyone disputes any longer that David Cronenberg is an artistic presence in this country. Still, between the continuing reluctance of traditionalists to make a place in the pantheon for anyone whose principal identifying feature is the habit of depicting gooeey inner body parts, and the emphasis of truly Canadian cinema partisans on a more culturally pure, less commercial genre, Cronenberg does not actually *fit* anywhere very comfortably. The truth of the matter is that he is at this moment arguably the best and most important filmmaker working in English Canada, and that he is a real presence internationally as well.<sup>1</sup> Cronenberg's work has its flaws and limitations, but what is far more striking is its passion, its uniqueness and consistency of vision, and the force and dexterity of its expression. In particular, Cronenberg's recent films are so rich in detail and dense in texture that each one deserves as close a reading as can be managed. The present essay is an attempt to apply this type of treatment to the 1983 feature *The Dead Zone*. But the highly personal and constantly evolving nature of Cronenberg's themes and style means that no film can be wholly understood in isolation from the body of work surrounding it. For his concerns, like his "language" and the growth and development of his sensibility, are as private and unique as Hitchcock's or Godard's (or Michael Snow's or Jack Chambers'), and really need to be seen in a setting of continuous discourse.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, viewed on its own, *The Dead Zone* scarcely registers as a David Cronenberg film at all. Released under the "Dino de Laurentiis Presents" banner, it is a reasonably faithful adaptation of Stephen King's novel—a best-seller. It features star performers (Christopher Walken,

Brooke Adams, Martin Sheen) in the principal roles and its scenario is, despite the presence of some paranormal elements, very low key. The script is not by Cronenberg, but by Jeffrey Boam. In short, it passes very well for a conventional Hollywood mainstream movie. And yet on closer examination *The Dead Zone* is very much a part of the Cronenberg "set," and emerges as a subtle and complex variation on his essential thematic concerns.

The protagonist, Johnny Smith, is definitely a Cronenberg hero. Essentially he is a victim who has to fight against both the hostile blows of fate and his own passivity. But if the forces oppressing the hero seem at first purely external, in the end they appear to originate from within himself as much as from outside, and the characteristic plight of the Cronenberg protagonist is thus replicated: a malign conjunction of inner predisposition and outward circumstance ends by destroying the subject. This thematic has come to replace the often discussed "mind/body" split in the Cronenbergian world—perhaps it was always its underlying cause.

Johnny Smith's life is a tragedy, marked by almost unbroken quiet suffering. All he wants out of life, it would seem, is a normal existence: a wife and family, a job as a useful member of the community, a sense of security and belonging. These simple desires appear to be just on the point of becoming reality when they are cruelly snatched away from him by a road accident, followed by five years in a coma, and an awakening which leaves him not only partially crippled and deprived of his girl and his job, but also experiencing disturbing moments of "second sight" which threaten to make him into a media freak. On the surface, then, he seems clearly to be the victim of calamitous bad luck. And when he is killed at the end trying to assassinate a politician whom he has foreseen will start a nuclear war, he looks very much like a martyr: he is a poor blameless man who dies—almost a sacrifice—to save us from destruction.

But this configuration of events is misleading. The "normal" life of domestic happiness and security the hero wishes for is not really normal at all—it represents a considerable idealization of reality. In fact, even Johnny sees this, at least subconsciously: he cannot believe that he will ever really feel safe and loved. Instead (as we can read between the lines), in his heart he believes himself destined for isolation and loss. He is very nice and very passive, and when disaster comes for him he seems particularly fitted to receive it. From a certain vantage point he seems even to have created it. His congenital melancholy expands to become a terrible, numb sense of deprivation and exclusion. His frame of mind, turning in circles of deepening depression, becomes suicidal. But here again we find that curious ambivalence in Cronenberg. Just as the protagonist's plight is both outwardly motivated *and* of his own making so the solution is both blunt self-destruction *and* a curious sort of salvation.<sup>3</sup> The dominant mood, however, is bleak, and in *The Dead Zone* the overwhelming tone is one of inner hopelessness and loss.

The objective correlative of this inner desolation is a corresponding outer desolation marked onto the cinematic landscape. The fateful accident occurs in a chilly, nocturnal rainstorm which obscures the vision. When Johnny wakes up, apparently soon afterwards but really five years later, it is winter—and it remains winter for most of the rest of the film. Snow and freezing mud, dense grey skies, barren leafless trees, a killing, all-penetrating cold: these are the regular conditions whenever the characters move out-of-doors or even glance through windows. Only towards the end of the film, when Johnny has begun to come to terms with his plight, does spring begin to arrive in a tentative and partial way. For most of the time the lifeless and hostile climate is simply the environment, an expression of both the objective bad luck which dogs the protagonist and his subjective sense that everything will work out for the worst. It is both an external and an internal landscape mirroring the thematic dilemma already mentioned.

While Johnny's fragile and complex psychology is well-documented in the film, a fuller understanding of its nuances is necessary for a proper exposition of the film (although it is scarcely possible to talk about the hero without also talking about the events and the *mise-en-scène* of the film, so closely are they intertwined). Christopher Walken presents the right sallow, sensitive physical type, characterized by a darting yet tentative manner. He looks and acts like a highly intelligent and highly repressed person; his psychic disability is physically echoed in a painful, lurching limp. The first time we see him, Johnny is teaching Poe's *The Raven* to his (junior high-school?) pupils, not so much describing its operation as entering into a kind of vicarious early-adolescent discovery of this purple romantic idealism-and-despair ("Pretty good, huh?," he shyly asks after reading a particularly gloomy passage).<sup>4</sup> This describes his disposition quite well: soft, romantic, sensitive and idealistic; but he is also pessimistic, almost melodramatically aware that life does not answer to his needs. It's as if he didn't believe that he could ever *do* anything to change his fate. Certainly, spontaneous action is the last thing he wants to get into. A key moment occurs just before the accident. Johnny has romantically (Poe-etically) swept Sarah, his girlfriend, off for an afternoon at the amusement park, only to become disconcertingly and prophetically ill on the rollercoaster. Standing on her porch in the cold rain, he rejects her invitation to stay the night. "No, better not . . . some things are worth waiting for," he says, looking sad and defeated, and moments later, "I'm going to marry you, you know." He wants Sarah, but in the context of a safe, permanent, institutionalized relationship, not on the basis of an impetuous instinct or indeed any kind of physical *act*. He can never have what he personally and poignantly wants; if he's lucky he can perhaps get what every other "Joe" aspires to.

Johnny's desires for normality are those provided by the dominant ideology around him: he believes, or *thinks* he believes, in family, home, and relationships as a bulwark and a haven. Shelter is what he wants—shelter from a ter-

rifying emotional insecurity. Some of this becomes clearer when we look at Johnny's parents and the house in which he was brought up. His father is a gentle, self-effacing type, his mother an intense, slightly deranged, religious enthusiast. Their home is poor and small, crammed with, one might say, *homely* things. It seeks to be warm and secure but seems so fragile and impoverished—it feels (to invoke again the realm of climate) like a very precarious barrier against the deadly winter outside. It resembles Johnny's own mental state. There is a wish to partake in an ideal world where parents love and nurture children, where home is a stout fortress against the dangers of the outside, where children grow up to be fine upstanding people and marry the girl more or less next door, living happily ever after while recapitulating the ideal for another generation. But the wisher is not strong enough, or lucky enough, or magical enough, to make the wish come true; what remains is a kind of faded outline, a sad pantomime of former hopes. This outline and pantomime are discernible in Johnny's gentle, melancholic disposition, and in the house as well, which expresses both the desire and the failure to make everything right.

The *house*, in general, is one of the protean recurring images through which the film communicates Johnny's psychological condition and his emotional understanding of the world. His parents' house is the most important example here, but versions of the *Ur-house* are omnipresent in the film from the credit sequence onwards. It is two-storied, wood-faced, usually with a picket fence and gate, often with a porch; it may be bigger or smaller, richer or poorer, in better or worse repair, but it is not particularly new. Virtually every house in the film is a repetition of it. What the buildings essentially signify is the sense of an old, heavy past, associated especially with family. This aura is at its least insistent in the clean and solid Weizack Clinic, where the guiding spirit is the sane, kindly Dr. Sam Weizack; and it is at its most overpowering in the chaotic and quasi-derelict home of Frank Dodd, where decaying emblems of childhood and too-close family embrace proliferate like rank vegetation, and the dwellers are a sex killer and his crazed, protective mother. The *house* is a thing which Johnny cannot escape wherever he goes—it is his past, his childhood, his sense of the fragility of things and the inadequacy of love and good intentions. Through such images a deterministic sense of entrapment or impotence is inscribed on the physical environment of the film.<sup>5</sup>

The scenes representing Johnny's visions are in strong contrast to the rest of the film. Where the surrounding text is drab and depressed, the visions are dramatic and violent. Moreover, they have a thematically inverse relationship to their surroundings: that is, if the action as a whole represents Johnny's acceptance of his fate and his repression of desire, the visions represent a bursting-out of feeling. Certainly, their literal diegetic function is essential to the film's surface (*The Dead Zone's* capsule description: a movie about a psychic), but their status as a metaphor for the protagonist's neurosis is just as essential to its



substructure. In the first place the visions are triggered by a strong touch—a hand-clasp, a grip around the wrist, or on the shoulder. Johnny’s malady may be said to be isolation, exclusion, an inability to feel connected; also, in a pathological sense, a fear of contact, a reluctance whose basis is a belief that attempts to connect and belong must always fail. *Touch*, then, is an apt detonator of repressed fears and wishes—which is how the visions may be described in this context. Their content, too, is metaphorically relevant. They deal almost invariably with family, especially parent-child relations, and they emphasize pain, loss and death. Each vision is preceded by anguished flinching by Johnny, as though he were being pierced by knives; and each instance leaves Johnny harrowed and drained (“it feels like I’m dying, inside,” he says of their effect).

The first vision, occurring as Johnny grasps the arm of a ministering nurse at the clinic, catapults him—and us—into a child’s bedroom engulfed in fire. It is the nurse’s house. The images are extraordinarily colourful and violent, especially compared to the surrounding “real-life” scenes. The nurse’s daughter cowers and screams as gaily printed wallpaper and cute stuffed animals are consumed by flames, the fish tank boils and explodes, and Johnny himself is seen lying in the child’s burning bed with a look of horror upon his face. “Your daughter is screaming!” shouts Johnny to the bewildered nurse, “The house is on fire!”

The next two visions are not so spectacular, but they continue the pattern. Johnny sees Weizack’s young mother hurrying him to safety amidst a fiery Nazi attack, then knows—as Weizack himself does not—that the mother survived. Then, at a news conference prompted by the burning-house vision, an aggressively skeptical reporter volunteers himself as a guinea pig. Sitting next to Johnny, in front of microphones and TV cameras, he asks nastily “Is *my* house on fire, John?” Johnny grasps his hand and talks about the suicide of the reporter’s sister; the reporter becomes very upset. Given the prevailing significance of houses in the film, it would seem that the reporter’s house is on fire, metaphorically at least.

In some respects the most compelling vision occurs midway through the film, when Johnny agrees to help the local sheriff find a serial sex killer.<sup>6</sup> A new homicide finds them at a park bandstand in the middle of the night; Johnny takes the corpse’s hand and finds himself witnessing the crime as it occurred. The *mise-en-scène* places Johnny in the shot with the murderer and the victim, and when the killing is over, Johnny babbles to the sheriff, “I stood there and watched him kill that girl . . . I did nothing . . . I stood there.” The murderer is the sheriff’s young deputy, Frank Dodd, and Johnny goes along to his house for the arrest. The aspect of the house and its significance has already been mentioned. Dodd’s wild-eyed mother is an important feature too. When she grabs him, Johnny discovers psychically that she knew about her son’s killings but did nothing. She is uncomfortably reminiscent of Johnny’s

own mother, whose Old Testament language and feverish gaze coexist disturbingly with her obvious love for him.<sup>7</sup> But Mrs. Dodd calls Johnny a “devil”; after her son’s gruesome suicide, she shoots Johnny with a pistol.

All of these events have the effect of drawing a striking parallel between Johnny and Dodd—people who on the surface appear to be opposites. Johnny is a sensitive, polite schoolteacher who would never hurt a fly and never even “take advantage” of a woman, let alone assault her. Dodd is a psychotic police officer who kills young women with a pair of scissors. And yet Johnny feels an element of complicity with Dodd. All the covert resemblances—the hinted-at deeply-felt relationships with their mothers, their solitude, their similar family houses, the strange private glance exchanged through the window as Johnny arrives with the sheriff—are clues to Dodd’s status as a nightmarish double of Johnny. It is as though Dodd represents what Johnny fears he might be if he ever stopped repressing. In particular, the murderous, predatory relationship with women is starkly contrasted with Johnny’s “honourable” reluctance and then his official exclusion from Sarah’s life (via her marriage to another man).

It is especially noteworthy that the whole Dodd episode follows quickly from, and is even diegetically motivated by, Sarah’s visit to Johnny’s house and her wonderful/horrible re-creation (for one day only) of the marriage and family life they never had. In detail, the sequence is as follows: Johnny’s mother dies; the sheriff approaches Johnny for help and is emphatically refused; Sarah visits and he temporarily lives out his fantasy of home and marriage (he dandles the child on his lap, Sarah cooks dinner, Johnny’s dad sighs contentedly and remarks that “it feels good to have a family eating around the table again”); Sarah announces this can never happen again; and Johnny helps the sheriff and “experiences” Frank Dodd. The death of Johnny’s mother—the result of a stroke suffered while watching Johnny scuffle with the reporter on TV—makes him feel still more bitter and excluded; Sarah’s visit makes his wishes seem more organic and real and allows him to feel less cut-off; he then *acts* (helping the sheriff) and finds himself virtually living out his worst nightmare of himself, thus reinforcing his will to passivity.

Until now, Johnny’s visions have had an increasingly worsening effect on him, even though they may have been socially helpful in an objective sense. The Dodd episode leaves him in a state of despair and gives rise to his most concerted effort simply to avoid life. He moves to another town and refuses to leave his house to work (he tutors at home). As ever, his psychological problems assume a clear physical aspect—he looks consumed by an inner malady. His closet is overflowing with letters from strangers who want him to use his powers to fix their lives (once more the film combines an outer cause—the world will not let poor Johnny alone—with an inner one—the bulging closet is a frightening image of a mind simply refusing to deal with business and letting it pile up monstrously). But his human feelings draw him back into life. He cannot resist

an appeal from a distraught father, Roger Stuart, to help his “troubled” son. The next vision is of the boy, Chris, and some friends, in full hockey gear, crashing through the thin spring ice at a practice organized by Chris’ rich father (who turns out to be pretty clearly the source of his son’s problems).<sup>8</sup> And this time it is not of the present or the past, but the future—it is an event which has not yet occurred, and which Johnny in fact partially prevents (he persuades the boy not to go, but the father is arrogantly skeptical and goes ahead). This is understandably interpreted by Johnny as a positive development.

The ice is melting because it is spring and winter is beginning to relax its grip at last. Renewed activity breaks into Johnny’s hibernation in the form of workmen across the street putting up a campaign sign for senatorial candidate Greg Stillson. Sarah shows up once more: she and her husband are going door-to-door for Stillson. And Stillson is the subject of Johnny’s most portentous vision yet—as President some time in the future, he is pushing the button to launch Armageddon. In every way, Stillson’s connection with Johnny is one of reawakening life, action, and a positive feeling for other people. He is associated not only with energy and constructiveness in the spring (the workmen and the face of the giant billboard which, like his fate, gradually takes shape in front of Johnny’s window), but also with Johnny’s compassionate young “project,” Chris (Johnny first meets Stillson at the Stuart house, where Stillson remarks “My God, what a glorious day!”), and with Sarah (who is working on Stillson’s campaign). These strange positive associations with someone who is essentially an evil force are, however, not indications of Stillson’s nature; rather, they suggest his role in Johnny’s internal drama. Once again the film shows its practice of making the protagonist’s inner dilemma the mainspring of everything and of marking an internal thematic element onto the outer, visible world of events.

For Stillson is essentially Johnny’s salvation, as well as the occasion of his death (almost the same thing). One way of describing Johnny’s disease is as an inability to get out of the self. In Johnny’s case, this is particularly debilitating because his own psyche is dominated by a belief that he will always fail. His prevention of Chris’s death shows him a way to *act* effectively. If he cannot ameliorate his own situation, cannot affect his own life, at least he can do something for others. Stillson is the next Hitler (a comparison drawn explicitly in the film) and, in killing him, Johnny will be doing incalculable service to humanity. Nothing could be more *outside* than Stillson or the threat he represents, and he therefore offers Johnny a perfect escape from the paralysis he is experiencing. Since killing Stillson will probably result in his own death (in fact, he is counting on it), Johnny is also extricated forever from his impossible position. He can *be good* and *act* at the same time, and he will be out of the situation and not have to deal with those contradictions any more.<sup>9</sup> In the end he dies in Sarah’s arms (she whispers “I love you” into his ear). He has ruined Stillson’s career and in the event has not even had to commit homicide, sure of

posthumous glory in the eyes of those, who like Weizack and Sarah, know his motives. It is a sort of happy ending, even if its premise is one of a prior, absolute defeat.

The visions as a whole are a byproduct of repression—repression of sexuality, repression of ambiguous family feelings, repression of the knowledge of contradiction between *is* and *ought*, repression of anger and fear. Their colour and drama, their latent or manifest violence, their alien and quasi-supernatural qualities, are all in striking contrast to the grey niceness of Johnny’s “regular” personality. They engage him in areas which he would avoid if he could. From a certain standpoint they might be viewed as therapeutic in that they force him to confront realities from which he is fleeing. But in truth they never really rise beyond the condition of neurotic symptoms; nor does Johnny ever achieve a self-knowledge which could help him—unless self-martyrdom in the service of an unfelt social good can be seen as an effective solution. Johnny’s disease is, in fact, incurable (or at least the film portrays it as such), and *The Dead Zone* is, like so much of Cronenberg’s work, rooted in despair.

Other facets of the *mise-en-scène* support the film’s thematic as well; indeed, its visual realization is all of a piece with its significance. We have already seen how the work uses climate and setting in this fashion; but there are numerous other aspects of the visual staging which support the central ideas in still more subtle ways. The repetition or partial repetition on a minute scale of camera angles, compositions, camera movements, and aspects of décor and setting all create echoes and crosscurrents—once more the embodiment of the protagonist’s experience (and the filmmaker’s intensity of vision) in the imagistic fabric of the film. One facet of costume—one among many—may furnish an example. Johnny dresses predominantly in greys, pale blues or earth colours. His favourite indoor style is a wool cardigan and indeterminate slacks, his constant props are spectacles and cane: an image of premature age or mature resignation reflects Johnny’s fear of and sense of exclusion from the active processes of life. Once more repression, and the desire for a controllable life, is a key note in this choice of dress. But at those moments when Johnny’s internal tensions are growing most painful, the instinctive begins to push its way out; and it is actually embodied in a particular item of clothing—a rust-red, brown, and white-striped terrycloth dressing-gown, the pattern of which almost resembles bacon strips. It is a rather ugly garment, but its principal characteristic is its aggressive use of “visceral” colours, in startling contrast to the quiet and controlled colours Johnny usually wears. Although the film contains comparatively little actual viscera (remembering that they are Cronenberg’s best-known characteristic), the dressing-gown signals their presence, as it were, off-screen. After particularly harrowing experiences Johnny is seen looking exhausted and racked with pain—and wearing the robe. It not only makes him look like an invalid (which he is in the psychological sense even more than the physical), but it conveys that sense of visceral revolt with all its overtones of instinctive and

uncontrollable inner convulsion that features so prominently in Cronenberg's earlier work.<sup>10</sup>

But the film is couched predominantly in a mode that is muted and depressed. What is not widely enough appreciated, I feel, is the extent to which this mode is characteristic and indeed quintessential in Cronenberg's *oeuvre* as a whole. It is understandable that the more violent and spectacular elements of the films should have received the greatest notice; but the works' pessimism and general air of bleak frustration and impotence are hardly less striking. Even in the earliest features, where Cronenberg is at his most detached and "playful," there is an undertone of grief—seen very clearly at the end of *Rabid*—which can scarcely be called anything but tragic. As Cronenberg has moved forward, the undertone has emerged more and more fully. *The Brood* and *Videodrome* are both not so much tragic as defeated in feeling; and the thematic dilemma seems to become more chaotic and insoluble the closer the author approaches to it (so that the almost deliriously subjective *Videodrome* is the most entangled and contradictory of all). The ultimate feeling is of a sensibility circumscribed, throttled, and incapable of moving in any direction, because in every direction there lies one or another form of damnation. A rage of frustration arising from circumscription is indeed one of the causes underlying the explosions of violence and blood in Cronenberg; even when the almost impotent hero does succeed in becoming active, the act is usually a destructive one. It may also be said that *The Dead Zone*, one of the least violent and horrific of Cronenberg's films, displays more than any of his other films the quality of resignation.

From the beginning, then, Cronenberg's work has displayed an affinity for emptiness and desolation in both the human and inanimate worlds, and, if there was a single feeling apart from horror that could be said to characterize his films, it was sadness. In this *tristesse*, arising from a bleak sense of personal isolation, an impotence that one cannot actually affect anything (beneficially, that is), and an oppressive feeling of being unable to touch others without unleashing destructive horrors of aggression and other visceral instincts, his films have seemed (psychologically) far more passive than predatory. *The Dead Zone* in particular is dedicated to isolation and impotence. The landscapes are wintry, the climate inhospitable, the environment a veritable Waste Land. Images of feebleness and incapacity abound. The hero is condemned to spectatorship (the visions) rather than action, and his separation from people and the world is agonizing. The film does not even offer a clear understanding of the cause of the predicament: is it external (circumstantial) or internal (psychological)?<sup>11</sup> In any event the outward and the inward forces unite in a monolithic alliance to immobilize and defeat the hero. To the same all-encompassing degree as in *Videodrome*, these forces are impossible to disentangle or even distinguish from each other; thus the film's failure to understand is, metatextually, just one more reason for hopelessness.

Cronenberg's stature and the stature of this film are of course not to be estimated merely on the basis of their index of despair. What is so striking here is the concentration and sense of uninhibited creative *speech*. Especially in the context of Canadian cinema it is unusual, to say the least, to find an anglophone filmmaker with so "natural" a command of his subject and vocabulary. In his idiosyncratic but highly responsive adoption of the framework of the horror genre, he has completely sidestepped the historic problem of English-Canadian cinema—namely, the need to make films which are either (bogusly) like Hollywood movies or (uncommercially) not like Hollywood movies. Indeed, Cronenberg has succeeded in doing what few American filmmakers have managed: he has brought a forceful, personal, basically unpalatable vision of life to a large audience. Traditionally, this has been one of the secret strengths of the Hollywood cinema; and in this respect Cronenberg can be added to the *auteurist* lists of subversive filmmakers like Alfred Hitchcock, Douglas Sirk, Nicholas Ray and Anthony Mann, if anybody is still keeping those lists. And yet Cronenberg, while working within the confines of genre-cinema, has made no particular accommodation to Hollywood shibboleths to find such a place.

As a stage in Cronenberg's artistic journey, *The Dead Zone* can be seen as contributing to its maker's deeply-rooted and obsessively reinvestigated concerns. Ever since *Shivers*, Cronenberg has been trying to discover how to break out of isolation and self-concern without drowning in an ocean of Otherness, how to maintain a rational control of life without becoming frigid and cut off, and how to follow healthy instinct without being devoured by raging appetite. But however the films twist and the characters writhe in the struggle to do this, they never quite can succeed. Taking its place in the procession, *The Dead Zone*, with its renewed failure to solve the dilemma, fits right in—and at the same time strikes its own tone of despairing passivity. How surprising it is to find this trait in a successful commercial movie, and how surprising as well to find it today in what is apparently a period of cinematic optimism in an English-Canadian film. But in an era of postmodernist pastiche, where pastiche-optimism is a dominant, agreeable, untroubling fashion, Cronenberg's pre-post-modern pessimism seems more genuine than practically anything else. Like many of his films *The Dead Zone* has confusions and avoidances in its fabric, but it is also, at a basic level, the authentic voice of feeling.

#### Notes

1. Cronenberg's stature is signalled by the existence of two books devoted to exegesis of his work: *The Shape of Rage*, ed. Piers Handling (Toronto: Academy of Canadian Cinema, 1983), and *David Cronenberg*, ed. Wayne Drew (London: British Film Institute, 1984). As well, a compilation of Cronenberg's interviews has been published (*Cronenberg on Cronenberg*, ed. Chris Rodley [Toronto: Alfred Knopf, 1992]).
2. In fact this essay may be seen as a continuation of the film-by-film survey of Cronenberg's work up to



*Videodrome* which forms the first part of *The Shape of Rage* (William Beard, "The Visceral Mind: The Major Films of David Cronenberg," 1–79).

3. This conjunction of damnation and salvation is most noticeable in *Scanners*, where the good hero is magically melded together with, and assumes the appearance of, the bad hero after a to-the-death fight, and (especially) in *Videodrome* where the central character, having experienced horrendous hallucinations and having really murdered a handful of people, blows his brains out under the impression that he is moving forward into a higher plane of existence.
4. After this he dismisses the class with an assignment to read "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow": "You're gonna like it—it's about a schoolteacher who gets chased by a headless demon." Obviously the literary content here, and in Poe ("Nevermore!"), is prophetic of what lies in store for Johnny, and his enthusiasm for the literature is something more than mere dramatic irony. The point is extended much later in the film, where Johnny is tutoring Chris Stuart, once more in *The Raven*, and the passage—about the eternal loss of the beloved—has its relevance emphasized by the reappearance of his former girlfriend, Sarah, while the lesson is going on.
5. Another such image is that of the empty road. It, together with the *house*, virtually constitute the long series of stills underlying the opening credits, and it reappears in various unassertive ways throughout the film like a refrain (again, "Nevermore!"). It is, as we can discern later, the road of the accident—an expressive metaphor for the crushing, inevitable blow that deprives one of happiness, inclusion, a sense of belonging.
6. Perhaps the strongest single shot in the film occurs as Johnny revisits the scene of an earlier crime—a dank, black, stone sewer tunnel illuminated by car headlights. Johnny fails to get a vision from the old clues. It is the dead of winter and the dead of night, and the strongly geometrical composition suggests that the tunnel is a metaphorical road, a dead end. Death and cold and desolation speak so strongly from this image that it might be said to be the film's most nihilistic point in the area of expressing inner feelings in terms of landscape.
7. In King's novel, Dodd's psychosis is traced to the horrific sexual punishments his mother exacted on him for having "dirty" thoughts. This is not mentioned in the film, though it seems to me that it would not be out of place.
8. *The Dead Zone* is set in some indeterminate Eastern American locale (King's novel specifies Maine); but it seems a particularly Canadian brand of surrealism to view an entire peewee hockey team under water. This is of course only the most trivial instance of the film's Canadianism. *The Dead Zone*'s Canadianism, and that of its director in all his work, is a fascinating topic for another occasion. See, however, the editor's essay, "A Canadian Cronenberg," in *The Shape of Rage* for a preliminary assessment.
9. This solution is reminiscent of the Pyrrhic victories achieved by the heroines of so many women's pictures over the decades—protagonists who, like Johnny, have to overcome unresolvable (and unacknowledged) contradictions through the "transcendence" of self-sacrifice. Moral stature, service to others, and a sense of honourable martyrdom, are their rewards for having to give up ordinary human satisfactions—and they are Johnny's, too.
10. In particular this stroke recalls *Videodrome*, with its intricate patterns of visceral imagery running through every level of the *mise-en-scene*. *The Dead Zone* features a number of similar effects, such as the viscerally patterned or coloured couches which are seen in Johnny's second house and in Roger Stuart's house, or the dull red-and-something-striped ties worn by some of the characters at certain moments—touches which also signify the hovering presence of the visceral in a world which appears to be largely free of it. It is notable, too, that Frank Dodd owns a remarkably similar dressing gown which can be seen hanging on the back of the door in the bathroom in which he commits suicide. Even Stillson sports a version of the pattern in the red-and-black-striped pyjamas he is wearing when he presses the nuclear button in Johnny's vision.
11. An example: The instrument of Johnny's condition is the enormous overturned tank of an 18-wheeler truck which slides monstrously along the road causing the accident. This would seem to be an external force—bad luck, fate. But Johnny is on the road in the first place (at night, in the cold rain and mist) because he has rejected Sarah's invitation of sexual intimacy. And the truck's tank contains *milk* (symbolizing nurture and especially mother—by extension family, childhood, upbringing). So: does the film signify that the cause of the accident is external or internal?

#### Andrew Parker (essay date Winter 1993)

SOURCE: "Grafting David Cronenberg: Monstrosity, AIDS Media, National/Sexual Difference," in *Stanford Humanities Review*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Winter, 1993, pp. 7–21.

[In the following essay, Parker explores sexuality, AIDS, and national identity in *Rabid* (1976). He theorizes that the horror genre and other "narrative systems" contributed to a popular conception about the nature of AIDS and about how it is transmitted. In addition he compares the struggle for male identity to Canada's struggle for national identity.]

Q: What is the symbolism of the lesbian agents with penises grafted onto their faces, drinking spinal fluid?

A: Oh, just a bit of science fiction, really.

William S. Burroughs, *The Job*

1965 was the year that, travelling on vacation with my family from profoundly suburban New York to Montréal, I first crossed a border into a foreign country, a border I came to associate with sexual transgression. What remains impressed in my memory from this trip (a memory whose very force and clarity owes greatly, I suspect, to the Freudian logic of deferred action) was a spectacle I had never “witnessed” as an event before, the sight of two men amorously caressing each other on a city street. “Monstrous!” I recall my father storming in disgust: “This would never be permitted at home!” He meant, of course, the United States, though I also understood his use of “home” to have a narrower, more local application. Later that same day—hardly a coincidence—I discovered at an Anglo-phone bookstore a used copy of William Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch*. I purchased the book and smuggled it back across the border without declaring it to my parents or *les douaniers*. Home again in the New York suburbs, I decided to let my hair grow long.

1965 was also the year that the Anglo-Canadian filmmaker David Cronenberg interrupted his university studies to travel in Europe. We now know, through a series of remarkable interviews I’ll be drawing on often, that Cronenberg was deeply absorbed at this time—hardly a coincidence—in the fiction of William Burroughs. He also was letting his hair grow long:

*I came back [to Canada] with shoulder-length hair and a paisley shirt, which were very shocking at the University of Toronto. When you see my 1967 graduation photo, I look like an ugly girl! I grew my hair in Copenhagen because the girls all thought that if you spoke English you were a Rolling Stone. So it was very necessary to have long hair<sup>1</sup>*

Mutating his gendered appearance to meet what he imagined were the heterosexual expectations of Danish “girls” (for whom all versions of English supposedly sounded the same), Cronenberg returned home to Canada already clearly preoccupied with the volatile set of issues that would suffuse his extraordinarily focused career. Perhaps the preeminent director working today in the genres of horror and science fiction—his films include *Scanners* (1980), *Videodrome* (1982), *The Dead Zone* (1983), *The Fly* (1986), *Dead Ringers* (1988), and most recently *Naked Lunch* (1991)—Cronenberg has consistently been drawn to the monstrous terrain where sexuality grafts itself onto nation, the same terrain the mass media have exploited since the advent of the AIDS crisis. I will be discussing below one of his earliest commercial films, *Rabid* (1976), in some extended detail.

Before doing so, however, I want to return one last time to 1965, the year Leslie A. Fiedler published an essay called “The New Mutants” in *The Partisan Review*.<sup>2</sup> Warning his readers of a monstrous threat to the tradition of Western reason, Fiedler likened the nascent student protests in the United States to the “emergence—to use the language of

Science Fiction—of ‘mutants’ among us.” Motivated by “the myth of the end of man,” a new generation of college students had begun to reject “the tradition of the human, as the West (understanding the West to extend from the United States to Russia) has defined it, Humanism itself, both in its bourgeois and Marxist forms; and more especially, the cult of reason.” If Fiedler was hardly the first to have linked the West, the human, and the rational, neither will he be the last to suggest that this linkage is in peril. Indeed, the question of what for Fiedler *counted* as the West resonates strikingly with contemporary attacks in the United States on the aims of multiculturalism. For despite his momentary and atypical broadening of its horizon to include Russia (an expansion calculated solely, it would seem, to accommodate his anti-Communism), Fiedler restricted himself in a “more parochial” way to “the Anglo-Saxon world”—the *telos* of a Western tradition that, in harboring the universal in its singularity, remakes the world in its own self-image.<sup>3</sup> “We Are the World” is a song Fiedler might later have hummed to himself, a “world” all but coterminous with one imagination of the United States.

But Fiedler was not interested then in pursuing this seeming paradox of the singular and the universal. He was concerned instead with a growing monstrosity that, blurring the accepted limits between the same and the other, threatened to undermine his West from within:

*I am thinking of the effort of young men in England and the United States to assimilate into themselves (or even to assimilate themselves into) that otherness, that sum total of rejected psychic elements which the middle-class heirs of the Renaissance have identified with ‘woman.’ To become new men, these children of the future seem to feel, they must not only become more Black than White but more female than male.*

“Turning from *polis* to *thiasos*, from forms of social organization traditionally thought of as male to the sort of passionate community attributed by the ancients to females out of control,” these mutant men (Fiedler irrepressibly continued) “have embraced certain kinds of gesture and garb, certain accents and tones traditionally associated with females or female impersonators.” The very length of “the Beatle hairdo”—this alone, I think, explains why Fiedler persisted in defining the West as *Anglo-America*—belongs to:

*a syndrome, of which high heels, jeans tight over the buttocks, etc., are other aspects, symptomatic of a larger retreat from masculine aggressiveness to feminine allure—in literature and the arts to the style called ‘camp.’ And fewer still have realized how that, through the invention of homosexuals, is now the possession of basically heterosexual males as well.*

With gender binarism thus collapsing in the West, what followed for Fiedler was the parallel collapse of any distinction between homo- and heterosexuality. Unable to tell not just men from women but straight from gay (or even, more to the point, straight from *basically* straight),

he proceeded to “explain” the growing popularity of heroin (!) as yet another “attempt to arrogate to the male certain traditional privileges of the female. What could be more womanly . . . than permitting the penetration of the body by a foreign object which not only stirs delight but even (possibly) creates new life?” It was not, of course, by chance that an imagined quality of foreignness underwrote this implied equation between drug use and gay sex. But neither was it coincidental that William Burroughs could thereby emerge as “the chief prophet of the post-male post-heroic world . . . [Naked Lunch is] no mere essay in heroin-hallucinated homosexual pornography—but a nightmare anticipation (in Science Fiction form) of post-Humanist sexuality.”

For Fielder, then, the crisis in Western reason presented itself as a crisis of the human as a crisis of masculinity as a crisis of heterosexuality as a crisis of drugs, all of which were figured through the monstrous example of William Burroughs. What makes this logic especially staggering is the way that it gathers nearly all the tangled threads passing through the German word *Geschlecht*: sex, nation race, species, genus, gender, stock, generation, genealogy, community, blood.<sup>4</sup> To find nation and sexuality under common siege in Fielder’s account is to be reminded that they share, for “the West,” elements of a common history—elements we will soon see redeployed in Cronenberg’s work. For if modern philosophies of the nation have had to negotiate between the contradictory requirements of sameness and difference, of universalism and singularity,<sup>5</sup> these are also the (equally unstable) terms that have shaped modern conceptions of sexual orientation. Those of us from the North Atlantic especially inherit from the nineteenth century “a theory of sexuality which carves up humanity into two vast and immutable camps” distinguished by the gender—cross-sex or same-sex—of sexual object-choice.<sup>6</sup> This theory, however, does not simply replace but inscribes itself upon an earlier, still prevalent and competing conception in which same-sex desire refers not to restricted *categories* of people (identities) but to *acts* in which all persons may engage. Where the one approach emphasizes the singularity of object-choices, “the diversity and mobility of sexual behaviour and identities *between* different social groups,” the other, universalizing viewpoint stresses “the diversity and mobility of sexual behaviour *within* individuals.”<sup>7</sup>

What this has meant, over the past century in a certain West, is the simultaneous insistence of mutually exclusive conceptions of “homosexuality,” of two epistemologies whose conflicting claims to truth no dialectic can hope to adjudicate. If gayness—at once identity and act, different and same, internal and external, singular and universal—thus divides itself conceptually from itself, then so must a heterosexuality that defines *itself* in simple opposition to a term intrinsically unstable. Indeed, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has argued, the resultant precariousness of the homo/hetero dichotomy has had, as one of its consequences, a pervasive and devastating impact on the homosocial continuum that structures all forms of male-male relations, especially those that are not specifically gay:

*The historically shifting, and precisely the arbitrary and self-contradictory, nature of the way homosexuality (along with its predecessor terms) has been defined in relation to the rest of the male homosocial continuum has been an exceedingly potent and embattled locus of power over the entire range of male bonds, and perhaps especially over those that define themselves, not as homosexual, but as against the homosexual. Because the paths of male entitlement . . . required certain intense male bonds that were not readily distinguishable from the most reprobated bonds, an endemic and ineradicable state of what I am calling male homosexual panic became the normal condition of male heterosexual entitlement.*

Since, in this structural panic, the line separating prescribed and proscribed male behaviors begins to look exceedingly tenuous, the “basically heterosexual” male remains faced with the task of mastering an unmasterable double bind, of proving what is by definition impossible to *prove*—“that he is not (that his bonds are not) homosexual.”<sup>8</sup>

This double bind, Cronenberg will show and tell us, has had a specially pointed force for a country like Canada whose very boundaries, like those of “homosexuality,” are similarly unstably both external and internal. For Canada, of course, not only shares an outer border with the United States but also divides itself internally along national lines. As the Canadian cultural critic Robert Schwartzwald has remarked:

*During the years leading up to Québec’s 1980 referendum on ‘sovereignty-association,’ a form of political independence from Canada, an oft-repeated argument for ‘national unity’ was that without Québec, Canada would be indistinguishable from the United States! This double bind of calling on Québec’s ‘distinctness’ but being unwilling to acknowledge it within a new constitutional arrangement explains why many Québécois feel they are held hostage by English Canada which, unsure of its identity, ‘needs’ Québec to prove its difference.’<sup>9</sup>*

Two double binds, then, structured by the identical necessity of proving what is impossible to prove. Though Cronenberg’s *Rabid* may seem an unlikely vehicle to explore these panicked crises of national and sexual identity, the film may be read as an oblique meditation—“in Science Fiction form”—on the grafts through which they fuse.

*Rabid* opens with a motorcycle accident involving Hart and his girlfriend Rose, played respectively by Frank Moore and the porn superstar Marilyn Chambers.<sup>10</sup> While Hart has sustained only minor injuries in the crash, Rose is comatose, bleeding internally, and near death. As the accident occurred near the gates of the Keloid Clinic (the projected first in a series of “franchised plastic surgery resorts”), Dr. Keloid—whose name puns on a surgical scar—saves Rose’s life by experimentally grafting to her damaged intestines thigh tissue that has been rendered “morphogenically neutral.” His method succeeds but with an unintended side effect: the new tissue inexplicably



migrates from her intestines to her armpit, forming there a (vaginal or anal) opening from which emerges a phallic spike—a penis *dentatus* (or is it *dentatum*? or *dentata*? all of the above? the gender indeterminacy is precisely to the point). Using this new organ to drain life-sustaining blood from a variety of sources (who, in the first half of the film, include male and female patients at the clinic, a would-be rapist, . . . and a cow), Rose attacks the suitably-anxious Dr. Keloid, who becomes infected as a result with a virulent strain of rabies. Delirious and oozing saliva, he bites several people, who in turn attack others, all of whom shortly die after passing on the disease.

Meanwhile, realizing she has become a vampire, Rose escapes from the clinic in search of fresh blood. Though the Keloid Clinic had been to this point wholly unmarked in its geographic location (it was situated in a completely nondescript rural area that could be anywhere in temperate North America), the movie suddenly and without any further explanation shifts to Montréal where Rose, now ensconced in her girlfriend's apartment, easily finds new victims in the local porno cinema. With the rabies epidemic raging out of control, Claude La Pointe (an official from the Québec Bureau of Health) explains to his television audience that the virus is transmitted through saliva dribbling into open wounds: "So don't let anyone bite you." As all efforts to stem the contagion prove useless, martial law is declared in Montréal and the director of the World Health Organization is called in to take charge. Hart finally tracks Rose down only to catch her in the act of siphoning blood from her girlfriend: "It's *you*! It's been *you* all along! You carry the plague! You've killed hundreds of people!" Unwilling to accept his account, Rose undertakes an experiment, locking herself into a room with one last victim in order to discover, after taking his blood, whether he indeed will turn rabid. He does, he bites her, and she dies. The film ends with health workers tossing her body into the back of a garbage truck.

Those previously unacquainted with *Rabid* may be most horrified that this film from 1976 includes nearly all the murderous details that would dominate the U.S. media's portrayal of AIDS. Not only will Marilyn Chambers's role soon be recast, "in real life," with a gay man—another promiscuous predator who wantonly infects his partners—but this gay man will also turn out to make his home in Québec: Gaëtan Dugas, the Patient Zero of AIDS, the Great Vampire whose exploits and death are sensationalized in Randy Shilts' *And the Band Played On*.<sup>11</sup> That Chambers' new sexual organ is also a syringe neatly condenses in one image several of the demographic categories (as opposed to behaviors) that the mainstream media have insisted on associating with AIDS. Indeed, among the so-called "high-risk groups" said to be most susceptible to HIV infection are intravenous drug users, hemophiliacs, recipients of blood transfusions, and sex workers. Trading on her cachet as a porn star, featuring a scene in a theater that could be screening one of her other, more popular films, *Rabid* grafts all of these categories onto the figure of Marilyn Chambers. As Leo Bersani has

noted, the media's iconography of HIV infection draws *its* life blood from the imagery of female prostitutes conveying disease to their "innocent" clients: this is "a fantasy of female sexuality as intrinsically diseased; and promiscuity, in this fantasy, far from merely increasing the risk of the infection, is the *sign of infection*. Women and gay men spread their legs with an unquenchable appetite for destruction."<sup>12</sup> (Chambers would go on to star in the films *Insatiable* and *Insatiable II*.) With the film's introduction of mandatory screening and identity cards—the Québec government's prophylactic measures exceeding in brutality William F. Buckley's own "modest proposals"<sup>13</sup>—the remaining pieces of the media's classic narrative have fallen into place: "The victims of the disease are beyond medical help," avers the head of the WHO; "Shooting down the victims is as good a way of handling them as we have got." Even the final sequence of the film is chillingly proleptic: "The 'homosexual body,' which is also that of the 'AIDS victim,' must be publicly seen to be humiliated, thrown around in zip-up plastic bags, fumigated, denied burial. . . . The 'homosexual body' is 'disposed of,' like so much rubbish, like the trash it was in life."<sup>14</sup>

What are we to make, then, of these extended resemblances linking *Rabid* with the discourse surrounding a medical condition that, in 1976, had not yet been "discovered"? Should we infer that Cronenberg was unconsciously prophetic, that he "knew" in advance how AIDS will have been constructed? I am, of course, hardly claiming that. The point, rather, runs in the opposite direction, for the mainstream media response to AIDS has taken its representational bearings from pre-existing, culturally pervasive "narrative systems along whose tracks events seem to glide quite naturally, whether in news reports, movie plots or everyday conversations."<sup>15</sup> As Simon Watney and others have argued, the most prominent by far of these narrative systems is the horror genre: "The 'AIDS carrier' story belongs to a cluster of similar stories, well known from popular fiction and film, about vampires, mysterious killer-diseases, dangerous strangers, illicit sex."<sup>16</sup> To portray AIDS consistently in media reports as "a killer disease" is to draw actively on these generic conventions; to imagine Science (as did Randy Shilts) "closing in on the viral culprit that bred international death" is similarly to recall "the typical denouement of a B-movie horror narrative."<sup>17</sup> The mass media and horror films have truly shared one script, mobilizing the same lethal fantasies in their common efforts to deny the incoherence of a series of binary contrasts: the human and the monstrous, the natural and the artificial, mind and body, masculine and feminine, straight and gay, health and sickness, innocence and depravity, victim and perpetrator, purity and pollution, redemption and retribution, public and private, self and other, same and different, inside and outside, singular and universal, national and alien. In horror film as in network AIDS reporting, the plot revolves around an identical danger, the inability to tell ("until too late") who is Not One of Us. And in both instances, this danger will be surmounted with the identification, isolation, and extermination of the monster as the founding binary order, at

great though “necessary” cost to human life, is restored once more to its original integrity.<sup>18</sup>

I dwelled earlier on Fiedler’s evocation of monstrosity in part because his essay—even with its sustained and elusive coyness, a tonality (say) quite unlike my father’s—clearly feeds off these same misogynist and homophobic impulses. *Rabid* does so, too—as must any work in a genre constitutively preoccupied, from at least as early as *Frankenstein*, with the origins of gendered and sexual differences.<sup>19</sup> But *Rabid* also shares with the most interesting of such works a tendency to acknowledge, analyze, or partially suspend these motivating energies; many aspects of its diegesis intersect at odd angles with the genre’s most characteristic features.<sup>20</sup> For example, even though Chambers appears in the film often clad—with little narrative “motivation”—only in her underpants, her body is not thereby highly eroticized. In fact no one’s body is, whether female or male, whether before or after the outbreak of disease. The film has surprisingly little affective investment in any of its characters (it has neither true villains nor heroes); nor does it seem to care greatly about the institutions it depicts. Where the media’s typical AIDS narrative is “a moralizing etiology of disease” designed to ward off threats to religious, familial, and civic values, there’s nothing remotely like moralization in this film—indeed, there’s no church at all, and neither of the two families it briefly portrays is even minimally idealized. It is also unclear what Rose means when, after Hart interrupts her with her girlfriend, she charges *him* with being the origin of the epidemic (“It’s *your* fault! It’s all *your* fault!”)—as if, perhaps, the disease itself were the monogamous heterosexuality he comes to represent, what in other horror films would be offered as the final cure. The public health officials hardly fill the moral vacuum: Claude La Pointe is attacked by rabid crazies, and the director of the WHO, intoxicated with his own powers, is clearly a monster himself. The film insists, moreover, that our access to these medical authorities is always strictly mediated; their televised reports are framed within the frame as if the viewer is being asked to contemplate their status as news. *Rabid* remains throughout peculiarly distanced, dispassionate, disinterested, estranged from what it portrays: less ironic than aloof, perhaps too coolly detached to be properly phobic, it seems fascinated only with the unfolding of its narrative logic. Looked at retrospectively, *this* may be the most monstrous aspect of the film—that its relationship to the epidemic it depicts remains neutral, apolitical, “academic.”

If this coolness is proverbially Canadian, what seems much less characteristic (if the AIDS crisis serves as a model) is the public hysteria and state repression depicted in the film, the Québec government’s actions resembling instead American patterns of quarantine and persecution.<sup>21</sup> But *Rabid* has little overt interest in such questions of national difference. Infection passes through blood and saliva, but these fail to represent what such fluids typically embody: the medium of racial, ethnic, or national differences.<sup>22</sup> While the carriers of the virus are portrayed as dangers to

civil society, the disease itself is never allegorized specifically as a threat to *national* values. We might, indeed, expect that a film situated for half of its length in mid-1970s Montréal would reflect in some way the Québécois nationalism then reaching a high point, but Montréal appears to function only as a Typical North American City where not one word of French is overheard (Claude La Pointe speaks to us in his televised reports in heavily-accented English). If *Rabid*’s Canadian provenance thus remains at best implicit, this illustrates what one critic has defined as a characteristic of Cronenberg’s work: “His films suffer from a vague sense of location. They all seem set in the same chilly-gray Everycity.”<sup>23</sup> Everycity is populated with Everymen rather than distinctive national subjects, which helps to explain why Cronenberg characteristically resists thinking of his later remake of *The Fly* as “an AIDS movie”: “It’s an examination of what is universal about human existence. . . . AIDS is tragic. But, beyond it all, I’m digging deeper. We’ve all got the disease—the disease of being finite” (128). AIDS, for Cronenberg, thus only affects particular populations; finitude, by contrast, is Global Truth: “If AIDS hadn’t been around, I still would have made *The Fly*, and I did make *Shivers* and *Rabid*. In retrospect, people say ‘My God, this is prophecy,’ but I just think it’s being aware of what we are” (127).<sup>24</sup>

But this universalizing idiom is itself the reflection of Canada’s position in the capitalist world-system: a Canadian filmmaker whose primary market is the United States may think himself *compelled* to efface in his work all signs of national difference.<sup>25</sup> This conflict between the universal and the singular cuts deeply throughout Cronenberg’s career. Thinking of his early days as a filmmaker, he describes how “it was different in Canada, as always. We wanted to by-pass the Hollywood system because it wasn’t ours. We didn’t have access to it. It wasn’t because we hated it, but because we didn’t have an equivalent, and we didn’t have the thing itself” (15). To promote this *Ding an sich*, Cronenberg on the one hand “still lives in the city of his birth, and to date has not made a movie outside Canada” (1).<sup>26</sup> On the other hand—the hand that gestures towards “what is universal about human existence” (and towards the market to the south)—he refuses to restrict himself to narrowly “Canadian” themes, which continually provokes the criticism of his more nationalist colleagues who take his films to be “living proof of the Americanization of our industry.”<sup>27</sup> This contradiction between the claims of (Canadian) singularity and (American) universality is sharply crystallized early in *Rabid* as Dr. Keloid and his partner Murray plan their series of franchised resorts: “I just sure as hell don’t want to be known as the Colonel Sanders of plastic surgery,” objects the doctor. “Sounds great to me!” is Murray’s exuberant reply.

Inhabiting both of these positions at once, Cronenberg almost blithely describes being caught in a double bind:

Thus the attraction of Canadians to things American, but also the repulsion?

*That's right. It's definitely a love-hate relationship.*

And where do you find yourself in that nexus as a Canadian filmmaker whose largest audience is American?

*Right in the middle. It's a very interesting place to be.*

It's a Canadian place to be.<sup>28</sup>

Though this place is described as distinctively Canadian, it is also and by the very same token *less* than fully distinctive—as if being “right in the middle” means to be on the edge:

*My sensibility is Canadian, whatever that is. But it's there, and I think Americans feel it. There was a man who called me up from Santiago, and he said: 'the fact that you make your films in Canada makes them even more eerie and dreamlike, because it's like America, but it's not. The streets look American, but they're not, and the accents are American, but not quite. Everything's a little off-kilter; it's sort of like a dream image of America.'*<sup>29</sup>

If Canada differs here at all from the United States, it does so solely in terms of its diminished, derivative, dream-like ontology.

In another respect, however, Canada *is* wholly different, for Québec can always be adduced as “proof” of national distinctness. *Rabid* and the earlier *Shivers* are unique in Cronenberg's corpus in their explicitly Québécois settings. The decision to film in Montréal was dictated in part by the location of Cinépix, the Québécois production company that backed Cronenberg in the hope of finding “something that would break them into the American market” (37).<sup>30</sup> Cronenberg describes his initial experience of the city in tellingly sexual terms:

*By the time I contacted Cinépix, they had made a couple of other films too: very sweet, gentle, lush soft-core films with a lot of tits—great tits actually. . . . This was unheard of in English Canada. This was really my first introduction to the fierce nationalism of Québec, and how well it worked in terms of a culture that could excite itself. It was very hard for English-Canadian culture to excite English Canadians. They were excited by Americana*

(36).

Where English Canada needs the United States for its stimulation, Québec gets it on by itself—which English Canada *also* likes to watch. Montréal surrenders here its putative Everycity quality in fulfilling its singular, sexualized role in the Anglo-Canadian imaginary. Indeed, far from being Cronenberg's invention, Québec has long assumed the part of English Canada's Mediterranean. As Robert K. Martin argues: “The exotic, the Southern, the Latin—all existed next door in Québec. And so English Canadian writers who have wished to attack their own culture for its Victorianism, its Puritanism, its moral rigidity have turned to Québec.” If, in this traditional scenario, “Canada is the man,” Montréal finds itself cast (no

surprise) as “the mysterious woman.” But Montréal is also, and just as venerably, the mysterious *man* on whom is projected “the homosexual fantasies of the proper English Canadian”:

*Located next door, Québec has remained the metaphor for that which is at the same time within and without. Québec is a metaphor for homosexuality, since homosexuality is the forbidden land of lustful desires; and homosexuality is a metaphor for Québec, since it is a state within, an inner subversion.*<sup>31</sup>

If Québec is what makes Canada different, it thus may also be, for Cronenberg, *too* different, not “universal” enough. For to set *Rabid* in Montréal is to imply both dimensions of this national/sexual fantasy, grafting them together on a porn star's body whose represented predatoriness and indeterminate gender stand in, as well, for a different sexuality. Cronenberg surely recognizes this implication given the heat with which he attempts to deflect it:

You have a kind of—I don't know if we want to say—‘repressed homosexuality’ in a lot of your work. The first two films you did—‘Stereo’ and ‘Crimes of the Future’—your lead actor certainly had a gay presence; then you gave Marilyn Chambers an underarm phallus in ‘Rabid’—

*But I gave her a vagina; I gave her a cunt, too! First there's the cunt, and then the phallus—it's both, you got everything! I gave her everything!*<sup>32</sup>

To give Chambers “everything” is not, Cronenberg insists, to link her metonymically with a singular gayness but to endow her with aspects of both genders, thereby making her . . . universal: “There is a femaleness and a maleness. We partake of both in different proportions. . . . If you think of a female will, a universal will, and a male will and purpose in life, that's beyond the bisexual question. A man can be a bisexual, but he's still a man. The same for a woman” (31). Where bisexuality thus delimits itself as irreducibly singular, the two genders are ubiquitous even or especially when they are lodged, “in different proportions,” within an individual. This latter, for Cronenberg, is the universal condition—with which he unflinchingly aligns himself: “I'm male, and my fantasies and my unconscious are male. I think I give reasonable expression to the female part of me, but I still think I'm basically a heterosexual male” (98).

Gayness, of course, has often been thought in the West on this model of internalized gender inversion (e.g., Ulrichs' *anima muliebris virili corpore inclusa*), a model that preserves what is basic to heterosexuality: gender difference itself.<sup>33</sup> But Cronenberg never thinks of his inner femininity in continuity with gayness; he conceives of it, in fact, as different enough in kind to *replace* the “less universal” term. I certainly *don't* want to say that this substitutive preference is the reactive sign of a “repressed homosexuality,” only that Cronenberg's singularization of the non-heterosexual has been so consistent over the course of his commercial career as to constitute something like a



signature. His masterpiece *Dead Ringers*, for example, recounts the lives and deaths of Beverly and Elliot Mantle, identical-twin gynecologists who, jointly addicted to drugs, fatally “separate” themselves from each other using tools designed to operate on “mutant women.”<sup>34</sup> The film is a fictionalized account of the “real life” Marcus twins, though changed in a major respect: where one of the original twins was gay, Elliot and Beverly are both portrayed as straight: “To me that just felt wrong. If one of them is gay and one of them is not, then already they are different in a very essential way, when the point of the whole story is how similar they are” (163). Gayness would have been a perverse singularity in a film that “has to do with that element of being human . . . with this ineffable sadness that is an element of human existence” (149). And to be human is not to be singular but to be multiply and conflictually gendered: “In *Dead Ringers* the truth, anticipated by Beverly’s parents—or whoever named him—was that he was the female part of the yin/yang whole. Elliot and Beverly are a couple, not complete in themselves. Both the characters have a femaleness in them” (147).

Predictably, Cronenberg discloses that he made *Dead Ringers* “out of the female part of myself” (147), a self that—though partially feminine—is basically straight overall.

But these sexual distinctions are finally no more coherent than Cronenberg’s version of Canadian identity. For a universally-conceived same-sex couple resembles nothing so much as its singular opposite—which is why Cronenberg takes such deliberate pains to portray his twins as basically straight. This “proof” of their heterosexuality will be less than definitive, however, since the plot entails that Beverly and Elliot share the *same* woman whose presence as an intermediary enables them to touch one another vicariously.<sup>35</sup> “Just do *me*,” Elliot coaches his brother: “You haven’t had an experience unless I’ve had it, too. You haven’t fucked Claire Niveau till you tell me about it.” As in the sequence in which Beverly dreams that he and Elliot are grafted together by a monstrous piece of flesh, what remains basic to their heterosexuality is this unstable fusion of cross-sex with same-sex desire, the difference between prescription and proscription having here been rendered all but moot. With the boundary between the universal and the singular now passing *through* the universal, Cronenberg acknowledges a crisis of national proportions: asked once more to “comment on the differences” between the United States and Canada, he confesses that “it’s obviously not so clear cut and that’s always been a problem in Canada, in terms of our own identity. In fact, maybe we’ve stumbled onto the reason that the real subject of most of my films is identity. Because I’m a Canadian, you see, and we are much more like Beverly and Elliot here.”<sup>36</sup>

This collapse of the singular/universal dichotomy repeats itself spectacularly in Cronenberg’s recent adaptation of *Naked Lunch*. As with *Dead Ringers*, Cronenberg sought to distance his script from the gay thematics of the origi-

nal.<sup>37</sup> “One of the barriers to my being totally 100 per cent with William Burroughs,” he notes, “is that Burroughs’ general sexuality is homosexual. It’s very obvious in what he writes that his dark fantasies happen to be sodomizing young boys as they’re hanging” (99). Though Cronenberg “can actually relate to that to quite an extent,” he still felt compelled to explain to Burroughs that “what I do is very different” (162):

*I did go to him, and we talked several times. One of the things I said to him was ‘You know, I’m not gay and so my sensibility, when it comes to the sexuality of the film, is going to be something else. I’m not afraid of the homosexuality, but it’s not innate in me and I probably want women in the film.’*

(162).

Yet “in order to bring something of *Naked Lunch* to the screen,” Cronenberg discovered that he needed “to fuse myself with Burroughs” (161), thereby creating a monstrous graft between them:

*I started to write Burroughsian stuff, and almost felt for a moment, ‘Well, if Burroughs dies, I’ll write his next book.’ Really not possible or true. But for that heady moment, when I transcribed word for word a sentence of description of the giant centipede, and then continued on with the next sentence to describe the scene in what I felt was a sentence Burroughs himself could have written, that was a fusion*

(162).

I’m *not* gay, but when it comes to imagining monsters I’m inside him, or rather I *am* him: now *that* was a fusion! Really not possible or true—though Cronenberg also describes having been from his adolescence “possessed” by Burroughs. Interfering with the development of “my own voice” (23), Burroughs had been in his mouth already from the start.

“Without Burroughs,” the film critic Mitch Tuchman has suggested. “Cronenberg may be without imagery.” Tuchman points out that *Rabid*’s “morphogenically neutral skin graft” has itself been grafted from Burroughs’ “undifferentiated tissue that can grow into any kind of flesh . . . sex organs sprout everywhere.”<sup>38</sup> That Cronenberg transplants Burroughs’ tissue to a wholly new context seems an appropriate act of homage given Burroughs’ life-long obsession with the effects of iterability. Indeed, in transferring the very principle of Burroughs’ writing—the cut-up—to his own film medium, Cronenberg deploys in nearly all of his works a sustained Burroughsian analogy between textual production and surgical technique.<sup>39</sup> In *Rabid* this analogy is routed through the figure of Dr. Keloid, since he and Cronenberg operate with similarly plastic materials and share a language of cuts and sutures. In light of this resemblance, the film’s central plot device—the graft fusing Marilyn Chambers’ thigh tissue to her intestines, her outside to her inside—comes to be invested with tremendous textual weight. As the putative “origin” of the epidemic, the graft is all that would splice together

the two halves of the film, the unmarked rural setting with the particularity of Montréal. Once more, however, any stable fusion of the universal with the singular stubbornly refuses to take:

*Cronenberg's tendency to cut to the bone during editing . . . did produce some confusion for the audience in Rabid. How exactly did Marilyn Chambers develop that blood-sucking penis in her armpit? A short dialogue scene between radical plastic surgeon Dan Keloid and his patient had been removed because Cronenberg felt it broke the tension of the scene: 'That was a mistake. It would have provided a simple rationale for people to understand Even those who like the movie have asked, 'But what was that thing?'*

(57)<sup>40</sup>

Dr. Keloid's experiment and Cronenberg's film thus commonly go astray, for "that thing"—Chambers' monstrous *Geschlechtsteile*—obeys the logic of a different graft, (up)rooting itself in the way that it chooses. Rather than reconciling the singular with the universal—indeed, rather than explaining itself—the graft cuts another way, even cutting itself out from its own diegesis.

To find *Rabid* once more piercing its own borders is to identify, as well, the particular kind of interest I take in Cronenberg's work—and that he seems, at times, to take in it too: "When you begin to mix your blood with the characters in the film . . . you're mixing your own anxieties with the anxieties that are being played out in the film." Cronenberg characterizes this fusion as other than classically "cathartic,"<sup>41</sup> as the boundary between insides and outsides drenches itself in an exchange of bodily fluids. A risky practice, certainly, but one that both enables and delimits my own grafts with David Cronenberg. Growing up on different sides of a common border, he and I jointly came of age in Fiedler's generation of mutant men. Though neither of us were born *that way*, we both became mutants in the face of an impossible double double bind—the necessity of proving, in national and sexual terms, what exceeds the order of proof. But there are ways and there are ways of being that way, of acknowledging that impossibility, of inhabiting that monstrous borderland. Am I able to imagine a Cronenberg less homophobically inclined, less ready to portray himself as the universal case, less willing to deny that his work profits from its contiguity with the media's construction of AIDS? *Really not possible or true.*

#### Notes

0. An earlier draft of this essay was presented in May 1992 at the Harvard conference "Dissident Spectators, Disruptive Spectacles." This version was delivered the following July in France at the Cerisy-la-Salle colloquium "Le passage des frontières (autour de Jacques Derrida)," and is reprinted here from Marjorie Garber, Jann Matlock, and Rebecca Walkowitz, eds., *Media Spectacles* (New York: Routledge, 1993). I thank the editors of the *Stanford Humanities Review* for their interest and their criti-

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1. Chris Rodley, ed., *Cronenberg on Cronenberg* (London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1992), 16. All further references will be cited parenthetically.
2. Leslie A. Fiedler, "The New Mutants," *The Partisan Review* 32 (1965), 505–25.
3. Cf. Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael B. Naas (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 73: "No cultural identity presents itself as the opaque body of an untranslatable idiom, but always, on the contrary, as the irreplaceable *inscription* of the universal in the singular, the *unique testimony* to the human essence and what is proper to man."
4. See Jacques Derrida, "Geschlecht: Différence sexuelle, différence ontologique" and "La main de Heidegger (*Geschlecht II*)," in *Psyché: Invention de l'autre* (Paris: Galilée, 1987), 395–414 and 415–51 respectively.
5. See, among others, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991); Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (London: Verso, 1991); Homi Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (London: Zed Books, 1986); and Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer, and Patricia Yaeger, eds., *Nationalisms and Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1992). As Gayatri Spivak has argued, this conflict between the singular and the universal defines as well the possibility conditions of international feminism; see "French Feminism Revisited" in Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, eds., *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 54–85.
6. Simon Watney, *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS and the Media*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 24.
7. Watney, xi.
8. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 184–85.
9. Robert Schwartzwald, "an/other Canada, another Canada? other Canadas," *Massachusetts Review* 31:1 & 2 (Spring-Summer 1990), 18.
10. This was Chambers' first attempt to cross over from porn into mainstream cinema; Cronenberg imagined

- Sissy Spacek in the role, but one of his producers insisted that Chambers would make the better draw (54).
11. See especially Douglas Crimp, "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," *October* 43 (Winter 1987), 237–71, and Ellis Hanson, "Undead," in Diana Fuss, ed., *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 324–40.
  12. Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43 (Winter 1987), 211.
  13. "Everyone detected with AIDS should be tattooed in the upper fore-arm, to protect common-needle users, and on the buttocks, to prevent the victimization of other homosexuals" (William F. Buckley, "Identify All the Carriers," *The New York Times*, 18 March 1986, A27).
  14. Simon Watney, "The Spectacle of AIDS," *October* 43 (Winter 1987), 80.
  15. Judith Williamson, "Every Virus Tells a Story," in Erica Carter and Simon Watney, eds., *Taking Liberties: AIDS and Cultural Politics* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1989), 69–70.
  16. Simon Watney, "Short-Term Companions: AIDS as Popular Entertainment," in Allan Klusacek and Ken Morrison, eds., *A Leap in the Dark: AIDS, Art and Contemporary Cultures* (Montréal: Véhicule Press, 1992), 153.
  17. Williamson, "Every Virus Tells a Story," 73.
  18. The confluence of these discourses has since acquired a ubiquitousness reflected in Pierre Chablier's running account in *Libération*, "Moi et mon sida": "J'ai parfois le sentiment que nous sommes ici, à Paris, quelques dizaines de milliers de *mutants parmi la foule*" (my emphasis; cited in Alexander García Düttmann, "Ce qu'on aura pu dire du sida," *Poesie* 58 [Decembre 1991], 89).
  19. See, for example, Noël Carroll, *The Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart* (New York: Routledge, 1990), and Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).
  20. It would be risky, of course, to ascribe these oddities to Cronenberg's "intention" when they may simply reflect the limits of his technical competence at that time (*Rabid* was his second feature film). I would argue, however, that—beyond any question of conscious design—such tensions are readable in his subsequent (and often dazzlingly realized) films, thereby remaining consistent over the course of his career. Carroll, for example, points out that Cronenberg's *The Fly* "has all the trappings of a horror film, including a monster. But classifying it as a horror film as such, without qualification, seems not quite right. It fails to capture an essential difference between this film and the rest of the genre" (*The Philosophy of Horror*, 39). Or between Cronenberg's entire *œuvre* and itself.
  21. Cf. Watney, "Short-Term Companions," 165: "However bad the [AIDS] epidemic is in Canada or Britain or Australia, we in these countries at least have advantages that remain all but unthinkable in the U.S.A., whether in terms of socialized medicine, good government-funded AIDS service organizations or regular access to network TV audiences on our own terms." This does not suggest, of course, that the Canadian government's policies have been at all adequate; on this topic see James Miller, ed., *Fluid Exchanges: Artists and Critics in the AIDS Crisis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).
  22. See Cindy Patton, *Inventing AIDS* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
  23. Owen Gleiberman, "Cronenberg's Double Meanings," *American Film* 14:1 (October 1988), 40.
  24. Cronenberg's interviews are filled to overflowing with these globalizing philosophemes: "Catharsis is the basis of all art. This is particularly true of horror films, because horror is so close to what's primal" (73); "Many of the peaks of philosophical thought revolve around the impossible duality of mind and body. Whether the mind is expressed as soul or spirit, it's still the old Cartesian absolute split between the two" (79). Descartes, of course, is not invoked here as a French philosopher.
  25. See Fredric R. Jameson, "Totality as Conspiracy," in *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).
  26. *Naked Lunch* was to have been an exception to this practice: "Planned as Cronenberg's first foreign-location movie (most exteriors were originally to be shot in Tangiers), the production became yet another of the director's interior journeys when the Gulf War prevented filming in North Africa" (xxiv).
  27. Pierre Véronneau, "Canadian Film: An Unexpected Emergence," trans. Jane Critchlow, *Massachusetts Review*, 31:1 & 2 (Spring-Summer 1990), 217–18.
  28. David Breskin, "David Cronenberg," *Rolling Stone*, no. 623 (6 February 1992), 68.
  29. Anne Billson, "Cronenberg on Cronenberg: A Career in Stereo," *Monthly Film Bulletin*, no. 660 (January 1989), 5.
  30. "Cinepix was just André Link, a European Jew who spoke French, and John Dunning, who was totally WASP. For me to say that they represented French-Canadian filmmaking is very ironic, but they did" (36). To be content with describing one's ignorance as "ironic" is, to be sure, a highly symptomatic response. On the history of Québécois filmmaking, see, for example, Joseph I. Donohoe, Jr., ed., *Essays on Québec Cinema* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1992).
  31. Robert K. Martin, "Two Days in Sodom, or How Anglo-Canadian Writers Invent Their Own Québec,"



*Body Politic*, no. 35 (July-August 1977), 28–30. For a contrasting account of the ways Québécois nationalists have projected “homosexuality” onto *English Canada*, see Robert Schwartzwald, “Fear of Federasty: Québec’s Inverted Fictions,” in Hortense J. Spillers, ed., *Comparative American Identities* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 175–95.

32. Breskin, “David Cronenberg,” 70.
33. Cf. David M. Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 16: “That sexual object-choice might be wholly independent of such ‘secondary’ characteristics as masculinity or femininity never seems to have entered anyone’s head until Havelock Ellis waged a campaign to isolate object-choice from role-playing, and Freud . . . clearly distinguished in the case of the libido between the sexual ‘object’ and the sexual ‘aim.’”
34. On *Dead Ringers*, see especially Barbara Creed, “Phallic Panic: Male Hysteria and *Dead Ringers*,” *Screen* 31:2 (Summer 1990), 125–46; Marcie Frank, “The Camera and the Speculum: David Cronenberg’s *Dead Ringers*,” *PMLA* 106 (May 1991), 459–70; and Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque* (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).
35. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).
36. George Hickenlooper, “The Primal Energies of the Horror Film,” *Cinéaste* 17:2 (1989), 7.
37. And what a distance this turned out to cover: “Scraping most of the novel and its frank depictions of gay sex, Cronenberg has made a pseudo-biography of Burroughs which, while retaining Burroughs’ tone and wit, almost completely obscures his sexuality. Burroughs’ ironic comment on the double lives many gay people lead, that ‘homosexuality is the best all-around cover story an agent ever had,’ is here transformed into an excuse to render his hero’s homosexuality nearly invisible, and Cronenberg inexplicably invents a love affair between Burroughs’ alter-ego and a character based on Jane Bowles, despite the fact that the real Jane Bowles was a lesbian. The most disturbing aspect of the film, however, is the invention of a character who does not appear in the novel, an effete, predatory homosexual (played by Julian Sands) who (recreating every straight man’s worst nightmare about gay sex) murders a young man while fucking him” (Al Weisel, “Bugging Out: David Cronenberg Exterminates Homosexuality,” *QW*, 9 August 1992, 36).
38. Mitch Tuchman, “Fish Gotta Swim. . .” *Monthly Film Bulletin* 51:605 (June 1984), 192.
39. “I am being this clinician, this surgeon, and trying to examine the nature of sexuality. I’m doing it by creating characters I then dissect with my cinematic scalpels” (151). For more on this congruence between film production and medical pathology, see Diana

Fuss’ essay in *Dissident Spectators, Disruptive Spectacles* (New York: Routledge, 1993) and Pete Boss, “Vile Bodies and Bad Medicine,” *Screen* 27:1 (January-February 1986), 14–24. Critics have been quick to grasp the implications of Cronenberg’s casting himself, in *The Fly*, as a gynecologist.

40. Cf. Lee Rolfe, “David Cronenberg on *Rabid*,” *Cinéfantastique* 6/3 (1977), 26: “I think, though, we cut a bit too much out of the explanation of why the disease develops the way it does. It was in the original script, we shot it but it was taken out because the scene where that information was given was poorly paced.” The precise nature of this “information” remains, to my knowledge, a mystery.
41. Breskin, “David Cronenberg,” 68.

#### William Beard (essay date 1994)

SOURCE: “The Canadianness of David Cronenberg,” in *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 1994, pp. 113–33.

[In the following essay, Beard discusses Cronenberg’s work in the context of the debate on what English-Canadian culture is and means. He asserts that Cronenberg’s male protagonists mostly resemble “the long line of Canadian cinematic and literary unheroes and their pattern of failure, powerlessness and hopeless waste.”]

It is becoming more difficult, in a postmodern environment, to speak with any confidence of “national character” or to define nationality in broad cultural (as opposed to sociopolitical) terms. In English Canada, where “national character” is famously weak and ill-defined, especially in contrast to the clearer and more confident cultural nationalisms of the United States and Québec, what was always uncertain has now become theoretically impossible or at least undesirable. The “what is Canada?” debate is a relatively recent one, but its vague and tentative wafflings—themselves very “Canadian”—have already been historically subsumed by the project of multiculturalism. The consequent attempt to define Canada actually as a place which has no “identity” other than the collective identities of its individual components, the project to strip Anglo-Canada of any claims to dominant cultural legitimacy (while affirming the cultural legitimacy of other ethnicities), is not only politically irreproachable but may even have been greeted with relief by those same theoretically disenthroned Anglo-Canadians who had become exhausted in the effort to find a stable Canadian cultural identity. In any event the older attempt at a relatively monolithic account of Canadian character, the attempt perhaps most effectively begun by Northrop Frye and seconded by Margaret Atwood to analyze Canadian literature and visual arts for a coherent set of social and psychological characteristics, has been so eclipsed as to be practically extinct.

While recognizing the inevitability and even the desirability of present cultural-theory revisionism, I believe that the Frye-Atwood model has not lost its relevance, even though it is now necessary to restrict sweeping generalizations about “Canadian character” to a more narrow cultural/historical base. If it is not adequate as a complete theory of English-Canadian culture, it retains, as it were, a local truth to the broad patterns of a particular once-dominant Anglo culture, and to particular members of that culture.

It is in this context that I wish to examine the work of filmmaker David Cronenberg, whose peculiar history as a cultural icon has always left him outside the dominant models of “Canadianism.” Although his particular subjects and artistic practice have encouraged his recent inclusion in a non- or supra-national paradigm of postmodern art dominated by a thematics of gender, the body and technology, I believe that such an analysis neglects an important aspect of Cronenberg’s artistic character, and that this “missing” aspect may be partly accounted for by a consideration of his work against the template of the older Frye-Atwood model of Canadianism in the arts. I would assert, then, that David Cronenberg is a profoundly and typically “Canadian” artist according to this paradigm, and that although he conforms rather idiosyncratically to the model, he finally does so in a clear and unmistakable fashion. Moreover, he conforms in ways which appear not to have been noticed and which, I believe, may help to “place” this troubling filmmaker.

For there has been a difficulty in *thinking about* Cronenberg within a Canadian-cultural context. He has somehow, without a lot of people in the Canadian “culture industry” quite understanding how, progressed from being an embarrassing figure who used Canadian Film Development Corporation (taxpayers’) money to make disgusting exploitation movies like *Shivers* (1975) and *Rabid* (1976) to being an internationally-celebrated film artist who has, in the past few years, adapted a modernist literary classic (*Naked Lunch*) with the blessings of the author, and been the subject of serious books in French and German. It is now widely accepted that Cronenberg is the most, or one of a handful of the most, interesting and valuable filmmakers in English Canada. Yet he has never really been integrated into our “cultural history” (Piers Handling’s 1983 essay stood for a long time as a lonely exception, and has only recently been joined by Gaile McGregor’s distantly related essay of 1993). Whatever place Cronenberg may come to occupy in a new, decentered Canadian culture model, it would be a shame to overlook how fully he conforms to the old monolith of national character.

Even in the context of an ongoing desperate search for a national filmmaking hero, Cronenberg is not usually the first name that arises in discussions of English-Canadian film, and particularly its role in the national culture. Sometimes his name does not arise at all: Bruce Elder’s *Image and Identity*, in 440-odd pages of “reflections on Canadian film and Canadian culture,” relegates Cronen-

berg to one dismissive mention in a footnote—referring to “schlock commercial vehicles like *Parasite Murders* [i.e., *Shivers*]” (420n6). There are a number of explanations for this fact, several of them obvious. From a traditional high-culture perspective, the mere fact that Cronenberg’s work is genre cinema, and in a particularly disreputable genre (horror), is enough to disqualify it. Although academic film studies and cultural studies have increasingly turned their attention to Cronenberg—as signalled for example in recent essays by Barbara Creed, Marcie Frank, Adam Knee and Helen Robbins, and an entire Cronenberg number of the journal *Post Script* (forthcoming)—interest in these (non-Canadian) quarters has centered on his astonishing co-incidence with the heavily theorized “hot topics” of gender, the body and technology.

At the same time, Cronenberg is certainly not *valued* for the characteristics which have attracted this attention. Current academic film studies assigns only political, not esthetic value: notions of “quality” have been rendered nonsensical. So arguments as to the quality of Cronenberg’s work fall on deaf ears. His subject matter and his treatment are anything but “progressive.” Moreover at a time when the whole concept of authorship is problematic, his obsessively personal themes and distinctive style have the status of valueless currency dating back to an antiquated auteurist misperception of cinematic significance. From a nationalist perspective, Cronenberg’s films look too much like American movies. Again, their genre status with its strong commercial associations have been perceived as originating in a Hollywood model of the crassest American cultural-imperialist variety—although in point of fact, Cronenberg has remained in Canada, refused to disguise Canadian locations as American, and generally succeeded in carving out a niche from which to make Canadian films with American money and with good “market penetration” in the U.S. (thus actually attaining the historic economic Grail of feature film production in Canada).

In traditional assessments of the history and status of culture in English Canada, fiction cinema is represented by that line of essentially art-filmmakers from Don Owen to Atom Egoyan, whose mostly tortured history inscribes the struggle to offer a worthy and clearly indigenous alternative to what was inevitably perceived as the predatory Hollywood colonizer. Cronenberg’s films (again, with the recent exception of *Naked Lunch*) are nothing like this anti-commercial model and make no effort to proclaim their difference from commercial cinema; hence there is some difficulty in thinking of them as really “Canadian.” Moreover, the famous documentary or “realist” impulse in Canadian film is inimical to the whole notion of genre and its conventions, and especially to an expressionist fantasy-based genre like horror.

In today’s postmodern environment of cultural production, where high-culture and mass-culture characteristics are so intermixed that the older modernist dichotomy between those two spheres is becoming harder and harder to enforce or even discern, it is easier for the cultural establishment

to embrace Cronenberg's films, with their "popular" elements, than it used to be. In an equally postmodern moment of celebration of cultural diversity and the destruction of normative attitudes, it is also more possible to find a place in the Canadian cultural mosaic for even a politically questionable (or indecipherable) presenter of quasi-pathological sex and violence like Cronenberg. This, indeed, appears to be the uneasy place which Cronenberg now occupies in the "national cultural consciousness."

Cronenberg, however, is not a postmodernist—if by postmodernism is meant any kind of essential "playfulness" or emotional detachment, any radical heterogeneity of form or content, any effacement of high/low boundaries or other "fundamental" definitions, any embracing of difference. Rather, his work hovers in an idiosyncratic space between classicism (Hollywood) and modernism (film "art"), committed to the totalizing assumptions of traditional narrative practice and traditional "meaning." Chris Rodley's book-length interview-compilation, or virtually any of Cronenberg's other interviews, demonstrate Cronenberg's conscious identification with the role of the modernist artist, and his self-modelling in this capacity after the example of such heroes of literary modernism as Burroughs, Nabokov and Beckett. The films themselves reveal general affinities of this kind underneath a surface layer of "popular" genre characteristics. They display, for example, a fear of the destruction of defining boundaries, a longing for wholeness and an agonized sense of its irreparable loss which is, in narrative-thematic terms, entirely rooted in traditional practice, both classicist and modernist. In short, Cronenberg's films, however momentarily ironic or self-conscious, are at base as traditionally serious as any art can be.

Worth noting, in turn, is that Cronenberg's formative years were spent in Toronto in the 1950s and 60s, the same environment in which such monolithic cultural critics as Frye and McLuhan were working. In making this observation, I am not suggesting anything as absurd as a direct influence on Cronenberg, a conscious desire on his part to produce works of specifically Frygian "Canadianism"—though anyone as manifestly well-read as Cronenberg might well have been familiar with Frye, and *Videodrome* contains what is clearly a kind of twisted version of Marshall McLuhan in the "media prophet" Brian O'Blivion. My point is simply that Cronenberg's "Canadianism" probably sprang from the same general cultural and intellectual environment as that which produced Frye's, and, later, that of those who followed him along a similar path. I am saying, I suppose, that Cronenberg's own idea of "Canadianism" is fully compatible with the Frye model. Once again, supporting evidence for this assertion may be found widely scattered through Cronenberg's interviews (see for example Rodley 22, 25, 97, 118). Yet while it is common sense to say that a self-consciously "typical Canadian" will produce works which manifest "typical Canadian" qualities, it is quite unnecessary—and even counter-productive—to try to prove that these "Canadian" characteristics were deliberately put into the films by the actual author. What needs to

be done is to interrogate the works themselves for any such qualities: to compare the films to the Frye-Atwood model and see what the comparison yields. Such a comparison reveals startling similarities. What Northrop Frye found in E.J. Pratt, or Margaret Atwood in Susanna Moodie, can also be found, more or less, in the films of David Cronenberg.

It is my contention, therefore, that Cronenberg, despite his anomalies, is a Canadian artist in this sense, and that his work reflects and embodies the national culture by existing firmly within the boundaries of that culture's most central traditions and attitudes—again, according to the Frye-Atwood paradigm. The relation of his films to Hollywood models is not imitative but dialectical, and the result of this dialectic is amongst other things a simulacrum of the Canadian-American cultural configuration. Cronenberg's cinema is most "Canadian" in its bleakness of *Affekt*, its overriding sense of defeat and powerlessness, its alienated dualism of nature against consciousness, its fearful cautiousness in the face of a hostile universe, and its powerful feelings of isolation and exclusion. The fact that these characteristics exist within a narrative context also populated by excremental sex-parasites, exploding heads, horrific cancerous transformations of the body and obsessive representations of sexual pathology should not distract one from a recognition of their determining importance.

Tony Wilden, in his Marxist/psychoanalytic exposition *The Imaginary Canadian*, finds a concise distillation of the national attitude in an entry quoted from Eric Partridge's *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*:

*you can't win.* A Canadian catch-phrase, dating since ca. 1950 and "expressing the impossibility of coming out on top and the futility of kicking against the pricks."

(4)

The idea that Canadian art reflects a fixation on defeat and failure is a feature of the first "identity" models of English-Canadian culture, and has been explicitly articulated in commentaries ranging from Northrop Frye's analyses of Canadian literature and painting to Robert Fothergill's well known essay on Canadian cinema. George Grant similarly depicts Canada as a nation founded on principles of greater order and self-restraint than the United States, but isolated from the crumbling European roots of the virtuous society and finally succumbing to the soulless and manic Calvinist techno-liberalism of the Americans. As recently as 1985, one finds Gaile McGregor consolidating the model in exhaustive detail: Canada as the place of anti-heroism, and encapsulation and defeat as a condition of existence. This Canadian emotional paradigm is one of solitude and isolation; of an ever-present looming sense of immense surrounding wilderness which can never be physically or even mentally encompassed; of a Nature which is treacherous, violent and unknowable; of self-repressive passivity and caution; of feelings of impotence and hopelessness and marginalization.



The great problem of Canadian culture, especially Canadian popular culture, is of course the terrible contrast between these waif-like self-imaginings and the trumpeting self-confident mythology of mastery emanating from the United States, a contrast which is bodied forth in the economic domination of American popular culture in the Canadian marketplace. Certain that nothing real can happen in their own frozen, atomized psychic landscape, English-Canadians have a positive thirst for the imaginary and are virtually designed to be spectators. Canada's national *per capita* consumption of movies is greater than that of the United States, and far exceeds that of Western Europe. Canadians have become expert appreciators of American culture, though because of their actual exclusion from it the very act of imaginative identification has come to be associated for them with vicariousness and unactuality. George Woodcock, in a sour essay entitled "McLuhan's Utopia," insists that McLuhan's theories of a media-united global village are prompted by a desire to cancel acute feelings of isolation and alienation in a new tribal community created by the electronic media's ability to give everybody the same vicarious experience. One of McLuhan's own comments is that Canada is "a country without an identity" and "a perfect place for observation" (qtd. in Powe 31). McLuhan is another exemplary Canadian: his essay "Canada: The Borderline Case" is full of generalizations about Canadian cultural identity, conceived mainly as a lack.

Canadian cinema was at one time distinguished for the truly impressive defeatism of its narrative content. It is not necessary once more to recount in detail the didactic depressiveness of such canonic pillars of English Canada's national film culture as *Nobody Waved Goodbye*, *Goin' Down the Road* and *Wedding in White*, nor to note again the absence of anything remotely reflecting self-esteem or a belief in the possibility of accomplishment in the whole of English-Canadian fiction film during that Golden Age of the 1970s. Since that time there have followed the co-production horrors of the Capital Cost Allowance (which unleashed a host of "commercial" movies *nobody* wanted to see), followed by a wasteland of non-production during the early 1980s. During the past decade there have been a number of signs of new life and direction: the work of Atom Agoyan, William McGillivray, Patricia Rozema, Sandy Wilson, Anne Wheeler, Guy Maddin and Bruce MacDonald seems both relatively vigorous and quite distinct in its diversity from the almost entirely depressive model of its predecessors. It would be wise, however, to recall that the history of Canadian feature film is largely one of repeated "rebirths," but no actual subsequent life. In other words, the relatively optimistic nature of current English-Canadian feature film culture may yet turn out to be a temporary phenomenon. Certainly it is a little disconcerting for champions of a Canadian national cinema to realize that just as the era of maximum bleakness in Canadian film coincided almost exactly with Hollywood/America's astonishing nihilist-modernist period inaugurated by *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Easy Rider* and *The Wild Bunch*, so the petering out of this bleakness more or less

coincided with the arrival of Hollywood's feel-good post-modernist period inaugurated by *Rocky*, *Star Wars*, and *Close Encounters*; equally disconcerting might be the way that the relative cheerfulness of much late-80s Canadian cinema parallels the plastic happiness of much post-Reagan American cinema.

Cronenberg is one Canadian filmmaker who has emphatically not followed any such trend toward a more positive view of things. In fact the reverse is the case. His films have described a line of increasing desperation: from the cool alienated humor of *Stereo* (1969) and *Crimes of the Future* (1970) through the relative ironic detachment of *Shivers* and *Rabid* to the arrival of straightforward despair in *The Brood* (1979) and an ever-growing sense of nightmarish anxiety and hopeless entrapment in *Video-drome* (1982), *The Dead Zone* (1983), *The Fly* (1986) and *Dead Ringers* (1988). The one meaningful exception to this trend is *Scanners* (1980), certainly Cronenberg's most optimistic feature. Yet it achieves its equanimity by omitting the most virulent source of trouble in Cronenberg's world—namely sexuality—and it is not all *that* optimistic. At the same time, even the early films contain at least an undercurrent of sadness and powerlessness, and it is only by comparison with the oppressively tortured later works that one would think of calling them unperturbed. Only the camouflage of genre and commerciality in Cronenberg's films can disguise, for example, the way that the Cronenberg male protagonist resembles the long line of Canadian cinematic and literary un-heroes and their pattern of failure, powerlessness and hopeless waste. Piers Handling drew attention to this likeness (105), but the point can be made even more strongly now that the pallid, confrontation-avoiding passivity of Cronenberg's early heroes has given way to a series of centralized narratively-dominant male protagonists, and within the context of these characters to an intense and self-critical examination of male agency in the world of the films. In fact Cronenberg's correspondence to the "Canadian model" extends to many aspects of his basic narrative stance and his evolving thematic concerns.

In the earlier films the clearly unbalanced and dangerous state of things, the condition which gives rise to violence and suffering, is attributed to the disequilibrium of human nature, posited as innate and universal. The "Cartesian" separation of rationality from nature (to use the description Cronenberg has frequently formulated in interviews), and the tyranny of rationality over the body and the instincts, produces a tension which causes nature to rebel. The films present this rebellion in the form of destructive sexually-based plagues unleashed by the hubristic projects of patriarchal-rationalist scientists. Since the scientists are usually motivated by prosocial aims, however, and since in any event the problems arise from a tendency felt to be innate in human nature and hence inescapable, nobody can really be blamed, and the films can be described as manifestations of philosophical pessimism (for a more extended discussion see my "The Visceral Mind" 3–39). In *Shivers*, a modernist high-rise apartment block is turned

into a bedlam of orgiastic sexual feeding when its inhabitants are "occupied" by foot-long wormlike parasites living in their viscera (the parasites were developed by a messianic scientist who wanted to put people in touch with their sexuality). In *Rabid*, a sweet young woman (played by porno-star Marilyn Chambers) develops a penis-like armpit spike and a need to consume human blood through it after undergoing radical experimental surgery following a road accident; her victims develop terminal rabies, and soon all Montreal is overwhelmed by an epidemic of people biting each other. In *The Brood* an emotionally troubled wife and mother is enabled by radical new psychoanalytic methods actually to *embody* her destructive feelings in the form of dwarf-like living creatures, to whom she gives birth from an external abdominal sac and who roam through the world killing people she resents (e.g., her parents) without her knowledge. The male protagonists in all these films (though not their patriarchal "mad" scientists) are powerless and ineffectual, especially in contrast with the liberated sexual-destructive energies attached to the female characters.

Beginning with *Videodrome*, the films begin to look more closely at the psychic origins of the schism between rationality and instinct, and particularly at the mechanisms of desire, fear and repression which are seen as the matrix of imbalance. At first there is a tentative effort to assign responsibility to extra-personal, socially-based sources, especially predatory corporations exploiting the appetites of individuals (e.g., Consec in *Scanners* and Spectacular Optical in *Videodrome*). However, the films eventually abandon this explanation in favor of the competing one: namely, that the catastrophic disfunction in the world (of the films) stems from the particular psychology of the narratively privileged male self, a self not easily severed from the narrative voice itself. That self is discovered to be a psychological failure, a sick animal, a subject whose structuring elements render him incapable of physical or emotional intimacy and by extension of a real and workable relation with the human world around him. So in *Videodrome* (Cronenberg's first film with a dominant male protagonist), Max Renn, a Toronto TV-station owner looking for provocative quasi-pornographic programs to broadcast, runs into a satellite-pirated program called "Videodrome," featuring real Sadean torture and murder, and simultaneously enters into a sadomasochistic sexual relationship with a young woman; he begins to hallucinate astounding things, notably transformations of his own body such as the appearance of a vagina-like abdominal orifice (through which videocassettes may be inserted) and of a penile flesh-gun hand (with which he murders people at the command of various individuals, real or hallucinated); in the end he kills himself. *Videodrome* is so complex and delirious that it is almost impossible to "read"—or rather it seems to want to be read in a number of conflicting ways—but in the end it exemplifies very well the change in emphasis in Cronenberg's work that I have just described. More and more the hero's destructive

acts, and self-destruction, are rooted in his own psychological structure: his emotional isolation, his hubristic belief that he can control his feelings and actions, his dangerous and unacknowledged appetites for "sick" sex. As the film progresses he emerges from his "Cartesian" controlling ego-shell and encounters forces, both without and within but mostly within, with which he is utterly unable to cope; he becomes their puppet and dies as a result. His successors in *The Dead Zone*, *The Fly* and *Dead Ringers* trace a broadly similar path: emergence from an isolated ego-shell; contact with nature/woman/sexuality/the body; destruction.

That this central psychology conforms to the first dominant Canadian archetype seems very plain. Frye, Atwood and McGregor have all described at some length the recurrent appearances of a fearful, hopeless and self-oppressive psychology in the English-Canadian imagination, and speculated about its genealogy. The first thesis is that the Canadian sensibility has been dominated from the beginning by the dreadful consciousness of a vast, unknowable, threatening Nature empty of human life and human values. In *The Bush Garden*, Frye describes Canada as "above all a country in which nature makes a direct impression of its primeval lawlessness and moral nihilism, its indifference to the supreme value placed on life within human society, its faceless, mindless unconsciousness, which fosters life without benevolence and destroys it without malice" (146).

In Canada, moreover, the enormous tracts of unpopulated nature have not been seen as a challenge to be overcome, a linear progressing frontier to be settled, as in the case of the United States; instead, in Atwood's phrase, Canada is "a circumference with no centre" (*Second Words* 379). According to McGregor, whereas the American "western frontier" is perceived as a challenge to be overcome, the Canadian "northern frontier" is perceived as a "line between the 'self' and the 'other', between what is and is not humanly possible," as a boundary of which there is no question of overcoming, only staying clear; "[t]he frontier did *not* play a positive role in the Canadian experience" (*Wacousta* 59). The terror of nature and the sense of fragility and vulnerability of human life in its midst leads to an overconsciousness of the contrast and indeed enmity between nature and culture, between nature and the mind. This is Frye's famous "garrison mentality." Atwood describes it in terms of the human struggle to impose order on the chaos of nature, where order is "straight lines" and nature is "curves"; the attempt is inevitably frustrated and the human agent often destroyed or driven mad by the impossibility of the task (*Survival* 120–24). Nature, though unconscious, is seen in the end as striking back against the violations and unnatural orderings of human endeavor. Moreover, the internalized struggle against the perceived chaos and unknowableness of nature uncovers a parallel demon of irrationality and disorder inside the human mind itself. Describing stories of exploration in Canadian literature, Atwood says:

Pushed a little further, the “exploration” story takes on overtones of another kind of journey into the unknown: the journey into the unknown regions of the self, the unconscious, and the confrontation with whatever dangers and splendours lurk there.

(*Survival* 113)

Frye crystallizes the idea: “Whatever sinister lurks in nature lurks also in us . . . the unconscious horror of nature and the subconscious horror of the mind thus coincide” (*Bush Garden* 141). And McGregor is still more explicit: “The unknown landscape within . . . is exactly equivalent to the wilderness without” (*Wacousta* 301).

In the process of living within and trying to master this monstrous-seeming nature, the early inhabitants of North America fostered in themselves an alienation not only from nature in general but from their own bodies. George Grant depicts the Europeans and their descendants confronting the immensities of nature on this continent with the tools of Cartesian dualism, Lockean rationalism and Calvinist notions of the supremacy of the individual conscience, and mastering it through a psychological abstraction from it and a successful manipulation of it:

When one contemplates the conquest of nature by technology [in North America] one must remember that the conquest had to include our own bodies. Calvinism provided the determined and organized men and women who could rule the mastered world. The punishment they inflicted on non-human nature, they had first inflicted on themselves.

(23–24)

Atwood contributes this gloss:

What is natural is not always external. As George Grant points out . . . attitudes towards Nature inevitably involve man’s attitude towards his own body and towards sexuality, insofar as these too are seen as part of Nature. It doesn’t take much thought to deduce what “Nature is dead” and “Nature is hostile” are going to do to a man’s attitude towards his own body and towards women. . . .

(*Survival* 63)

To this general North American neurosis may be added a particularly Canadian characteristic: the mental and emotional conservatism of a people whose natural surroundings enforced isolation and discouraged confidence, and whose history was the direct consequence of an opposition to the social and political daring of the American Revolution. The result is a psychological regime of self-repression whereby the desire for order, restraint and control is paramount as a response to a condition of solitude in a dangerous and unfathomable environment; and it necessitates an acute alienation from both nature and the body.

In Cronenberg’s films, it is true, nature as an external presence plays almost no part; yet this very absence may reflect a kind of alienation and isolation. In any case, the dualistic

and unstable relationship of mind and body, of conscious order and natural chaos, of ego-self and id-other—these configurations of the Canadian psyche are overpoweringly present. Mistrust of the world outside consciousness and the self, mistrust of the body, terror at the inevitable subjection of consciousness to the forces of organic life and death, are as central to Cronenberg’s world as to any described by the paradigm. Nature, routinely represented as female or associated with female qualities, is so depicted once more in Cronenberg, where natural forces are connected with female characters and with the idea of sexuality as an irruption into the (male) rational self. Terror of nature becomes terror of woman in Cronenberg, or more accurately terror of what the male self’s aroused sexuality will do to the emotionally repressed and isolated but still more or less functional ego-habitation of reason and control. Sexuality not only threatens to overwhelm the rational ego in a flood of chaotic desire but also brings forcibly into consciousness the subordination of the ego-self to the body and by extension to the threatening bodily developments of disease and death. In this construction, nature is synonymous with the annihilation of the self. In one traditional kind of science-fiction narrative, attempts to separate the brain from the body always meet with failure; in Cronenberg, it is the process of *joining* the cognitive self to the body that results in horror and death.

The best examples of this pattern are found in Cronenberg’s relatively recent films, especially *The Fly* and *Dead Ringers*. In *The Fly*, a nice, repressed scientist trying to develop a teleportation device meets a woman and begins a serious relationship with her; the physical and psychological liberation he experiences as a result allows him to realize his invention successfully; but in a moment of carelessness caused by celebratory alcohol and a spasm of sexual jealousy he teleports himself together with a fly, causing a genetic fusion of the two and a subsequent horrific physical transformation into a monstrous fly-human. The solitary rational self, cut off from the body and from human contact, cannot be saved: even an “ideal” relationship will result in destruction of the self. In *Dead Ringers* the twin Mantle brothers become successful gynecologists, maintaining a privately-shared and manipulative relationship with the outside world and especially practicing a quasi-predatory deception of women; when one of the brothers, craving a deeper relationship, begins to love and need one woman in particular the process of “separation” from the other (less emotional, more rational and controlling) brother drives him to drug addiction and madness; in the end the brothers both die in a kind of double suicide. The complementary halves of the ego-self, representing the respective principles of yearning and detachment, cannot endure a breaching of the hermetic shell of ego-isolation. In both films a relationship with a woman (i.e., aroused sexuality and emotional intimacy) opens the door for nature’s entrance into the domain of bodiless consciousness, and what this entrance signifies is the arrival of sickness, decay and death.

Cronenberg’s films, however, cannot be described as totally privileging consciousness over nature, either. “Cartesian”



dualism is what he is stuck with, but it is not very attractive or healthy. The separation of consciousness and nature leads consciousness to an arrogance of supposed mastery. Frye speaks of this tradition as “the Baroque sense, most articulate in Descartes, that the consciousness of man created an immense gap between him and all other living creatures, who belonged primarily in a world of mechanism.” This belief, according to Frye, leads to an “attitude of arrogant ascendancy over nature. For the white conquerors of the continent, creation does not begin with an earth-mother who is the womb and the tomb of all created things, but with a sky-father who planned and ordered and made the world, in a tour de force of technology” (*Divisions* 19–20). The patriarch in the sky has his homuncular embodiment in the hubristic scientists who play a crucial part in virtually every Cronenberg film. These scientists are forever tinkering with nature in an effort to make it serve more fully the convenience of the rational consciousness. It is their machinations which are the first catalyst of the plagues and terrors which invade the Cronenbergian world.

This is very clear in the earlier films, but it is equally true of several of the later ones, where the protagonist also assumes the function of the scientist: in *The Fly* the hero is an actual scientist, while in *Dead Ringers* the gynecologists are not only clinicians but inventors. Much more than the female “carriers” of destruction, these male originators may be seen as causing the explosive rebellion of nature in response to the effort to force its “curves” into the “straight lines” of rationality, to put its chaos into some kind of order. Of course they are merely reflecting their social environment, and are acting “in good faith.” Disaster in Cronenberg’s world devolves from the mistaken belief that nature is knowable, that nature is *not* the enemy, that rationality can be naturalized or nature rationalized. In this respect, Cronenberg is true to the Canadian model: nature is the enemy of consciousness; it is unknowable, unquerable. Nature is death.

In the early films the dialectical clash of rationality and instinct was universalized, and the authorial attitude to the spectacle was one of alternately ironic and sorrowing detachment. Obviously rationality was not right to behave in this way—it was too repressive and confining—but after all this was the (“Cartesian”) human condition, was it not? More recently the films have come to situate the clash in a perspective carefully designated as subjective. The alienation from nature is situated in a single personality, the male protagonist, and is presented as incomplete or crippled. The solitary heroes of *Videodrome*, *The Dead Zone*, *The Fly* and *Dead Ringers* (if the twins are seen as parts of a single personality) are cut off from social warmth and, especially, constructive relations with women, not as a result of the iron laws of human existence but because of psychological disfunctions in themselves. Moreover in these later works, woman as the bearer of natural forces is seen more clearly in a positive (one might even say idealized) light, even if her ultimate effect is still to open the door to destruction. The central female characters

especially of *The Fly* and *Dead Ringers* are clearly depicted as possessing a psychological wholeness which the male characters do not have and cannot attain. The heroes of all the later films feel immensely liberated and renewed by their relationships with women, and receive what few (brief) glimpses of wholeness and contentment they will ever have as a direct result of them. So nature/sexuality/woman is death, but also wholeness from which the male protagonist, and by extension the authorial sensibility, is exiled. It is a dismal, intolerable situation. Action brings disaster; inaction is withering and ultimately destructive too. No movement is possible: hopeless passivity and impotence are the enforced conditions. This is the “Canadian” paradigm of isolation, alienation, powerlessness and stasis.

It is, of course, the element of genre that separates Cronenberg’s films from the depressive English-Canadian cinema they might otherwise clearly resemble. With its horror/science-fiction/fantasy heritage whose most visible avatars lie in comic books, pulp fiction and Hollywood B-features, the genre he works in not only infringes on high-culture taboos but also shows a genetic similarity to a strictly American popular culture of the most invasive sort. Violence is no stranger to Canadian narrative, of course (John Moss devoted a whole book to *Sex and Violence in the Canadian Novel*), but the sensationalist foregrounding of spectacle-violence with elaborate special effects is a particularly American formula associated with the “limitations” of popular genre (indeed it is often labelled *as* one of the principal limitations). The American commercial film—driven by the engine of classical narrative with its causal relations, goal-orientation and narrative closure, and privileging the dynamics of successful problem-solving and action as spectacle—stands in strong contrast to the relatively drab “realist” (more properly, “documentarist”) world of Canadian features: where progress toward goals is illusory or non-existent, where narrative tends to meander and stop, where characters and events are structured in an absence of heroic or dynamic models, and where things are, to paraphrase Atwood, all circumference and no center. And although the formation and evolution of Canadian cinema has occurred to some extent actually on the basis of non-similarity to the Hollywood cinema, it is also true to say that the differences between the two cinemas conform to the broader cultural differences between the two nations as they have traditionally been theorized. In its loud dramatic gestures and poster-paint hues, as well as in the systematization of its thematics, American cinema often approaches the expressionist model. Canadian cinema approaches instead the documentary model.

How then can we define the “American” component of Cronenberg’s films? The thematic dualism of his works is accompanied by a dualism of articulation, found in both narrative and *mise en scène*, wherein the elements associated with consciousness are quiet, controlled and receding, while the elements associated with nature are violent, chaotic and brash. These may be said to correspond

respectively to the “Canadian” and “American” aspects of Cronenberg’s cinema. Narratively, the world of a nice repressed (“Canadian”) protagonist is invaded by loud unrepressed (“American”) convulsions of feeling and explosions of violence and horror. Concomitantly, the “American” narrative of mastery, wherein the subject is able to exert control over nature and existence, is controverted by a “Canadian” disaster which follows any such attempt (all of those scientists whose projects blow up in people’s faces; Max Renn in *Videodrome* who thinks he is an “American” but who is revealed to be “Canadian” after all). In the visual realm, the (“Canadian”) detached wide angles, static controlled compositions, and sense of cold foreboding which constitute the basic cinematic stance of the films is inflected by danger-signifying “hot spots” and by despairing motifs of dereliction and decay; eventually this gives way to the far more noticeable (“American”) explosive expressionist outbursts of spectacle-violence, garishly colored and often accompanied by frenzied montage or camera movement. In short, the Canadian drama of restraint, internalized violence and stasis, and the American drama of freedom, externalized violence and progress, have their equivalents in the frozen despairing inner identity and explosive visceral outer genre-qualities of the films.

Moreover, there is a sense in which the relationship between the two facets—one overpowering and horrifically transforming the other—may be said to replicate the relationship of Canadian and American cultures in the marketplace. The fact that in the later films, particularly, the violent “natural” elements are seen as coming from inside the protagonist’s self rather than having some outward origin merely reproduces that scenario in which Hollywood values become internalized by Canadian audiences, as in Wim Wenders’s famous comment (via a character in *Kings of the Road*

[1976]): “The Americans have colonized our unconscious.” I would not wish to emphasize this correspondence too much, but the similarity is there.

The Canadian cinematic model I am applying to Cronenberg here is not so much the messy handheld *vérité* of, for example, *Goin’ Down the Road*; it is perhaps rather the alternate National Film Board (especially the B Unit of the 1950s and 60s) or CBC prototype of distant, balanced, slightly melancholy omniscience and control. The drab cardigans worn by Johnny Smith in *The Dead Zone*, the interchangeable grey sports jackets which constitute Seth Brundle’s wardrobe in *The Fly*, the cold blues and slate greys of the Mantles’ living environments in *Dead Ringers*—that is to say, the style and surroundings of all of Cronenberg’s recent protagonists *before* the invasion of nature—all evince a neatness, repressiveness and self-effacement that defines this “Canadian” mode. The blood and guts and disease, in contrast, are those of low-budget American horror movies from *Night of the Living Dead* onwards, and closely related to the gaudy plebeian traditions of Hollywood in general. The Cronenberg film which

most clearly articulates the pattern of restraint is *The Dead Zone*, probably because of its special emphasis on the passivity and repression of its protagonist (for a more extended discussion see my “Anatomy”). Thematically, this is the work which most fully explores the (non-) option of meeting the consciousness/nature crisis by doing nothing. Johnny Smith is drying up of loneliness and sadness caused by his largely self-imposed isolation from sexuality and emotional intimacy until nature comes along and hammers him over the head (a milk truck runs over him); thereafter his consciousness is periodically invaded by violent and terrifying telepathic visions of catastrophes befalling others; these waste him even further until he decides to commit suicide by attempting to assassinate a dangerous politician. Johnny’s actions are not an attempt to bridge the consciousness/nature split (as the protagonists of *The Fly* and *Dead Ringers* try to do), but simply to avoid it and stay enclosed in consciousness.

This attempt at stasis is characteristically “Canadian,” and characteristically it does not work. Moreover in *The Dead Zone* nature itself actually plays a part. Outdoors it is winter, and the lethal, numbing cold becomes a tangible correlative of the emotional desolation slowly killing the protagonist. Here, very plainly, external nature is not beneficent or generative; it is frozen and deadly. Although ironically *The Dead Zone* is the only Cronenberg feature explicitly set in the United States (New England), it is probably his most Canadian film. The same pattern, however, may be traced in almost every one of his features: a repressed protagonist forced to confront the “natural” powers of the unconscious, and being destroyed in the process.

I have attempted to show how the violent dualism of Cronenberg’s films reflect a “Canadian” pattern. Although his films might appear to differ from the examples used by Frye, Atwood and others, I would assert that the difference is superficial. The glaring contrast between the “substantially colorless, odorless, noninfectious and nonoffensive” Canadian exterior of archetype (Friedenberg 152) and the potentially riotous and even monstrous disorder occurring within is perhaps simply more obvious in Cronenberg’s films than in most other cases. Consider, for example, Margaret Atwood’s comment on the reputation of a former Canadian Prime Minister:

Mackenzie King, formerly a symbol of Canada because of his supposed dullness and greyness . . . is enjoying new symbolic popularity as a secret madman who communed every night with the picture of his dead mother and believed that his dog was inhabited by her soul. “Mackenzie King rules Canada because he is himself the embodiment of Canada—cold and cautious on the outside . . . but inside a mass of intuition and dark intimations,” says one of Robertson Davies’ characters in *The Manticore*, speaking for many.

(*Second Words* 231–32)

In Cronenberg’s films the inside and the outside are both manifest: the work of repression is visibly countered and reversed in the most spectacular way. Yet at narrative’s

end it is very clear why the dominant attitude in the Cronenberg world is one of stasis and repression, and the moral (for the protagonists and the authorial sensibility, if not for the viewer) is that no constructive action is possible. The idea may not be as didactically presented as in the "definitive" Canadian features of the 1970s, but the resemblance is strong. That Cronenberg's work has persisted with the themes of isolation, failure and despair when the national cinema (such as it is) seems perhaps to have abandoned this stance serves once more to distinguish his films from their Canadian contemporaries. Yet in maintaining a perspective of alienated dualism and in suffering an emotional burden of pessimism and anguish, Cronenberg seems very much an *Ur*-Canadian.

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#### Michael J. Collins (essay date Winter/Spring 1996)

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[In the following essay, Collins studies how the films *They Came from Within*, *Rabid*, and *The Brood*, compare with the work of surrealist artists, and explores how Cronenberg uses medicine, or medical procedures, as a starting point to address our fears of the body.]

All Right, nurse, bring the next patient in.  
Get up on this table, pull off that gown  
Raise up that right leg, let that left one down  
Pull off them stockings, that silk underwear  
Doctor's got to cut you, mama, lord knows where

—Big Bill Broonzy, "Terrible Operation Blues" 1930

If the common man has a high enough view of things  
which properly speaking belong to the realm of the  
laboratory, it is because such research has resulted in  
the manufacture of a machine or the discovery of some  
serum which the man in the street views as affecting  
him directly. He is quite certain that they have been  
trying to improve his lot.

—André Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism" 1924

Although these may seem disparate citations with which to begin an essay concerning three of David Cronenberg's early films (*They Came from Within*, 1975; *Rabid*, 1977; *The Brood*, 1979), in the collision of these quotations lies much of the basis of Cronenberg's peculiarly arresting



imagery and ideation. Where landmark early blues hero Big Bill Broonzy uses a vernacular series of medical images to construct a droll series of double-entendres (with distressingly incisive overtones), Breton uses the notion of laboratory research as a springboard from the rationalist world into the surreal. Here Cronenberg's medicine lies between these quotes, pulled at once in the direction of the violently sexual and the disruptively intellectual. He demonstrates little concern here for the ostensible goal of the curative, for the reassuring aims of "wellness." As Mary B. Campbell says of Cronenberg, ". . . mutation, telepathy, epidemic, and sexual metaliberation become, in [Cronenberg's] trembling hands, the precise pathology of the human spirit" (Campbell, 307).

Medicine, the study of the body's reaction to disease and trauma with the eventual aim of healing or curing, is perhaps the most noble and practical application of rational consciousness. It is a science which ideally aspires to improve human life, to eliminate illness and suffering, to advance both *mens sano* and *corpore sano*. It is a science in which creative thought directs itself toward the most concrete and empirical of rewards, that of a well life extended.

Surrealism, as conceived by Breton, Valery, Dali, Bunuel, and De Chirico, demanded the release of the imagination from the shackles of the rational: Breton early in his first *Manifesto* bemoans that "[t]his imagination which knows no bounds is . . . allowed to be exercised only in strict accordance with the laws of an arbitrary utility" (Breton 4). The surrealists conceived in text and image—symbolic and imaginary—a world in which the dream and the real flowed in an unchannelled perfusion. The medical imagination of Cronenberg flows similarly unfettered through the intimately tangible, rationalized body of the western patient.

Like Broonzy and Breton, Cronenberg sees in medicine not the autoclaved sterility of the lab, but a rich, fecund landscape of septic possibility. His film work has, from the beginning, manifested symptoms of the physiologically surreal, and of the outrageously, uncontrollably sexual (itself polymorphously elemental to surrealism). Like a Magritte canvas pairing the strictly-rendered representational with the physically-impossible figurative, these films use the possibilities of the body subjected to medical intervention to explore worlds forbidden the physician, and they find in those worlds a poisoned ripeness, a diseased engorgement of promise.

*Bring on that ether; bring on that gas  
Doctor's got to cut you, mama, yes, yes, yes  
The doctor knows to fix it; the doctor knows just  
what to do.*

—“Terrible Operation Blues”

*I am not quite sure to what extent [medical]  
scholars are  
motivated by humanitarian aims, but it does not  
seem to me  
that this factor constitutes a very marked degree*

*of  
goodness. I am, of course, referring to true scholars  
and  
not to the vulgarizers and popularizers of all  
sorts who take out patents.*

—“Manifesto of Surrealism”

*They Came from Within* (1975) is set in the austere, Bauhaus microcosm of the Starliner Apartments. The credit sequence offers a descriptive syntagma of this setting, as a salesman's voice guides the viewer through a slide-show tour of the glamorous, swinging complex, isolated like Ballard's eponymous High Rise into a self-contained social vacuum. The rental units are pre-furnished, the complex has its own shopping arcade, and, in lovingly-composed, lingering final credit-sequence images, we see that there's even an onsite dental and medical clinic. Immediately, Cronenberg has screened for us the ideal controlled lab environment for his first major experiment.

As the film opens, a fresh-faced young couple have arrived for a pitch tour. The goofball security guard boasts that his gun is a useless appendage at Starliner, and moments later the oily rental agent talks up the numerous advantages of the complex. But almost immediately, interrupting these blissful exchanges, Cronenberg's icy camera intrudes into Room 1511, where a messy murder is taking place. At first starkly ironic, the counterpoint in this crosscutting grows increasingly menacing as the young woman victim, once strangled, is placed by her killer onto a dining-room table—the killer, a doctor (who bears an unintended but nonetheless startling resemblance to former Surgeon General C. Everett Koop) begins a terrible operation of his own. Grabbing a scalpel from his bag, he opens the woman's abdomen and pours in a caustic chemical, then takes the scalpel to his own throat.

Eventually, we learn that the young woman, Annabelle Brown, was the incubation subject for an experimental parasite being bred by her killer, Dr. Emil Hobbes.<sup>1</sup> We learn, further, that this parasite is a combination aphrodisiac and venereal disease, which a stimulated Brown has already communicated to numerous men in the apartment complex. Hobbes, it seems, has been doing research on organ transplants, experimenting with the notion that parasites can be bred to take over the function of diseased organs—this research has led him, in his dirty-old-man way, to create these venereal parasites with the aim of creating a groovy, worldwide orgy of free sex.

A telling moment early in the film comes as Hobbes' slovenly partner describes the organ-transplant project to the film's hero, the complex's chief medical man, Dr. St. Luke. After explaining the parasite research they've been doing, the man tells St. Luke: “It's crazy. But who cares?”

This simple statement condenses much of Breton's argument into a blunt insistence upon the worthiness of apparently purposeless research—in Breton's second “Manifesto,” he comments to similar end: . . . the idea of

surrealism aims quite simply at the total recovery of our psychic force by a means which is nothing other than the dizzying descent into ourselves . . . the perpetual excursion into the midst of forbidden territory . . . (Breton, 136).

It's crazy, but who cares? These are shocking words to hear emerging from the mouth of a medical researcher, but in Cronenberg's surrealist world they fit perfectly. Not much later in the film, Hobbes' partner speaks again to Dr. St. Luke, telling him that the ill-fated murderer Hobbes has written in his notes that "man is an animal that thinks too much. An over-rational animal that's lost touch with its body and its instincts." And one of these instincts, the primal instinct, is the sex drive. As decades of love songs and advertising have taught us, it's crazy, but who cares?

Sexuality is the point around which much of *They Came From Within*'s surrealism coalesces. It is sexuality that fosters the spread of the parasite, and sexuality which the parasite encourages. With Annabelle murdered, her numerous sex partners carry the parasite around the building—Nick Tudor, a singularly unpleasant insurance man, seems to have the most thriving selection of parasites churning around his midsection. It is Nick who makes the initial discovery of the murder, entering room 1511 presumably in search of another in his apparent series of illicit assignations with Annabelle. As he enters, Cronenberg allows himself a rare parry with pastiche: the shot of Nick discovering Annabelle's mutilated corpse features her lower leg in the foreground, dangling off the table, with Nick in the background struck violently ill at the sight. The image is practically an element-for-element reversal of the celebrated leg shot from Mike Nichols' 1967 *The Graduate*, a shot which prefigured a sexual awakening of a no less debased but ultimately healthier nature. That Cronenberg should choose to allude to Nichols' film, so much a favorite of the early sexual revolution, places *They Came From Within* at the opposite end of that particular revolution. Where Nichols' farce dealt with a mannered corruption and its impassioned redemption, Cronenberg's film considers the eroticized collapse of all systems of order, and concludes with a shot implying the promised spread of the love bug's determined decadence, as the new-made sex maniacs drive out of the parking garage, presumably to take over the world.

*They Came From Within* uses the erotic in the same morbidly liberatory manner as did the surrealists. Throughout the story, people discover and seize opportunities for arousal under circumstances ranging from the grotesque to the violent. Dr. St. Luke is the hero of this film, the one person who successfully resists the clamoring sexuality. Thus, while the film's medicine is surreal, its politics are not.

Dr. St. Luke finally succumbs to the horny hordes at the film's conclusion, being dragged into the swimming pool by a gaggle of orgiasts and given the parasitic kiss by his nurse, now a complete love zombie. The choice of a swim-

ming pool here recalls the familiar use of water as a representation of the unconscious—Dr. St. Luke has finally capitulated to his suppressed desires and allowed, against his will, the surrealists' desire to commingle the conscious and unconscious, with St. Luke the representative of the rational, and the poolful of lust rompers embodying a polymorphous, post-conscious id. This scene too recalls *The Graduate*, visually quoted earlier in the film. But if the swimming pool in *The Graduate* came to represent peace, escape, contemplation, the pool in *They Came From Within* is a tawdry, despoiled font, a place where degradation and sin go to spawn, to reproduce in its unwholesome depths.

*They Came From Within* acts out the surreal death of the love generation, a death writ in blood, pus, and parasites. Where flower children once in that dooryard bloomed now blossom only flowers of evil—Cronenberg has taken medicine into the early stages of a corrupt freedom, a space in which mutation repeats itself so often it comes to seem healthy. The sex-death conflation which was soon to become the distinguishing cliché of the slasher genre here remains true to its surreal-psychoanalytic roots. Cronenberg's medicine, and his surrealism, are all too conscious of mortality, and bespeak a rage for life without consideration for the banalities of convention insisted upon in medicine's traditional code of ethics.

*Oh, Doctor, what you going to do with that long knife?*

*Oh, don't worry about that, that's just a doctor's tool.*

*Oh, What you going to do with that saw?*

*Oh, we just take off legs with that.*

*"Terrible Operation Blues"*

*In this realm as in any other, I believe in the pure surrealist joy of the man who, forewarned that all others*

*before him have failed, refuses to admit defeat, sets off*

*from whatever point he chooses, along any other path save a*

*reasonable one, and arrives where ever he can.*

*"Manifesto of Surrealism"*

In 1977, Cronenberg left the Starline: Apartments behind, and turned his attention to another experimental medical procedure, this time a skin graft. *Rabid* opens with a wry critique of organized medicine, as the founders of the Keloid Clinic discuss franchising their operation. The ethics of a chain of cosmetic-surgery resorts are quickly sidelined, however, when a motorcycle accident brings Dr. Keloid a perfect subject on whom to try out a prototypical grafting procedure, using "neutral field tissue," which will adopt the cellular structure of the tissue surrounding it.

That the name of the clinic, and of the doctor, should be Keloid is a sly poke at the plastic surgery industry. Keloid tissue is lumpy, bulbous scar tissue, resulting from an excess of collagen, and it's one of plastic surgery's pet peeves, since it's extremely unattractive and extremely dif-

ficult to remove in any lasting way. Naming a plastic surgeon Keloid is like naming an anesthesiologist "Agony." The disruption of language, whether through the hemorrhaging flights of metaphor enjoyed by Breton in his novella *Soluble Fish* (1924) or the anarchic collages of Max Ernst's *The Hundred Headless Women* (1929), or through the linguistic vexations of puns a la Keloid, is a standard surrealist technique. And the Keloid image is particularly apt in this film, as the surgeon's effort to replace damaged organ tissue with experimental grafts comes back bigger and meaner than he could possibly have imagined.

Rose, the recipient of the skin graft (played by former pornstress Marilyn Chambers) develops a bloodthirsty flesh probe in her armpit as a result of the procedure. She can no longer accept food and needs human blood to sustain herself (she makes a token stab at a cow with little success). Her attentions leave her victims appearing rabid—foam-flecked mouths and bloodthirsty hostility spreads to the proportions of plague, and the film becomes a series of vignettes prefiguring the body-count slasher films of the eighties.

Cronenberg manages the escalating mayhem with his customary skill, but what's most interesting about the film is the idea of a medical procedure demanding blood and overtaking a person's life-sustaining systems. Transplants and grafts generally cause peril through tissue rejection—in *Rabid*, the obverse is the case: the transplanted tissue achieves its own metastatic abnormality, overtaking the body and its systems. Rose's body becomes the canvas for Keloid's *Tuna Fishing*—a locus upon and within which takes place the war between the normally-predictable processes of the healthy body (the pre-medical rational) and the alternate, mutagenic process of the graft's rapid takeover of these healthy processes (the post-op irrational). Rose's rational, real body melds with Keloid's irrational dream graft . . . as Breton put it: "I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality, if one may so speak."

In *Rabid*, medical experimentation inadvertently triggers a raging epidemic. Yet this film does not serve as an indictment of the medical industry, any more than *Un Chien Andalou* is an indictment of lust. *Rabid*, like most of Cronenberg's films, uses medicine as its foundation and builds upon it; or, perhaps more appropriately, it uses medicine as its wound and, keloidally, blooms upward in an extrusive denial of the rational's primacy over the organic.

The film concludes with a dead heroine tossed into a garbage truck, the crowning moment in a work which, like all of Cronenberg's, steadfastly refuses to adhere to convention. Random, encroaching disorder—the antithesis of traditional narrative and western medicine—surrenders finally to mortality, a resolution which claims the rational and the irrational indiscriminately.

*Oh, doctor, what did you take out of me?  
All right, I'll tell you now.  
Four monkey wrenches and a two-hoss shay  
A pair of old britches and a bale of hay  
Your ribs were kind of loose: they moved about  
If I hadn't sewn you up everything would fell  
out*

"Terrible Operation Blues"

*Such and such an image, by which he deems it  
opportune to  
indicate his progress is, to me, I must confess, a  
matter  
of complete indifference. Nor is the material with  
which he  
must perforce encumber himself; his glass tubes  
or my  
metallic feathers . . . as for his method, I am will-  
ing to  
give it as much credit as I do mine.*

"Manifesto of Surrealism"

Cronenberg further honed his technique and concerns in *The Brood*. A perfect follow-up to his earlier two, *The Brood* uses elements from both of these earlier films to create a work of uncompromising vision. Briefly, the film concerns a radical psychotherapeutic technique, psychoplasms, which encourages its patients to physically manifest their psychological problems.

This premise perhaps best sums up the concerns of Cronenberg's early work—that the body, and medicine, should be no less landscapes for psychic development than should be the canvas or stone (or metallic feathers, for that matter). The film's intensely nasty "children of rage" are creatures which gestate in wombs outside Nola's body: living expressions of her psychological problems, they seek bloody revenge upon those Nola imagines have wronged her.

The unconscious suddenly freed of repression, embodied to act out its most violent impulses—seldom had narrative film seen such surreal desires played out upon so superficially conventional a screen as horror film. The film's climax arrives when Nola's husband encounters her as she gives birth to one of her children of rage: biting open the membranous sac containing the evil infant, she licks it clean of its amniotic fluid—a shocking commingling of the surreal with the naturalistic. Cronenberg comments revealingly upon this moment: "[t]he visual image for the cinematic scene crystallized for me in a sort of waking dream. It didn't come from sleep. It came from whatever unconscious place these images arise" (Rodley, 85).

With this in mind, it's noteworthy that Dr. Hal Raglan is not a practicing physician, but a psychotherapist. *The Brood*, unlike the earlier two films, finds the roots of its horror in the mind before the body. Here more than anywhere else are articulated the tenets of surrealism, the commingling of the real with the imagined. Cronenberg's unconscious produced Nola's unconscious producing children of rage, his text rooted in the imaginary, the



psychic world of pictures. Philip Brophy notes that contemporary horror concerns itself with “. . .this mode of showing as opposed to telling . . . David Cronenberg has consolidated himself as a director who almost exclusively works within this field . . .” (Brophy, 8) It is precisely the difference between showing and telling that comprises the basis for Dr. Raglan’s therapy: where Freudian analysis is based upon the process of translating dream language into spoken language, psychoplasms bypasses the ordering system of words, diving headlong into the purely physiological.

That Dr. Raglan’s therapy emerges through the bodies of his patients, rather than through their speech, indicates Cronenberg’s surrealist interest in the commingling of acting out with working through. The illnesses of the mind and body combine, just as do the rational and the irrational in the surrealist aesthetic. As Brophy remarks earlier in his essay, “. . .contemporary horror film tends to play not so much on the broad fear of Death, but more precisely on the fear of one’s own body, of how one controls and relates to it.” (Brophy, 8). Or in the words of Jacques Lacan, “. . .the fear of death, the ‘absolute Master,’ presupposed in consciousness by a whole philosophical tradition from Hegel onwards, is psychologically subordinate to the narcissistic fear of damage to one’s own body” (28).

*The Brood*, like countless other violence-unleashed films, has its roots in the explosive proto-psychoanalytic fantasy of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. It’s interesting to regard the shifting roles of science through the history of horror film—it has never been the Friend of Mankind it has always claimed to be, and Cronenberg’s sterile fevers update the surroundings but maintain the attitudes that have powered mad-scientist films and stories dating back to Marlowe’s *Faust*: a fear of knowledge that motivates even the book of Genesis. As Bruce Kavin observes, “[h]orror emphasizes the dread of knowing, the danger of curiosity.” (Grant, 8) Despite this traditional, even reactionary, stance, Cronenberg’s works maintain the illusion of a forward-thinking rationalism.

In none of these films does the scientist spend time cackling over gas-bubbling beakers. The image of the scientific researcher remains stolid, rational, cool, even as his work spirals further and further out of control. Similar concerns are played out in the entropic post-surrealist (or, more accurately, post-futurist) machine performances of artists such as Jean Tinguely and Mark Pauline.

But the pieces in Cronenberg’s gallery remain biological—objects constantly rebuilding themselves from within at the behest of science. As Surrealism rose from the blood-soaked battlefields of post-WWI Europe, so rises Cronenberg from the gauze-and-needle-littered morgue of modern medicine: each brooding upon its own cultural apocalypse, each relishing its own dread.

That Surrealism of this order should so easily have achieved the metaphraxis from the stretched canvas to the reflective screen speaks strongly of the endurance of its

concerns. Cronenberg’s audience, as bound by its enforced rationality as was Breton’s, De Chirico’s, or Dali’s, both desires and dreads the spectacle of the unshackled flight of productive intellect. But where the original surrealists wove dark tapestries of war, of passion, death, lust, and liberation, Cronenberg broods on the far more intimate mysteries of the body.

The body’s appetites, its seemingly infinite capacity to reinvent its form through illness, through mutation, and through scientific intervention, find expression in Cronenberg’s work. *They Came From Within* and *Rabid* explore diseased corollaries of the biological urges toward reproduction and feeding, and *The Brood* ventures into teratomacious territories of emancipated psychosis. That the principal practitioner of contemporary surrealism should choose as his locus the human form, and as his agent, science, speaks of the universal intimacy of illness, and of the psychological free-fall which accompanies illness.

Breton envisioned a system of thought unencumbered by the distinction between the conscious and the unconscious: a system wherein two plus two, or a doctor plus a patient, could equal anything at all. Broonzy, at the conclusion of the terrible operation, boasts, “That’s the way that patients do who come to this hospital” as his patient exclaims, “Say, doctor, I feel like doing a little mess-around!” Adrift between the unrestrained oneiricism of Breton, and the lusty curatives of Broonzy, Cronenberg floats—suspended in a fertile soup of vital fluids. The caress of a parasite, the phallic kiss of a bloodthirsty skin graft, and the breeding stock of nightmare squirt periodically forth from Cronenberg’s primordial pond, and if we lean closer we hear him mumble: “It’s crazy, but who cares”?

#### Notes

1. One wonders if Cronenberg, always careful in his choice of characters’ names, was ironically referring with Dr. Hobbes to early political philosopher Thomas Hobbes, whose 1607 text *The Leviathan* was the first to introduce the notion of a “State of Nature.” Hobbes, a “cynical realist,” built his philosophy from his observations of the worst types of human behavior—he regarded humanity as a chaotic mass of greed and war, needing an absolute power of government answerable to no one. Cronenberg’s Dr. Hobbes sought a return to a sexual state of nature in which base desire saw neither boundary nor obstacle to its satisfaction.

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### William Beard (essay date Winter/Spring 1996)

SOURCE: "Lost and Gone Forever: Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers*," in *Post Script: Essays in Film and the Humanities*, Vol. 15, No. 2, Winter/Spring, 1996, pp. 11–28.

[In the following essay, Beard examines the Cronenbergian themes found in *Dead Ringers*: sexual otherness, struggle for a male identity, emotional paralysis, rationality versus nature, and science and sexuality. Also he discusses an element particular to the film—a portrayal of twins played by the same actor.]

*I've had a response to the movie that I've never gotten from any of the other films. I went to one of the first public screenings in Toronto and one guy, a doctor, said, "Can you tell me why I feel so fucking sad having seen this film?" I said, "It's a sad movie." Then I heard from someone else that a friend of his saw it and cried for three hours afterwards. So I thought, "That's what it is. That's what I wanted to get at." I can't articulate it. It's not really connected with gynaecology or twinning. It has to do with that element of being human. It has to do with this ineffable sadness that is an element of being human.*

—David Cronenberg<sup>1</sup>

*I felt, when I was working on the movie, that I made it primarily out of the female part of myself.*

—David Cronenberg<sup>2</sup>

*Dead Ringers* continues the evolution of David Cronenberg's work as a filmmaker. It is different from earlier films in a number of ways—above all it contains no "science-fiction" or even unambiguously "horror" elements. But it is more upon its similarity than its difference that I wish to concentrate; or rather upon its particular features as a point of continuation and development in a line of work stretching back through nine earlier films.<sup>3</sup> In its central themes and concerns, its iconography, its unmistakable repetitions of peculiarly Cronenbergian markings, most important perhaps in its overall affect—and even in its forms of substitution for now-absent genre characteristics—*Dead Ringers* is very much a culmination of its predecessors. Its outstanding narrative feature, the presence of identical-twin protagonists (Beverly and Elliot Mantle) played by the same actor (Jeremy Irons) allows it to consider problems of conflicting psychological imperatives and desires and to dramatize these conflicts in a manner which both extends and complements Cronenberg's earlier expressions of them. As this remark implies, the twins will be seen here as differing components of a single personality, and that personality as another manifestation of the developing Cronenberg protagonist.<sup>4</sup> This particular manifestation—twin gynaecologists—constitutes for Cronenberg a very subtle instrument for re-examining the anguished dilemmas of inner balance he has always been concerned with, and in particular the most powerful agent for the expression of that sense of sadness and loss which is to be found at the base of virtually every one of his films.

Cronenberg's work may be seen from one angle as a progression towards an evermore-complexly-understood sense of subjectivity in the world, and in particular of the problems of the isolated individual male subject. In his earlier films (up to and including *The Brood*) he developed his celebrated "take" on the mind/body problem, which involved polarizing the world into on the one hand the overweening attempts of rationality to order human life (this symbolized by the actions of visionary but overconfident scientists) and on the other the violent rebellion against this attempt to control on the part of the instincts, the unconscious, the body (this symbolized by parasites, plagues, cancers, mutations—most of them sexualized). But emerging notably in *Videodrome* was an emphasis on the subjectivity of this battleground, a transposition of the dialectic of mind and body into an individual male protagonist. The mind and body of Max Renn, the protagonist of *Videodrome*, are the landscape upon which are enacted the conflicts of appetite and guilt, sexuality and control, the pathologies of the flesh and the yearnings of the spirit. Mind and body are in fact difficult to distinguish from each other, and indeed all boundaries of difference become blurred, when this film moves so easily between an objective "actuality" which includes sadomasochistic sex and murder and a series of subjective hal-

lucinations in which the subject's body develops alarming new organs—among them a vagina-like opening which appears in his abdomen. Beneath the lurid drama of these bombshells one may discern in *Videodrome* a kind of “literal” emotional condition, a dilemma of which these are the hysterical symptoms. This psychological state is one of self-enclosure, of the difficulties of the subject in relating meaningfully or healthily to the outside world and in particular to women.<sup>5</sup> Sexuality is a channel of connection with others and a principal means to human intimacy, but the sexual drive invokes the nexus sex/body/disease/death, and the proximity of woman produces simultaneously desire for physical and spiritual union and panic at the same prospect.

From *Videodrome* onwards, Cronenberg's protagonists find themselves repeatedly experiencing this dilemma, and both they and the films are continually balancing and rebalancing the sterility of self-enclosure against the holocaust of bodily and emotional liberation. Neither of these antinomies is satisfactory or even endurable, and there is no workable way to combine them. In capsule description: *The Dead Zone* tries out the option of passivity and retreat, the protagonist forswearing the woman he loves and focusing his repressed and powerful “bodily” energies—his terrifying abilities as a psychic—on the sacrificial-suicidal gesture of saving the world from the next Hitler. Here the subject preserves his identity, denies sexuality and body, and buries the consequent wasted life of loneliness and unhealthy repression under a mausoleum of noble martyrdom. In *The Fly* the protagonist, who is by now not merely the victim of scientific experimentation but its actual author as well, begins as another isolated and repressing individual but then discovers sweet sexuality in the arms of a loving woman and the conceptual breakthrough he needs for the success of his teleportation machine more or less simultaneously. However, the liberation of his flesh and the breaching of his emotional solitude lead directly to a series of escalating catastrophes: jealousy, errors of judgement, megalomania, the discovery that he has fused his genetic makeup with that of an insect, and finally horrifying transformation and death.<sup>6</sup>

*Dead Ringers* returns then to the same stalemated situation, peering into it more deeply yet and emerging with a new, powerful narrative metaphor and instrument of expression for the sense of psychic enclosure and longing for release, the fascinating and terrifying imperatives of the body and sexuality, and the final recognition of hopelessness, which have strongly characterized the films preceding it. Those films connect the protagonist's sense of a stable identity with the controlling presence of a rational ego-self, whose every existence is based on a repression of or refusal to recognize the dual bodily facts of sexuality and mortality, and whose natural (though unhappy) condition is physical and emotional solitude. The ego-boundaries of all these characters, when penetrated, collapse into a chaotic hell of undifferentiation: *Videodrome*'s confusions of subject/object and of sexual difference, *The Dead Zone*'s invasion of everyday life by

rampant “visions,” *The Fly*'s final inability even to identify the subject's species. In *Dead Ringers* the protagonist is twinned, and thus has in a sense achieved “monstrosity” already.<sup>7</sup> But the film replicates the pattern of the others: this “exotic creature” lives in a state of enclosed symbiotic balance which in itself recalls the initial state of his predecessors, and moves, via an attempt at liberation from this enclosure through a relationship with a woman, to a disastrous imbalance ending in death. Instead of marking the conflict inside the protagonist's psyche onto his mind and/or body as hysterical “sensational” symptoms (hallucinations, visions, transformation), that conflict is institutionalized in the narrative by means of assigning a separate character or persona to each block of psychic characteristics. Elliot and Beverly do not represent mind and body; rather, the dialectic is between rationality and emotion, detachment and engagement, control and “letting go”—these antinomies also repeating the “literal emotional condition” of the heroes of the earlier films. The pathology of this condition (which all the films stress) is seen not in the wild monstrosity of the symptoms (the horror or science-fiction element which is absent here) but in the twins' fascination from childhood with gynaecology, “radical” means of treatment, and female “mutation,” and of course in their final psychological collapse and self-destruction.

The symbiosis of the couple is complex but quite strongly marked and legible. So: Elliot is the external ambassador, the public relations person, the speechmaker and grant-getter and report-writer, the sybarite who watches *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* and appreciates good wine and Italian furniture, the unflappable social smoothie and Don-Juanish sexual manipulator, the leader and organizer. Beverly is the shy domestic recluse, the researcher, clinician and surgeon, who is forever slouching around the house in old pullovers, who detests having to put on any kind of performance, is nervous, moody and unhappy and eventually falls in love, and who feels oppressed in the relationship (with Elliot, that is) and makes an attempt to get out. Claire tells Elliot the two are easy to tell apart: “Beverly is the sweet one and you're the shit.” Elliot is the “male” and Beverly the “female”: their names indicate this fact, as does their division of duties in the professional ménage and the almost caricatured assignment of psychological gender characteristics (calculation/feeling, order/mess, materialism/idealism, abstraction/involvement, power/work, sadism/masochism, “shit”/“sweet one”).<sup>8</sup> Another configuration sees Elliot in the role of the adult or even the parent, Beverly in the role of the child, “baby” brother. Here Elliot's *sang-froid* is contrasted with the range of Beverly's mannerisms which are childlike (tentative, secretive, transparent, unprotected) or even foetuslike (he is always hugging himself, pulling his knees up, trying to shrink into a foetal curl).

The first impression is that it is Elliot who is in control of the partnership, Elliot who is the dominant one, the stronger. When Beverly moves into Claire's apartment, both he and Claire assume that Elliot will try to break up



the affair, Beverly in tears telling Elliot "I was afraid you wouldn't let me have her." But in fact the film ultimately presents another picture. Although Elliot casually demeans Claire to Beverly and attempts to downgrade her to the harmless status of another passing amusement, he does not press the point or become obsessive or panicked. Indeed, his weightiest statement on the topic of how Beverly's involvement with Claire will affect their partnership is a mild and thoughtful one: "This is unknown territory we're moving into." It is Beverly and not Elliot who feels threatened, who worries and panics, who feels driven to drugs by the impossibilities of having Claire and Elly both, who at last collapses under the pressure into addiction and derangement. But this is simply because only Beverly can truly contemplate a separation from his twin. Elliot cannot even imagine such a thing—or at any rate not until he sees Beverly close to death, whereupon he changes abruptly from "leader" to "follower." In truth Beverly is the stronger of the two—or perhaps one should say the more "authentic," the more "essential" or "real."

This perspective is revealed through a series of moments which show Elliot's dependence upon Beverly visible through a surface of facility and control. In their habit of impersonating each other during affairs with women, it is Elliot who does the seducing, pushes his brother towards "repeating" the sexual encounters ("if we didn't share women, you'd still be a virgin"), and then presses Beverly for full reports. When Beverly refuses to talk about his time with Claire ("I want to keep this one for myself"), Elliot grows almost angry and asserts, "you haven't had any experience until you've told me about it!" But it is Elliot who has not had any experience until Beverly has repeated it and documented the repetition, for Elliot has (or feels he has) no "truth" or "reality" in himself—only Beverly has those things. What Elliot does is to pretend, to impersonate, to perform. Hence his mastery of playing various roles in the world (the gracious doctor-genius, the irresistible lover, the man of taste, etc.), and hence also his fascination with acting, stardom, the star actress Claire Niveau. Elliot is not particularly interested in Claire's three cervixes (that is Beverly's obsession) but her star-celebrity captures his attention immediately, and even later on he remains fascinated by her status as a really famous actress ("lucky Bev, he gets to rub up against the magic," he says while gazing at Claire's painted-on facial bruises). Similarly, his slighting description of her to Beverly actually applies to himself: "She's an actress, Bev, she's a flake, she plays games all the time—you never know who she really is." Elliot, then, has no identity under all the layers of pretence. Beverly does, even if that identity is suppressed and crippled. He has no interest in Claire as an actress, is a poor actor himself (always signalling a lie, grotesque in his script-reading scene with Claire), and indeed seems to have no mechanism for mediation with the outside world at all: his face registers every emotion, every thought, with undiluted painful directness. But his agonized emotionality and vulnerability, his "female" and "childlike" intuitive connection with life, have a status of authenticity or genuineness that Elliot's suave manoeuvres

cannot pretend to. This at least is how Elliot feels about it at base, and it is what allows Beverly to reach out for another human relationship (Claire) and to seek a release from the "rule" of Elliot's mediation of the outside world through detachment and manipulation.

Beverly's "independent" personality is certainly now a strong one. As we have seen, the spectre of separation from Elliot creates intense anxiety in him, indeed he cannot endure either the prospect of the old life with Elliot (no Claire) or the new life with Claire (no Elliot). (This is the "Cronenberg state" in a nutshell.) Neither does he have any means of "solving" the problem. He does not even attempt to solve it, but falls immediately into the non-solution of drug abuse (unlike Claire or Elliot, he cannot control his use of drugs, he cannot control anything), which is in effect merely a form of avoidance and finally surrender and defeat. It is Beverly who becomes the drug addict, becomes unstable and "mad," who loses control of both himself and the Mantle brothers enterprise. Beverly is the one who becomes obsessed with "mutant women" and has the bizarre instruments made up (moreover insisting they are not art works for show, but "real"), who starts mainlining drugs during office hours and assaulting patients with the Mantle Retractor, and who almost kills a patient on the operating table. In the end, this "genuine," "baby" half of the Mantle personality is not capable of leaving its controlling, detached "older" brother: the attempt produces overwhelming fear, drug addiction, personality collapse.

At the same time these events reveal a new Elliot, one might say "the real Elliot"—the Elliot who knows at some level that there is no Elliot without Beverly. (There is a miserable, addicted, deranged Beverly without Elliot, but there is no Elliot without Beverly.) Even now this new Elliot does not resemble the pitiable, suffering creature of feeling that Beverly has always been—his fear and pain are differently expressed. His decision to "get in synch" with Beverly (i.e. to become an addict too), his assertion that both brothers share the same bloodstream—and also his overconfidence that once they are in synch he will be able to sort things out—all emerge from an aura of calm and rationality. He follows Beverly into oblivion and finally goes to his death at Beverly's hands without a word of complaint or remonstrance. And in doing all this he confirms that he is the subordinate one, Beverly the dominant. This is most clearly evident in the comparison of the two brothers with Chang and Eng, the original Siamese twins. The comparison is first implied in Beverly's nightmare, in which the brothers are Siamese twins and Claire is physically separating them with her teeth. But it is Elliot who points specifically to the Chang and Eng parallel, as he watches Beverly, at his most infantile, destroying himself with drugs:

Elliot: Don't do this to me, Bev!

Beverly: But I'm only doing it to me, Elly. Don't you have a will of your own? Why don't you just go on with your very own life?

Elliot: Do you remember the original Siamese twins?  
 . . . Remember how they died?

Beverly: Chang died of a stroke in the middle of the night. He was always the sickly one, he was always the one who drank too much. [quoting]

*When Eng woke up beside him*

*And found that his brother was dead,*

*He died of fright*

*Right there in the bed.*

Elliot: Does that answer your question?

This is Elliot's confession that he cannot exist without Beverly. It also identifies Beverly with Chang, "the sickly one," "the one who drank too much," and this seems an appropriate comparison, when the sickly Beverly is at death's door because he has taken too many drugs. Yet in the final scenes, where the twins are virtually (but not quite) indistinguishable, when Beverly "separates" the two of them by disembowelling Elliot, Elliot is specifically named as playing the role of Chang (the weaker one who dies first), and Beverly is now Eng (the stronger one who survives but then dies of fright—or in this case grief).

All of this is confirmation that of the twins it is Beverly who is the primary subject. He is of course already primary in a narrative context by virtue of his greater centrality in the story and, in a narrative sense, his greater agency. The emotional turmoil written on his face and body makes him the dramatic centre just as Elliot's calm demeanour and controlled behaviour push him towards the dramatic periphery. It is true (in a multiple sense) that Elliot "acts" while Beverly "suffers." But in the end Beverly's feelings control the viewer's affects, Beverly's decisions and actions determine the course of the story. In this respect *Dead Ringers* might be described as a melodrama, soap opera or "women's picture"—but with Beverly in the role of the suffering female protagonist. Here Cronenberg's remark, quoted in the headnote, that he felt the film was coming from the "female side of him," seems apt. (One remembers also that another work the filmmaker describes as "female," *The Dead Zone*, features a protagonist driven to martyrdom as a substitute for workable real-life relationships—i.e., ultimate self-sacrifice in place of an impossible marriage—and that this film too bears a resemblance to "feminine melodrama.")<sup>9</sup> But the idea of femaleness, its significance in itself and in relationship to the condition of the protagonist(s) and the film as a whole, has a far more pervasive importance to which we will turn later. Here it is sufficient to emphasize that Beverly is the primary protagonist of the film, and that structurally his role has "female" associations. It is also at least interesting to note that Cronenberg characterizes the "female" and "childlike" aspects of the symbiotic dual-personality as the essential ones and the "male" and "controlling" aspects as the superficial ones.

We must return now to this perspective of the brothers as different aspects of a single personality, and that single personality as another version of the Cronenberg protago-

nist. The symbiotic character Beverly / Elliot has the vulnerable, emotional Beverly—the "essential" (but buried) egoself, imprisoned and yearning for release from encapsulation but unable to deal easily with the outside world, longing for completion in a relationship with a woman and also fascinated and tormented by the difference of female bodies and the mysteries thereof—overseen and managed by the detached, calculating, performer-fabrication Elliot, who ensures the viability of the twin-unit in the outside world, negotiating its professional and social success, and channelling deeper emotional and sexual desires into superficial instrumental / predatory relationships. The cold rationalism and alienated sensuality of the Elliot-self represent an unsatisfactory management for the weeping, suffering, sensitive Beverly-self: Beverly-under-the-direction-of-Elliot is unhappy and wants to be "itself." And indeed, as we have seen, the egoself Beverly (unlike the mediating-tool, protective-shell Elliot) may have at least a notional independent existence.

But—and here is where *Dead Ringers* reveals a really basic similarity to preceding Cronenberg films—such an independence, such an escape of the feelings from the control of reason (now the terms perhaps begin to seem inadequate), is simply not possible. However emphatically desirable, from every point of view, a close, loving sexual relationship might be for Johnny Smith in *The Dead Zone*, for Seth Brundle in *The Fly*, for Beverly Mantle in *Dead Ringers*, some catastrophe always interposes itself between each protagonist and this goal.<sup>10</sup> In *The Dead Zone* the source of the catastrophe is occluded through its disguise as a road accident which puts the protagonist into a coma for five years (though he is on the dark and rainy road only because he rejected his girlfriend's invitation to stay the night in her bed). In *The Fly* the "accident" (a fly gets into the telepod along with Seth Brundle) is now much more explicitly connected with the protagonist's agency—his feelings, in particular his inability to cope with released sexuality. In *Dead Ringers* there is no accident at all. (Or perhaps one must say it was the "accident of birth," a phrase which takes on a new resonance in this film.) Rather the barrier to emotional communication is inscribed in the nature(s) of the protagonist(s): the (primary) affective self is simply unable to maintain an existence independent of its protective coating, the (secondary) instrumental self. The dialectic of forces within the personality is emphasized by giving each "side" its own persona; at the same time the inextricability of those forces from each other is asserted by making the personae twin, and by the narrative demonstration of their inability to exist separately. The lineage of this dialectic in Cronenberg is clearly traceable right back to the original "mind / body" split and the concerns of the earliest films, with the outcome of the struggle almost always dire. In *Dead Ringers* the conflict is more clearly than ever contained and played out within the personality of the individual subject. And the resulting psychic landscape is one on which are enacted great struggle and suffering, a powerful drama of vulnerability and pain and destruction. Indeed within a psychological context it is hard to imagine a greater or more catastrophic

upheaval than this one which results in the ritual disembowelment/suicide of the self.

There is no accident in *Dead Ringers*, but there is an intervention or a stimulus. Once again it is the arrival of a woman which begins this catalytic development. But the existence of sexual otherness and the problem of how to deal with it have always been of central importance in the way this (dual) personality has been constructed; and here we may approach the important topic of their profession, gynaecology. The film's first two scenes, depicting the Mantle brothers in 1954 as newly-adolescent boys, show the formation of the strange and unique psychological mechanism whereby they will keep this disturbing problem at arm's length. As the first scene opens they are already revealed as intellectually precocious children (prim and bespectacled) who seek to encompass potentially troublesome facts by placing them within the purely rational constructs of science. Sex is Topic Number One in this regard, and the film opens with Elliot offering an explanation for its existence: "It's because humans don't live in the water," where they could propagate without touching each other—an idea Beverly likes. But their own sexuality, however intellectualized, is still the engine of desires and compulsions, so they proposition a neighbourhood girl in the following fashion:

Elliot: Rafaella, will you have sex with us in our bathtub? It's an experiment.

Rafaella: Are you kidding? Fuck off, you freaks. I'm telling my father you talk dirty. Besides, I know for a fact that you don't even know what fuck is. [she leaves]

Elliot or Beverly: [puzzled and disappointed] They're different from us. And all because we don't live under the water.

The next scene shows them having taken the final decisive step: they are "dissecting" the viscera of a plastic model Visible Woman with instruments of their own invention, and prescribing "interovular surgery": already fully-formed Boy Gynaecologists.

Gynaecology is the form taken in *Dead Ringers* of Cronenberg's persistence in attaching sexuality to science—this combination itself simply a crystallization of the larger problem of mind and body. Cronenberg comments on this very succinctly:

Gynaecology is such a beautiful metaphor for the mind/body split. Here it is: the mind of men—and women—trying to understand sexual organs.

(Rodley 145)

The displacement specifically of sexual desire into a scientific terrain, the attempt to circumscribe or contain it within a project of science or rationality, is a narrative motif which has been extremely consistent throughout Cronenberg's films, from *Stereo* onwards. This displacement has had the (predictable) effect of distorting both terms of the convergence. Sex has become bizarrely

rationalized, transplanted into various forms of scientific endeavor and subjected to quantification, experimentation, technologization. Meanwhile science has become saturated with desire: scientists invent sex-crazing-parasites (*Shivers*), stimulate the growth of new quasi-sexual organs (*Rabid*, *Videodrome*), or find ways for machines to "be made crazy by the flesh" (*The Fly*). Medical science in particular, concerned with the human body, is a magnet for Cronenberg, and his films are not only full of mad doctors but there are recurring nightmares of operating-room horrors and especially of surgeons going haywire at the operating table (there is one in *Dead Ringers*). And here it is evident how close is the relationship between sexuality and disease/decay/death, very much the province of doctors: in a context of sexualized medical science the contiguity of sexuality and physical pathology is more or less inevitable. In *Dead Ringers* this configuration has achieved a new density of concentration. Gynaecology is indeed a "beautiful metaphor" and hence an extremely useful tool to focus one of Cronenberg's central concerns. But in addition the tremendous symbolic (not to mention actual) importance of the medical impulse and the medical spectacle, the issues of life and death it raises in a social and cultural sphere and also the intense meaning it holds for the obsessively displacing Mantles and for the filmmaker too, are expressed in the awesome, sacral ritualism with which the operating-room scenes are staged. Here the red blood of the human body, the red blood of fertility and birth, the enormous daring and risk and *superbia* of the human mind in thus intervening in the natural process, are all abstracted into scenic elements of costume, decor and lighting, and elevated into a grandiose ceremonial wherein surgeons are Princes of the Church of the Science of the Body, and it is very much an open question whether their ritual is a holy or a blasphemous one.

The Mantle brothers' gynaecological clinic is a direct outgrowth of their fascinated perception of women's bodily otherness. Their sexualized scientific examination of women takes the particular form of their own techniques for exploring the female body, personalized "radical" techniques symbolized by the Mantle Retractor, an instrument for ensuring the continued exposure of the female viscera during surgery. To the male perspective the sexual difference of the female body is that the sexual organs are "inside," anyway: penetration of the "secret places" of the female is precisely sexual intercourse. The idea of penetrating and exposing women's bodily difference (but far more fully and more "safely" with instruments rather than penises), of exposing what is hidden and may not be seen, of actually physically looking at the mystery (and we may again recall the ceremonial aspects of the medical "celebration" of this mystery) is at the centre of the Mantles-as-gynaecologists.<sup>11</sup> The eroticization of science and scientific procedures has never been so marked in any Cronenberg film. And the last fillip of excitement is produced by the realization of society's validation of this process of displacement of desire into science. Gynaecology is not only the means of distancing the psyche from disturbance, postponing or cancelling a reckoning with sexual feelings;



it is also, inversely, a means of permitting and authorizing the fascination with sex/body/otherness/death. The gold-plated Mantle Retractor trophy presented to the young medical students is like an Oscar recognizing the success of their personal, radical form of displacement.<sup>12</sup>

One notes then that the Mantle Clinic deals not just with women but with “abnormal” (i.e. infertile) women—its aim is to restore “unnatural” female sexual organs to a condition of “naturalness,” and to return to them their role as the home of life. But this quality of defect or unnaturalness is clearly also a source of erotic fascination, especially for Beverly, whose profound excitement at discovering Claire’s trifurcated uterus is highly symptomatic. If women’s difference is exciting, then really different women are really exciting. The presence of this particular fascination at a crucial “seam” (and weak point) of Beverly’s neurotic understanding of the world is most evident when, threatened with the loss of Claire, he begins talking about “mutant” women. In a convulsion of hurt and jealousy he accuses Claire’s (male) secretary of “fucking a mutant”; later it is the most powerful symptom of his demented state that he designs and has made a set of “gynaecological instruments for operating on mutant women,” and fetishizes them as he has previously done with the Mantle Retractor trophy. Moreover these frightening instruments are not the bizarre and intriguing art-objects which the sculptor Anders Wolleck at first takes them to be, but instead real tools “necessary” for Beverly’s work; what is “deranged” about them is that they are for actual use, not imaginative contemplation, that they are tools, not art (and here Cronenberg is doubtless also pointing to the difference between his films and what his films would be if they were really happening). These instruments become the last intense focal point of the film’s exposition of sexuality-as-science, sexuality-as-science-as-sickness, and (in a metacommentary) sexuality-as-science-as-sickness-as-art. They exist also against the larger ground of the film’s own awed and anguished stance towards sexuality, the human (or perhaps male) mind, the body and death. Intended for “mutant women,” they are used instead, and appropriately, on the self. They are the “final versions” of the antique medical instruments so strikingly featured in the opening credit-sequence—one might say that the first set of instruments opens the parentheses of the film and the second closes it. If they are not art-works for Beverly, they are for *Dead Ringers*. And in the film’s own fetishization of these (and the other) instruments and in its recognition also of their dimension of ugliness and pathology (their dimension as weapons and as reflections of sickness and aggression in the wielder), we may discern the sad, awful state of pain and contradiction, the awareness of the impossibility of *this* desire, which underlies the narrative and the film itself.

The principal “mutant woman” of the film is of course Claire. The film’s own distance from any sense that this character is freakish or repugnant is (or ought to be) clear. She is strong, intelligent, sympathetic, attractive. True, she is female and Other, and thus fascinating to the film’s own

(acknowledged) neurosis. Also she is infertile, her uterus is abnormal, she takes drugs, she is promiscuous, she has a taste for masochistic sex, and she does not hesitate to obey the imperatives of her career instead of sacrificing it to Beverly’s enormous emotional needs. What needs to be stressed here is that despite all these things she is without doubt the healthiest, the “wholest,” and the most admirable character in the film. Every scene she appears in offers some new evidence of her perceptiveness, her wit, her self-knowledge, her courage. She represents Beverly’s only chance for a life outside encapsulation, as Beverly recognizes; it is emphatically not her fault that in the end Beverly really has (and had) no chance for such a life. (Accusations that the film is misogynistic pure and simple<sup>13</sup> seem to me quite misplaced; *Dead Ringers*, like every Cronenberg film since *Videodrome*, if anything idealizes women as wholer and healthier beings than men, creatures to be admired for their ability to confront life squarely and live it sanely.) The quality of Claire’s “mutancy” is a complex one. Her trifurcation is the cause of her infertility; her infertility is a cause of her own unhappiness; and the quality in her which Beverly responds to most of all is her unhappiness and human vulnerability. In the development of their love, the most intimate and moving scene between them centres first upon an act of intense sexual union involving bondage with surgical tubing (a form of “operation” in which her body is penetrated),<sup>14</sup> and then upon Claire’s confession of how much she wants a child “of her own body”:

Claire: I’ll never get pregnant. I’ll never have children. When I’m dead, I’ll just be dead. I will never really have been a woman at all—just a girl. . . . Don’t tell, please don’t tell anybody about me. I’m so vulnerable. I’m slashed open.

Beverly: [tenderly] Who would I tell? Who would I tell?

(The answer to the last question, of course, is Elliot; and in refusing to tell Elliot when he asks, Beverly inaugurates the process of division of himself from his brother.) The “slashed open” woman is a particularly resonant and powerful concept in the film. Claire is “slashed open” like every woman, in her physical-sexual characteristics, as a crude description of her female body. Moreover she is the universal female patient, slashed open upon the operating table. In this she also resembles the old engravings seen in the credits, repeatedly of women slashed open, anatomy-book style, to reveal inner sexual organs and children in wombs. Here the connection is made between the women’s revealed body and the baby’s beginning and refuge, and here lies the beginning also of Beverly’s desire to be Claire’s child (and perhaps Claire’s to be his mother, or at least his desire that she should so desire). The word “slash” suggests a violent act of aggression, and it is the oxymoronic sense in which Claire’s slashed-openness implies both a sadistic penetration of the body of the other and a masochistic emotional vulnerability that answers exactly to Beverly’s neurotic contradictions as male gynaecologist and “female” sufferer. Claire, a woman at his mercy as

male and doctor (she keeps calling him "Doctor"), is asking for his mercy; this he grants her and in return he asks to be her child (the child she cannot have and desires for her completion), at her mercy. Her impossible longing for motherhood (impossible because she is "mutant") is the exact parallel of Beverly's impossible longing for separation or "oneness" rather than "twoness" (impossible because he is twin). Her "incompleteness" is the mirror of his "incompleteness," her "mutancy" is reflected in his, i.e. his twinning. (Thus is reached one point of equivalency between "mutant women" and "Siamese twins"—a point emphasized by the transformation of the instruments' purpose from that of operating on mutant women to separating Siamese twins.) Claire is also a woman whose sexual masochism equals Beverly's emotional masochism, and who will allow him to be not just a child but a "female": suffering, inarticulate, interior (like a woman, Beverly too has everything "inside," just as Elliot is all surface). And it seems scarcely necessary to say that Claire represents for Beverly not just sexuality but also love, contact, union with otherness, a forsaking of the castle of the self.

Here I must pause to acknowledge Barbara Creed's powerful commentary on *Dead Ringers*, and to try to incorporate some of its insight into this study. Her 1990 essay "Phallic Panic, Male Hysteria and *Dead Ringers*" sets the film within a feminist psychoanalytic perspective, and its primary purpose is to see in it an example of male hysteria ("phallic panic") when the male subject is confronted with the fears attending symbolic castration and sexual difference. Anxieties and feelings of loss arising from the infant's separation from the mother produce the subsequent neurotic symptomatology wherein the female body is recast as monstrous, uncanny, terrifying:

. . . [Kaja] Silverman stresses the notion of lack as that which holds the most terror for the male subject. I would also include the mother's body as an object of terror from which the male subject wishes to separate himself. It is her body which serves as a constant reminder of the anguish associated with separation; consequently, it is in her body that he displaces his fear of castration. . . . It is the body of the mother, the maternal figure, that most clearly represents the body of separations, the body which reawakens in the male subject his unconscious anxieties about separation. But the mother's body also represents simultaneously a desire for reunification, a reassurance that total symbiosis and unity are possible.

(139–140)

The Mantle brothers' "radical" gynaecology represents an hysterical attempt to mask or compensate for this psychological state: the Mantle Retractor "functions as a fetish object, offering the twins the solid reassurance of their own phallic power which, as gynaecologists, they clearly need when confronted with the threatening sight of female genitalia" (142). Fueling everything, both hysteria and the sense of defeat and elegy found at the end of the film, is the overwhelming feeling of loss and incompleteness dat-

ing back to birth, to separation from the mother. This loss may be seen in *Dead Ringers* as creating both the ambivalent attitude towards women (reminders of separation and threateners of further separation on the one hand, on the other the sole hope for regaining the loss in "reunification," "total symbiosis and unity"), and also the protagonist's condition of twinning as a response to and defence against loss of the mother and loss of wholeness. In the latter instance a number of notions present themselves. The Mantles are twin because a primary defence against feelings of loss and anxieties about difference is narcissism, "the reassuring display of their own self-image in the ever-present identical image of the other [brother]" (133). The narcissistic pairing Beverly/Elliot also attempts to compensate for the loss of the mother, of "completeness," by taking up different sexual roles (the "female" Beverly and the "male" Elliot) which may produce a complementarity standing in for the lost oneness. Creed draws attention to Ambroise Pare's engraving of the twin hermaphrodites in the credits:

Pare's twins each have both sets of genitals. Cronenberg's represent each sex separately, their "difference" symbolically marked. Elliot/Elly and Beverly/Bev become one. In disavowing sexual differences, both sexes are reunited with the other half: the androgyne is a totally self-sufficient figure, its narcissistic desire for complete sexual autonomy fulfilled. Thus the androgyne represents a fantasy about the abolition of sexual difference—a fantasy at the heart of the Mantle twins' ill-fated existence.

(144)

At the same time it is exactly separation from the mother—and in the Mantle twins' case the consequent act of doubling—which has produced subjectivity. For the Mantles, separation from the mother has produced the (narcissistic) subjectivity Beverly/Elliot. But in the desire (Beverly's) to unite with the other (Claire)—which is also a form of reunion with the mother—this narcissistic subjectivity becomes threatened. Hence Beverly's nightmare about being separated from a Siamese-twinning Elliot by Claire:

Here castration is represented not as a fantasy about the origins of sexual difference, but rather as a fantasy about the origin of subjectivity. Separation and difference are the price one pays for subjectivity.

(137)

The attempt to reverse the separation from the mother requires also the reversal of the formation of the twin-subjectivity, a separation from the twin (i.e. from subjectivity). Beverly must kill Elliot in order to join Claire. But in the end this is not possible; and another fantasy of reparation takes its place:

The twins' symbolic attempt to cut the cord which binds them is also, paradoxically, an attempt to seek reunification—but in their own bodies, not in the maternal body. They thus seek to make up for a double loss—the loss which arises with awareness of sexual difference and

the earlier loss of imaginary wholeness. The desire for complete union with the ideal other, in this case one's twin, implies a desire to return to an earlier time in one's history: a time beyond that of the symbiotic union with the mother, a time beyond even that of the beginnings of consciousness and the awareness of objects, a time which reaches back to pre-birth when the embryo existed in total harmony with the body of the mother, suspended in the waters of the womb—an intrauterine haven. It is this desire, the narcissistic desire to find oneself in the other, which leads ultimately to death.

(145)

It is also, of course, a return to that idealization of an unsexualized existence which the boy Mantles had fantasized as existing among creatures of the water: an early evidence of that "other world" of pre-birth as a home from which they have been exiled. I would disagree with Creed on some points of emphasis, and I would especially stress the degree to which the film's neurotic condition is a self-recognizing one rather than merely an unconscious symptom (as she often appears to believe). But it seems to me that she has uncovered a crucial underlying area of the film, one whose mapping accounts for the ways in which its apparently heterogeneous or even contradictory elements collaborate in an emotionally coherent work.

Twinness then in *Dead Ringers* becomes a very idiosyncratic way of demonstrating isolation and loss. The final acceptance of isolation and loss is the realization that there is no path to independent adult subjectivity, that what for a moment presented itself as a liberation through the union with a "complementary" other (i.e. female) creature was merely a disguise for the truly impossible desire for reunion with the mother, the return to the imagined source of life when everything was one. Beverly's recognition that union with Claire is real and not imaginary, that it can never fulfil the "oceanic"<sup>15</sup> yearnings motivating it, and that under these circumstances self-encapsulation is all there is (i.e. a final acceptance that what he has is Elliot, who he is is Elliot) is half of the great sadness that lies at the base of the film—the other half is exactly the recognition that the "oceanic" longing is that and not something more finite and appeasable. And from this deepest dual sadness comes the death-impulse. Suicide in *Dead Ringers* comes as a logical answer to an existence whose very constituent terms do not allow for any resolution of their insistent contradictory yearnings. In a word, it is the inevitable telos of the story, long prepared-for and recognized as the only possible end when its shape at last emerges in the final scenes. Here we may recall those similar moments of recognition of *Videodrome* and in *The Dead Zone* and note that in both cases death—suicide—is seen as having an aspect of deliverance or fulfillment (the New Flesh, salvation for the innocents of the world). In the two earlier films, this is an aspect which mitigates or even obscures the piercing wound of defeat in life. In *Dead Ringers* the consoling or elegiac overtone directs the viewer towards what the film feels as a universal human lack, hence a universal tragic predicament.<sup>16</sup>

One must account too for the extraordinarily touching development which might be termed "Elliot's surrender." For the most devastating and poignant moments of the film arise not from Beverly's acceptance of his inseparableness with Elliot (that is a last and logically-concluding state) but from Elliot's surrender of himself in the face of Beverly's life-threatening crisis. Initially this may be traced simply to the transference of a degree of affect to Elliot's character: for the first time he is seen to care, to love, to shed the slick armourplating of his hitherto materialist and calculating role. Beverly has tried, in effect, to separate himself from Elliot—not succeeded, however, since his own anxieties have prevented him from any effective movement away from his brother. Elliot simply reiterates their oneness, and when it is clear that the old arrangement is not working, and is resulting in Beverly's oblivion-seeking drug-addiction and pathological public behaviour, he recognizes that instead of trying to restore Beverly he must become Beverly. This he calls "getting in synch." He becomes a drug addict, he "lets go" of everything (the gross dereliction of the apartment / clinic follows), finally he becomes childlike and even "female." At the end, although the two brothers are almost impossible to tell apart, Elliot is "Chang," he delights at the prospect of birthday cake, calls for orange pop and cries because there is no ice cream. And of course he is "enfemaled" by occupying the patient's chair and being subject to the instruments and the operation: he (or he-plus-Beverly) is now the "mutant woman," he has a womb carved out of his abdomen and exposed to view. This womb is to be the home to which Beverly wishes to return (as in a way he does in suicide, curling himself foetally upon Elliot's stomach).

Beverly's return to oneness involves killing the other half of his twoness. If the twins are seen as a single personality, the emotional and instinctive part kills the rationalizing, world-mediating and distancing part. (Rather fancifully, perhaps, one might see this as the Imaginary killing the Symbolic in a doomed attempt to return to the Real.) In any event this process, which begins with the recognition by the rationalizing-aspect that it must conform to the emotional imperatives of its underlying life-force or watch this vulnerable and infinitely precious personality-source die, reveals that the symbiosis of the two parts, which had appeared as an unsatisfactory and even false strategy for coping with conflicting desires, is in fact the only thing there is. The attempt for a "realer" connection with the saviour-other outside the personality is illusory. It isn't just that such a development is only wished for by Beverly and not by Elliot, and that part of his motivation is a desire to get away from Elliot. It's also that Claire, very understandably, only likes Beverly, she doesn't like Elliot, and she unhesitatingly rejects the "arrangement" suggested by Elliot whereby she might "like" both of them—which he recognizes as the only "possible" relationship of Beverly / Elliot with Claire. But she can only love part of the protagonist: the other part simply isn't loveable in the strictest sense of the term. This experience, this saddening education in what is not possible, leads to psychological



instability and a reversion to the underlying ur-wish: “oceanic” prenatal oneness. Such a wish is of course even more impossible, but its likeness to death becomes too great for resistance. The wish for lost oneness is exactly a wish for the death of subjectivity, the effacement of the recognition of loss, the death of the conscious mediating self. That self wills its own death in *Dead Ringers*, and what follows is the understanding that no self can survive the death of this self and that the search for lost oneness is a death-wish. The sadness of Elliot’s surrender and meek acceptance of disembowelment and death, the extraordinary tenderness of the brothers’ farewells, are the film’s mourning for the inescapable death of subjectivity and the self.

“The narcissistic desire to find oneness in the other,” as Creed calls it, is an apt description of the sort of hyper-Romantic love-death that may be found in such an exemplary text as Wagner’s *Tristan und Isolde*. What prevents *Dead Ringers* from being an impassioned proto-Wagnerian embrace of oblivion is just its sense of the failure of life that such an embrace implies. And yet the film lingers with agonizing precision over the gap between the bitterness of emotional failure and the elegy of self-forgiveness. This balance, it seems, is something Cronenberg has been searching for in the preceding films. In *Dead Ringers*, the strange expedients of twin gynaecologists, “mutant women,” drug addiction and “medical” murder-suicide have created a clear channel for this intricate but powerful impulse. The tone of the film is struck with astonishing affective force already in the credit sequence in which the old engravings shine forth somberly against a sea of red, accompanied by Howard Shore’s music. The engravings alternate instruments (male, sadistic) with dissected women and fetuses or babies (female, masochistic). Their “pastness” simultaneously signals both qualities—primitive (pre-or proto-scientific) cruelty and savagery on the one hand<sup>17</sup> and on the other the mother-and-unborn-self whose life lies in the (pre-historic, pre-subjective) past. These are of course the conflicts within the film’s central character(s). The image of a pair of twins in the womb—which returns to conclude the film after the end-credits—has a particular tenderness, even (or especially) when set next to the “cruelty” of their visibility through dissection. As for the music: just as Bernard Herrmann understood *Psycho* better than anybody—understood it as fundamentally a foreclosed and deeply sad work and not nearly so much a sensational thriller—so Howard Shore understands *Dead Ringers* better than anyone, and in something like the same way. The main-title music is, as Royal S. Brown has pointed out, profoundly sad while remaining in the major mode; thus it replicates or rather prefigures that balance of defeat and tenderness which is the film’s affective centre. Reportedly, Cronenberg’s response on first hearing this music was: “That’s suicide music. That’s the suicide. You’ve got it.”<sup>18</sup> Actually this music, although hinted at in various places through the film, only returns during the end-credits after

the suicide; and yet its role in indicating to the viewer exactly what emotion to feel, and in foreshadowing the film’s end so powerfully, can scarcely be exaggerated.

The film supports its schema with a complex *mise en scène* which illuminates the story expressively in a fashion parallel with the music, though of course much more intricately. The decor of the operating-room scenes has already been mentioned, but an equal importance resides in the decor of the Mantle clinic and its adjacent living apartments. Pierre Véronneau has commented on the role of this décor:

*Qu ce soit dans l'appartement des jumeaux ou dans leur salle de consultation, les tons de gris et de bleu qui dominent l'image et l'ordonnance cartésienne du mobilier à l'italienne et des accessoires, créent une imagerie rigoureuse, clinique même, étouffante certes, qui rend encore plus percutante et perceptible l'émergence rougeoyante de l'anormalité.*

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The overpowering coldness and control of this environment, with its decorative markings of black venetian blinds over enormous windows looking out across vistas of huge blank modernist office blocks, clearly signals the hand of Elliot. Elliot sits here in his navy-blue blazers or black silk dressing gowns, an elegant wineglass in his hand, beadily viewing the television screens which always seem to be showing *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*.<sup>20</sup> Beverly perches unhappily in this unhomey environment wearing pepper-and-salt pullovers and usually surrounded by a small modicum of disorder, and soon shows his preference for Claire’s apartment, whose decor is the absolute antithesis: cream-coloured upper walls and ceilings, extensive dark wood panelling and furnishings, fronds, *chinoise* art-objects and paintings, an “older” provenance altogether. This is an organic environment, with a degree of “natural” mess or at least absence of the severely regimented frigid modernism of hard surfaces, sharp edges and cold hues of the Mantle premises. Claire herself is usually in white, as opposed to the darker formality of Elliot’s dress or the rumpled earth-tones of Beverly’s. There is an aesthetic war between opposing moral and emotional forces going on here whose terms stretch back to the Cartesian modernist architecture of *Stereo* and *Crimes of the Future* on the one hand and the dark woody textures of the “brood shack” in *The Brood* on the other; and it again demonstrates that the consistency of Cronenberg’s work is not merely thematic. Its climax and aftermath are visible in the wreckage of dereliction which overwhelms the Mantle Clinic when the drug-addicted twins take up permanent residence in the consulting rooms at the end of the film. Here is a horrifying image of the destruction wrought upon the “controlled” world through the process of “letting go.” Drug addiction too is a form of “letting go,” and both it and dereliction have a powerful history of Cronenberg’s recent work (i.e. *The Fly*, *Naked Lunch*) as evidences of the process of self-destruction, self-abandonment, loss of self: in *Dead Ringers* they clearly signal what we have called the loss of subjectivity. The film concretely visualizes both states: the world of

encapsulation and control is unlivable; the abandonment of it is worse. One might also note the film's use of patterns of light and dark. The Mantles' environment is dark in its domestic settings, evenly lit but cool and controlled in their offices, starkly *chiaroscuro* in the operating room. Claire's world is characterized instead by an open luminosity, and at first this seems the opposite of oppressive. But when she leaves Beverly to go on a job he is flooded and withered by a harsh sunlight coming through the door she opens to depart; and afterwards in his condition of misery and helplessness he is repeatedly placed near a sunlight-admitting window. These and innumerable other markings of psychological states onto the visible world of the film simply continue and extend the pattern of Cronenberg's work; they are a principal feature of what makes his films "cinematic" and draws attention to his work from viewers as interested in the visual as in the conceptual.

The purpose of *Dead Ringers* is to explore an "impossible" state, and in this it continues the project of Cronenberg's work since its inception, and in a more particular and detailed fashion since *Videodrome*. The Mantle brothers' strategy for dealing with the world—especially a world involving sexuality and death—is to seal off the vulnerable, "essential" part of the personality and protect it with a shell of rational detachment. The tensions which continue to exist following this retreat are instrumentalized through the sexualized science of "radical" gynaecology. The ensuing encapsulated existence leads to loneliness and sterility, and thence to the heartfelt desire to form an intimate relationship with a woman and thus to "regularize" sexual and "mortal" feeling rather than internally neuroticizing it. But, as in earlier works, the attempt to leave the shell merely precipitates a drastic imbalance and a process of horrifying destruction ending in death. The special force of *Dead Ringers* lies in its clear indication that the fundamental source of unhappiness, the first cause of unease in the world and its symptomatic responses of encapsulation, instrumentalization and hence the desire for escape, is that profound and unstillable feeling of incompleteness, of loss, which may be seen at last as a desire to reunite with the mother, to repair a primal separation, to be unborn. Barbara Creed is right to point to the "male hysteria" arising in the Mantle brothers and even in the film as evidences of this condition—the "panic" following the recognition of sexual difference, the projection of grotesqueness on to the female body as a defensive response. But it seems to me that far from participating uncritically in this state, *Dead Ringers* could hardly be clearer in its recognition and acknowledgment of its pathology. The film fully realizes the impossibility of its condition. That is indeed its essence, and the source of that deepest sadness which so strongly characterizes the film and with which we began this discussion. *Dead Ringers* in the end is not a film of hysteria or panic, but of the most profound melancholia. And this, as we look back on its predecessors and even ahead to its successor *Naked Lunch*, is at the very centre of the Cronenberg sensibility.

#### Notes

1. Rodley 149.

2. Rodley 147.
3. To reach this figure I am including Cronenberg's two earliest available films *Stereo* (1969) and *Crimes of the Future* (1970), but not his even earlier experiments (e.g. *Transfer, From the Drain* [1966–7]), his egregious 1979 racing-car feature *Fast Company*, or his scattered work for television. The remainder are *Shivers* (a.k.a. *They Came From Within, The Parasite Murders*, 1975), *Rabid* (1976), *The Brood* (1979), *Scanners* (1980), *Videodrome* (1982), *The Dead Zone* (1983) and *The Fly* (1986).
4. Cronenberg appears to disagree, at least to some extent, and avers an interest in the phenomenon of actual identical twins, partly in terms of what it intimates about genetic or "innate" vs. social origins of human characteristics ("the implication of this is that a huge amount of what we are is biologically determined" [Rodley 144]). This "scientific" interest in twins, moreover, stands in for the absence of the science-fiction/horror elements: "In one way, *Dead Ringers* is conceptual science-fiction, the concept being 'What if there could be identical twins?' Some might say, 'But there are.' But I'm suggesting that it's impossible, and let's look at them really closely. I can imagine a world in which identical twins are only a concept, like mermaids. Elliot and Beverly . . . are creatures, as exotic as *The Fly*." (Rodley 144)
5. See Beard 1983: 50–78.
6. For more extended analyses of these films along these lines, see my "An Anatomy of Melancholy: Cronenberg's *Dead Zone*," and "Cronenberg, Flyness and the Otherself."
7. See note 4.
8. Cronenberg has talked about this himself: "In *Dead Ringers* the truth, anticipated by Beverly's parents—or whoever named him—was that he was the female part of the yin/yang whole. . . . The idea that Beverly is the wife of the couple is unacceptable to him." (Rodley 148). During his drunken outburst at the banquet, Beverly's complaint takes the form of the housewife's lament over the division of labour ("I slave over the hot snatches and Elliot makes the speeches"). But Cronenberg also says that "both the characters have a femaleness in them" (Rodley), and one notes that Beverly's nickname for his brother, "Elly," is also "female."
9. See Rodley 147; also Beard 1992–93: 179 n9.
10. The beginnings of this ongoing drama are to be found in Cronenberg's "epistemological break" film *Videodrome*, but the impact of enclosing the dialectic of forces in a single personality is so great, the unconscious connections and boundary-destructions its probings reveal so literally unthinkable, that the film has an aura of delirium and chaos. However, one might suggest very roughly that Max Renn begins under the illusion that he is only Elliot Mantle,

- but discovers through a very unpleasant process which is partly inside and partly outside him that he is actually Beverly, or perhaps rather that his condition is the impossible one Beverly / Elliot.
11. Cronenberg says that men are jealous of their women's gynaecologists: "It's his knowing stuff that you can never know." (Rodley 145).
  12. Now that Cronenberg himself has begun to get his own gold-plated awards (he has already received many "Genies" from the Academy of Canadian Cinema and there is the not-impossible prospect of an actual Oscar), it is at least conceivable that the gold Mantle Retractor is a characteristic Cronenbergian reflexive and self-satirical joke, like Max Renn's TV interview in *Videodrome*, wherein the character is asked exactly the same questions Cronenberg had to deal with from the media in the early 80s. In this interpretation, Genies or Oscars would be to Cronenberg as the gold Mantle Retractor is to the Mantles: an official recognition and validation of "radical" and morally / psychologically dangerous practices as an artist.
  13. E.g. Jacobowitz and Lippe: "The most offensive misogynist product to emerge in some while," "[one of those] films which exploit and denigrate women" (1965).
  14. Note that in the second childhood-prologue scene, the Visible Woman model also has extremities tied with surgical tubing and pinned to the table. Also, presumably the idea for engaging in bondage-sex comes from Elliot (the previous scene has Elliot threatening to visit Claire as Beverly and "do terrible things to her"; "what terrible things"? Bev asks with unwilling curiosity).
  15. It is Marcie Frank who draws attention to the appropriateness of this term to *Dead Ringers*, recalling that Freud described the feeling of the infant at the breast as "oceanic." She remarks that such "oceanic feelings" may be approached through the use of narcotics: a useful connection between the twins' drug addiction and their suicide (Frank 469 n6).
  16. Perhaps, especially in the light of the perspective presented by Creed, Frank, and others, one should say "universal male lack," though I am not sure this is in fact advisable. Cronenberg might well respond that, being a male, he must speak in male terms and that this does not cease to be the case if he attempts a "universal" statement. Also, Claire's "lack"—although one of physical accident rather than psychological construction—is presented as giving rise to equivalent longings and sadness. (As ever in recent Cronenberg, though, the heroine is stronger and better adapted to life than the hero.)
  17. Véronneau says that the old engravings depicting "instruments de chirurgie primitifs . . . témoignent d'une époque barbare" (151).
  18. See Brown.
  19. "Italian furniture," indeed, seems to a code-word for this decor: Beverly tells Claire that he and his brother "share a taste for Italian furniture," and that later (in a scene where he gratefully rediscovers Claire) he complains that an exhibition of extremely severe modernist furniture—objects presided over by an Italian—is "cold and empty." Véronneau also says, in a striking comparison, that "ce mélange de contrôle et de passion" recalls the work of Canadian pianist Glenn Gould (152–3).
  20. Later, when the situation has become more fraught and Elliot has begun to devote himself to the rehabilitation of Beverly and their relationship, the television is tuned to a daytime soap opera where a daughter is telling her mother she cannot bear to stick with her marriage another day (the mother replies, "Every relationship has its ups and downs, dear").

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[In the following essay, Haas places Cronenberg within the tradition of the gothic narrative (in either literature or film), and compares his "monsters" with those found in films of the 1930s.]

Over the past twenty years, the films of David Cronenberg have remained remarkably consistent in subject matter and theme. Exploring his own conception of the nature of horror (often with bloody excess), his initial films were at first dismissed as grade "z" horror films, relegated to second feature drive-in status. However, over the past twenty years, Cronenberg's films have matured, evolved, perhaps even mutated into complex examinations of the human condition. And, while the visceral nature of his early films may have been largely stripped away in his later work, his original vision and perspective regarding the nature of horror have been maintained, mostly through a creative decision to remain independent of the Hollywood system. Whether one likes his work or not, ultimately it demands attention. Contemporary film and cultural scholars are approaching Cronenberg's films from remarkably diverse critical perspectives, observing that his work is often free of the conventions and limitations that plague directors ensconced in Hollywood franchises and studio politics. Everyone, it seems, has something to say about Cronenberg and his films, even Cronenberg himself. In an interview from the book *Dark Visions*, David Cronenberg is asked what led him to remake *The Fly*, a film first released in the 1950s through the Hollywood system. He replies:

Immediate thoughts of remaking the original *Fly* would lead you to think that maybe I'd do some type of campy film and maybe get Vincent Price to do a cameo, which I believe another production was going to do. That would make it something else, not bad, but not something that I would be interested in. It was really reading the script I was given that had some elements in it that really struck me as being very powerful and very much me.

(Wiater 37)

The idea that a David Cronenberg film must be, according to the director himself, "very much me," is a key to understanding the unique and independent body of work that Cronenberg has amassed. Because Cronenberg's professional career spans almost twenty-five years, special emphasis must be placed on multiple perspectives addressing issues concerning who Cronenberg is and how that relates to his work. Is there a conscious renewal in each film of Cronenberg's original theme of the visceral nature of human beings? Does this theme evolve with each new film or does it stagnantly repeat itself? Does a diminution of blood diminish this theme in his later work? Is Cronenberg a misogynist? Given that Cronenberg was originally a literature major at the University of Ontario, do literary allusions permeate his work? Indeed, what is the influence of classical literature on this distinctly modern (and often postmodern) director? How has his use of language evolved throughout his career? What about Cronenberg's reliance on psychology? Is he able to translate abstract

psychological concepts into screen images? Can visceral and surrealistic images coexist on screen? While there are many approaches to answering these questions, one consistent element occurs within all of Cronenberg's work. In the films of David Cronenberg, these themes revolve around the role of the monster: a being so conventionalized in past films that it becomes problematic and an area of discovery for both the director and the audience.

#### THE MONSTERS AND THEIR MAKER

With respect to the narratives of Cronenberg and specifically the role of the monster(ous) in those narratives, many of Cronenberg's films rely largely on the conventions of classical gothic fiction, but with a difference: none of his films maintain the romantic ideology concerning man and his relationship to nature and God so often found in other films dealing with gothic monsters. Also, although many Cronenberg monsters maintain a strong connection to the great gothic monsters of early thirties film (especially *Frankenstein* and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*), and employ various conventions of gothic cinema throughout the narrative, Cronenberg still manages to create a purely post-modern creature—a combination of that easily recognized cinematically gothic monster and an infinitely more complex monster: a cyborg in the Harawayian sense, by which I mean one who is able to move beyond the boundaries of classically structured gothic narratives, psychological analysis, mythology, science, medicine and sexual identity, one who can operate within the blurred boundaries of all of these disparate elements.

Any notion of Cronenberg's films being throwbacks to the classic gothic horror films of the thirties is in fact not necessarily an inaccurate description of his work. After the glut of post-World War II nuclear monster films, the Hammer series of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* films from England, and the low-budget gothic visions of Roger Corman and William Castle, Cronenberg, like the earlier gothic film makers, emphasizes grotesque elements, the mysterious, the desolate environment, the horrible, the ghostly, and ultimately, the abject fear that is aroused in the viewer. Additional gothic conventions within Cronenberg's film include the sense of enclosure as events occur within the confines of a warehouse laboratory (*The Fly*), a self-contained apartment complex (*They Came From Within*), or the inner recesses of one's own mind (*Naked Lunch*), causing the viewer to be removed from everyday environments (a tactic Poe would have been all in favor of). One of the primary aims of the gothic narrative is to create the single effect of an eerie and ghostly atmosphere, and to do so the narrative emphasizes the physical aspects of various structures: the vastness of the warehouse-factory filled with machinery and experimental equipment in *The Fly*, the sterile environment of the Mantle Twins' apartment in *Dead Ringers*, or the "interiorized" set-like quality of Interzone in *Naked Lunch*. Finally, like most gothic monsters, Cronenberg's characters are often at first supersensitive heroes who cannot function in conventional society. Johnny Smith (*The Dead Zone*), Seth Brundle

(*The Fly*), Beverly Mantle (*Dead Ringers*), and Bill Lee (*Naked Lunch*) all attempt to share their super-sensitivity to the point of maladjustment, but due to physical appearance, supernatural mental abilities or instabilities often induced by experimental drugs, these attempts always ultimately fail.

However, more than just recreating the gothic, Cronenberg rethinks what it means to be a monster in an age of post-modernism. *The Fly* is the only Cronenberg “monster” film in any traditional sense (unless you count the cheesy looking slug of *They Came From Within* as a monster). But, even then the approach to creating any monster for Cronenberg could never be simplistic or conventional. In fact, Brundlefly, the monster in *The Fly*, is a heterogeneous combination of many conventions, including gothic, classic fifties science fiction, contemporary science fiction, and cyberpunk, combined with Cronenberg’s own visceral conception of the body turned against itself and inside out (graphically foreshadowed by the bloody baboon found in the telepod after one of Brundle’s early experiments).

Now there is a tendency by many to retain a firm belief in Brundlefly as a pure extension of gothic symbolic imagery. Another perspective regards the monster of *The Fly* as a creature solely from the domain of science fiction. Some critics see simplistic combinations of both of these elements. Thomas Dougherty in his *Film Quarterly* review of *The Fly* states that “patched though the director’s own transmission devices, *The Fly* fuses old time science fiction with new age sexual friction” (39). Ultimately, Brundlefly works best, I think, as a fusion of many disparate elements. A combination of insect, human, and machine; sexless; driven by instinct but possessing some semblance of intellect up to the end; suffused with a mimetic sense of humanity and pathos, Cronenberg’s monster transcends conventional and contemporary representations of monsters. It is not undead, not an alien, not a mad demonic slasher. It is a gothic cyborg, existing only as a fiction but imbued with science fact, medical relevance, and psychological musings concerning what it means to be a man or a bug in contemporary society.

Now, to say that all of Cronenberg’s monsters are cyborgs is not entirely accurate either. Implicit in any definition of a cyborg is the idea that it is a “successful” integration between machine and flesh. Brundlefly is not. Max Renn in *Videodrome* is not. The integration between human and animal and machine, between science and nature, between the mind and the body is, in fact, disastrous in every Cronenberg film.

#### CRONENBERG’S CYBORG CINEMA

Horror and science fiction films have never been too particular concerning definitions of monsters (or cyborgs); they include a wide range of types and can be found in a vast number of films spanning the eighty-five years since Thomas Edison’s “one reeler” *Frankenstein* (1911) and Karel Capek’s play, *R.U.R* (1920). From *Metropolis*

(1925), and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931), to *Alien* (1979), *Blade Runner* (1982), *The Terminator* (1984), and even *The X Files*, many films (and television shows) have effectively developed the public’s multi-dimensional conception concerning the intersection between science and horror. However, this intersection, especially in relationship to humans, has never been especially complex, whether they appear malicious, beneficent, or something in-between flesh and machine.

By “successful,” I mean that the cyborg as represented on film is, regardless of motivation, somehow superior to the human(s) who created it. James Whale’s *Frankenstein Monster* is physically a haphazard collection of carrion and metal bolts. Yet it displays superhuman physical abilities, resiliency, and (through Karloff’s performance) a sympathetic connection with the audience that qualify it as a successful creation. Likewise, Ridley Scott’s Roy Batty, the genetically replicated, programmed, and manufactured off-world slave leader from *Blade Runner*, displays superiority not only through his physical accomplishments, but also through his emotional and ethical development. Harrison Ford’s Decker becomes a mere cipher through which the audience watches the development and the destruction of a better human than the humans.

Cronenberg’s cyborgs are unusual, for rarely do they advance morally or even physically beyond human limitations; here the cyborg more often regresses and, through accident and chance, can meld both animal and machine to create a genetic monster (the “new flesh” of *Rabid*, *Videodrome*, and *The Fly*), or the mind and the body to create neither man nor animal nor machine, but something “other” (*The Brood*, *Scanners*, *The Dead Zone*, *Dead Ringers*, and *Naked Lunch*).

Therefore Cronenberg’s genetically or psychically altered scientists, doctors, writers and teachers can only be considered as an alternative to conventional images of the cyborg. However, these images not only allow for unsuccessful meldings of flesh and machine, but also allow for disaster. Only here do they become closely allied with other cinematic representations of cyborgs.

Historically, the cyborg has stood for the radical anxiety of human consciousness about its own embodiment, at the moment embodiment appears almost fully contingent. Cyborg anxiety has stood for a oscillation between the “human” element associated with affections, eros, error, innovation, (projects begun in the face of mortality) and the “machine” element (the desire for long life, health, physical impermeability, self-contained control processes, dependability, and hence the ability to fulfill promises over the long term) (Csisery-Ronay 399).

Throughout the history of cinema, the cyborg has fit into two distinct roles, largely stemming from this anxiety, anxiety that is in no small way bound up with romantic and gothic assertions concerning humans and their relationship with God: the first is the physically superior but mor-

ally inferior superman and the second is the tragic technological monster (albeit still functionally superior to humans). In *Frankenstein*, the monster is destroyed for the sake of humanity, demonstrating, “through sentimental nostalgia, the superior value of God’s favorite creature just the way He made him” (Csisery-Ronay 398). This romantic/religious sentiment is easily identifiable. An idealistic scientist reflects on God and nature early on in the narrative and by the end, before he places his head under the drill press, or is thrown off a windmill, declares through tried and true cliché that “there are some things mankind shouldn’t tamper with.”

Another typical definition of a cyborg insists that there is an exaggeration of the body / intellect dualism plugged into a form of cinematic prosthesis. In *Blade Runner*, the replicants (cyborgs) generate and absorb dread, possibly because human beings, without knowledge of the original conditions of their construction, have no way of knowing the degree to which the body and mind can be considered distinct (if they can at all). Additionally, humans have no other way to approach the “renegade replicant” problem than through retirement (termination). This solution is ultimately ironic and inevitably parodic, since cyborgs already represent difference even as they are despised for their similarities to humans.

A possible way to accept the gothic cyborg in Cronenberg as a monster is to recognize the conflict between traditional examples of cyborgs so often found in science fiction cinema from *Frankenstein* to *Blade Runner* and the cyborg as defined by Donna Haraway in her essay “The Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century.” Haraway’s cyborg is not classically superhuman or necessarily monstrous, although it can assume monstrous proportions. Her cyborg is a theoretical object for which the schizo-physical body is not necessary, in the same way that Alan Turing, in *Mechanical Intelligence*, considered a machine to be “a set of operations, relations, algorithms, not necessarily a physical object” (254). Her cyborg is simultaneously object and subject, free of the conventional dialectics or narratives of power, yet constantly concerned with the machinations of power. Once the distinction between Cronenberg’s character and the conventional cyborg in other science fiction films is recognized, then “Brundlefly” can be placed more specifically on the boundary between Haraway’s theoretical cyborg, a creature that also lies on the boundaries of societal community, and the cinema’s gothic monster creation.

Cronenberg’s development of a creature both traditionally monstrous and possessing qualities of a Harawayian cyborg is explored in *The Fly* through the techno-nightmare of the protagonist, Seth Brundle (Jeff Goldblum). A unique way of accomplishing this is created through an approach that rejects the phallogocentric perspective normally associated with high-tech science fiction cyborg narratives. Cronenberg consistently dehumanizes the male protagonist, deemphasizes the male perspective, and deobjectifies the

female persona. So, in an attempt to move beyond the boundaries of monolithic perspective and narrative, the images chosen in *The Fly* often reject the empathetic relationship between audience and male hero / protagonist or audience and cyborg, (although both relationships exist in the film). Instead, they maintain an (inconsistent) reliance on alternatives proposed by Haraway, especially in her theories concerning cyborgs:

The cyborg is a hybrid creature, composed of organism and machine. But, cyborgs are compounded of special kinds of machines and special kinds of organisms appropriate to the late twentieth century. Cyborgs are post Second World War hybrid entities made of, first, ourselves and other organic creatures in our unchosen “high-technological” guise as information systems, texts, and ergonomically controlled, labouring, desiring, and reproducing systems. The second essential ingredient in cyborgs is machines in their guise, also, as communications system, texts, and self acting, ergonomically designed apparatuses.

(1)

#### THE MIND-BODY SPLIT: *THE FLY* AND THE CRONENBERG SOLUTION

To best illustrate the idea of the monstrous cyborg as employed by David Cronenberg, let’s look at one film: *The Fly*. In the world of Cronenberg’s film, the fly becomes a pedagogical translation (or simulation) of Haraway’s hypothetical definition of the cyborg as a “promising [gothic] monster”: human, animal, and machine are literally spliced together on screen using the forms of Seth Brundle and the fly and the telepod that transports them. This new creation is methodically and painfully dehumanized over the course of the film—appendages fall off, food must be vomited on in order to be consumed, and superior intelligence is replaced by raw emotion.

Presence and self-presence have been called into doubt by technology and subversion of gothic and science fiction conventions. According to the old school of scientific thought, or as Haraway calls it “the old boys of science,” fusion, especially between narrative and boundary creature, is a bad strategy of positioning when attempting to envision the future. Yet, the character of Seth Brundle, in the narrative *The Fly*, places himself in the exact position: a boundary creature who transports himself through the telepods, a machine aptly described as a “designer phone booth,” and, like the baboon who is turned inside out, is fused, but at the same time split into distinct (though not immediately obvious) selves: the scientist (the cyborg/man) and Brundlefly (the cyborg/monster).

Central to the divergent concept of Brundlefly as cyborg/man and cyborg/monster in society is the split between Brundlefly and society. According to Haraway, “monsters have always defined the limits of community in western imaginations.” (180) While this split is not nearly so clearly defined in *The Fly*, splitting in the context of *The Fly* should be about heterogeneous multiplicities that are



simultaneously necessary and incapable of being squashed into isomorphic slots or cumulative lists. Brundle, the intellectual scientist, has noble passions for his work, for the betterment of society, as well as romantic passions for Ronnie. Brundlefly desperately attempts to retain some elements of reason in an effort to transform itself back into Brundle or a combination of Brundle, Ronnie, and their unborn child.

To emphasize the loss of his humanity, Brundlefly even has moments of poetic sadness as it recognizes its relationship to Kafka's dung beetle from "The Metamorphosis": "I was an insect who dreamed of being human, but now the dream is over." In the film's most moving scene, Brundlefly longs to be the first insect politician, the compassionate fly, but realizes that it is declining into raw instinct. It is an attempt to become a Haraway cyborg that fails. Faced with the impossibility of its desire, Brundlefly begs Ronnie to run away before she is hurt.

Even when man, fly, and telepod are all successfully "spliced," the self and other still exist. The creature that falls from the telepod at the film's climax is a tripartite creation of intelligence, passion, and technology—connected yet obviously separate. Brundle's quest for unity has failed and he remains forever apart from and outside of humanity. However, Cronenberg isn't entirely ready to do away with monolithic perception. With his body and mind completely transformed, Brundle painfully communicates his desire to die; this is a unique human decision and allows the audience a certain pathetic acknowledgment of Brundle's position. For a brief cathartic moment, the audience sees themselves mirrored in Brundle's suffering and then he is killed. Yet Brundle/Brundlefly maintains a unique place in cinema. He/it is a polymorphous, post-modern creation that exists neither in the gothic tradition nor in the boundaries wherein traditional boundary creatures lie. This monster exists outside the boundaries of both monster and cyborg. Cronenberg's Brundlefly is a creature never filmed before: a monster as failed cyborg.

#### CONCLUSION

Literature, science, and psychology are all bound together in the films of David Cronenberg. And the single unifying element that holds them together is the monster(ous), the physical manifestation of our deepest social, sexual, psychological fears. Without the signifying monster or the Cronenberg cyborg, as we have come to call it, the pieces unravel and the film falls apart. In fact, David Cronenberg's last film, *M. Butterfly*, was a failure for this precise reason. When it was released in October of 1993, critics saw the film as slow, lifeless, and on the heels of such films as *The Crying Game* and *Farewell My Concubine*, a retread of already familiar ideas. Commercially, audiences were uninspired. The film fared poorly at the box office and quickly closed in the few theaters that chose to show it. Yet, the film contains the fundamental elements found in every other Cronenberg film.<sup>1</sup> *M. Butterfly* is the second collaboration between the director and actor Jeremy Irons,

star of *Dead Ringers*, widely acknowledged to be Cronenberg's best film. The only possible reason behind the failure of *M. Butterfly* is, I believe, its lack of any monstrous element. Unlike Cronenberg's other films, this story of a French diplomat and his 20 year affair with a Chinese opera star / spy who successfully deceives him into thinking he is a woman is indeed a tragic one. Yet, because it lacks the dynamic relationship between tragedy and horror that *Dead Ringers*, *The Fly*, *The Dead Zone* and all of Cronenberg's other films had, the film remains simply an interesting, if uninspired, retelling of the familiar themes of love, loss, deception, and tragedy. However, it is easier to recognize, through the failure of *M. Butterfly*, the remarkable power of David Cronenberg and his work over the past twenty years.<sup>2</sup> He has created a series of films all remarkably bound together by similar subjects, themes, motifs, and technical elements. It is, by all accounts (including his own) an ongoing project, the creation of a new genre of film where these elements combine with traditional conventions of horror, science, and psychology to create the Cronenberg project. Each of the following articles in some way reflects an acknowledgement of Cronenberg's creation. They reflect the diversity of critical approaches currently being employed in Cronenberg criticism, which move beyond an exploration of "bloody excess," disease and human decay.

No other film of David Cronenberg has received as much critical attention as *Dead Ringers*. Lauded by some as one of the best films of the 1980s, this film has been examined from widely diverse perspectives including genre analysis and feminism. In his article, "Lost and Gone Forever: Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers*," William Beard, one of the first critics to write about David Cronenberg,<sup>3</sup> applies psychoanalysis to Cronenberg's most celebrated film.

Lynda Haas and Mary Pharr approach a variety of Cronenberg's films from alternating feminist perspectives. Discussed in dialogue, this article allows each author to examine several important women's issues that are raised when viewing Cronenberg's films. The format for this piece is both liberating and invigorating.

Throughout the films of David Cronenberg, there are constant allusions, both obvious and obscure, to literature: Kafka in *The Fly*, Lewis Carroll in *Videodrome*, etc. Not surprisingly, Cronenberg's college years were spent as a literature major. Therefore, to find "literary" imagery in his films is not entirely unexpected. In fact, references to literature occur quite frequently in Cronenberg's films. Tony Magistrale, in one of the first major essays on *The Dead Zone*, examines its protagonist, Johnny Smith, as a tragic figure who both complements and extends Stephen King's original character. He also examines Cronenberg's least typical movie to observe what types of literary imagery emerge. Christ imagery prevails, Romantic conventions imbue the script, and allusions to Gothic tales permeate the atmosphere of the film.

The idea that many of the myths and legends of the ancient Greeks are both appropriated and retold in contemporary narratives is not especially groundbreaking news. However,

one does not usually associate David Cronenberg with conventions of the ancient Greeks. Leonard Heldreth reviews Cronenberg's films, starting with *Scanners* and discovers in them many surprising parallels from classic Greek drama and mythology.

Though often ignored as nothing but "interesting" early films and far more often as drive-in movie fare, the early films of David Cronenberg are important. It is through these early films that Michael Collins explores the connection between medicine and surrealism that ultimately provides the energy behind many of Cronenberg's later films.

Finally, over the past few years, several books and interviews have appeared dealing with David Cronenberg. Two of the best, *Inner Views: Filmmakers in Conversation* and *Cronenberg on Cronenberg* are reviewed by Mark Charney in this special edition of *Post Script*.

It is my hope that these differing perspectives, which range from the traditional to the avant-garde, will provide even more discussion and additional scholarship concerning a director whose films continually challenge our notions of horror, sexuality, and beauty. Certainly one thing we can never do with David Cronenberg is ignore him.

#### Notes

1. The only exception to this is *Fast Company* (1979), a film made more for Cronenberg's love of drag racing than for artistic purposes.
2. In 1993, even as *M. Butterfly* failed with both audiences and critics, three books were published that either were dedicated to Cronenberg or had substantial sections devoted to the director. In 1990, as Jeremy Irons accepted the Academy Award for his performance in *Reversal of Fortune*, he made special thanks to the director of his previous film—*Dead Ringers*—David Cronenberg.
3. See "The Visceral Mind: The Major Films of David Cronenberg" in *The Shape of Rage: The Films of David Cronenberg*, Ed. Piers Handling, Toronto, Academy of Canadian Cinema, 1983. 1–79.

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#### Jennifer Wicke (essay date 1996)

SOURCE: "Fin de Siècle and the Technological Sublime," in *Centuries' Ends, Narrative Means*, Stanford University Press, 1996, pp. 302–15.

[In the following essay, Wicke analyzes *The Fly* as a "fin de siècle narrative" about technology, specifically genetic science, and its relationship to the body, or the human subject.]

As a bridge to the longer analysis of David Cronenberg's film *The Fly* (1986) that I will make in this essay on fin de siècle narrative and the technological sublime, I interpolate a short piece of text that meditates on the technologization of narrative's body. A Mr. James Stephenson, writing in 1907 for *Star Story* magazine, and thus dated somewhat after the nineteenth-century fin de siècle, but not too late I hope to qualify as an exemplar of the technological sublimity I am tracing, makes these astonishing remarks in his article, "Electrical Desire":

And is it not the case that in our new electrifying age desire is everywhere and always to be discerned? Is it not clear that the new avenues of communication and their byways always operate on our human core of desire? Why, think to the great moment when Alexander Graham Bell made his discovery. He said into his telephone—"Watson, come here. I want you." Over the wire went the human cry of desire, and the chance to bring it into fulfillment.

Writ very small, this parable of transformative technology represents the fin de siècle technological sublime. Both 1900 and 2000 have been summoned up or narratively represented via the conjuring of an unrepresentable technology, an incorporation of a bodily yearning for apocalyptic sublimation. In the immediate post-1900 "electrifying age" the phone call is rendered as the quintessential expression of desire mediated technologically. I'm not sure if Stephenson was deliberately positing an exquisite homoerotic scenario, a glimpse that certainly casts a salutary glow over a founding moment of American capitalism. Regardless, the narrative still *embodies*, suggests the retention of the bodiedness of narrative even as it is extruded through the electronic mediations that figure it mass-culturally. The trajectory "I want you" is indeed the ghost voice, the volatilized voice, within narrative formation. "Reach out and touch someone" is hardly a happy narrative translation of this phenomenon within narrative I refer to, but the latter exists side by side with the ideological inscriptions of advertising, as a possibility of narrative,

although not, of course, its essence. In what follows, I will sketch a more current example of the technological sublime, but viewed through this same lens, namely, that the narrative of a century's end and consequent rebirth is now epitomized by a technologized apotheosis, a bodied narrative I refer to as the technological sublime.

*The Fly* may seem to burst all boundaries of decency and present something more akin to a body bag than a corporeally distinct dead body, but in its *disjecta membra*—its dismembered parts so nicely collected by the protagonist, Seth Brundle (Jeff Goldblum), into the “Brundle museum of natural history,” housed in his medicine cabinet—it gives us a foretaste of narrative's body in the age of technological reproduction. As a mass-cultural narrative, the film belongs to several social genres, among them the horror film and the science fiction film, and it works as it does by playing off the recognizable codes of those movie types. *The Fly* is obviously in an intertext already, since it is a remake of the Vincent Price classic, and harkens one to many narrative connections, from *Frankenstein* (the book and the movies that are its spawn) to *Paradise Lost*, with a stop at Charles Laughton playing Quasimodo in between. What has seldom been suggested is that *The Fly* is a genuinely fin de siècle text, and it is under that apocalyptic rubric I shall engage it.

The technological sublime of *The Fly* focuses primarily on genetic science, whose ubiquity in the public eye extends from the Genome project and its struggles for funding to the recent first step in the cloning of human embryos as a technique in reproductive technology. Mapping the human genetic code involves not only the isolation of the individual bits of genetic material but also the construction of a sort of narrative about those bits—a story about a projected future, which in an immediately capitalized way has import on all aspects of social life. In tandem with the more rarefied genetic scientists who want to map the code either because it is there, or for specific medical purposes, has arisen a genetic code mapping industry, already able to sell genetic tests to prospective employers or prospective insurers. This is narrativity with a vengeance, and *The Fly* makes a narrative reply to it in relation to the closure of the century.

Seth Brundle hates vehicles—he has been subject to motion sickness since he was a small boy, when he used to “puke on his tricycle.” The teleportation system he has devised is a way around that dislike of movement—it seems to be a transport method that strips away motion itself, in favor of the instantaneity of travel. When Brundle is describing the miraculous effect on the world of his invention, and the way he will be described by the grateful world citizens, he says he will be “the one who ended all concepts of transport, of borders.” The problem is contained in the incredible ironies of that self-description, because the transport that is ended is the transport of metaphor, and the borders closed down are the very borders that give us the bodily outline we like, with some illusion, to call “ourselves.” By film's end, Seth Brundle

has indeed transported himself, made a metaphor of himself, until the borders of even the molecular genetic level have proven permeable, have been transported.

People eat meat in *The Fly*—Seth and Veronica (Geena Davis) go out for a cheeseburger to consolidate their project of collaboration—the journalist Veronica to record Seth's experiment “from the inside out,” as she puts it to her employer on *Particle*, a science magazine, the ambiguously named Stathis Borans (John Getz). Seth doesn't want to tell Veronica what has gone wrong with the teleportations of animate objects thus far—“not while we're eating,” he says, while Veronica retorts, with reference to the cheeseburgers they are clutching—“it can't be worse than this!” The whole teleportation project takes place in our familiar contemporary world, whose anxieties assault us even, or especially, while we are eating—the flesh of mass-produced hamburger is not going to bear much contemplation. The worries about contamination, infection, and poison are all too environmentally and medically omnipresent, and the degeneration of the body in *The Fly* speaks to these. The flesh is being invaded, but from where? A self-evident subtext of the film is the social shock effect of the HIV virus, and Seth Brundle's decomposition mimics all too harrowingly the depredations of the disease. Fear of AIDS is only one strand in the narrative body of the film, however, since it seems to be subsumed, terrible as it is, under a more general terror of genetic reproducibility.

Seth Brundle is innocent of the flesh, in more than one way. The scene of his first sex with Veronica is a crystallization of this problematic of knowledge and a harbinger of its difficulties. We see them in a languorous post-coital moment, Seth rolling over onto his back and embedding a piece of circuitry below his shoulder, which Ronnie gently removes. So far, it's an amusing anecdote of the absent-minded genius, so sublimely unconcerned with ordinary human relations that he has bits of stray technology amid his sheets, the way other people might have cracker crumbs. But that moment of what might be called inscription, or branding, allies Seth's body with a machine part, suggesting in miniature the process that will ultimately leave us the unbearable final picture of Brundle-Fly's infusion with the third telepod, in the final scene. Of course we know that it is through just this sore and punctured grid of skin that the telltale fly hairs make their first appearance, after Brundle has unwittingly fused with a housefly at the molecular genetic level—they “transported” together, and transportation is also fusion. The wound is fresh and thus less resistant to the new fly genes, but the patch of skin marked by the piece of circuitry is the site of a mating that echoes the more straightforwardly sexual one Ronnie and Seth have just completed.

This uncanny imprinting of the computer on Seth's body also signals the uneasy alliance of knowledge between the computer and the human subject—although the computer, as Seth rightly describes it, is “confused,” and only knows what it has been told by the human who programs it, the



computer is also inscrutable, prepared to make judgments and to initiate active sequences that are horrific in their human consequences, although merely successful to the computer—"fusion of brundle-fly with telepod successfully completed," the glowing screen reads drily, while we have been shocked almost primordially by the resulting, tragic hybrid. Throughout the film the computer screen comes to fill the frame to show the change in scene, or to effect the cut—generally, these super-closeups of the screen occupy all of it, so that we, as the audience, are reading the movie screen as if it were translated into a gigantic computer monitor, a laptop with a giant monitor. There are no such closeups of the human face, except when Seth Brundle-Fly stares mordantly into the mirror, and then he is framed by the rim of the medicine cabinet. Although one shock cut moves from this super-intimacy with the computer screen down to Brundle-Fly's grotesque webbed hands, so that we know he has been staring into the screen just as we have, more often the screen is telling the tale, on its own. The most common readout across the big, impersonal green face is the phrase "initiate active sequence," another way of saying that the computer is also narrating to us, while it narrates Seth into Brundle-Fly. The sequences are frightfully absorbing for all but the teller—the computer is, a bit like Hal, imperturbable. There is more than a suggestion of Seth's face, and by extension our faces, staring into the face of God—a God without the slightest personal interest in the active sequences as they relate to human beings, but a God created by those same human beings as a form of systems manager. The uncertainty about the narrative's "body" persists throughout the film, as the issue of "who" is in the position to tell or be told the story emerges obsessively. When the screen is nothing but a pulsing cyberspace, the horror-show bodies on display are just epiphenomena of the truer narrative—the unfolding narrative of the genetic code.

The paradoxes of the flesh in a postmodern technological age begin to be explored when Veronica passionately declares that she could "eat Seth up—the flesh makes people crazy." What Seth realizes is missing from the computer sequence in his first unsuccessful tries to teleport is some understanding of this fleshly craziness. The reason inanimate objects can go through without a hitch is that their recreation is purely combinatorial, an information sequence process, a repetition of their codes. Flesh, however, is accorded a kind of "poetic" status in the film, in that it is the "poetry of steak" Seth resolves to teach the computer. To send a silk stocking from point A to point B is to translate it so perfectly that the simulacrum is the copy is the original. What the computer has been doing with Seth's data about animate objects, like the baboon it pulps against the telepod porthole, is "interpreting, translating, rethinking," rather than reproducing. At least in our social ideologies, there is a salient difference. The poetry of steak requires not the mere interpretation of a synthetic something, but a reproduction, a destruction, and a recreation.

*The Fly* takes us into three kinds of reproduction and shows us how they are all intertwined. The first is sexual

reproduction, in the film's case, technologically unassisted; the second is representational reproduction, represented here by the movie's self-reflexivity as a copying medium, and in which the camera is analogous to the computer; and the third, which might be called social reproduction, the continual self-reproduction of the socius, as Bourdieu terms it. What begins in *The Fly* as a supremely ingenious way of getting things from place to place soon outstrips those limits entirely—the telepods are not only designer phone booths, as Ronnie refers to them before she knows what they do, they are reproduction chambers, telewombs of sexual, social, and simulacral reproduction. While the computer, it was thought, was reading the information sequences of the objects in the pod and then reconfiguring that information in a sequence at the other pod, in order to do this a reproduction is required, a reproduction that mimics childbirth, that mimics re-presenting, that mimics that copying of social relations.

*The Fly* cannot help but take up the vestigial mythologies of the body provided by Christianity, and these are weirdly blended in the confusions over reproduction levels (and narrative levels). As played by Jeff Goldblum, and courtesy of a certain haircut, Seth Brundle resembles the chromolithographs of Jesus sold at Walmart and K-Mart—this is before Brundle-Fly comes to fore. Seth is analogous to Jesus in a variety of ways, or at least the film narrative has metaphysical fun with the crossover of theology into cyberspace; in his programming of the computer and then sending himself through, he is God as the Nutty Professor, deciding to take on human form, thus bifurcating himself and yet retaining the attributes of one entity. The transport process that goes so awry involves Seth in that mystery of bodily incarnation evoked by Jesus, as if, with his discovery, Seth were an avatar of the Second Coming. Post-teleportation the film continually hints at these links, as when Seth ends his monomaniacal diatribe at the cafe with an exasperated "Waiter!—Jesus Christ," or when Ronnie calls out to Seth in his super-prolonged sexual state, "Wait, oh god, wait!" The trinitarian mystery that is so baffling—how it can be that Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are distinct and separate, and yet one, fused and inseparable, is given ghoulish palpability in Brundle-Fly's intense desire to teleport with Ronnie and her unborn fetus, so that the three of them would become fused and indissoluble. But fused in what sense? Would the resultant triad of Brundle-Fly, Ronnie, and baby Brundle-Fly/Ronnie become cognizant of its one-in-threeness, as, presumably, the triune godhead of the trinity is presumed to be? Or does one just imagine a nightmare blend-in at a Dairy Queen in techno-hell, where no individual narrative flavor retains consciousness of its narrative supremacy? To paraphrase Carson McCullers's *Member of the Wedding*, who would be the I of their we? The metaphysics of this fusion state may seem a relic of postmodern "encyclicals" that never were, but the improbable juxtaposition of these narrative questions with the socioeconomic vocabulary of technological capitalism, happening at a faster and faster rate now, turns the court cases and the medical ethics decisions into referenda on this movie.

Veronica plays a protean role in this set of religious resonances. Her name alludes to that mystical relic of the middle ages, Veronica's veil, a cloth that was used to wipe Jesus' face during the procession to the Crucifixion and that later displayed on its surface a perfect image of Jesus' face, a Shroud of Turin done in proto-photographic blood. This Veronica also wields various veils—one might say that her photojournalistic reporting on videotape of Seth's experiments held the modern representational veil of video up to him; there's also quite the bloody veil of her dream. By the last scene of the movie Veronica has gone from being Fay Wray in the grip of a giant Brundle-Fly to the Madonna, radiant in blue, calling out to the Fly to intercede with him before he deposits his corrosive enzymes on the head of Stathis Borans, already crippled from his exposures to fly juice.

The metaphor of the body invaded and rearranged on the genetic level is so powerful that it works as a template for a range of issues—the social text of the film is a dense field. Each further metamorphosis Seth Brundle-Fly undergoes as he becomes more Gregor than Seth is correlated to an episode from our common social text. A case in point is the scene that has Seth and Veronica out for a happy outing to celebrate what they think is the benign result of his teleportation. Suddenly, in this rather underpopulated film, the streets are thronged, and Seth and Veronica are joining the millions for a cup of espresso. The intimations of Fly-dom begin with the enormous amounts of sugar Seth heaps into his cup, a crystalline powder akin to the yuppie drug of choice in the 1980s. Convinced that teleportation itself is responsible for his feelings of manic energy and superiority, Seth's language becomes a verbal catalog of every promise held out by the "Me Decade." "It's given me a chance to be me," he natters on, sounding like a particularly fervent guest on Sally Jesse, or like Werner Erhard, back when he had good days. "Not to wax messianic," he waxes, "it makes a man a king—I feel like a million bucks." Every desperate social cliché of overweening egotism and the culture of narcissism spills out—evidence, perhaps, as well, that David Cronenberg is Canadian. The erstwhile mild-mannered Seth becomes Superman-Fly, who is at this moment much less than the piteous spectacle of self-knowledge he will later become. Seth unwittingly becomes a spokesman for a corporate ethos he otherwise knows nothing about, translating the surcharge of insect energy he is beginning to feel into the monetary discourse of the monstrous "me."

Things darken in the social mirror almost immediately. After a lovemaking bout he insists that Ronnie go through teleportation to be able to keep up with him; sexual prowess is now the linchpin of his bodily superiority, and he now translates the transport experience into a drug revel. "It's like a drug," he assures Ronnie, "we'll be the perfect couple, the dynamic duo." His frenzy can only be called Dionysian *manqué*: enraged that Ronnie has dared to question the nature of his sexual energy, he threatens her with a fear of being "destroyed and recreated." But Seth, becoming Brundle-Fly despite himself, shouts with Ni-

etzschean hyperbole that Ronnie must be afraid "to penetrate beyond the veil of the flesh and enter the plasma pool!" His offer to move beyond the body into a swirling collective at the cellular level where individuality is dissolved has overtones of prophecy, but is also inevitably limited by the social discourse surrounding it, so that his invitation has none of the visionary power he might feel, but sounds like a cross between Walt Whitman's body electric and a genetic health club membership ad. Nonetheless, the veil of the flesh has proven to be just that, a veil cast up by the narrative of the plasma pool, a mere side effect of its codes, a readout or printout of its hieroglyphs. We are just an inexpensive bodily envelope bearing a solid-gold address.

What Seth has taken on, unwittingly, I have been trying to show, is a foray into reproduction and, as it happens, self-reproduction *malgré lui*. In response to this, the lines of sexual difference begin to be drawn ever more starkly, accounting for his descent into blue-collar machismo in the next circle of Brundle-Fly hell. Throwing on a leather jacket and dismissing Ronnie as a "drag," Seth heads out into the night in search of a "real" woman, one who will enter the vertiginous universe of sexual empowerment (and male dominance) with him. Not understanding his newfound strength, but not caring to mute it either, Seth is flush with macho glory as he wins Tammy for the night in an arm-wrestling contest. To the sounds of a horrendous scream uttered by the man whose arm he has snapped, Seth declares nonchalantly, "Yes, I build bodies—I take them apart and I put 'em back together." At this junction we realize Seth is inhabiting familiar textual terrain—he is Victor Frankenstein and his monster, cohabiting. While that text left its two as a haunted pair in a chase to the icy ends of the earth, Seth Brundle is the scientist who has devised re-creation as the very basic alphabet of life, become the monster of his own begetting. That this monstrosity should wear such everyday garb of masculine self-assertion is part of the social reproductive text of the film. Seth chooses relatively gullible and compliant Tammy for his own teleportation sex mate, but she is reluctant to go through just on the strength of his urging. Ronnie comes to warn her, and Seth angrily replies to Tammy's question about who Ronnie is with the retort "Oh, I live with my mother, too." His anger at Ronnie's intrusion on his masculine grandiosity takes the form of a fury at women as mothers, but the grotesquerie of this staple of male dependency rage is far more grotesque in this new terrain of narrative technological reproduction. He does live with his mother, because he is his own mother, his own father, and his own child, too, for that matter. Additionally, although he doesn't know it yet, Ronnie is his mother, because she is pregnant with a Ronnie/Brundle-Fly composite, whose Brundle-Fly genetic part is the "being" Seth is rapidly becoming.

The sticking point of the narrative logic as it cascades forth with these implausible genealogical riddles is the nature of the fetus as the narrative terminus. While that fetus is only half Seth's genetically, the logic drives us to

an understanding of the reproduction as entailing a copy, or a simulacrum, of Brundle-Fly, while Ronnie's genetic contribution drops out of narrative sight. This is hardly an oversight on the part of the film, in my view, but yet another replication of the social text. Note that in anti-abortion rhetoric the fetus is narrated as male almost exclusively, and the passion of many male adherents of right-to-life positions rests on the presumption that the fetus in jeopardy is, or could be, them. An examination of the language of Operation Rescue shows how powerful this gendering of the fetal imaginary is, so that the injury done to the fetus in aborting it is construed as a masculine narcissistic wounding. This psychic narrative loops back in time with all the vertiginous qualities of Cronenberg's film, making fetuses homuncular copies of already adult men, who then grieve for their own putative aborting.

The terror of reproduction and reproductive technologies in toto is let loose in the film in its concentration on the abortion issue. To my knowledge it remains the only film—or at least the only mainstream Hollywood film—that has ever narrated abortion from the subject position of the woman contemplating it. This goes beyond the television movie narratives that have represented the decision on the part of sympathetically portrayed female characters, to interior subjective narrative that forces the audience inside the woman's mind, in the case of *The Fly* into Ronnie's very dream. We are deliberately "tricked" by the film into reading the sequence as "real," at first, so that her trip to the hospital for the abortion appears to be diegetic. As she lies, terrified, in her hospital bed we cower in our seats as well, even the anti-abortionists among us having been horrified by the thought of the Brundle-Fly fetus. Ronnie's dream is a charged arena of the social fears about women's control, or lack thereof, of reproduction, intersecting with the male-inflected world of science, medical technology, and social authority. Like a sleepwalker she is wheeled down a bright pink hospital corridor, until we see her in the procedural room attended by a gynecologist played by the director, who is thus facetiously placed at the literal site of horror, the vaginal Medusa.

Fetuses are frightening creatures in their own right, because they are so different; on another level, they can seem to be something other than fetuses where fear about loss of male control is strongest. The truly monstrous image we are presented with in Ronnie's shocker dream is theoretically not a whit less monstrous than the fetus we are asked to suspend disbelief she is actually carrying, but as a phallic monster or a penis-baby, it is hideously scary. The assumption is that one aspect of abortion in the social imaginary is the extrusion of male authority, abortion as castration of the symbolic male presence presiding at reproduction. This is extremely important to the logical economy of the film, because the antiseptic and innocent-seeming transport experiment has turned into a gene-splicing, reproductive mechanism that can, through an act of reading, shuffle the deck of the genetic code and come up with a new hand. Reproduction is stolen away, while at the same time a gender coding myth is enforced—the

computer becomes male, and the telepods female. *The Fly* permits us to see that what is lost at one point in the system will have to crop up again in monstrous metamorphosis at another place. The throbbing phallus baby is, and forgive the antiquated theoretical language, a floating signifier spliced out by the disturbance created in the realms of sexual and social reproduction. If the bathwater is thrown out, the baby will be found somewhere. Thus the film is littered with references to the phallus, as when Ronnie is buying clothes for her then-new lover Seth, and the jealous Stathis Borans confronts her in the men's department. When she says that Seth is doing remarkable work and that, as his chronicler, she is "on to something huge," Borans shouts, "What's huge—his cock?" Borans flaunts cigars as suggestively as Clarence Thomas might have, where the cigar is not just a cigar, but an image of the tactics and strategies of power that have the phallus to back them up. The towers of Monolith Publishing are hilariously phallic, and Stathis is also (almost) hilariously emasculated in the final scene, losing arms, legs, and other members with abandon. Seth's gradual metamorphosis as Brundle-Fly is marked by the shedding of his human members, as he loses teeth, ears, fingers, and ultimately his penis, small as a mushroom and less formidable, relegated to a jar in the medicine cabinet of bodily curios.

It does not take long for Seth to realize that he is suffering from a disease, a "disease called life." Explaining to Ronnie on one of her terrifying house calls that he now knows why he is subject to such grandiloquent decay, he refers to his metamorphosis as a disease with a purpose, to turn him into something else, Brundle-Fly. Here is a rebirth that must take place through total destruction, giving a new twist to Seth's earlier boast that he wasn't afraid to be destroyed and re-created. Moreover, this literally means that Seth has died to the flesh and come back to life, because where did he go when he was teleported into himself? The valences of these sequences in relation to AIDS are of course overwhelmingly poignant, and pertinent.

When Seth has discovered the nature of his disease—a disease for him, but for the computer's active sequence, just another successful fusion in paradise—and before the subjectivity of Brundle-Fly begins to take command, he passes through an antic, almost surrealist humorously period as a kind of underground man. Holed up in his apartment, he uses his scientific persona to watch himself and document the changes of this rare discovery, himself as an unprecedented genetic experiment. All his impulses to catalog and taxonomize are devoted to Seth's extraordinary efforts to produce himself as an object of study, a narrating narrative body. In one scene Seth is ebullient, almost dizzy with the grotesqueness of his own being, and he stages a mock children's science show for Ronnie's videocam, demonstrating to the boys and girls out there how he eats his food now—by emitting a substance over his doughnuts he says is colloquially referred to, by the single species member of Brundle-Fly, as "vomit drops." His hideous face still manages a toothy grin, and his transforming torso is still donned in a T-shirt, a sign of his



link to human mass culture. He is like, and he knows he is like, and he spoofs being like, a crazed breakfast cereal commercial come to video life. Seth's insertion into a simulacrum of TV as an Incredible Hulk/Mr. Wizard celebrity indicates the narrative level of representation or aesthetic reproduction the film also explores. No one is exempt from the image circuit, not even a housebound housefly extraordinaire. This narrative level accords Seth a new, mass-cultural identity that is reproduced along the circuits of the media. We watch in rather agonized nausea through the lens of Ronnie's camera, as the scene slowly changes to Stathis Borans watching this same video tape on Ronnie's VCR. She has played it for him as a proof of the transformation, and as Stathis watches in disgust he little realizes he is being tutored in the mode of his own mutilation.

Let me advert here to one of the most remarkable scenes of the film, the height of its convergence of personal and political narrativity. Ronnie has come to tell Seth that she is pregnant but will be having an abortion; however, he is so much a Fly at this stage that she cannot really tell him, there being no Seth left to tell. Instead, Brundle-Fly delivers his own eulogy:

"Have you ever heard of insect politics? Insects don't have politics. They're very brutal—no compassion, no compromise. We can't trust the insect. I'd like to become the first insect politician."

Ronnie asks, "What are you saying?"

"I'm saying I'm an insect who dreamed you as a man, but now the dream is over, and the insect is awake. . . .I'll hurt you if you stay."

Ronnie exits, while we are left to witness Brundle-Fly's choking insect sobs. While there may be bathos in this (and a little bathos in my opinion never hurt anybody), there is also politics. Seth has been innocent of more than sex, and it is important for bringing the narrative ontologies of reproduction together that the locus of Brundle-Fly transformation is the border of Canada and the United States, a little pre-NAFTA, but still symbolic of the fusing borders of late or global technological capitalism. Seth had considered himself a scientist without portfolio, un beholden to the corporations who would presumably have manufactured his teleportation invention. Bartok Systems controls his research, but he has never really been part of their corporate structure. Seth has an almost childlike conviction that the system he has developed will be used for transport only, that it will help to annul cultural borders and boundaries. Just as he discounts his own contribution, by saying that he is a systems management man who farms out the really hard pieces of work to scientists even more reclusive than he (the romantic genius notion of science), so he ignores the presence of the real systems management, that in effect predetermines the catastrophic outcome of his experiment in space and time. James Watson, the famed geneticist and co-cracker of the genetic code, has

been working for the Genome project, the attempt to map out completely every single human gene particle. This project is being fought over by scientists who want more government funding devoted to it, and by a technology corporation called Genome that wants to undertake the mapping as a private project with patent protection. Both groups refer to the process of identifying all the human genes as reading the language of the human being, with the molecular-genetic code as a kind of script. The goals of the groups diverge, though; Watson argues for the efficacy of the project as offering hope for genetically transmitted diseases, while Genome wants to be able to sell information on genetic codes to those who want to buy, on that new information superhighway. Both groups use millennial language to sell this technological sublime. The film is investigating precisely this: how control of the Particle level, as in *Particle* magazine, becomes part of the Monolith, the mega-control of life as corporate, intellectual, property. The uses of technology do not (usually) belong to those who conceive them at the particle level; they belong, ultimately and permanently, to the monolith, for whom the loss of Seth Brundle and the ghastly spit-out at the finish have no more meaning than these do for the computer's implacable screen. Brundle has been involved in a Faustian trade-off, without his knowledge—the corporation owns his intellectual labor and will determine what to do with it, until Brundle's dreams of effortless travel will be unrecognizable in their remoteness. What Brundle has stumbled on, because he works in a corner of the corporate empire, is a way to decode the entire living world, a device that operates as a super reading machine, as a super reproductive machine. Brundle may become the fly that fell to earth, but that is a mere wrinkle in the corporatization of the technology of life.

Something that cannot be accounted for in the systems of narrative reproduction I have been discussing is the phantom excess or commensurability, the volatility, of this narrative body. I am forced to give that volatility a name in the context of this film, where it is love (allow me to provisionally call it that) that offers the volatilization. Sexual reproduction may sometimes coincidentally occur as the result of what sometimes is "an act of love," but that has nothing to do with the process or its outcome; simulacral reproduction seems immune to the realms of love and the reproduction of social relations to rely on ideologies of love for its own purposes. The bombastic pathos of the end of the movie, however, highlights love as an uncomfortable extra circulating through these systems. What else can account for Ronnie's inability to kill off the despairing new mutant, Brundle-Fly-Telepod, or for that unnameable being's sacrificial placing of the rifle to its own head?

Ronnie's narrative is the most difficult one to suppress or repress. At one point she says to Stathis Borans, in arguing why her research with Seth is so important: "I'm the only recorder of this event from the inside out." Those words come literally true, as her recording is also reproductive. For much of the first part of the film Ronnie is the recorder,

and frames and sets up scenes through her camera superimposed on the film's point of view. When she finds out she is pregnant, her place behind the camera comes to a halt. The narrative has been extended inside her—she is recording it from the inside out, a telepod or transporter of Seth's genetic narrative. At the film's end, with the death of Brundle-Fly-telepod, Ronnie's story is still left over. We almost forget that the fetus is still inside her, that the narrative of reproduction has not been officially halted. The death of Brundle-Fly-Telepod is as much a self-sacrifice as Gregor Samsa's quiet death was: the human machine puts itself abjectly to death, it practices insect politics. For Seth Brundle the monstrous task of self-knowledge has ended on a trebly Oedipal note. What is clear in the sexual politics of the narrative is that Cronenberg never intended to make a sequel featuring the impossible baby, as if that route could finesse the mother Ronnie and continue on with male self-reproduction in the form of Seth II. Instead, what is left is Ronnie's narrative, from the inside out, discontinuous, with no way left to report it.

*The Fly* shows us that every act of narration leaves its mark, leaves its trace, if not as openly and monstrously as the transformations of Seth Brundle. Seth Brundle is read by the computer and fused with a housefly—"We weren't even properly introduced," he points out. The technologies of narrative have moved even to the submolecular level, where strangely enough, metaphor can also be seen to inhere. Love entered in for Seth Brundle as he hoped to become the first insect politician, an emissary from the reading machine, and it kept him fixated on preserving the last bit of "himself" introjected into Ronnie's body. This was an illusion, of course, the illusion that Seth Brundle could still exist, unread and uncoded, and led to his attempt to form the most nuclear family ever conceived, by transporting himself and Ronnie in the telepod to fuse their three into one. This is another of love's lost illusions. Where should the love that I am talking about come in, then? And what rough beast comes stalking to the telepod to be born? The imponderability and the impossibility of the millennial new man, the fly-Christ-woman-telepod that hovers at the threshold of the new century, is a narrative abyss and a technological one. The terror is that our technology, which cinema has best represented since its invention in 1894, is no longer a representable one, or a narratable one. *The Fly* as film acknowledges its own superfluity in the face of that sublime terror and fades out on a human, female, face.

Asuman Suner (essay date Winter 1998)

SOURCE: "Postmodern Double Cross: Reading David Cronenberg's *M. Butterfly* as a Horror Story," in *Cinema Journal*, Vol. 37, No. 2, Winter, 1998, pp. 49–64.

[In the following essay, Suner writes that the foundation of *M. Butterfly*, which is a drama, is the conflict between the colonizer and the colonized, between West and East,

between male and female. He argues that the film is not so much of a departure for Cronenberg as it might at first seem to be since he is addressing, once again, the male search for identity through the use of an inwardly fragile male protagonist.]

David Cronenberg's cinema has received considerable critical attention in recent years not only from film scholars but also from scholars working on contemporary cultural theory, particularly theories of postmodernism. For that latter group of scholars, Cronenberg's films testify to the emergence of a "postmodern," "postgender," and "posthuman" subjectivity. In *Terminal Identity*, for example, Scott Bukatman reads Cronenberg's cinema in relation to the coming out of a new "information/space age"<sup>1</sup> According to Bukatman, Cronenberg's films stage a "terminal identity," which refers to a double articulation: "both the end of the subject and a new subjectivity constructed at the computer station or television screen."<sup>2</sup> All the protagonists in Cronenberg's films, according to Bukatman, signify a "slippage" in human definition: "the loss of power over the form of the human, the visible sign of our being, combines with the absence of the moral certainties that once guided that power."<sup>3</sup>

What is not sufficiently addressed in Bukatman's analysis is the fact that the "double articulation of subjectivity" in Cronenberg's films, which refers to both the end of the subject and the construction of a new postmodern mode of subjectivity, is not a postgender or posthuman phenomenon but is deeply grounded in gender. In Cronenberg's cinema, it is specifically the male subject whose unified, coherent, and central status is disturbed and disarticulated. The new, decentered, and fluid mode of subjectivity which signifies a "slippage in human definition" is also unmistakably male. As Michael O'Pray puts it, "The Cronenberg mise-en-scène of techno-phantasy upon which his reputation rests—the parasites the growths, the visceral invasions of the body—is male through and through."<sup>4</sup>

Cronenberg's 1993 film *M. Butterfly* occupies a particularly interesting place in the director's cinema, because for the first time he articulates the crisis of the male subject not only in terms of the questions of gender and the crisis of modernity but also in terms of the questions of race, ethnicity, and imperialism. Unlike some well-known Cronenberg films such as *Videodrome* (1985), *The Fly* (1986), *Dead Ringers* (1988), or *Naked Lunch* (1991), *M. Butterfly* cannot be categorized within the confines of horror and/or science fiction genres. Instead, *M. Butterfly* is a "political melodrama" set in postrevolutionary China.<sup>5</sup> There is a double sense of politics in the term "political melodrama," since melodrama, as a genre exploring the politics of desire and subjectivity in the private realm, is always already political. Revolving around personal dramas that the characters undergo in the periods of social upheaval and transformation, political melodrama reads a particular historical situation through the lens of the politics of desire and subjectivity. Since the mid-1980s, political melodrama has been most effectively incorporated

by the Fifth Generation Chinese directors whose films have gained considerable international attention. In the films like *Army Nurse* (Hu Mei, 1984), *The Blue Kite* (Tian Zhuang Zhuang, 1993), and *Farewell My Concubine* (Chen Kaige, 1994), personal dramas at the foreground are grounded in the social and political context of the Cultural Revolution taking place in the background.<sup>6</sup> Exploring the issues of subjectivity, desire, and sexuality against the backdrop of the Cultural Revolution, *M. Butterfly* has an interesting affinity with contemporary Chinese cinema.

Because of the drastic shift of genre conventions from science fiction and/or horror story to political melodrama, one can argue that *M. Butterfly* is at odds with Cronenberg's earlier films. In this paper, I will try to show that *M. Butterfly* does not represent a rupture from Cronenberg's conventional style. *M. Butterfly* is indeed also a horror story, like the director's earlier films, but of a different sort.

In Cronenberg's cinema, horror arises from the violation of the boundaries of the male body and male subjectivity. Abjection of the male body, in other words, is the primary source of terror. Usually, it is the excessive desire for transcendence and omnipotence on the part of the male protagonist that causes the ultimate destruction of the male body. The impulsive male desire for omnipotence and transcendence is connected with the modernist ideals of asserting full control over nature through the means of scientific and geographical discovery which would supposedly lead to the progress and emancipation of humanity. In films like *Videodrome*, *The Fly*, and *Dead Ringers*, male protagonists aggressively push the boundaries of the human body to transcend its limits. In each case, however, the desire to assert full control over nature results in total loss of control, the desire to transcend the limits of the body results in getting stuck even deeper in the flesh, the desire for omnipotence ends up in ruination. In these films, the male protagonists over and over again experience metamorphosis, abjection, and monstrosity. *M. Butterfly*, in this context, is also a horror story, since it is about the violation of the boundaries defining and securing male subjectivity. Like the other Cronenberg films, in *M. Butterfly*, the impossible male fantasy for omnipotence eventually leads to the psychic and physical destruction of the male subject.

Reading *M. Butterfly* as an extension of the earlier Cronenberg films, however, is not to suggest that *M. Butterfly* is first and foremost a Cronenberg film, carries the signature of its "auteur," and reflects solely Cronenberg's voice. *M. Butterfly* obviously echoes multiple voices other than Cronenberg's, including the voices of the Chinese American playwright Henry Hwang (whose play had been originally staged on Broadway and then adapted to cinema) and the actors (particularly Jeremy Irons and John Lone). Moreover, the film, as a complex cultural text, reflects the issues and sensibilities of its own time. It is not a coincidence, for example, that *M. Butterfly* came out at a period when the issues of transvestism, homoeroticism,

and homosexuality have become more and more explored even in the mainstream cinema.<sup>7</sup> In this paper, my reading of *M. Butterfly* in the context of Cronenberg's cinema obviously does not aim to preclude alternative readings of the film emphasizing other voices involved in the film text.

FEMINIZATION OF THE COLONIZED AND  
COLONIZATION OF THE FEMININE: INTERTWINED  
MODES OF THE ORIENTALIST DISCOURSE.

The story of *M. Butterfly* is inspired by a notorious "real-life" scandal: a French junior diplomat was driven to spying during the course of an eighteen-year-long love affair with a Chinese transvestite who he never realized was actually a man. Henry Hwang turned the political scandal into a play and then a film scenario. Hwang organized the entire story around Puccini's famous opera *Madame Butterfly*, which contains, in Hwang's terms, "a wealth of sexist and racist clichés."<sup>8</sup> *Madame Butterfly*, in other words, is a showcase of the Western sexual/colonial fantasy which is most vividly embodied in the opera through the stereotypical representation of the submissive and obedient "Oriental" woman who falls in love with a Western, white man and sacrifices herself for him.<sup>9</sup> Hwang reads the text of Puccini's opera against the grain and creates a "deconstructivist Madame Butterfly": the story of a French diplomat who falls in love with the image of an ideal Oriental woman which is created by Western modernist/imperialist culture. What is "deconstructivist" in this story is that the ideal Oriental woman is actually a man, and, at the end, the French diplomat turns himself into "M. Butterfly."

Adapting Hwang's play into film, Cronenberg emphasized an element which is already strongly evident in the original text: the blatant banality of the Western sexual/colonial fantasy. Cronenberg's camera in the film assumes the French diplomat's dull and ignorant perspective, turning the entire historical complexity of Chinese culture into a big cliché. In effect, what is offered by Cronenberg's film is not so much a critique but a caricature of the old imperialist dream, the romance with the Other. The blatant banality of the colonial fantasy is emphasized in *M. Butterfly* on both narrative and visual levels.

Two major discursive strategies can be delineated in modernist narratives in relation to the representation of the Western sexual/colonial fantasy: "colonization of the feminine" and "feminization of the colonized." Both strategies center around the Western, white, male subject who is the main protagonist of a sexual/colonial scenario through which he assures the unity and integrity of his own identity. In this respect, there is a commonality in the representations of women and the colonized (non-Western, nonwhite) cultures on the basis of the shared strategies employed by Western modernist discourse in constructing them as Others with regard to the Western, white, male subject. In both cases, Otherness is constituted as a fixed, stereotypical construct. Homi Bhabha asserts that "an



important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of 'fixity' in the ideological construction of otherness. Fixity as the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and demonic repetition."<sup>10</sup> In this regard, then, what gives the colonial stereotype its currency is its ambivalence. The colonial stereotype connotes both a desire and an anxiety. It is simultaneously inscribed in the economy of pleasure/desire and domination/power. In turn, the double articulation of the forms of sexual and racial difference in the colonial body marks it simultaneously as the object of desire and domination at once in relation to the Western modernist project and its central subject. The intertwining discursive formations of racial/sexual desire and domination produce and maintain the status of Western, white, male identity as the sovereign subject of the modernist project. Parallel discursive strategies employed in the construction of Otherness on the part of women and colonized people consistently invest them with the attributes of difference, disorderliness, chaos, mystery, enigma, irrationality, and so forth. Exotic and erotic become intermingled discursive tropes in the modernist narratives, justifying the discovery and control of the female/colonized body.

At this point, it is important to note that the construction of Otherness on the part of women and colonized people is constitutive for the centrality of the Western, white, male subject in the hegemonic humanist discourse of modernity. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty notes: "it is only insofar as 'woman/women' and 'the East' are defined as *Others*, or as peripheral, that (Western) Man/Humanism can represent him/itself as the center. It is not the center that determines the periphery, but the periphery that, in its boundedness, determines the center."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, the very constitution of the Western, white, male subject depends upon the construction of Otherness in a certain way. The intertwined strategies of the colonization of the feminine and the feminization of the colonized open up a discursive space in which the categories of self/other, male/female, subject/object. West/non-West appear as binary oppositional constructs that mutually define and determine each other. It is not only the first term that defines, determines, and controls the meaning of the second, but it is also the second term that gives definition to the first one.

*M. Butterfly* overtly employs these two discursive strategies—colonization of the feminine and feminization of the colonized—in its portrayal of Otherness. On both narrative and visual levels, the film highlights the interplay between the binary oppositional categories of male/female and West/East.

*M. Butterfly* consistently associates erotic desire with desire for domination from the first encounter of its two protagonists, the French diplomat (Rene Gallimard) and the Chinese opera singer (Song Liling). Gallimard (played

by Jeremy Irons) first sees Song (played by John Lone) at an ambassador's residence in Beijing where *she* performs the death scene from *Madame Butterfly*.<sup>12</sup> Deeply moved by Puccini's opera, Gallimard has a chance to talk to Song after her performance. Gallimard says that Song's performance made him realize for the first time the beauty of *Madame Butterfly*'s story. What Gallimard finds beautiful in this story, in his own words, is the "pure sacrifice" and the "death" of the Oriental woman. Although Song belittles Gallimard's taste as a product of a colonialist mentality, the French diplomat still falls in love with the romantic imperialist fantasy in Puccini's opera. The dominant/submissive pattern of the fantasy that Gallimard falls in love with is vividly illustrated on the record cover of the opera that he orders the day after he meets with Song. On the record cover, we see a man standing in a white navy uniform and an Oriental woman in a kimono kneeling down in front of her lover. Gallimard looks at this dull cliché admiringly. What he is actually attracted to is the stereotypical image of the Oriental woman as passive, submissive, and obedient. As Gallimard admits at the end of the film, he in fact falls in love with the image of an Oriental woman created by the Western man.

As their relationship develops, Gallimard's desire to restage the dominant/submissive pattern of the colonial romance becomes more aggressive. Once he gets Song's affection, he starts to ignore her. Song's desperate letters, overt vulnerability, and passive obedience make him feel, for the first time, the "absolute power of a man." For Gallimard, this is an exciting experience. As in Puccini's opera, what is arousing is the experiment of catching a butterfly, piercing its heart with a needle, and then leaving it to perish. The new masculine self-confidence that Gallimard gains through his domination over Song makes him more successful in his diplomatic career, and he gets a promotion to vice-consul. Learning that he is promoted, Gallimard goes to see Song after several weeks of not answering her messages. Now, being flattered by his victory, he wants Song to say that *she is his butterfly*. Behind Gallimard's determination to hear Song's submission is the eroticized imperialist desire to conquer and dominate the Other. In order to assure his own "masculine" self-integrity and power, Gallimard needs a declaration of "feminine" submissiveness on the part of the Other. Once Song accepts being *his butterfly*, Gallimard never uses her name again; instead, he calls her "butterfly." The metaphors that Gallimard chooses to name their relationship are no less revealing with regard to his desire to conquer and dominate. Theirs is a "master/slave" relationship. Song is an "obedient slave," a little "schoolgirl" waiting for her lessons.

In the course of the years that Gallimard spent with Song as his mistress, the last instance that his masculine potency is fully affirmed is when he learns that Song is pregnant with his child. In this way, all his suspicions about his own masculine potency are happily resolved. The moment that Gallimard learns that Song is pregnant with his child marks the moment when the remaking of the Madame

Butterfly story is completed: just as in Puccini's opera, we have a Western man having a child from his Oriental mistress. What happens next, however, is not the tragic and "beautiful" death of the Oriental mistress.

The second major narrative strategy employed by *M. Butterfly* is the feminization of the colonized. In *Woman and Chinese Modernity*, Rey Chow analyzes Bernardo Bertolucci's highly acclaimed film *The Last Emperor* (1987) by employing the psychoanalytic model developed by Laura Mulvey.<sup>13</sup> In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey engages in a critique of the patriarchal regime of looking embedded in the visual organization and narrative structure of mainstream cinema and suggests that in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. In this regard, the three kinds of gaze involved in the cinema (the gaze of the main character, the gaze of the camera, and the gaze of the spectator) collapse into one masculine gaze. Whereas the gaze in cinema is necessarily masculine, the sexualized image on the screen has to be feminine. Chow further complicates Mulvey's argument in two ways. First, she extends the interpretation of "image as woman" to "image as feminized space" which can be occupied by a male as well as a female character. In this way, "femininity" as a category is freed up to include fictional constructs that may not be "women" but that occupy a passive position in regard to the controlling symbolic.<sup>14</sup> Femininity, in other words, does not have to refer to a woman; it can be produced as a feminized space and spectacle. Second, Chow asserts that the "image as feminized space" raises questions as to what is involved in the representation of "other" cultures. The category of Other is mostly produced in the dominant cinema as a "feminized space." According to Chow, in Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor*, for example, China occupies the "feminized space" in the cinematic structure of eroticism. Idealizing China through the category of the feminine, *The Last Emperor* counterposes China to the West not only because the former is different but also because it is "feminine" from the masculinized perspective of the West. Through this feminization, China is marked off taxonomically from "our" time, and it is located within an ahistorical mode of existence in which it is allowed to play with its own rhythms. Being defined as a mysterious, exotic, and spectacular culture, the entire social and political complexity of Chinese society is reduced to a pure object of display investigated and colonized by the masculinized Western gaze.

Following a similar line of argumentation, I would like to suggest that China is consistently depicted as a "feminized space/spectacle" in *M. Butterfly*. Within the film's narrative, Chinese society is portrayed from the perspective of the French diplomats, especially that of Gallimard. In this view, China is romanticized and eroticized as an Oriental culture whose exotic and mysterious quality makes its control justifiable. As Edward Said argues in *Orientalism*, the Orient is constructed as a distinct entity whose traditional ways and rhythms mark it off from the modern

Western culture.<sup>15</sup> Orientals live in their world, "we" live in ours. A certain "freedom of intercourse," however, is always the Westerner's privilege; because his is the stronger culture, he can penetrate, he can wrestle with, and he can give shape and meaning to the Orient.

In this framework, Gallimard himself has a cherishing approach to China which benevolently acknowledges that "the Orientals are people too." For him, Chinese people are willing to get the good things that the Westerners could give them; indeed, they find Western ways exciting, though they would never admit it. These "feminine" attributes which portray Chinese people as naive, childish, and submissive also imply that China requires Western control not in brutal but benevolent terms. Ella Shohat suggests that the "civilizing mission" of Europe is established in colonial narratives through two ostensibly opposite but actually connected constructs of the Other culture as feminine: the "inviting virginal landscape" versus the "resisting libidinal nature." Shohat notes: "colonial discourse oscillates between these two master tropes, alternatively positioning the colonized 'other' as blissfully ignorant, pure and welcoming as well as an uncontrollable savage, wild native whose chaotic, hysteric presence requires the imposition of the law, i.e., the suppression of resistance."<sup>16</sup> Given this split discourse of virginal/libidinal, Gallimard's approach to China clearly falls into the first narrative trope, which sees the Other culture in a state of availability, that is, logically calling for Western penetration. In this sense, Gallimard's response after learning that Song is a virgin is characteristic of his overall attitude to China as a feminized culture: "Then, I want to teach you gently!" A similar chain of reasoning is also evident in Gallimard's rather naive opinions about the Vietnam war which eventually lead to his transfer to France. Since "the Orientals simply want to be associated with whoever shows the most strength and power," Gallimard suggests that the Vietnamese people would welcome Americans. Relying upon his own sexual/colonial fantasy, he envisions the "Oriental world" as a shy but in essence passionate virgin, submissively welcoming Western "penetration."

Feminization of the colonized is a recurrent strategy in *M. Butterfly* at the visual as well as the narrative level. Visually, the film offers a blatantly banal and romanticized image of China. In a sense, Cronenberg's camera totally identifies with Gallimard's perspective and shows us how the French diplomat sees China as an eroticized Oriental culture. Though it was shot on location, the China reflected in *M. Butterfly* is unmistakably artificial and visibly staged. The effect of staginess is self-consciously created by the film at the very opening. The film begins with the image of a white door opening from left to right. As the credits appear on the screen one by one, we begin to see certain objects moving from left to right against a background composed of Chinese watercolors and prints moving in the opposite direction. The slowly moving objects on the screen are supposed to represent the traditional Chinese culture to a stranger, probably to a Westerner. We see a mask from the traditional Chinese

theater, a little purple piece of flower made of tulle, a globe-shaped object covered with yin and yang signs, a small Chinese umbrella, a traditional musical instrument, a rice cup with Chinese prints on it, a blue stamp, a little butterfly. These can easily be the souvenir objects that one can find in the living room of a Western traveler who has visited China. These small artifacts do not necessarily tell us anything about China, but they successfully reveal the commonplace image of China in the West. The opening of the film with the display of the objects which supposedly symbolize the "authentic" Chinese culture gives the first signal of the fact that Cronenberg's real concern in *M. Butterfly* is not Chinese society but the image of China in Western imagery. In this sense, Cronenberg's camera never pretends to be a transparent medium reflecting the reality of a different culture. On the contrary, we are consistently reminded that what we see is an artificially constructed image of China. The exaggerated constructedness of the film is especially evident in the use of color and lighting. In the outdoor shooting, especially when nighttime is represented, Cronenberg uses an excessive purple lighting. With the artificial color effect, Beijing's dim and foggy streets appear exotic and mysterious. In such a theatrical setting and lighting, we see equally artificial images from Chinese culture: an old Chinese man hunting butterflies along the river, a small handcart fading out in the darkness of the night. Every image contributes to the artificially constructed look of the film, which is self-consciously ignorant of the cultural and historical complexity of China. In this regard, the political developments in Chinese society (the Cultural Revolution) are also reduced to a cliché.

The staginess of the film, however, is nowhere more evident than in the first and the last images. As I mentioned above, the first image of the film is a white door opening from left to right. The last image is also a white door (this time, the door of the plane that is carrying Song back to China) closing in the opposite direction: from right to left. The effect created by these two images that we see at the beginning and at the end is that of a bracketing which emphasizes the constructedness of the events in the film. In a sense, these opening and closing doors function like the opening and closing curtains in a theater performance: both mark the film/performance of the "reality." The choice of the opening and closing doors as the first and the last images of the film, in this respect, does not seem to be coincidental; instead, it illustrates the film's preoccupation with theatricality and staginess. This is a pull away from the cinematic conventions of realist representation to an artificial construction of reality. In this regard, Cronenberg does not try to give us a realistic representation of Chinese society, but he plays with the eroticized imperialist fantasy that produces China as a feminized Other.

On the visual level, China is constructed as a "feminized space" in *M. Butterfly* most evidently through a strong emphasis on the spectacular aspect of the Chinese culture, which is strikingly embodied in the Oriental theater. As Marjorie Garber points out, makeup, costume, symbols,

and stylization are the key elements of the Oriental theater as it is known by the West.<sup>17</sup> In Western culture, these are also the key elements of female impersonation. In *M. Butterfly*, China is constructed as an enigmatic Oriental woman hidden behind a spectacular mask represented by the traditional Chinese theater. The mask is a recurring figure in *M. Butterfly* and symbolizes the enigmatic and mysterious qualities of the feminized China. The mask, just like the veil, covering the face of the non-Western (and usually female) Other, has a special meaning in the Western sexual/colonial imagination. It provokes curiosity and desire on the part of the Western subject to discover the truth of the Other. On the one hand, it is seductive, since it invites an intervention to solve the puzzle, to reveal the truth hiding behind it. On the other hand, it indicates a "danger" because of its opaque structure that prevents the Western male gaze from seeing through it. Behind the mask, there is the unknown, the enigma, the trap. This double function of the mask as a seductive and dangerous figure is undertaken by the heavy makeup that Song puts on when she performs in the Oriental theater. Her costume, makeup, and hairstyle function as a deceptive cover which provokes Gallimard (as well as the audience) to see her truth. Rather than reinforcing it, however, *M. Butterfly* subverts the Western sexual/colonial fantasy by suggesting that there is no "truth" behind the mask. The film never attempts to capture the "truth" of the Orient. On the contrary, at the end, the mask is finally put on by the Western, white, male subject through a subversive role reversal.

#### CULTURAL IDENTITY AS PERFORMANCE.

What makes a film which simultaneously reveals and reproduces the blatant banality of the Western sexual/colonial fantasy subversive? Adapting Marjorie Garber's argument, I would like to argue that the subversive potential of *M. Butterfly* lies in the *border crossings* that it invokes.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, it can be argued that the film is based on political, cultural, and sexual acts of border crossing that revolve around the notions of spying, acting, and performing. In each case, the act of border crossing is embodied by the figure of the transvestite. According to Garber, the transvestite figure functions simultaneously as a mark of gender undecidability and an indication of crisis. Here, crisis means "a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another."<sup>19</sup> The borders between male/female and West/East are crossed twice in *M. Butterfly*, first by Song and then by Gallimard.

Song's presence in the film as a transvestite body is consistently contained within the boundaries of performance. As an actress she performs on the stage, and as a spy s/he performs off the stage. In each case, s/he crosses sexual, cultural, and political borders. Through this constant shuttling between different positions and roles, we never know Song's true identity. Her/his "reality" is circumscribed by the different roles s/he performs. In her own terms, she always tries her best to become someone



else. And in each performance what we get is this someone else, not Song's true identity. In this way, the identity of the transvestite figure in *M. Butterfly* is deliberately constructed as performative. Song's multiple performances, as both female and male, put into question the very binary oppositional categories of male and female as ontological essences. To use Judith Butler's argument about the "performativeness" of gender, Song's impersonation of the Oriental woman implicitly suggests that "gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real."<sup>20</sup> In imitating femininity so perfectly, the transvestite figure actually reveals the fabricated structure of gender itself. The transvestite body suggests that gender is constituted through the stylization of the body and through the stylized repetition of certain bodily movements, gestures, and acts. What is subversive about the transvestite figure embodied by Song, then, is the way that transvestism renders the notion of "true" gender identity obsolete. As Butler notes: "If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false."<sup>21</sup> Similarly, at the end of the film, it is impossible to tell which performance of Song (female or male) is "true" and which one is "false." All we have is several border crossings; each passes as the real.

It is possible to identify four major performances by Song in *M. Butterfly*. Each performance is supported by the use of special costumes, hairstyles, and makeup. First, Song has on-stage performances in which she plays several roles from traditional Chinese theater as well as from Western opera. In these performances, she usually puts on exaggerated costumes and makeup.

Second, Song plays the ideal Oriental woman in her relationship with Gallimard. In this off-stage performance, her costumes are simple but elegant. The dark or white silk tunics and slim pants she wears reflect her modesty and humility as a traditional Chinese woman. (Indeed, her costume is nowhere more vital than in this performance, since it hides *his* genitals. Even when Song makes love with Gallimard, she refuses to take off her clothes.) Similarly, her makeup and long, black hair seem quite plain and "natural." In performing the ideal Oriental woman, every single gesture is carefully calculated. Song usually sits on her knees and looks down. There is always a suffering expression on her face. Her voice is soft and low. All these details build up the image of the obedient, submissive, and self-effacing Oriental woman. After all, as Song herself puts it, she gives a perfect performance as the Oriental woman, because "only a *man* can know how a woman is supposed to act."

The third performance by Song is a more complicated one, that is, her/his performance as a spy working for the Chinese government. In this case, s/he plays a man who impersonates a woman for the sake of his country. The troubling aspect of this performance is that Song continues to wear feminine clothes even when s/he is giving reports to the Chinese officials. To justify his situation, he says

that he practices his deception as often as possible. In this statement, her/his identity is even more obscure: what is Song's deception? Being a female or being a male, being a lover or being a spy? The film does not allow us to know either her/his "deception" or her/his "reality." All we have is a constant sense of ambivalence between ever-changing roles and performances. Interestingly enough, Chin, the Chinese official that Song contacts, gives another gender performance that further complicates Song's position.<sup>22</sup> As a committed member of the Chinese Communist Party, Chin stylizes her body in such a manner that she tries to efface all signs of femininity. Hers is a performance of androgyny. Once again, gender appears as a performative construct, a *truth effect* which is produced through a certain stylization of the body. The contrast between Song and Chin is strikingly ironic: a man who tries to be feminine and a woman who tries not to be feminine.

The fourth performance by Song is that of a man. His performance of a Chinese homosexual man being judged in a French court for spying against the French government is again accompanied by a certain stylization of the body. In this performance, Song looks like a *real* man with his short hair, his masculine face without makeup, and his dark-gray suit. Here, Cronenberg engages another small trick to further unsettle the notion of a stable gender identity. In contrast to Song (the homosexual), who looks like a "normal" man with his plain appearance, the members of the court (the supposedly regular, heterosexual French men) look quite "queer" with the small red caps they wear as part of their embellished costumes. Once again, gender is to be found operating in the realm of stylization and performance.

The most ambiguous moment in the film—and one which does not quite fit into any of these performances—is when Song takes off her/his clothes for the first time in front of Gallimard while they are brought to the jail in the same van. In this scene, we see Song naked only from behind. By denying the sight of his frontal nudity to the audience, Cronenberg once again avoids giving us a final closure with regard to the gender ambiguity surrounding the transvestite body. We see Song's naked body bent and kneeling in front of Gallimard. Song's body is marked by the ambivalent signs of both genders. Despite the short hair and masculine lines of the body, s/he speaks with her/his soft female voice. Song wants Gallimard to look at her/his body; after all, s/he says, "under the robes, beneath everything, it was always me." The pronoun "me" escapes from any gender marker. Therefore, when Song declares that under the "mask" there was always the same person, indeed he/she does not reveal much about the truth of that person. As Homi Bhabha argues in a different context, the most threatening aspect of mimicry is that it "conceals no presence or identity behind its mask."<sup>23</sup> The ontology of gender/colonial mimicry in this sense defeats the binary opposition between essence and appearance, inner truth and surface, and renders the notion of essence/inner truth of identity obsolete. At the end of Song's final performance, although we know that it was always the same person

behind the mask, we are left not knowing who this person *really* was beyond the roles s/he played.

ABJECTION THROUGH THE APPROPRIATION OF  
OTHERNESS.

Unlike Song, whose presence in the film is consistently framed as performative, Gallimard saves his sole performance to the very end. This is an on-stage performance which is set in a French prison where he was put after having been convicted of spying. In front of an all-male audience, Gallimard transforms his body into the body of an Oriental woman: Madame Butterfly. As he puts makeup on his face, Gallimard begins to tell his story to his audience. With each item that he puts on his body (first he wears a black kimono with a white belt, then he puts exaggerated, masklike makeup on his face, and lastly he wears a black wig), he gradually becomes a transvestite. Gallimard's performance is juxtaposed with the scene showing Song in an airplane returning to China. By juxtaposing these two scenes, the film radically switches the gender and ethnic stereotypes that it had presented at the beginning: now we have Song in a suit and Gallimard in a kimono, Song as a male, Gallimard as a transvestite. Toward the end of his performance, Gallimard remarks: "I have a vision . . . Of the Orient . . . that, deep within its almond eyes, there are still women. Women willing to sacrifice themselves for the love of a man. Even a man whose love is completely without worth." With a spectacular twist at the end of the film, Gallimard becomes one of these women, while Song becomes the man whose love is worthless. Gallimard's final words are "My name is Rene Gallimard, also known as Madame Butterfly." Once again, the pronoun "me" escapes from a gender marker. Mirroring Song's final statement ("under the robes, beneath everything, it was always *me*"). Gallimard's self-definition at the end also embodies a gender ambiguity ("My name is Rene Gallimard, also known as Madame Butterfly"). As the audience applauds him, Gallimard cuts his throat with a small mirror that he used when he applied his makeup. After he collapses, we can see Gallimard's bloody face reflected in the mirror as he dies. The horror in this scene arises from the disjuncture between fantasy and the real, "body-as-experience" and "body-as-spectacle." At fantasy level, Gallimard identifies with "Madame Butterfly" and experiences the "graceful" self-sacrifice of the Oriental woman for pure love. The smooth and lyrical tone of his voice speaks the seamless elegance of Madame Butterfly. The spectacle of his body, however, reflects the grotesque image of a composite being who transgresses the conventional boundaries of gender and ethnic identity. Like Cronenberg's other films, monstrosity occurs at the borderline, at an undecidable and composite space. The incompatibility of "body-as-experience" (Cronenberg's male protagonists always experience empowerment and liberation at the beginning of the process of monstrous transformation) with "body-as-spectacle" (the male protagonists' lack of awareness about the monstrosity of their look makes them even more horrifying) is the locus of abjection in *M. Butterfly*.

In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva develops the concept of "abjection" in relation to the notion of a self-integrated and unified body.<sup>24</sup> According to Kristeva, subjectivity is organized around an awareness of the *boundaries* that separate inside and outside and, in this way, around the sense of the body as a unified whole. In this regard, the constitution of acceptable forms of subjectivity demands the expulsion of those things that are defined as improper and unclean, that do not respect *borders*.<sup>25</sup> Those expelled things that disturb identity and order are constituted as the abject. What causes abjection, then, are the things that disturb identity, system, and order. In other words, the abject is "what does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."<sup>26</sup> According to Kristeva, the boundary between the subject and the abject can never be completely secured. The abject continuously threatens the borders of subjectivity. The subject's relation to the abject, however, should not be conceived only as fear and repulsion. Besides being threatened by the abject, the subject is also fascinated and enticed by it.

Cronenberg's films are predicated on the pleasures and terrors of abjection. The male protagonists in Cronenberg's films usually experience abjection quite literally through a monstrous transformation which includes the dissolution of the boundaries defining and securing the body as a unified and integrated whole. Borders of the male body and male subjectivity are radically decomposed in a way that the inside and the outside of the body, the self and the other, human and nonhuman are no longer identifiable as separate entities.<sup>27</sup> *M. Butterfly* is consistent with Cronenberg's earlier films in the sense that its white, male protagonist experiences abjection at the end of the film as a result of his desire to enact the Western sexual/colonial fantasy. Gallimard pursues a romantic ideal to reach omnipotence. He wants to play the part of the white hero in Western sexual/colonial fantasy who would enjoy absolute domination over the Other. His desire for fullness and omnipotence, however, only brings a complete loss of unity and self-integrity. Crossing the borders between male and female, West and East, life and death, Gallimard's self-destructive performance ends up in an excessive and wasteful spectacle. His body becomes abject through a confusion over the limits of identity and the appropriation of Otherness.

THE LIMITS OF POSTMODERN TRANSGRESSION.

*M. Butterfly* overtly employs a postmodern mode of representation at several interconnected levels. Postmodernism in cinema complicates the transparency and smoothness of the very process of representation by denying the audience a sense of having direct access to the "real." Pastiche is one of the strategies through which the assumption of the transparency of representation is disrupted. Adopting Fredric Jameson's well-known definition, pastiche is a "neutral practice of mimicry," that is, the imitation of a peculiar style without a satirical impulse.<sup>28</sup> Unlike parody, pastiche does not invoke a sense of

comic irony, because it does not have a notion of “normal” compared to which what is imitated would become comic. In *M. Butterfly* pastiche is incorporated in the representation of the recent history. The film stages history as an empty signifier which does not connote any “real” referent. As I discussed above, from the credit sequence to the end, postrevolutionary Chinese society in *M. Butterfly* is reduced to an exotic backdrop. Mise-en-scène produces a sense of unrealness and artificiality which does not necessarily create a critical distance or comic effect. The cultural signs that supposedly reflect the “essence” of China appear in the credits only to reinvokethe cliché image of the exotic Orient in Western imagination. Given these characteristics, *M. Butterfly* is actually consistent with a particular form of pastiche in contemporary cinema that Jameson calls “nostalgia film.” Unlike conventional period films, which reinvent a “picture of the past in its lived totality,” the nostalgia film reinvents the “feel and shape of characteristic art objects of an older period,” and therefore it seeks to reawaken a sense of the past associated with these object.<sup>29</sup> In this framework, *M. Butterfly* is consistent with some aspects of the “imperial nostalgia film,” which seeks to reinvent the feel of the past by reinvoking the commonplace figures and images of the Orientalist fantasy. Unlike mainstream examples of imperial nostalgia films,<sup>30</sup> however, in *M. Butterfly* nostalgia takes a catastrophic rather than a celebratory tone.

When history becomes pastiche in the film, it is impossible to maintain a coherent and centered narrative subject who advances the story. Like earlier Cronenberg films, *M. Butterfly* testifies to the disappearance of a fixed, unified, and coherent mode of male subjectivity. Instead, male subjectivity becomes a fluid, unstable, and insecure construct which cannot be located within a cohesive narrative. Blurring the boundaries between the self and the other, the male and the female, the heterosexual and the homosexual, the Western and the Oriental, *M. Butterfly* positions its narrative subject at a postmodern double-cross. Here, “double-cross” refers to what Scott Bukatman calls the “double articulation of subjectivity” in Cronenberg’s cinema, that is, both the end of a modernist construction of sovereign subject who is capable of knowing himself and the world surrounding him from a detached and controlling standpoint, and also the emergence of a postmodern subject who is constituted as an effect of various discourses, images, and narratives.

Returning to the question that I began with, what is the significance of acknowledging the gender and cultural identity of the disintegrating subject in the postmodern film text? In other words, why is it important to acknowledge that the subject of “double articulation” in Cronenberg’s cinema is specifically the Western, white, male subject? In a discussion of Cronenberg’s *M. Butterfly*, Rey Chow indicates that in Western sexual/colonial fantasy, the Orient is often associated with femininity itself.<sup>31</sup> In Orientalist representations, therefore, both the Orient and woman function as the support for the white man’s fantasy. What distinguishes *M. Butterfly* from these

Orientalist representations, according to Chow, “is precisely the manner in which the lavish visible painting of fantasy finally takes place not on the female, feminized body of the other, but on the white male body, so that enlightenment coincides with suicide, while the woman, the other escapes.”<sup>32</sup> Following Chow’s argument, I want to suggest that *M. Butterfly* is a horror story, since it is about the undoing of the Western sexual/colonial fantasy—one of the prominent sites of the modernist discourse—and the psychic and physical destruction of the central protagonist of the modernist/imperialist narrative. The process of disintegration and self-destruction that Gallimard goes through, however, is not presented in moralistic terms, in the form of a punishment. Instead, Gallimard’s abject body at the end—a composite being who is both male and female, both Western and Oriental—signals the emergence of a new, composite, fluid subject position which is constituted through the very act of crossing the borders of gender and cultural identity. The narrative death of Gallimard is not a closure but a beginning. Having said that, however, it is also crucial to acknowledge that Gallimard’s transformation, which takes place in interaction with the Other, cannot speak for Song and the transformation that he/she goes through. The voice of the Other subject, in other words, whose presence radically unsettles the sovereign, self-integrated, and unified status attributed to the Western, white, male subject, is unspoken in *M. Butterfly*. Gallimard’s transgression tells us only half the story. The Other half is yet to be told.

#### Notes

1. Scott Bukatman, *Terminal Identity: The Virtual Subject in Postmodern Science Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).
2. Ibid., 9.
3. Ibid., 17.
4. Michael O’Pray, “Fatal Knowledge,” *Sight and Sound* 1, no. 11 (March 1992): 10–11.
5. *M. Butterfly* is different from Cronenberg’s earlier films not only in terms of its generic structure but also in terms of its production conditions. Besides being Cronenberg’s first film to be wholly financed by a Hollywood studio (Warners) and first to be made outside Canada, *M. Butterfly* is also atypical in that Cronenberg himself does not have a writing credit on it.
6. For more discussion on the melodramatic structure of the contemporary Chinese films, see E. Ann Kaplan, “Melodrama/Subjectivity/Ideology: Western Melodrama Theories and Their Relevance to Recent Chinese Cinema,” *East-West Film Journal* 5, no. 1 (January 1991): 6–27.
7. It is interesting to note that *M. Butterfly* came out almost at the same time as Neil Jordan’s 1994 film *The Crying Game*, which explores similar issues like the construction of the cultural, national, and ethnic identity; the fine line between homosexuality and heterosexuality; the scandal of the transvestite



- identity; and so forth. For more discussion about *The Crying Game*, see, for example, Kristin Handler, "Sexing *The Crying Game*: Difference, Identity, Ethics," *Film Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (Spring 1994): 31–42.
8. David Henry Hwang, Afterword, in *M. Butterfly* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 95.
  9. In an extensive analysis of the representation of Asian people in Hollywood cinema, Gina Marchetti points out that "Madame Butterfly" stories have had quite a legacy in Hollywood since the 1920s. Though allowing a possibility of the resolution of the racial tensions on an emotional level, those interracial romance stories almost always end up with the elimination of the Asian, female Other. See Gina Marchetti, *Romance and the "Yellow Peril": Race, Sex and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).
  10. Homi Bhabha. "The Other Question: The Stereotype and Colonial Discourse," in John Caughie and Annette Kuhn, eds., *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 312.
  11. Chandra Talpade Mohanty. "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," in Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, eds., *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 73–74.
  12. In discussing a transvestite performance, the use of gender pronouns becomes inevitably confusing. As a way of coping with this confusion, I will adapt Marjorie Garber's strategy and use the pronouns "she" and "her" to describe the Chinese actor (John Lone) when dressed as a woman and the pronouns "he" and "him" when the actor is dressed as a man. See Marjorie Garber, "The Occidental Tourist: *M. Butterfly* and the Scandal of Transvestism," in Andrew Parker et al., eds., *Nationalisms and Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
  13. Rey Chow, *Woman and Chinese Modernity: The Politics of Reading between West and East* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).
  14. *Ibid.*, 18.
  15. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 44.
  16. Ella Shohat, "Imaging *Terra Incognita*: The Disciplinary Gaze of Empire," *Public Culture* 3, no. 2 (Spring 1991): 55.
  17. Garber, "The Occidental Tourist," 135.
  18. *Ibid.*, 125.
  19. *Ibid.*
  20. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), vii.
  21. *Ibid.*, 136.
  22. James Moy makes an interesting analysis of this character in his discussion of Henry Hwang's play in the context of the representation of Asian identities on the American stage. Moy argues that though Hwang seeks to criticize the stereotypical representations of Asianness in American theater, Comrade Chin is more stereotypical and cartoonish than the worst of the nineteenth-century stereotypes. For Moy, Chin serves as a stereotype whose "jarring" language alienates while fixing a provisional position for this traditional view of the Orient. For more discussion, see James Moy, "David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly* and Philip Kan Gotanda's *Yankee Dawg You Die*: Repositioning Chinese-American Marginality on the American Stage," in Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach, eds., *Critical Theory and Performance* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1992). In Cronenberg's film, Chin is represented in a similar way as a one-dimensional stereotype. Actually, in Chin's personality, the entire political system of communist China is reduced to a cliché.
  23. Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man" in *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 88.
  24. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
  25. For Kristeva, the maternal (female) body is most closely affiliated with the abject. The major source of abjection in relation to the female/maternal body is menstrual blood. The female/maternal body is conceptualized in opposition to the phallic/paternal body, which represents the symbolic order. The female/maternal body lacks "corporeal integrity." Its borders are constantly violated by fluids and substances coming in and out of the body. It secretes blood (menstruation) and milk (nursing). Its size and shape change through the process of pregnancy, its borders are decomposed. And finally, giving birth is the ultimate violation of the borders of the body.
  26. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.
  27. Several feminist film scholars applied the concept of "abjection" to earlier Cronenberg films. For more discussion, see Barbara Creed, "Dark Desires: Male Masochism in the Horror Film" and Helen W. Robbins, "More Human Than I Am Alone: Womb Envy in David Cronenberg's *The Fly* and *Dead Ringers*." Both are published in Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark, eds., *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1993).
  28. Fredric Jameson. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in Hal Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), 114.
  29. *Ibid.*, 116.
  30. A commonplace example of "imperial nostalgia film" would be Steven Spielberg's Indiana Jones series.

For more discussion about the contemporary “imperial nostalgia film,” see Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

31. Rey Chow, “The Dream of a Butterfly,” in Diana Fuss, ed., *Human, All Too Human* (New York: Routledge, 1996).
32. *Ibid.*, 86.

#### Kevin Jackson (review date May 1999)

SOURCE: Review in *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 9, No. 5, May, 1999, p. 46.

[In the following review of *eXistenZ*, Jackson writes that the film, for all the unconventionality it aspires to with its creation of an alternate-reality games world, is really unthreatening and unsatisfying.]

North America, the near future.

A group of players gather to try out *eXistenZ*, the latest brainchild of the games world’s most notorious genius, Allegra Geller. *eXistenZ* is an elaborate game in which the players wire themselves up via a bioport—a plug inserted in the spinal column—to a semi-organic game pod, to induce plotted hallucinations. However, as Allegra begins to download *eXistenZ*, an antigames assassin opens fire on her.

Allegra is rescued by Ted Pikul, a junior company member. They set off on the run, pursued by bounty hunters, though Allegra is more concerned about her damaged game. She insists she and Ted must play *eXistenZ* to assess the damage. Initially fearful, Ted agrees finally to have a bootleg bioport shot into his spine by Gas, a roughneck garage man who turns out to be one of the enemy.

They flee to a ski resort where Allegra’s colleague Kiri Vinokur replaces Ted’s sabotaged bioport so the couple can finally plug in and play. Together, they enter a violent and frequently bloody set of narratives about spies, counterspies and assassins—a story which becomes increasingly confused with events in the outside world. Finally, it emerges that the entire action so far has itself been a game called *transCendenZ*; “Allegra”, “Ted” and all the other men and women are merely players. “Allegra” and “Ted” are themselves the true anti games terrorists. As the lethal couple corner *transCendenZ*’s inventor Yevgeny Nourish, he asks them fearfully if this is only an episode in a still more inclusive game. They do not reply.

\* \* \*

Fairly or otherwise, two of the critical terms least frequently applied to the Cronenberg oeuvre thus far have been ‘fun’ and ‘cute’: a regrettable state of affairs that *eXistenZ* should do much to remedy. First, the fun part:

notwithstanding its showstopping metaphysical somersaults between Chinese-boxed levels of reality, *eXistenZ* is in many respects an unexpectedly conventional entertainment. Some of the conventionality is due, we must assume, to the imaginative tastes of Allegra Geller (or, more pedantically, of the tranCendental inventor of “Allegra Geller”), who may be a whiz at bio-tech confections but seems to enjoy an essentially rather banal, if lurid, fantasy life. On the evidence of her taste in adventures, Allegra must have spent her childhood gorging on B movies, Bond films, *The Avengers* and such like, and she’s plainly not averse to rescripting herself from a barely articulate wallflower in real life into a devastatingly sexy action babe in *eXistenZ* life. Somehow, Jennifer Jason Leigh manages to make Allegra into a sympathetic and very nearly plausible character, the single fleshed-out (if that is the apposite term) human being in a gallery of ciphers and caricatures. It’s quite a feat.

Next, the cute part. At one point, Allegra notices and smiles at a frisky little two-headed amphibian that wouldn’t look out of place in a Disney confection. A few years ago, the *Independent* asked its readers to nominate the least likely combination of director and subject. The winning entry was: “David Cronenberg’s *National Velvet*”. Maybe that competition came to the director’s notice, and gave him some ideas. Rest assured, the wee beastie meets a literally sticky end, for in most other respects *eXistenZ* is something of a resumé or, less kindly, a puree of just about every previous Cronenberg film, from the mournfully dignified score by Howard Shore to the sombre lighting and preposterous names. Among its equally familiar attractions are furtive visits to the House of Fiction (cf. *Naked Lunch*), a dangerously seductive new form of entertainment (*Videodrome*, the most obvious precursor of *eXistenZ*), crossings of the borderline between biology and technology (*Crash* and so on), lashing of erotic body modifications (*Rabid* and so on) and, of course, a generous portion of the old Cronenbergian red glop.

The red glop factor is at its highest within the *eXistenZ* world, particularly when the twists and turns of the game’s plot land Allegra and Ted as labourers in a low-rent abattoir-cum-laboratory, where grubby workers hack up frogs and lizards for biotechnological ends, and take their lunch-breaks in a nightmarish Chinese restaurant. Here, Ted orders the daily special, chomps his way through the unidentifiable slippery, slimy horrors he’s served, uses the leftover bone and gristle to construct a gun which fires teeth (the very weapon used on Allegra at the beginning) and murders the waiter with a well-aimed molar. At a guess, this is the point of Cronenberg’s film at which a lot of younger viewers will find themselves thinking it might be worth saving up for a bioport implant.

But the same qualities which make *eXistenZ* potent for games-world addicts make *eXistenZ* inadequately satisfying for those of us who go in for less all-absorbing forms of diversion, like the cinema. As a thrill-ride in its own right, *eXistenZ* is fine—it’s slick, swift and droll. But as

an anxious entertainment, which is meant to nag and gnaw at our hunger for surrendering ourselves to surrogate thrills, especially of the disreputable kind that last about two hours (for what, the film keeps nudging us, is *eXistenZ* if not a hyper-real story, and what is *Allegra* but a *Künstler* with the *Gesamtkunstwerk* to trump them all?), it's more than a touch half-baked.

*eXistenZ* tries to make our flesh creep with the insinuation that many of us, if we weren't deterred by the prospect of spinal surgery, would cheerfully invest in bioports and drift away into other people's fantasies. It does its dutiful best to make that Huxleyan thought appear guilty and disquieting. But cheerfulness, or its nastier Cronenbergian equivalent, keeps breaking through the gloom, and the very qualities which make *eXistenZ* watchable also make *eXistenZ* seem like unthreatening fun. Cronenberg has said the film's point of departure was an interview he once did with Salman Rushdie, but as Kim Newman has pointed out elsewhere in these pages, its more compelling literary source is the haunted fiction of Philip K. Dick. Compared to Dick's writing at its ontologically insecure best, though, *eXistenZ* looks as trifling as it is diverting: a little too perky, a little too pat.

#### Adam Lowenstein (essay date Winter 1999)

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[In the following essay, Lowenstein defines Gothic films, shock horror films, science fiction films, and art films. He compares and contrasts Cronenberg's *Shivers* and *Crash*, and also situates them into the horror genre.]

David Cronenberg has playfully suggested that the characters who inhabit *Crash* (1996) might actually be the parasite-infected condominium dwellers from *Shivers* (1975), his first commercial feature (Smith 17). Despite an interval of over twenty years between the two films, Cronenberg's comment seems more accurate than outlandish. Indeed, perhaps the sole cinematic context that finally suits *Crash* is the niche carved out by the director's previous work, a body of films marked by a thematic resemblance as powerful as their ability to confound any tidy classification—particularly with regard to genre or national character. In recent years, these issues of categorization have informed a number of scholarly discussions focused on evaluating Cronenberg's "Canadianness" (Handling; Parker; McGregor; Beard; Testa; Leach, "North of Pittsburgh"). Juxtaposing *Crash* and *Shivers* allows us to reassess the assumptions underlying these discussions, and to illuminate how perceptions of Cronenberg's relation to the charged oppositions of Canada/ Hollywood and genre/ art continue to challenge our understanding of their points of contact. I will argue that it is Cronenberg's engagement with a specific mode of viewer confrontation linked to the modern horror film that necessitates fresh consideration if a meaningful reckoning with his "Canadianness" is to be reached.

#### FROM ATROCITY TO RADICAL PHILOSOPHY: CRONENBERG'S CANADIAN RECEPTION

Any investigation of Cronenberg's critical reception in Canada must acknowledge the impact of Robert Fulford's damning review of *Shivers*, which appeared in a 1975 issue of *Saturday Night* with the title "You Should Know How Bad This Film Is. After All, You Paid For It." As the headline suggests, Fulford (writing as "Marshall Delaney") embeds his condemnation of *Shivers* within an outraged assault on the film's federal co-sponsor, the Canadian Film Development Corporation (CFDC): "If using public money to produce films like [*Shivers*] is the only way that English Canada can have a film industry, then perhaps English Canada should not have a film industry" (Delaney 83). In hindsight, Fulford's invective against the CFDC seems more understandable than the dismissal of *Shivers* as "an atrocity" (83). After all, the "principal legacy" of films produced during the mid-1970s and early 80s under the CFDC's sponsorship, especially after the supplement of the Capital Cost Allowance of 1974 (a one hundred percent federal tax shelter used to stimulate private investment), has been aptly described as a "gaping, self-inflicted national wound" (Pevere 11). Many films produced during this period were approached primarily as tax write-offs, with a significant number never even reaching the theaters. The CFDC specialized in funding imitations of Hollywood genre fare, resulting in what have been described as "the anonymous films of Hollywood North" (Leach, "Body Snatchers" 366). Fulford's double-pronged attack implies that the CFDC's misguided tendency to produce films "imbued with the Hollywood ethos" led directly to *Shivers*, which he calls "the most repulsive movie I've ever seen" (Delaney 85, 84). It is crucial to bear this connection in mind, for Fulford's review effectively set the critical tone in Canada for Cronenberg's early work and assured that the reputation of his films at home would lag significantly behind their status abroad, at least until *Videodrome* (1982) (Handling 98).

Patricia Pearson's 1996 article on *Crash* (also published in *Saturday Night*) contrasts sharply with Fulford's account of *Shivers*. Pearson introduces Cronenberg as "Canada's pre-eminent filmmaker" (119) and describes what must have been Fulford's nightmare in 1975: Cronenberg given permission by the city government to close sections of major Toronto freeways in order to film car crashes and actors "[making] explicit, moaning love amidst the wreckage" (119). Yet Pearson, like Fulford, carefully situates Cronenberg between Canada and Hollywood. Pearson's Cronenberg is not just a director, but a "radical philosopher" because his films feature provocatively graphic sex instead of mindless Hollywood violence (122). She focuses special attention on Cronenberg's casting difficulties with Hollywood stars because "Hollywood actors seem to have an easier time being shot than being made love to" (122).

Yet whether testifying to Cronenberg's poisonous proximity to Hollywood or his immaculate Canadian distance from it, both Fulford and Pearson reduce the director's



films to an “us vs. them” matrix of interpretation. Of course, there are powerful social and economic factors informing the deployment of this distinction. Manjunath Pendakur’s study of the Canadian film industry’s political economy has a simple title that speaks volumes about its subject: *Canadian Dreams and American Control*. Pendakur cites a Canadian government report which estimates that 90 percent of annual revenues from Canadian film and video markets are controlled by U.S. interests, and notes that since 1974, Canada has had “the dubious distinction of being the number one foreign market for American feature films” (29–30). Barry Keith Grant, paraphrasing Peter Harcourt, goes so far as to conclude “it is nothing less than the Canadian imagination that has been colonized by American culture” (3). Paradoxically, this condition of cultural colonization has led to a tendency among Canadians to “define themselves not in terms of their own national history and traditions, but by reference to what they are *not*: Americans” (Lipset 53). Canadian criticism has chronicled the influence of such (dis)identifications on its films and literature by noting, for example, the centrality of the Canadian male “loser” or “outsider” figure as distinct from the aggressive, self-assured, and successful American hero (Fothergill, Atwood).

Given these factors, it is not surprising that Canadian film criticism has continually anchored its engagement with Cronenberg in poles defined by Hollywood and Canada. But what, then, do we make of a remarkably successful Canadian director whose work consistently treads on the territory of horror, that seemingly most American and un-Canadian of film genres? Where does he belong? R. Bruce Elder’s expansive study *Image and Identity: Reflections on Canadian Film and Culture* suggests Cronenberg does not belong at all; Elder refers to him only in a footnoted rejection of *Shivers* as a “schlock commercial vehicle . . . constructed on the model of the American B-Movie” (420n). Piers Handling also admits Cronenberg’s complete formal departure from a national tradition of Griersonian documentary realism, but then makes the first claim for a “Canadian Cronenberg” by relating his films to themes such as fatalism and alienation from the landscape prevalent in numerous Canadian literary and cinematic narratives (Handling). Handling’s model has recently been refined by a number of critics who offer a variety of lenses through which to view Cronenberg as a specifically Canadian artist. These range from a paradigm of national identity derived from Northrop Frye and Margaret Atwood (Beard), to a deployment of ethnographically-inflected criticism (McGregor), to a literalization of George Grant’s concept of technologized humanity (Testa), to a theorization of Québécois separatism as key to Cronenberg’s representations of national and sexual difference (Parker). Rather than systematically review the strengths and weaknesses of each of these models, I will speak to an issue which informs nearly all of them, and which stems from the Canadian reception of Cronenberg I have outlined: the connection of Cronenberg to horror, and consequently to American genre film.

#### SHOCK HORROR AND THE CANADIAN/AMERICAN NIGHTMARE

First, I wish to interrogate a key assumption that underlies discussions of Cronenberg’s Canadianness: that the modern horror film within which Cronenberg must be contextualized is a definitively American generic form. George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and John Carpenter’s *Halloween* (1978) are often cited in the articles mentioned above as examples of the modern horror tradition Cronenberg must be measured against, whether finally to attach him to it or divorce him from it (e.g., Beard 130; McGregor 50). But the shorthand exercise of using these films to represent modern horror again defines the genre frame within which Cronenberg will be evaluated as a matter of competing Canadian or American (and by extension, Hollywood) contexts. Such a framework erases not only the key fact that much of the most influential American horror of the 1960s and 70s came from independent filmmakers working outside the Hollywood mainstream (including Romero and Carpenter), but also the considerable international complexity of the birth of the modern horror film in general.

*Night of the Living Dead*’s debt to *The Birds* (1963) is nearly as pronounced as *Halloween*’s to *Psycho* (1960). Both Romero and Carpenter are direct descendants of Alfred Hitchcock’s landmark delivery of graphic carnage to the modern American horror film. Yet Hitchcock himself made *Psycho* in response to the European film scene at the close of the 1950s, particularly the bloody remakes of Gothic fiction standards by Britain’s Hammer Studios and Henri-Georges Clouzot’s French thriller *Diabolique* (1955) (Rebello 20–22). Hitchcock’s rivalry with Clouzot, who had been dubbed “the French Hitchcock,” extended to battles over rights to stories by Pierre Boileau and Thomas Narcejac, who provided the source material for Clouzot’s *Diabolique* as well as Hitchcock’s *Vertigo* (1958). Boileau and Narcejac also collaborated with the French director Georges Franju, most notably on the contemporaneous horror film *Les yeux sans visage* (*Eyes Without a Face*, 1959).

Franju’s *Eyes Without a Face*, though less well-known than *Psycho*, has an equally powerful claim to the title of modern horror prototype. In fact, the graphic gore that would later gain such central generic importance is only flirted with by Hitchcock, while it occupies center stage for Franju. I believe that it is the work of Franju, far more than that of Hitchcock, Romero or Carpenter, that provides an appropriate model of modern horror with which to evaluate Cronenberg’s engagement with the genre. Through Franju, we can contextualize the aesthetic that binds *Shivers* and *Crash* in terms of a generic mode I have defined elsewhere as “shock horror.”<sup>1</sup>

Shock horror, which I date from the late 1950s to the present, is characterized centrally by a confrontational address of the audience. This address utilizes graphic gore and visceral shock to access the social and historical

substrata of traumatic experience for viewers, and challenges them to integrate these publicly disseminated traumas with the realm of the personal and private. In this sense, I understand “shock” as it is theorized by Walter Benjamin—a symptom of the alienation and impoverishment of modern experience, but simultaneously a means of “adjustment” by jolting us into a state of awakened consciousness (Benjamin, “Work of Art” 250n). Shock horror’s merger of horrific spectacle, visceral viewer response, and social trauma challenges the audience’s relation to perception—both of the body and of history. This emphasis on self-recognition in shock horror extends the modern horror film’s shift to inner, *human* monstrosity following the more external threats characteristic of the Gothic adaptations of the 1930s and 40s and science fiction efforts of the 50s.

Shock horror also tends to blur distinctions between genre film and art film categories, thus disrupting high and low cultural boundaries. In this sense, the shock horror aesthetic mirrors Surrealism’s destabilizations of art and popular culture. Franju greatly admired Luis Buñuel’s Surrealist milestones *Un chien andalou* (1929) and *L’age d’or* (1930), and Cronenberg included both films in his eclectic program for the 1983 Toronto Film Festival Science Fiction Retrospective (Drew 57). *Le sang des bêtes* (*Blood of the Beasts*, 1949), Franju’s first professional effort, is a grisly documentary study of Paris slaughterhouses with a decided Surrealist edge. Although Franju once planned to give a lecture with André Breton on “fragments of bad films which correspond to Surrealist notions” (Durnat 28), the Surrealism of *Blood of the Beasts* seems much more indebted to Georges Bataille. It is Bataille’s relentlessly embodied, brutally shocking Surrealism that animates Franju’s film, rather than Breton’s more romantic investments in automatic writing and liberatory love. *Blood of the Beasts* enacts Bataille’s fascination with slaughterhouses as a space of social confrontation; Bataille criticizes the “fine folk who have reached the point of not being able to stand their own unseemliness” and have ensured that “the slaughterhouse is cursed and quarantined like a boat with cholera aboard” (Hollier xiii). Franju, like Bataille, insists on restoring the diseased substance of the slaughterhouse to the social field of vision and challenging those who wish to look away.

Franju powerfully adapts this Surrealist mode of confrontation for the horror film in *Eyes Without a Face*. In the film’s most notorious sequence, a plastic surgeon removes the facial skin of a kidnapped female victim in order to graft the flesh to the maimed face of his own daughter. Franju’s horrifyingly graphic spectacle juxtaposes visceral viewer response with the distant rationalism of medical practice and the disembodied method of the science film in order to undermine the authority of the social structures depicted. But the sequence is also confrontational on a more specific historical level: this scene resonates with other key moments in the film to evoke the trauma of World War II. The surgery strongly suggests Nazi medical experiments, just as the doctor’s noisy kennel recalls the

guard dogs of the German Occupation. The film presents a shocking vision of the present impregnated with a disturbing past, the everyday world haunted by specters of war, tainted technology, and death. Franju’s achievement in addressing the traumatic legacy of the Occupation and the Holocaust is all the more stunning in the context of late 1950s France, a moment when the explosion of the New Wave masks the disavowal of World War II trauma in most French fiction cinema.

Cronenberg’s films share strong affinities with Franju’s model of shock horror, and distinguish him from a director like George Romero, with whom he is more often associated. *Shivers* certainly resembles *Night of the Living Dead* at the level of broad narrative themes, such as the siege of individuals by a contagious, infected mass, and both films comment bitterly on contemporary social issues (the aftermath of the sexual revolution in *Shivers*, the racial turmoil of the civil rights struggle in *Night of the Living Dead*). But where Romero constructs a strong and sympathetic protagonist in Ben (Duane Jones), Cronenberg’s Roger St. Luc (Paul Hampton) is cold, unemotional, and bland. When Ben is shot by a redneck militia posse at the conclusion of *Night of the Living Dead*, we are meant to feel sorrow and anger at his death, to criticize the social order that murders him, and to acknowledge that his supposed saviors are no less deadly than the zombies. By contrast, when St. Luc finally succumbs to the infectious parasitic kiss at the end of *Shivers*, we are torn between horror *and* relief as we contemplate the shot in agonizing slow motion. St. Luc’s transformation is violent and disturbing, but it is also a welcome abandonment of his stifling disconnection from desire exhibited throughout the film. While Romero reaches a dramatic endpoint (albeit a nihilistic one), Cronenberg inhabits the ambivalent moment of transformation itself, where neither forward nor backward movement promises any definitive resolution of conflict.<sup>2</sup> This variation in emphasis establishes an important index of difference between the films, one that seemingly points toward a matter of familiar Canadian / American distinctions (e.g., St. Luc the “loser” vs. Ben the “hero”), but that ultimately exceeds such formulations in a register of shock horror.

Cronenberg has referred to himself as afflicted with the “very Canadian” and potentially “paralyzing” curse of balance—to “see all sides of the story at once” and “come down on all sides at once or none at all” (Beard and Handling 176). By considering his work in terms of shock horror, however, this “curse” becomes the productive foundation of his films, as well as the basis for an account of his Canadianness that moves beyond paralysis. Cronenberg’s films do more than merely contrast or even dialectically oppose “the Canadian drama of restraint, internalized violence and stasis” with “the American drama of freedom, externalized violence and progress” (Beard 129). Instead, Cronenberg transforms these categories by insisting on their absolute interdependence in a shock horror aesthetic of viewer confrontation. There is no possibility of artificially separating one element from the other,

nor of dividing them neatly into “Canadian” or “American” components, nor of determining one’s ultimate domination of the other (*contra* Beard 131–32). Cronenberg’s realism depends on the shocking spectacle of horror, just as his horror depends on the shocking recognition of a realistically depicted world. In this sense, Cronenberg does not completely diverge from a Canadian tradition of documentary realism, but revises and challenges its scope in critical ways.<sup>3</sup> Although he has referred to “the heavy hand of John Grierson” and the National Film Board as a “suffocating” influence in his early years as a filmmaker (Rodley 35), Cronenberg ultimately integrates horror with acute social observation in his films. Just as Franju imports Surrealism to documentary form in *Blood of the Beasts* in order to engender a brutally accurate vision for his audience that surmounts the eye’s resistance to “seeing everything as strange” (Durgnat 20), so Cronenberg presents a brand of social realism in his features that uses horrific affect to lend truthful color to its documents.

The same strategy permeates the work of both J.G. Ballard and William S. Burroughs, authors whose importance for Cronenberg is evident even outside the adaptations of Ballard’s *Crash* and Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch* (1991). When *Shivers* is considered in conjunction with Ballard’s *High-Rise* (also published in 1975), the revelation of two such idiosyncratic imaginations working along uncannily intertwined lines is startling. And when Ballard speaks of his own admiration for Burroughs, he could be describing the impulse behind Cronenberg’s films as well:

Burroughs called his greatest novel *Naked Lunch*, by which he meant it’s what you see on the end of a fork. Telling the truth. It’s very difficult to do that in fiction because the whole process of writing fiction is a process of sidestepping the truth. I think he got very close to it, in his way, and I hope I’ve done the same in mine.

(Kadrey and Stefanac 5)

Although the social trauma addressed by Cronenberg is never as specific or as pointed as Franju’s engagement with World War II, his representation of social strife mirrors Franju’s confrontational methods: the embodiment of the social issue through painfully literalized images and a visceral audience address. Witness, for example, the treatment of divorce in *The Brood* (1979) and media manipulation in *Videodrome*. Cronenberg’s interaction with the horror genre has been long-term and consistently subversive of genre expectations. With each new film, Cronenberg reinterprets his central question of “What is horror?” Can it be found in a single psychology shared traumatically by identical twins (*Dead Ringers*, 1988)? Or at the heart of writing as a perilous creative act (*Naked Lunch*)? Or at the intersection of sexual and imperialist self-delusion (*M. Butterfly*, 1993)? Cronenberg’s films answer “yes” by consistently adapting an aesthetic of horrific confrontation to terrain that may seem alien to the genre, and even diametrically opposed to it. In this sense, Cronenberg has always been and continues to be in conversation with the horror film, but his contributions to that conversation

constantly renegotiate its very parameters. Much of Cronenberg’s power comes through an encounter with and transformation of genre, where the manipulation of genre conventions and even the orchestration of his own patterns of genre revision are constantly reworked to keep the disturbing challenge to his audience potent and vital.

#### *CRASH: THE WRECKAGE OF GENRE AND ART*

With this analytic framework in mind, perhaps now we can better comprehend *Crash*, a film which resolutely evades audience attempts to define its generic, authorial, or national identity. *Crash* generated specific viewer expectations through advertising emphasizing its Special Jury Prize for “audacity” at Cannes and its preoccupation with “sex and car crashes.” Additional publicity came from the film’s struggles with censors and distributors, most notably in Britain and the United States (especially Ted Turner). One critical reaction to the film has been dismissal based on a perceived failure to live up to its controversial advance word—for delivering unerotic sex and unthrilling car crashes.<sup>4</sup> But the film resists such blanket descriptions. James Ballard’s (James Spader) first crash shocks us in its jagged, real-time rapidity, while Vaughan’s (Elias Koteas) climactic suicide wreck stuns us in its denial of dynamic spectacle in favor of a brief aftermath shot. Likewise, the stagy emptiness of the opening three sexual encounters lulls us into unreadiness for the intensity and erotic danger of scenes like the car wash sequence, which establishes an electric relay of desire between Catherine (Deborah Kara Unger), Vaughan, and James. Cronenberg’s staccato rhythm of engagement and estrangement of audience expectations persistently questions just what these wishes are, and how our urgency to fulfill them may access the very subjectivity of desperation embodied by the film’s characters. Murray Pomerance eloquently distills the philosophy propelling these characters, as well as the film itself: “Action is nothing in the face of the desire for action, and the desire for action is exhausting” (Pomerance 20). *Crash*’s ever-receding address of audience desire for genre sex and violence ensures that its level of confrontation remains both challenging and exhausting. In other words, the film’s shock horror aesthetic paradoxically maintains its affective power by querying the very desire for affective arousal.

*Crash*, in keeping with shock horror trends, does not limit itself to an interrogation of genre filmmaking pleasures and conventions; like almost all of Cronenberg’s work (and increasingly so since *Dead Ringers*), it also calls to mind genre film’s flipside, the art film. David Bordwell describes international art cinema as a “distinct mode of film practice” that appears after World War II, defines itself in opposition to classical Hollywood structures, and “foregrounds the narrational act by posing enigmas” for the viewer to ponder (“Art Cinema” 56, 60). Since the art cinema “defines itself as a realistic cinema,” it also tends to feature “realistic” locations, character psychology, and most importantly, sex (“Art Cinema” 57). Given the importance of sexuality and censorship to the success of



the international art film, “it could be maintained that from the mid-1960s onward [art cinema] has stabilized itself around a new genre: the soft-core art film” (Neale 33). In light of these definitions, *Crash*’s scandalous sex and enigmatic, non-classical narrative substantiate its status as a textbook art film.

Or does it? A crucial ingredient in the marketing and criticism of art cinema is its identity as an author’s cinema, associated with the names of certain individual filmmakers. The art film, according to Bordwell, often “uses a concept of authorship to unify the text.” The effect is that “the competent viewer watches the film expecting not order in the narrative but stylistic signatures in the narration” (“Art Cinema” 59). *Crash* directly preserves the literary imprint of J.G. Ballard by retaining the name of the novel’s protagonist, “James Ballard,” but where are the cinematic “stylistic signatures” of David Cronenberg in the film? Certainly the broad thematic components (bodies, technology, agonized transformation) match his *oeuvre*, but where are the fantastic images, the grisly metaphors made flesh that earned him his cult status as the “Baron of Blood?” The scars and prosthetics of *Crash* cannot begin to approach the nightmarish convergence of human, housefly, and telepod in *The Fly* (1986). The spectacle of Colin Seagrave’s (Peter MacNeil) demise as Jayne Mansfield barely registers next to the flamboyance of the exploding head sequence in *Scanners* (1980). Even when James penetrates Gabrielle (Rosanna Arquette) through the wound in her leg, we are only given the *suggestion* of an image made graphically explicit via Max Renn’s (James Woods) slit stomach in *Videodrome*.

Yet Cronenberg *does* appear in *Crash*. Near the end of the film, James and Catherine visit the auto pound to claim Vaughan’s wrecked Lincoln. The pound officer, invisible behind his post, tells the couple he cannot fathom their attachment to the car, aside from its value as “a total write-off,” and informs them that they will have to return during regular business hours to file the correct form. The disembodied voice of the pound officer belongs unmistakably to Cronenberg himself. This unusual, spectral cameo (Cronenberg has guested only once before in his own films, as an obstetrician in *The Fly*) deserves consideration for its appearance at a point in Cronenberg’s career when his status as a cult celebrity has reached a level of real visibility. In addition to playing himself on Canadian television programs like *Maniac Mansion* (1991) (in the spirit, perhaps, of *Videodrome*’s McLuhanesque Brian O’Blivion?), Cronenberg has landed starring roles in Clive Barker’s horror film *Nightbreed* (1989) and Don McKellar’s Canadian short *Blue* (1992), along with smaller but notable parts in *Extreme Measures* (Michael Apted, 1996), *To Die For* (Gus Van Sant, 1995) and the Canadian vampire film *Blood and Donuts* (Holly Dale, 1995). So why has Cronenberg, whose chief authorial sign would have to be depictions of the body in all its painful corporeality, chosen to present his own now-recognizable person in such a flagrantly disembodied manner in *Crash*?

The cameo is a significant hint about the film’s stance toward the safety and stability granted by a traditional art film label. Cronenberg’s appearance as a faceless voice (upholding the tidy order of Canadian bureaucracy, no less!) satirizes the mystique surrounding notions of the author as individual genius that lends the art film its coherence—both as an industry and as a mode of viewing practice.<sup>5</sup> When Vaughan refers to “the reshaping of the human body by modern technology”—the standard critical interpretation of Cronenberg’s films—as a “crude sci-fi concept that floats on the surface and doesn’t threaten anybody,” employed only to “test the resilience of my potential partners in psychopathology,” he is on one level speaking *for* Cronenberg and directly *to* the audience. Vaughan’s challenge underlines the fact that there is no truly comfortable position offered to the spectator of *Crash*, whether they appeal to the familiarity of genre conventions or to the art film’s trademarks of authorial expressivity. Cronenberg’s cameo ultimately questions the nature of his own position as “star” author, and, by extension, his status as a national author. David Bordwell asserts that the “fullest flower of the art-cinema paradigm occur[s] at the moment when the combination of novelty and nationalism” converges in an ideal marketing package, such as a film representing a distinct national movement or “New Wave” (*Narration* 231). Cronenberg’s (dis)appearance in *Crash* mirrors the film itself as it frustrates attempts to compartmentalize identity under art film banners of the author or national essence. Rather than display a celebrity visibility in the manner of Hitchcock, Cronenberg’s cameo emphasizes the unseen, suggesting that capturing star identity or national character is as tantalizing (and as improbable) as placing an invisible face to an ethereal voice. But the *desire* to capture such definable identities brings us to the heart of *Crash* and its address of contemporary social crisis—namely, the imagination of self across the traumatic divide of public and private in the mass media age.

*Crash*’s status as shock horror revolves around the obsession of its characters with the pleasure and pain drawn from the crashes of public icons such as James Dean, Jayne Mansfield, and John F. Kennedy. For Vaughan, who literally lives in a replica of the car in which Kennedy died, the president’s assassination is a “special kind of car crash.” Vaughan and his circle reflect our own participation in “the public fascination with torn and opened bodies and torn and opened persons” described by Mark Seltzer as a “wound culture” (3). The phenomenon following Princess Diana’s death is yet another instance of the “collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound” characteristic of wound culture, with its ability to function as a “switch point between individual and collective, public and private orders of things” (Seltzer 3, 5). The characters of *Crash* also worship the violent and erotic moment of impact, but participate physically in crashes in order to bring themselves ever closer to the fulfillment it appears to offer: a flashing instant, however brutal or fleeting, which could truly bind a private self and public icon, along with the networks of fantasy and desire traversing them. For the

relation between private selfhood and public star iconicity can be volatile, fluid and resolutely ambivalent. Public star bodies are at once “prostheses for our own mutant desirability” as well as objects of humiliation “reminding us that they do not possess the phallic power of their images: we do” (Warner 250, 251). As Hal Foster characterizes this fraught dynamic, “the star is too far from us, or too close . . . the star has too little, or too much, over us.” (58) By painstakingly restaging James Dean’s crash down to the smallest “authentic” detail, Vaughan and his comrades (including, by proxy, ourselves, represented by the diegetic audience of witnesses) attempt to capture a moment when the shifting private relation to the public star body—identification and abstraction, longing and hatred, sympathy and revenge—crystallizes and coheres. There is no longer a private self existing in tension with a famous public other, but a perfect fusion, an integrated embodiment of all the psychic energy that has attracted and repelled them.

The utopian moment of private/ public fusion always proves just beyond realization, so compulsive repetition ensues.<sup>6</sup> Vaughan plans the Jayne Mansfield reenactment as blood still trickles down his temple from the Dean crash. Vaughan’s group feverishly pursues activities that strive to surmount the impossibility of fusion by testing the divisions between public spectacle and private act: studying crash-test videos with the rapt (and erotic) attention of devoted movie fans, posing in photographs designed to evoke the documents of famous crashes, having sex in cars and public spaces with interchangeable partners in order to erode the intimacy of the act. But eventually and inevitably, there is only repetition, and then the simulation of repeated events. Vaughan dies with a cry of frustration, not triumph, as he abandons yet another attempt (whether using cars or sex) to collide with James and Catherine. The cycle continues even after Vaughan’s death, as James assumes Vaughan’s role and stalks Catherine. The last lines of the film, spoken by James to Catherine after she survives her crash, are “Maybe the next one . . . maybe the next one.” This doubled phrase is itself a duplication of lines spoken near the beginning of the film by Catherine to James. The sense of an inescapable standstill is highlighted by the camera movement, which effectively cancels the descending tracking shot of the film’s opening sequence by concluding with a mirrored ascending shot away from the couple in the grass beside the highway.

But *Crash*, like *Shivers*, complicates its shock horror aesthetic of audience confrontation by insisting on irreconcilable counter-currents in its portrayal of social trauma. The intertwined horror and relief of *Shivers*’s climactic transformation as a commentary on the sexual revolution finds an analogue in the wrecks of *Crash* as displays of wound culture. These crashes are horrifying in their violent, destructive, and ultimately failed attempt to fuse public icon and private self, but somehow also affirming in their furious determination to connect with a sense of truly lived experience—at any cost. Cronenberg has called *Crash* “an existentialist romance,” and the label

rings true in terms of the film’s ability to convey the real affect at stake in the desperate desire for experience (Smith 17). The disarming long take of James gently retracing and caressing the bruises inflicted by Vaughan on Catherine’s body reveals the need to heal and empathize behind the drive to alienate and destroy. Similarly, Catherine’s tears at the end of the film disclose the powerful emotion motivating an increasingly mechanical series of forced, disengaged simulations. *Crash* insists that these tears cannot be fully explained as an empty gesture of mourning practiced by a wound culture—a culture which Walter Benjamin foresaw in the individual consumed with “the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about” (“Storyteller” 101). Instead, Catherine’s tears also signify the genuine, bodily vulnerability and pain of groping for experiential meaning in a deeply threatening world. Benjamin’s description of such a world, which bears a spiritual resemblance to the final scene of *Crash*, vividly captures this dimension of pain: “A generation . . . now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body” (“Storyteller” 84).

Benjamin’s countryside belongs to a Europe irrevocably altered by the destruction of World War I. Where, then, does the landscape of *Crash* finally belong? Some might claim the film is the most persuasive evidence yet that Cronenberg is fundamentally a Hollywood filmmaker, enraptured with specifically American icons and stardom above all else. Yet the representation of these icons, as well as their consumption, reflects back an image so fractured with ambivalence that any simple association with American mythology crumbles. Others might interpret *Crash* as testimony to Cronenberg’s Canadian identity, with its unprecedentedly explicit and strategic use of Toronto locations. But witness the crucial Jayne Mansfield crash scene, where a Toronto freeway is denaturalized by heavy stillness and the absence of diegetic sound to the point of unrecognizability. Yet this sequence *does* take on a somewhat familiar aspect when considered in conjunction with the recent work of such major Canadian directors as Atom Egoyan, Guy Maddin, and Jean-Claude Lauzon, all of whom have also given shape to troubling visions of fantasy, violence, and insanity as documents of a Canadian imaginary.<sup>7</sup> The fact that Cronenberg’s shock horror has helped pioneer a “Canadian” framework for these visions precisely by transforming generic and national traditions is an appropriately ironic tribute to a career which continues to expand the horizons of both the modern horror film and Canadian cinema by never truly finding a home in either.

#### Notes

0. A version of this essay was presented at the 1997 Society for Cinema Studies Conference in Ottawa. I would like to thank Peter Harcourt, William Paul, and Murray Pomerance for their comments and encouragement at the conference. Lauren Berlant,

Barry Grant, Tom Gunning, and the Mass Culture Workshop at the University of Chicago also provided valuable questions, suggestions, and editorial feedback.

1. The following three paragraphs summarize my previous work on shock horror and Georges Franju. For the more fully elaborated discussion, see my "Films Without a Face: Shock Horror in the Cinema of Georges Franju."
2. At this point, I should underline my argument's divergence from the reading of Cronenberg advanced by Robin Wood, who interprets just this sort of painful ambivalence as "reactionary" ("Introduction" 24) and an expression of "total negativity" ("Cronenberg" 132). See, respectively, Robin Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," in *The American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. Robin Wood and Richard Lippe (Toronto: Festival of Festivals, 1979), 7–28; and "Cronenberg: A Dissenting View," in *The Shape of Rage: The Films of David Cronenberg*, ed. Piers Handling (Toronto: General Publishing, 1983), 115–35. Of course the title of this subsection is meant to signal both my indebtedness to and departure from Wood's analysis of Cronenberg.

The ambiguity of the *Shivers* ending also resembles the "loosening of causal relations" that David Bordwell finds characteristic of art cinema narration ("Art Cinema" 57); I will return to the matter of the art film later in the essay.

3. Along similar lines, Murray Pomerance describes Cronenberg's work in these terms: "As a portrait of the Canada of his time it is—remarkably and perhaps unbelievably—a kind of photo-realism." "Considering Cronenberg," *Canadian Art* 9: 2 (Summer 1992), 42. Jim Leach believes *Crash* "works best as a documentary . . . it is a film about Toronto, a slightly skewed account of the experience of living, and especially, driving there . . . Grierson meets Baudrillard?" Review of *Crash*, *Film Studies Association of Canada Newsletter* 21: 1 (Fall 1996), 19. Cronenberg wrote, photographed and directed several Canadian landscape documentary fillers for Canadian television in the early 1970s.
4. For a Canadian statement of this position, see Bart Testa's review in the *Film Studies Association of Canada Newsletter* 21: 1 (Fall 1996), 15–17. Interestingly, Testa's review recalls Fulford's attack on *Shivers* in both its vehemence and its need to associate Cronenberg negatively with Hollywood: "*Crash* is the biggest erotic-film-scandal dud since *Showgirls* (Paul Verhoeven, 1995), or maybe that's too general, let's say since *Barb Wire* (David Hogan, 1996). (Both films star Canadian women, incidentally, while Cronenberg relies on American stars)" (15).
5. This is not to say that Cronenberg has resisted cultivating his image as an *auteur* throughout his career. Indeed, his cooperation with the recent release

of digitally remastered "collector's edition" videocassettes by CFP attests to his support of such an image, at least on a marketing level. The cassettes feature his photo on the packaging, and new interviews with the director. It is also worth noting that Cronenberg's cameo in *Crash* recalls Jean-Luc Godard's audio "appearance" in *Vivre sa vie* (1962). (I am indebted to Tom Gunning for this observation.)

6. Failed fusion and the subsequent attempts to revisit that site of failure are themselves (compulsively?) recurring themes in all of Cronenberg's work. The increasingly desperate "experiments" of Seth Brundle/ Brundlefly in *The Fly* and the Mantle twins in *Dead Ringers* are especially noteworthy examples.
7. Also worth mentioning here are the Canadian horror films beyond Cronenberg's *oeuvre*. These films, most notably Bob Clark's *Deathdream* (1972) and *Black Christmas* (1975) and the prolific genre work of William Fruet, including *Death Weekend* (1976), *Funeral Home* (1982), and *Spasms* (1983), have received only the slightest critical attention.

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### Chris Rodley (review date April 1999)

SOURCE: "Game Boy," in *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 9, No. 3, April, 1999, pp. 8–10.

[In the following review, Rodley discusses the comedy, the double meanings, and the various levels of reality in *eXistenZ*.]

**eXistenZ**. It's new. And it's here. It's a virtual-reality game that's almost indistinguishable from lived experience and it's also the new movie from David Cronenberg. What's more, it's the first wholly original creation from the director since *Videodrome* (1982)—the film his fans regard as his quintessential work because it most effectively captures the alarming nature of the cinema's invasion of the passive self. **eXistenZ** is *Videodrome*'s inverse twin, in which the interactive self invades cinema.

I talked to Cronenberg in London, a city which greeted his last cinema release *Crash* (1996) with an uproar of tabloid outrage. He'd just arrived from the Berlin Film Festival where **eXistenZ** had received its world premiere and its director had won a Silver Bear for "outstanding artistic achievement". But there was an air of dread about him. The near-psychotic reaction of some British film critics to *Crash* seems to have scarred him. To Cronenberg, being in London with a new movie feels "creepy".

Over the past 17 years Cronenberg has played the symbiotic bug, gleefully infecting other people's texts with his own concerns—novels as diverse as Stephen King's *The Dead Zone*, William Burroughs' *The Naked Lunch* and J.G. Ballard's *Crash*. There's also David H. Hwang's play *M Butterfly* and the rethinking of the 1958 sci-fi movie *The Fly*. Even *Dead Ringers* (1988) was loosely based on the real-life case of identical twin gynaecologists Cyril and Stewart Marcus. **eXistenZ**, however, is completely new.

Shy, sexy Allegra Geller (Jennifer Jason Leigh) is an adored game-devising goddess in a near future in which the inventors of virtual-reality games have become cultural megastars. Her new game, **eXistenZ**, plugs so effectively into an individual's desires and fears that the frontiers between fantasy and reality disappear, leaving the player wandering compassless in landscapes and situations that may or may not be of their own imagining. However, this

successful game genius has fanatical enemies—both those who are against gaming and rival gaming companies. After a botched attempt on her life during *eXistenZ*'s first public demonstration, Allegra finds herself on the run with Ted Pikul (Jude Law), a novice security guard for Antenna Research, the hitech toy firm with millions invested in the game.

The intense game reality of *eXistenZ* is produced by its unique Game Pod, an organic creature grown from fertilised amphibian eggs stuffed with synthetic DNA. Resembling a kidney with large, aroused nipples, the fleshy, pulsating device is connected to each player via an Umby-Cord which plugs directly into a Bioport at the base of the spine. Hotwired into the human nervous system, the pod has unrestricted access to personal memories, anxieties and preoccupations. With a \$5 million Fatwa on her head from one company or another (possibly her own employers), Allegra, accompanied by Ted, embarks on a synaptic road movie into the virtual heart of her own game where nothing—and this is a gross understatement—is as it seems.

Cronenberg works this game/movie connection into a metaphor so effective that as soon as *eXistenZ* is over you feel the need to 'play' the film again to understand its rules more fully, certain you must have missed something. As one might expect from Cronenberg, *eXistenZ* fuses all the components of cinema—storytelling, acting, production design, sound, images, music—to play with the viewer at the same time as representing the game to them. But what makes *eXistenZ* potentially dangerous is its philosophical basis. Like reality, it can bite. Literally. It's a virtual-reality game. And it's a movie.

#### TECHNO-PROPHET

"It came as a shock to me," Cronenberg says of the idea. "It wasn't out of desperation, or a feeling of, 'Oh my god, I haven't written anything original for a while and therefore I haven't been true to my flame.' I was just ready to write something original. The spark for it, though, was the Salman Rushdie affair. I had an idea for a sci-fi movie that would have something to do with that situation, which horrified and fascinated me at the same time."

In spring 1995, while still conceiving *eXistenZ*, Cronenberg was asked by *Shift* magazine in Canada to interview Rushdie. "I might have had the idea of making the artist character in the movie a game designer even then. Why that should be, I don't know. Maybe I wanted some distance, some metaphorical play that wasn't autobiographical." During the interview, and unbeknownst to Rushdie, Cronenberg tested his ideas out on the fugitive writer. "We talked about games and computers. He'd had to learn about computers because, being on the run, he needed to work on a laptop. That meeting crystallised things for me, so I posited a time when games could be art, and a game designer an artist."

With *eXistenZ* Cronenberg has returned whole-heartedly to his most abiding source of ideas—radical developments in bio-technology, and their often disturbing, but potentially

liberating, consequences. As in the telekinetic conspiracy tale *Scanners* (1980) and the telepornographic hypnosis conspiracy tale *Videodrome*, the appropriation (or destruction) of these developments by political interests drives the narrative. Indeed, Cronenberg revamps some of *Videodrome*'s notions of "the new flesh" as technological hardware, confident that some of his seemingly outrageous past imaginings have become reality. For instance, Dr Dan Keloid's "neutralised" skin grafts in *Rabid* (1976) are now science fact, not fiction.

Cronenberg: "It's bizarre that something I invented then has come to pass. By using foetal or umbilical tissue they can now make a skin graft that will work on a kidney or whatever because it doesn't know what it is yet. It just says: 'Oh, I can be this.' But that's a classic sci-fi thing, like Arthur C. Clarke saying, 'I invented satellites ten years before they happened.' I'm not interested in being that kind of techno-prophet. However, I'm very aware of what's happening with computers and I find it exciting.

"Intel and all the chip makers are now experimenting with animal proteins as the basis for their chips. They can't use metals any more—they have to get right down to the molecular and even atomic level. Imagine the market! People will want it—either on the entertainment or the health front. You have your little case full of different organs that have been designed specifically for game playing. Or organs for things we've never had before. You could have new sexual organs—which I play with metaphorically in the movie. They could be very pleasurable in a way no naturally derived organ has been. People are having surgery for all kinds of frivolous reasons, so why not have it for a really good functional reason?"

#### SEX YOU'VE NEVER EVEN DREAMED OF

In this bio-degradable anti-metal world, many of the aesthetic signatures Cronenberg's critics love to disparage—deadpan acting, anonymous-looking locations, lack of 'drama'—become virtual virtues. This is not a hand-eye co-ordination-testing shoot-em-up world at all, but something that allows the participant to take decisions at their own pace. At a certain point, *eXistenZ* takes the viewer inside Allegra's game, providing a complex Chinese-box structure to the film itself because the game and its framing 'reality' look so similar. Although the 'reality bleeds' continually signalled throughout the movie are not an original device, they presage a massive narrative haemorrhage at the end, so much so that it's impossible to give an in-depth synopsis of the film without literally giving the game away.

"When I started writing it," says Cronenberg, "I remember thinking I wouldn't play the game in the movie; that it would be about an artist on the run. I'd allude to the game and you'd see people playing it, but the audience would never get into it. It would be like an elegant frustration. But that didn't last long! Once I'd started, I thought, 'I wanna see what this game's all about!' At that point it

became a meditation on the virtual-reality genre and how I didn't want to be part of it. As soon as you do, you're *The Lawnmower Man*, you're *Strange Days*, whatever. Of course we have to be arrogant and assume that we can do something no one else has done."

And the weight of Cronenberg's recent past—the somewhat solemn debates engendered by his films of the key counterculture novels *The Naked Lunch* and *Crash*—has been lifted in another way. The concern to work at the level of metaphor remains, but there's now a rich vein of black humour. *eXistenZ* is never more hilarious than in the scene where Ted gets fitted with a Biopod (he doesn't have one because of a phobia about having his body penetrated) so he can play *eXistenZ* with Allegra in order to assess the damage done to her Game Pod during an assassination attempt. The trouble is, the fitting has to be done off the beaten track in less than hygienic circumstances by a greasy mechanic named Gas (Willem Dafoe, in gleeful, Bobby Peru mode). Ted's virginal fear, a filthy Biopod insertion gun and an explosive 'fitting'—which leaves him face down in agony, legs paralysed, while Gas goes "to wash up"—are so loaded with sexual content the scene threatens to burst.

*eXistenZ* is full of such scenes, and Allegra's game works on so many levels that everything the characters say, do or see offers multiple meanings—sexuality being only one of them. "At Berlin one French journalist wondered if I was aware of the homosexuality in that scene because to him it was totally an anal-fuck scene. So I said, 'Y-e-e-s-s I can see that now you mention it!' Humour was always there in my films, even in *Crash*, but here it's right up front. The whole middle of the movie plays like a comedy, basically. People sometimes think you decide it's time to lighten up, but it wasn't intentional. There's a ton of sex in the movie, metaphorically speaking, and because it pleased me so much, I didn't want to spoil it with real sex. I'm saying, 'This is better sex. This is sex you've never even dreamed of before. Let's just concentrate on this.'"

*eXistenZ* was initially developed by MGM, but the studio was concerned that the central character was a woman. "Their own demographics tell them this kind of movie is going to be attractive to young men—because it's sci-fi and about games—and young men don't want the lead to be a girl. They want it to be *them*. Suddenly you realise you've not written quite so commercially viable a script as you thought. Feminist so-called paranoia about Hollywood is absolutely justified."

Cronenberg himself had first conceived of the game artist as male, "because it's me, Salman Rushdie, whatever", but the script didn't snap into place until he changed the character's sex. "It's that whole role-reversal thing. If Allegra were a man and Ted a woman, imagine the scene where he has to talk her into getting a Biopod fitted so he can plug into her. It's the guy fucking the girl, it would have been crude. But the punishment came when we tried to find a hot young actor to play a character like Ted,

because they don't want to be subservient. Even in unusual movies that same old American macho stuff is still going on."

#### EXISTENTIALISTS VERSUS REALISTS

*eXistenZ*'s vision of the near future is set in a countryside littered with old buildings now being used for something other than their original function. This move away from the city comes out of a decision made by Cronenberg with regular collaborators Carol Spier (production designer) and Peter Suschitzky (director of photography) to remove from this world everything people would expect from a sci-fi movie about game playing. There are no computer screens, televisions, sneakers, watches or suits. The result of this multiplication of minor subtractions is perfectly subliminal: you can feel the operation of a 'look', but its exact nature is elusive.

"I removed *Blade Runner*, basically," admits Cronenberg. "The production design of that movie has a weird life of its own. It's almost as if that world exists. It's a very interesting phenomenon. Instead, we were replicating some of the style of some video games. If you want a character to wear a plaid shirt, it takes up a lot of memory, so it's much easier if he has a solid beige shirt. So I was trying to replicate the blockiness of the polygon structure of some games."

Everywhere in the *eXistenZ* world there are game players, game inventors, game doctors and game manufacturers. As Gas declares, he's a garage mechanic, "only on the most pathetic level of reality". But the countryside is also home to fundamentalist fanatics opposed to the "radical deforming of reality" caused by such games. Around this conflict is where Rushdie, the game, the movie, cinema and the metaphor that is *eXistenZ* itself fuse so effortlessly. *eXistenZ*'s supporters proclaim "Death to realism!" and describe its wounded and weary as "victims of realism". When Allegra's Game Pod, at one point hopelessly diseased, explodes in a shower of black spores, they are the smothering black spores of "reality". This play-off of perceptions is what makes *eXistenZ* such an unexpected meditation on cinema. The characters yelling "Long live realism!" are not only, on a purely narrative level, the enemy of *eXistenZ* the game; they are literally enemies of *eXistenZ* the movie—which toys with reality precisely for our visceral and intellectual pleasure.

Humorous as *eXistenZ* is, there's a small scene at the centre that slyly represents the underlying seriousness of the project. Wandering around in a disused virtual-reality trout farm where components for Game Pods are now being bred from mutated amphibians, Ted confesses to Allegra: "I don't want to be here. We're stumbling around in the unformed world, not knowing what the rules are, or if there are any rules. We're under attack from forces that want to destroy us but that we don't understand." The game goddess replies: "Yeah, that's my game." Ted can only observe sarcastically: "It's a game that's going to be difficult to market." But Allegra has the last word: "It's a game everyone's already playing."



Cronenberg: "I'm talking about the existentialists, i.e. the game players, versus the realists. The deforming of reality is a criticism that has been levelled against all art, even religious icons, which has to do with Man being made in God's image, so you can't make images of either. Art is a scary thing to a lot of people because it shakes your understanding of reality, or shapes it in ways that are socially unacceptable. As a card-carrying existentialist I think all reality is virtual. It's all invented. It's collaborative, so you need friends to help you create a reality. But it's not about what is real and what isn't.

"At Berlin I jokingly said the movie is existentialist propaganda. I meant it playfully, of course. But I have come to believe that this is the game we are playing. In Berlin I didn't even get into the discussion about mortality. That's even more basic—the absurdity of human existence. Because it's too short to be able to understand enough, to synthesise enough, to make intelligent choices. So we're blundering around, terrified because we know we're going to die at some inopportune moment."

#### Marq Smith (essay date Summer 1999)

SOURCE: "Wound Envy: Touching Cronenberg's *Crash*," in *Screen*, Vol. 40, No. 2, Summer, 1999, pp. 193–202.

[In the following essay, Smith discusses the auto accidents that occur in *Crash* in the context of Freud's thought on male and female hysteria, trauma, and the connection between sex and death.]

*The frantic use of automobiles is not . . . for the purpose of going somewhere in particular; here it is not a priori a question of distances to cross, which creates inevitably new travel conditions. To go nowhere, even to ride around in a deserted quarter or on a crowded freeway, now seems natural for the voyeur-voyager in his car.*

Paul Virilio<sup>1</sup>

*Screen* is right to have begun a debate on David Cronenberg's *Crash* (1996), a film which seems to have caused so much controversy and yet, up to this point, has neither received nor generated sagacious consideration in film studies.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the reasons for this noisy silence lie with the manner in which *Crash* makes the marriage of desire and death a beautiful thing. Indeed, no one should ever have doubted the sensual poetic beauty of death's aesthetics. In approaching the proximity of *Crash* one might talk of an anticipation where sacrificial urgency goes beyond vanity, of being on the verge, the sublimity of losing control, of a meeting and of a coming together. A meeting by accident, a coming together of strangers. Of the erotic tenderness of impact. The painful pleasures of the crash, the intimacy of the graze, the arousal of the head-on collision. A touching. The union of the shapes and spaces of an imploding moulded interior and the enfolding surfaces and planes of body parts reaching out for

intimacy. A crash course in love.<sup>3</sup> The fusion of every polymorphous perversity sanctioned by a deviant technology, every anatomical meld, every possible permeation of corporeal and physiological contact. Finally, at last, a remembering. The memory of a unique event that every deformity signals. An aching, barely sensed experience of pain and desire. The invention of a new algebra: wounds—not just facial and genital injuries (we should not presume or fixate)—become 'handholds', contact points for all of the possibilities to come; a tracing out of the machine through the imprinted contours of these mysteriously erotic stigmatized wounds and tissue-damaged scars. The beauty of having your first crush.

But beauty, as Georges Bataille suggests, 'cannot act. It can only be and preserve itself.'<sup>4</sup> It cannot give the imminently possible accident a meaning. It cannot show that the accident is not a defect but 'a property of the system'<sup>5</sup> of progress, of movement, and of speed. And anyway, the accidents that this beauty speaks of in *Crash* are not accidental. They are an affirmation, like the wished-for voluntary death proscribed by Nietzsche: the imperative is to die at the right time.<sup>6</sup> These accidents, then, are desires: desires for what J.G. Ballard has called 'the new sexuality that is born from a perverse technology'.<sup>7</sup> And surely this is a matter not of beauty, but rather of sexuality.

And yet there is little sexuality in the history of the crash. You have to look hard for it. You have to look hard to find out how sexuality got involved with the crash. And here we might say that this hard look, the very process of searching for the history of the crash—car, train, plane, whatever—replicates and plays out the structure of the Trinity at the heart of the discourse of psychoanalysis: symptomatology, aetiology, therapeutics. First we look to the crash site for signs of life, for movement, for survivors. We inspect for damage, for missing limbs, for wounds, lesions and indicators of physiological, neurological or psychological injury. We seek to explain the lost moment of the accident. We search out the black box for unexplained truth. Then we look for causes, explanations, justifications, for who to blame, who to accuse, and for those who should be held accountable, who or what should our recriminations be directed against, and what might their motives or purpose have been. If any. Finally we mourn. We (try, and fail to) overcome loss through a search for, and the manipulation of, memories in the barely optimistic hope that ultimately, as Sigmund Freud so generously anticipated, hysterical misery can be turned into commonplace unhappiness.<sup>8</sup>

This is not sexuality. Rather, it reeks with the singed smell of trauma. And here we are at the door which opens onto the modern world of wound culture. (Etymologically, trauma derives its meanings from the Greek form of the wound, which is *trauma traumatos*). This wound appears in specific response to the historical industrial and technological conditions of the modern era, and is tied to the conflictual relations between trauma and mechanical discord, the human body under siege from new labouring

machines and changing structures of work, modes of transport, forms of weaponry and styles of warfare, and poisons that encourage its instability. Between the 1860s and 1920 these encounters with extra-human machinery produce always mutating figurations of the wound which undergo significant epistemic shifts, the most important of which is their disappearance, their displacement from the field of the visible to the inexplicable realms of the invisible. That is, they move from a visible, if elusive, topography of organic spinal lesions, caused by what John Eric Erichsen christened 'railway spine' in the 1860s, to the disturbances of the cerebral function, caused by the invisible 'railway brain' of the 1870s. Gradually, such disappearances were also the case in J-M. Charcot's dermatographic physiological symptomatology, or 'body maps', often of male hysterics from the late 1870s to the early 1890s who suffered from disorders caused by the inevitable accidents of industrial production—akin to the German neurologist Hermann Oppenheim's 'traumatic neurosis'—and the nervous disturbances of 'intoxication neurosis' identified by Gilles de la Tourette as the result of lead, mercury and carbon disulphide poisoning in the workplace.<sup>9</sup>

These disappearing signs of injury, the 'problem of the missing lesion' as it was known, testify not to the possibility that victims were unaffected by the trauma, or that the causes of their disorders were invisible as such—that they could not be seen because there were no patho-anatomical determinants—rather, the coordinates of the lost symptoms simply confused the medical fraternity to such an extent that the search was forced to continue elsewhere. This 'elsewhere' dictated that what featured as an 'objective' diagnosis, bearing the wounds and scars of its happening on the surface of the traumatized somatic body, became more of a—and I use this term with great caution—'subjective', and thus psychological, concern. It therefore became a matter of how the physical shock of trauma triggers or produces the psychical neurosis. For, it was discovered, a long time after the accident, the collision, the shock itself, the trauma returns. (This is what Charcot called the 'period of psychical working-out' [*élaboration*] and what Freud later characterized as 'an interval of incubation'.)

Such is also the case in incidents of 'shell shock', a phrase coined by C.S. Meyers in 1915. Like those with derailed nerve tracks left staggering by the verges of railway lines from the 1860s and before, and the disenfranchised wanderers who populated the wards of the Salpêtrière from the 1870s, so it is for those who littered the battlefields of Europe, the terrain of its satellite skirmishes, and North America from the middle of the nineteenth century to the end of World War I. Due in part to the nature of modern industrial warfare, the Taylorized mass-production of weaponry by unskilled workers, the deployment of barely trained 'deskilled' workers, and the fragile ontological condition of modern man, many of the traumatized and incapacitated invalids returning from war suffered from shell shock, or 'war hysteria', brought on and stimulated by explosive circumstances.<sup>10</sup>

The often contagious disorder of shell shock repeatedly lead to a regular confusion over the misdiagnosis of hysterical symptoms. While most victims of shell shock had suffered no organic damage to the central nervous system, soldiers' traumatic memories of combat were treated by physical means. Suggestion was employed to help the patients remember and, obversely, ineffectual distracting techniques were used to help them forget. The patient, now cured, was ready to be sent back out into the field. But, of course, the use of inhuman techniques such as electricity—very different from the seemingly dialogic(al) talking and listening procedures of psychoanalysis—do not stop the cured patient from relapsing, from breaking down again the moment that he next hears the noise of gunfire or exploding shells. As a result of these failures, psychotherapy was turned to as a humanitarian treatment for encouraging the reliving of painful memories. However, British psychotherapy—and the same is largely true for German and Austrian thought at the time—launched an almost wholesale refutation of Freud's sexual aetiology of neurotic disorders, although there was some support for his nonsexual aetiology.

Apart from the work of Freud, there are very few reasons to support the claim that trauma and shock provoked by the accident or crash have anything to do with the coming together of sexuality and death. Within a historical context, at least, this should have profound effects on any confrontation with Cronenberg's *Crash*, and also with those numerous instances in film history when sexuality and death are seen by necessity to meld into this apparently most obvious of couplings. But in Freud these claims are everywhere. It is significant that Freud, then, marks the point at which medical observation of shock as a somatic neurological physicality is found to be insufficient as a diagnostic, thereby giving way to a more proto-psychological, or psychogenic, and decidedly sexual understanding of trauma and its ensuing scars. And it is this shift from the somatic to the psychical that we should heed. For it is a seismic displacement which takes place in his thought, almost imperceptibly, between his first dealings with the trauma of accidents in 1886—incidentally, around the same year as the appearance of the first road-worthy car, and its first crash—and the publication of 'Beyond the pleasure principle' in 1920, where threads of sexuality and death are intimately interwoven through the anxieties of traumatic neuroses and war neuroses.

How does sexuality emerge from this breach? Before Freud's and Breuer's 'Preliminary communication' of 1893, sexuality is almost wholly absent from Freud's encounters with that scattering of occurrences known as hysteria. In his writings before 1893, all references to the (usually male) body are encountered through the desexualizing languages of physiology and anatomy, and are still largely tied to Charcot's hereditary aetiology. But in the 'Preliminary Communication', the introduction of a psycho-analysis initiates a move away from the hysterical male figured through a nonsexual symptomatology and towards what will become a highly sexualized configura-

tion of the female hysteric. This move, initiated by a shift from bodily contour to psychical cartography, from man to woman, takes place thanks to Freud's introduction of the notion of memory, or, more precisely, the return of a specific memory, the return of the event which caused the outbreak of hysteria, the psychical trauma. By the time we reach *Studies on Hysteria* two years later, this transition is almost complete. Male hysteria is all but forgotten. And, somehow, through the fabrication of memory as a determinant, discussions of a more or less asexual physiological condition known as male hysteria give way to the beginnings of a more psycho-analytic and highly sexualized talking around hysterical female bodies.

Reminiscences become the precondition for the emergence of sexuality. They are the vehicle for fathering a now wholly sexualized female hysteria. And they still maintain an obligation to shock. The sexual shocks initiating the hysterics of Freud's female patients have been well documented. More elusive are other incidents of shock, including those recounted in Freud's letter to Fliess dated 2 November 1895, where he is finally able to explain how he has managed to substantiate the spurious claims of his seduction theory: through sexual shock. Other letters to Fliess during the summer of 1897 repeatedly mention his own neurosis brought on by (memories of) the earlier death of his father, a hysteria compounded by a recent visit to the mediaeval town of Nürnberg, a journey crippled by his newly found travel anxiety.<sup>11</sup> And, similarly, his 'Screen memories' of 1899 centres on a recounting, if not a direct recollection, of infantile railway crash memories.<sup>12</sup> In all cases, the return of a memory is an *a priori*. After all, for Freud, the finding of the lost object is the re-finding of it. Although as Jean Laplanche's reformulation of Freud's equation makes clear, the object re-found is not identical with the object lost.<sup>13</sup>

By the time that something vaguely resembling male hysteria does reemerge in Freud's psycho-analysis, it looks very unfamiliar. By 1919, his 'Psycho-analysis and the war neurosis' suggests that there is *no* question that the sexual aetiology, or libido theory, of the neurosis *does not* play a central role in the narcissistic traumatic war neuroses.<sup>14</sup> By 1920, his 'Beyond the pleasure principle' is in no doubt that 'traumatic neurosis' no longer only appears in the great railway disasters of the late nineteenth century but also as a consequence of the psychological trauma of war. Woven throughout this text, a discussion of traumatic neuroses and war neuroses indicates that both are a consequence of the shock of the accident. For Freud, the neurotic condition is a result of surprise, of fright, of anxiety: conditions which characterize the trauma and both produce and bind an excess of sexual excitation. And here, as one would expect, the compulsion to repeat alludes to how all of this is caught up in the beginnings of a sustained discussion of the death instinct which has, in its service, the pleasure principle.

What becomes apparent in this brief trawl through over thirty years of Freud's thought is that a shift does take place from a nonsexual typography of male hysteria to a

sexually specific and sexually differentiated tropology. Male hysteria, although rarely named as such, has fallen headlong into murky relations with sexuality and death. But what brings this shift about? How do sexuality, or pleasure, or unpleasure, and death become such a tangled enigma? Not through the advent of psychoanalysis *per se*. Nor by means of the direct, if fleeting, interferences of memory. Perhaps, though, it is specifically the proximity that these reminiscences might have to the emergence of *castration* within psychoanalysis that precipitates such a knotting.

This union of sexuality and death secured under the shadow cast by castration begins to make clear my attempt at figuring its genealogy through male hysteria. And, indirectly at least, this is something similar to what Barbara Creed does in her article published in *Screen* in 1990 on Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers* (1988).<sup>15</sup> It is exactly this conjunction of sexuality and

death, male hysteria and castration, never clarified by Freud himself, which is central to Creed's suggestive argument. But in portraying male hysteria as a defence against the possibility of *symbolic* castration rather than castration anxiety, Creed refers not to (a) lack, but to a loss: to the loss of (the) mother's body, of the breast and of the faeces. Following Kaja Silverman following Lacan, Creed seems to suggest that this inability to distinguish between lack and loss comes about because male anxieties of symbolic castration are usually converted into anxieties about so-called female castration.<sup>16</sup>

But what if this anxiety conversion does not take place? What if the (male) subject does acknowledge the notion of lack prior to the recognition of anatomical sexual difference? And what, most importantly, is at stake in thinking castration not as loss, but as a gain? What does assuming one's own castration and refusing to cover up this inadequacy imply?<sup>17</sup> All I can do here is begin to try to place a necessary wedge between male hysteria and castration anxiety, and between castration and death, in an effort to challenge certain kinds of spectral male uneasiness in and around sexuality which exist and persist, unquestioned, within psychoanalysis, and that are particular to it.<sup>18</sup> I will approach this by turning to another role that sexual pleasure might play in the discourse of psychoanalysis. But not before a final effort at putting this sex/death union to rest. To this end, I refer to Elizabeth Grosz's 'ANIMAL SEX: libido as desire and death'<sup>19</sup> in which Grosz—following Roger Caillois's and Alphonso Lingis's explorations of the persistence of the link between desire and death, and sexual pleasure and death—proposes that there is an urgent need to disassemble or sever the relations between sexuality and death because, apart from the damage that this bonding has done to female (and male) sexuality, and potentially within gay communities, these relations are not determined in advance. That is, they are not determined by figuring 'erotogenic zones as nostalgic reminiscences of a pre-oedipal, infantile bodily organization . . . of seeing the multiplicity of libidinal sites in



terms of regression'.<sup>20</sup> Grosz is against the need for sexuality to compensate for the inevitability of death, against the sexual encounter as only or necessarily an adventuring (orgasm) driven compulsion, against what she calls a fantasy of 'the hydraulics of the Freudian model of sexual discharge or cathexis'.<sup>21</sup> Rather, in proposing a materialist account of sexual desire which favours entire surfaces of bodies as series of erotogenic zones, sites of provocations coming together to contaminate and intensify their contiguous and disparate others, where the points of mutual interaction and intensification may come from different bodies, things, substances, the sexual encounter becomes 'a directionless mobilization of excitations with no guaranteed outcomes'.<sup>22</sup>

As Lynne Kirby implies in her account of the historical birth of cinema in the Golden Age of railway travel, it might be seen to be this compulsive structure of Freud's hydraulic sexuality that suggests both the narrative imperative of early moving pictures and the speeding urgency of the train, as they simultaneously hurtle towards their climactic finale (*le petit mort*) of shock as trauma.<sup>23</sup> Michael Grant's 'Crimes of the future' makes a similar point through Vaughan, the tragedian of *Crash* who suggests that the car crash should be seen as 'fertilizing'.<sup>24</sup> But unlike the logic of loss at the hub of this hydraulic sexuality, Grosz's productive coming together of parts of bodies, things and substances figures an erotic desire which is always in superabundance, in excess, superfluous. For Grosz, materiality is 'always in excess of function or goal'. For me it is always something less. And perhaps it is what lies in-between this 'always in excess' and surreptitious understatement that is the thing which distinguishes *Crash* from just any other road, or rail, movie.

The structure of *Crash*, both as an imaginative space of conjecturality and as a site for the playing out of sexual encounters, is unlike more familiar road movies. The banality of its narrative drive fails to direct us towards anything other than a disappointing and unresolved denouement. Its geography refuses the simple pleasures of an exploratory narrative unfolding and, instead, offers a rhizomatic network of road systems leading to nowhere in particular. The crashes which take place on these roads to nowhere are themselves rarely accidental, but their outcome is never determined in advance. By necessity, these conditions generate, and are produced by, a different order of sexual contact which must come into play, one that is proper to these new assemblages of human relations. This contact occurs, and takes the form of an offer of both explicit and discreet instances of touching between human and extra-human bodies, bodily parts, things and surfaces. Some of these instances confer a different manner of sexuality; others imply a nonsexual intimacy.

This takes us a long way from Barbara Creed's 'Anal wounds, metallic kisses', where she reaffirms what we, as subjects, are already supposed to know: that a viewing of Cronenberg's *Crash* will reaffirm the strong, already existing connection between desire, sex and accidental death.

And we know this because the film's violent dissembling and disarticulating experience of such a crash culture is so appropriate to us, to the postmodern desiring subject. But her account of our ontological condition, while questionable, is neither here nor there. And, incidentally, if anything, Fred Botting's and Scott Wilson's 'Automatic lover' proposes a much more empathetic understanding of where the sexualized subjects in *Crash* come from, and also, perhaps, how the extent to which the incomplete formation of the subject through the identificatory viewing strategies of a restrictive psychoanalysis cannot fail to replicate the pleasures of these characters. From Creed, caught, much like the characters, in Freud's restricted sexual economy, we should not be surprised to discover that Cronenberg's approach to questions of sexual difference does little more than replicate a series of already familiar themes around the subject's formation through its relations with technology, the eroticization and fetishization of its already overdetermined wounds, and that this wound culture is primarily concerned with a male desire still shackled to a fear of the female body. Not unexpectedly, the erotic encounters in *Crash* are seen to play out this male desire through displacement onto women's bodies, and to repeat a long-standing failure to engage with female desire, thus confirming the film's phallogentric sexual politics.

These customary remarks notwithstanding, Creed's most important observation is that 'none of the characters, no matter how resourceful in their pursuit of the erotic, will ever find fulfilment'.<sup>25</sup> This incapacity to realize fulfilment is echoed by Grant, who sees Cronenberg's *Crash* emerge from the tradition of romantic art which is embodied in the necessary provocation and failure of spiritual life, the same spiritual life that J.G. Ballard sees played out in the 'sacramental aspect' of the car crash in Cronenberg's film. And this competing structure of provocation and failure is very much in keeping with what Creed calls the films 'perverse subject-matter',<sup>26</sup> although not necessarily in the way in which she might mean. Given the film's perverse subject matter, she says that it is 'unexpectedly detached',<sup>27</sup> a point also made by Grant who gestures towards Cronenberg's coldness, artifice and dispassion of style. But this perverse detachment should not surprise us, given what Freud has to say about the nature of perversions.

In keeping with the colourful language within which *Crash* has been discussed by others, to find out just what Freud has to say about the nature of perversions it might be useful to return to the consideration of smut that appears half-way through his book on jokes. For Freud, the production of smut is about the production of pleasure through sexual exposure. And for sexual exposure to take place successfully in his smut scene, the practice of touching must be replaced by the act of looking. This pleasure, which remains so mysterious to him, is the pleasure of desire, and is discovered for the first time in the region of laughter. For him, laughter is, in fact, the first form assumed by what he calls 'fore-pleasure'.<sup>28</sup> Fore-pleasure is an interesting thing. In Freud's hands, it is the thing which 'serves to

initiate the large release of pleasure',<sup>29</sup> that would arouse sexual excitation and demand to know how pleasure can become greater,<sup>30</sup> that will go on to satisfy desire through the sexual act proper, or what he calls 'end-pleasure'. But a problem arises for Freud when fore-pleasure endangers the attainment of the normal sexual aim: if an interest in fore-pleasure becomes too great, and its motivation so strong that the will to proceed is curtailed and disappears.<sup>31</sup> Fore-pleasure, previously a precipitous act, takes the place of the normal sexual aim. It cannot become end-pleasure and is, instead, practised for its own sake or 'without a purpose', as Freud warns discouragingly.<sup>32</sup> Persisting with our language of travel, Freud indicates that the pleasures of touching and looking 'lie on the road towards copulation',<sup>33</sup> until their station as fore-pleasures is fully revealed.<sup>34</sup> Once this realization takes place, we are in the presence of the emergence of perversions. This is how Freud describes perversions here: 'Perversions are sexual activities which either *extend*, in an anatomical sense, beyond the regions of the body that are designed for sexual union, or *linger* over the intermediate relations to the sexual object which should normally be traversed rapidly on the path towards the final sexual aim'.<sup>35</sup>

Against a Freudian hydraulics of sexuality which seems to necessitate that *Crash* be interpreted, favourably or otherwise, through the violence of vaginal and anal penetration and its reproductive (or 'creative') imperatives, I am interested in the perversion of touching as fore-pleasure. I am intrigued by how Cronenberg's film also offers numerous touching encounters, extended lingerings which conjure up a landscape of intermediate, non-genital, non-predetermined regions of the human and machinic body, and the deftness of the touch that lingers on their skin as it suggests and welcomes stimuli.<sup>36</sup>

This erotogenics speaks of earlier sensations that might have snaked their way across the perilous hysterogenic zones of Charcot's male hysterics, had they been allowed to flourish. But they were not. Touching was made to disappear. The dominance of psychoanalysis eclipsed this sensuality. But this need not continue to be the case. Just because psychoanalysis has so much difficulty engaging with anything that is not always and already made to be about sexuality, this does not mean that figures caught in its petrifying grip, such as touching, have to continue to disappear into its grammar simply because they have been on speaking terms with it for so long. It is tempting to suggest that touching might not be just about sexuality. If it is, it is a largely unexplored, unknown and secret language of contagious intensifications and contaminations across or between bodily and other surfaces and substances, a coanimation of . . . provocations and reactions, a conjunction of charged caresses which have frequently lain dormant since the beginning of this century.<sup>37</sup> Touching can become a sexual encounter with itself. If touching is about sexuality, it might be about forepleasure. And if it is about forepleasure, it might not necessarily even be sexual.

David Cronenberg's *Crash* tries to play with the idea of forepleasure. At its worst, the film draws attention to its inability to escape from a crude and contrived Freudianesque model of sexuality. But at its best, it offers innumerable touching opportunities and encounters. More often than not, this touching is an encouragement to something else: to genital and anal sexuality. But sometimes this touching is no more than simply touching. Its aim is still to produce pleasure, and it can still be sexual, but it swerves away from the *a priori* compulsion that is the futile finality of hydraulic sexuality for Freud. At these moments, it fails to satisfy (the knowledge of) Desire and, instead, responds to a desire that has only ever been glimpsed. This touching is, in Freud's own words, a perversion. Following Paul Virilio's words extracted in my epigraph, I would rather think of it as a fore-pleasure leading to nowhere.<sup>38</sup>

#### Notes

1. Paul Virilio, *The Aesthetics of Disappearance*, trans. Philip Beitchmann (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), p. 67.
2. See Barbara Creed, 'Anal wounds, metallic kisses', Michael Grant, 'Crimes of the future', and Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, 'Automatic lover', *Screen*, vol. 39, no. 2 (1998), pp. 175–92.
3. Georges Bataille speaks of a *copula* as a vehicle of love in 'The solar anus', in Georges Bataille. *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*. ed. and trans. Allan Stoekl, with Carl R. Lovitt and Donald M. Leslie, Jr (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), pp. 5–9, 6. The US trailer for *Crash* speaks of 'love in the dying moments of the twentieth century'.
4. Georges Bataille, 'Hegel, death and sacrifice', trans. Jonathan Strauss, in Allan Stoekl (ed.), *Yale French Studies*, no. 78 (1990), special issue 'On Bataille', p. 16.
5. See Octavio Paz, 'Order and accident', in *Conjunctions and Disjunctions*, trans. Helen Lane (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1990), pp. 103–13, 112.
6. Friedrich Nietzsche, 'Of voluntary death', in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1969), pp. 97–9.
7. J.G. Ballard, *Crash* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 13.
8. Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria*. trans. James and Alix Strachey, The Pelican Freud Library Volume 3 (Harmondsworth Penguin, 1974), p. 393.
9. See work by John Eric Erichsen, Hermann Oppenheim, Jean-Martin Charcot, and Georges Albert Édouard Brutus Gilles de la Tourette. For an instructive discussion on these matters, see Ursula Link-Heer, "'Male hysteria": a discourse analysis', *Cultural Critique* (Spring 1990), pp. 207–11.
10. See Martin Stone, 'Shell shock and the psychologists', in W.F. Bynum, Roy Porter and

- Michael Sheperd (eds), *The Anatomy of Madness: Essays in the History of Psychiatry. Volume II Institutions and Society* (London and New York: Tavistock Publications, 1985), pp. 242–71.
11. Freud discusses how a 'rhythmic mechanical agitation of the body' produces sexual excitation. He mentions this in relation to the movement of carriages and railway travel and how, in later life [due to the repression of adolescent pleasures], this [sexual excitation] leads to travel anxiety, or traumatic neurosis. Freud, *Three Essays*, pp. 120–21. For the early Freud, anxiety, as displaced libido which has failed to discharge through sexual activity, later becomes the very protection against such disturbances of the psyche. See Samuel Weber, 'Appendix A. Beyond anxiety: the witch's letter', in *Return to Freud: Jacques Lacan's Dislocation of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Michael Levine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 152–67, 154, for further elaborations on this theme.
  12. Sigmund Freud, 'Screen memories', *S.E. Vol. III (1893–1899)*, pp. 303–22, 310.
  13. See Juliet Mitchell, 'From King Lear to Anna O and beyond: some speculative theses on hysteria and the traditionless self', *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, vol. 5, no. 2 (1992), pp. 91–107, 94.
  14. Sigmund Freud, 'Introduction to psycho-analysis and the war neuroses', in *S.E. Vol. XVII (1917–1919)*, pp. 207–10. Freud suggests that in traumatic and war neuroses the ego defends itself from either internal (the libido) or external (violence) threats of damage. A more fully developed and reworked version of this assertion is later echoed by Freud in 'The ego and the id' (1923). in *On Metapsychology* (London: Penguin, 1984), pp. 350–407, where he ties the ego, as the seat of anxiety, to a fear of death, a development of the fear of castration, but only once the ego has relinquished its narcissistic libidinal cathexis, given up itself, 'because it feels itself hated and persecuted by the super-ego, instead of loved' (p. 400).
  15. Barbara Creed. 'Phallic panic: male hysteria and *Dead Ringers*, *Screen*, vol. 31, no. 2 (1990). pp. 125–46.
  16. Ibid., p. 138. Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: the Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1988), p. 15, cited in Creed. 'Phallic panic', p. 139. Lacan's theory of sexual identification is already a theory of inadequacy, of castration.
  17. Here I am trying to follow closely the still incredibly suggestive approach of Jane Gallop in her *Reading Lacan* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 20. That Gallop and I begin from differently gendered starting points will of course significantly impact upon both the desire behind, and the effect of, our efforts.
  18. Castration is not penectomy. It would be interesting to consider the implications of this misrecognized misrecognition for Freudian castration anxiety, Creed's symbolic castration, and the repercussions that this difference might have for a psychoanalysis so reliant on the successful completion, and the ensuing effects, of this misrecognition.
  19. Elizabeth Grosz, 'ANIMAL SEX: libido as desire and death', in Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn (eds), *Sexy Bodies: the Strange Camalities Of Feminism* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 278–99. For another fascinating reading of Freud's 'Beyond the pleasure principle', see Suhail Malik, 'Castrating. Inventing Death', in Joanne Morra, Mark Robson and Marq Smith (eds). *The Limits of Death* (MUP, forthcoming 1999).
  20. Grosz, 'ANIMAL SEX', p. 289.
  21. Ibid., p. 293.
  22. Ibid., p. 291.
  23. Lynne Kirby, 'Male hysteria and early cinema', *Camera Obscura*. no. 17 (1988), pp. 112–31.
  24. Grant, 'Crimes of the future', p. 183.
  25. Creed, 'Anal wounds', p. 176.
  26. Ibid., p. 175.
  27. Ibid., p. 175.
  28. Paraphrasing is too generous a word to describe what I am doing to Jean-Luc Nancy's sharp observations. See Jean-Luc Nancy. *The Birth to Presence*, trans. Brian Holmes et al. (Stanford, CT: Stanford University Press), pp. 380–1.
  29. Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 188.
  30. Freud, *Three Essays*, p. 130.
  31. Ibid., p. 132.
  32. Ibid., p. 132.
  33. Ibid., p. 62.
  34. In *Three Essays*, Freud continues to use train travel, and the space of the carriage, as an example of the sexualization of movement, for this very reason necessarily leading to travel anxiety in later life. Ibid., p. 120. See also p. 101.
  35. Ibid., p. 62.
  36. In *Three Essays*. Freud points to Moll's discussion of 'contrectation', the need for contact with the skin, see p. 84. n. 2. A footnote added in 1915 suggests that Freud is now happier to 'ascribe the quality of erotogenicity to all parts of the body and to all the internal organs' (p. 100, n. 1).
  37. Many of these emotive suggestions have been borrowed from Grosz.
  38. I would hope that this small gift of fore-pleasure can be offered with impunity, and that it amounts to



something more than a severe, perhaps terminal, case of wound envy on my part.

**Don McKellar (essay date July 1999)**

SOURCE: "Children of Canada," in *Sight and Sound*, Vol. 9, No. 7, July, 1999, pp. 58–60.

[In the following essay, McKellar writes of his first impressions and his later impressions of *The Brood*.]

I saw David Cronenberg's *The Brood* in Toronto in 1979 at the world's first Cineplex. I went with a friend to see *The Silent Partner*, another good Canadian film, and afterwards we walked around the complex and looked in through the doors of all the other theatres—the doors had little windows, like in an operating theatre. You could only just see what was playing inside because in those days the screens were very small and the image was very grainy because it was reel projection. Looking through that little window with my friend, the image I saw was a scene near the end of the film where Samantha Eggar opens up her white robe to expose her naked body covered in living pustules that are about to give birth. It had a devastating effect on me. I was 16 years old and I'd seen a lot of horror movies—*Night of the Living Dead*, *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*—and also a lot of French art-house films. But nothing had prepared me for these inexplicable, visceral images.

I remember the movie theatre well—its bleak lighting and the lavender graphics on the walls, the kind you only see now in suburban hospitals or airports in small countries—and the ushers dressed like underpaid fast-food employees in short-sleeved polyester uniforms. It was the perfect environment in which to see a Cronenberg film from that period as there was little difference between the images on the screen and the feel of the place.

At the time I felt an intuitive disgust for Canadian films. They were mostly cheap genre films with faded B-movie actors. But Cronenberg was different. *The Brood* was a precursor to the Toronto scene that erupted later with such film-makers as Atom Egoyan, Patricia Rozema and Bruce McDonald, who all portrayed a creepy Canadianness with austerity and elegance. Toronto is a city that functions so well on the surface you feel something must be wrong underneath, which is why I think a lot of films about Toronto deal with hypocrisy or surface alienation, and Cronenberg is certainly a master at portraying these. He used Toronto institutional buildings—schools, police stations, hospitals—to create a sinister atmosphere, just as he had done in *Shivers* (1974) where the enclosed, institutional spaces burst with viral menace.

I asked David recently about the ever-so-familiar, brightly coloured 70s snowsuits the seemingly innocent children—who are actually manifestations of adult repressed rage come to life to kill people—wear in *The Brood*. The first

thing he said was, "I know, it's so Canadian." I've always loved films with evil children in them—*Village of the Damned*, *The Omen*, *The Shining*. In a lot of these films there's a white-blond little girl who plays the mute witness to the horrors, and in *The Brood* this little blonde girl is being fought over in the world's ugliest custody battle. I've spoken to David about this and I now know that the film is autobiographical, about his own custody battle. He often refers to it as his *Kramer vs. Kramer* and the girl is called Candy, and looks quite similar to his own daughter Kathy. It's the most emotional and anguished film Cronenberg has made.

Howard Shore's soundtrack is also very creepy. It's so stark and so very different from the busy soundtracks of most contemporary American movies, but it perfectly complements the look of the film: the cold, winter landscape and sterile buildings. And there are some fine performances. Oliver Reed at the time was the most evil man in the world of movies and here, in a typical Cronenberg paradigm, he plays the leader of a quasi-scientific pop-psychology cult called Psychoplasms which is concerned with manifesting your emotional states on your body. It's a satire of the 70s human-potential movement and at the time I too was fascinated by existentialism and gestalt therapy, particularly the side of gestalt that involved the dramatisation of traumatic moments of your life—exactly what this film is all about.

As an adult, I empathise with the Art Hindle character. He's just suffered a traumatic marriage break-up, he's trying to get custody of his daughter and he's imagining the very worst of his ex-wife, who's under the influence of the Svengali-like monster played by Reed. However at the time I empathised with the child, who witnesses this devastating stuff. The boils that come up on her skin are creative to some extent, and for a teenager with nascent creative impulses, that was a liberating idea. The boils were like a creative cancer.

The children are malevolent creatures who turn to violence whenever they're denied something. In one scene they visit their grandmother, who lives in an elegant, upper-class Toronto house. First they destroy all the domestic implements in the kitchen and then they attack her with mallets—blunt weapons to break through the veneer of civility. To me Cronenberg represents the repressed id—perhaps that's why I have his character's head splattered on the floor in *Last Night*.

*The Brood* seems to confront the need for a healthy expression of emotions, yet the emotions are so ugly it also articulates the terror of releasing them. When I first saw it as a teenager I thought, "Oh, my God, if I allow this stuff inside me out—this rage I'd seen in my sister when she yelled at my mother, this sexual energy burning me up, my feelings about the hypocrisy of my very sedate neighbourhood—it could be devastating." There's actually not that much violence in *The Brood*; the explicit horror is held to the very end, and that's the moment I happened to have caught as a young voyeur.

*The Brood* was a revelation to me—the first time I saw that Canadianness can be used to advantage, that self-loathing can be exploited that ugliness has horrific cinematic potential. And you do have the feeling that for Cronenberg it's a catharsis.

### Richard Porton (interview date 1999)

SOURCE: "The Film Director as Philosopher," in *Cineaste*, Vol. 24, No. 4, 1999, pp. 4–9.

[In the following interview, Porton talks with Cronenberg about the censorship *Crash* faced in the U.S. and about issues related to *eXistenZ*—including the film's exploration of technology and the body, and the self-reflexive humor that serves as a commentary on Hollywood films.]

Ever since David Cronenberg began directing films over thirty years ago, his career has been distinguished by a string of intriguing paradoxes. A brilliant student and the son of book-loving parents who scorned movies, Cronenberg soon abandoned the avant-gardist aspirations of his early films, *Stereo* (1969) and *Crimes of the Future* (1970), for gory, low-budget horror films—a genre not usually identified with intellectual audacity. Nevertheless, Cronenberg's early horror films, particularly *Shivers* (1975), *The Brood* (1979), and *Scanners* (1980), confounded critics who maintained that supposedly schlocky genre concerns were incompatible with the kind of intellectual rigor identified with the 'art cinema' of European cinéastes such as Alain Resnais and Michelangelo Antonioni. And, most incongruously of all, these viscerally aggressive films examine irrationality and often stomach-churning violence with calm, rational detachment.

Unlike old-fashioned horror films' fascination with the supernatural, Cronenberg emphasizes what is frequently referred to as 'body horror.' Instead of two-headed monsters, the villains—and, in some perverse respects, the heroes—of his films are the inner demons spawned by modern technology and sexual anxiety. Hugely indebted to William Burroughs's experimental fiction, Cronenberg baffled audiences with deep-seated ambiguities that were more reminiscent of the modernist novel than the platitudes with which audiences are usually left at the end of horror films. To cite one seminal example, the parasites which strip middle-class apartment dwellers of all their sexual inhibitions in *Shivers* can be viewed as either positive harbingers of a world free of repression or warnings of the chaos which would result from total sexual revolution. Neither a prude nor an unreconstructed disciple of Wilhelm Reich, Cronenberg himself sympathized with the parasites but acknowledged that sexual freedom is neither wholly positive nor negative. Similarly, the phallus which grows under Marilyn Chambers's arm in *Rabid* (1976) was both denounced as misogynistic and embraced as further evidence of Cronenberg's fascination with polymorphous perversity—an obsession obvious as early as *Stereo* and *Crimes of the Future*.

By the 1980s, larger budgets allowed Cronenberg to abandon the bare-bones visual style of his early films and hire more accomplished actors. After the succès de scandale of *Videodrome* (1982), a mediation on our media-saturated society that remains hugely influential, films like *Dead Ringers* (1988) and *The Dead Zone* (1983) echoed the thematic concerns of the early films while abandoning their shock tactics for a more elegant, allusive style.

The enormously controversial *Crash* (1996), an adaptation of J.G. Ballard's cult classic, synthesized the audacity of the early Cronenberg with the stylistic restraint of the later work. While Cronenberg's adaptation of Burroughs's *Naked Lunch* (1991) seemed staid when compared with the more genuinely Burroughsian *Videodrome*, *Crash*'s chilly evocation of a world where automobile accidents promote sexual frisson hit a remarkably sensitive nerve in North America and among Britain's more squeamish moviegoers. Ted Turner, owner of Fine Line—the film's distributor—was outraged by the film's affection for semen-stained chrome and held up its American release for months. It was a minor miracle that *Crash* received commercial exposure in the United States at all.

Cronenberg's latest film, *eXistenZ*, recapitulates many of his favorite themes, even though many diehard fans were disappointed by this lackluster follow-up to *Crash*, and long-time skeptics remained hostile. *eXistenZ* recounts the battle between computer-game designer Allegra Geller (Jennifer Jason Leigh) and the "Realist Underground," a Luddite cell whose anticomputer zealotry rivals that of the Unabomber. Of course, on another level, the demonization of the "Realists" mirrors Cronenberg's own antipathy towards mainstream cinematic naturalism.

Despite many witty visual flourishes (primarily the "biopori"—an anus-like outlet at the base of the spine that allows participants to plug Allegra's game directly into their nervous systems) and inventive performances by Leigh, Jude Law, and Ian Holt, much of *eXistenZ* seems like a tongue-in-cheek rehash of preoccupations that had more resonance in earlier Cronenberg films. Unfortunately the script's penchant for periodically denouncing its own dialog and plot devices with self-reflexive glee is evidence more of desperation than bona fide ingenuity. In addition, *eXistenZ*'s Chinese-box narrative emerges as annoyingly stale during a time when Hollywood sci-fi films such as *The Matrix* and *The Thirteenth Floor* pilfer similar gimmicks from the arsenal of the late Philip K. Dick, the twentieth century's most enjoyably paranoid science-fiction novelist.

Cineaste interviewed Cronenberg in New York City shortly before the commercial release of *eXistenZ*. Our discussion reinforced his reputation as an unusually erudite director and a man who relishes his status as a cinematic provocateur.—Richard Porton

Cineaste: The word fatwa is mentioned in *eXistenZ* and you've said that a meeting with Salman Rushdie served as

*an initial inspiration for the script. Can the film be considered in any way an allegory of the Rushdie affair?*

David Cronenberg: Only sort of. The film is about an artist—a game designer—who has a hit order placed upon her because of something that she's created. As I originally wrote it, we would never get into the game or see it: you'd hear them talking about it and see them playing it but you'd never as an audience be involved in it. It was going to be elegant and allusive—there would be more about the two people on the run from the *fatwa* and how that affected them. But when I started to write the script, I immediately wanted to play the game and know what was in it. Although there are the underpinnings of the Rushdie situation, you could be forgiven for not noticing it. I guess it's just an indication of how, when you start to work on something, it takes on its own life and sort of pushes you around and tells you to go here when you want to go there.

*If I hadn't read that you had planned this film before Crash, I might have interpreted it as a response to the abuse that was heaped upon you during the reception of that film.*

Yeah. Of course, I didn't suffer like Salman Rushdie, but I did feel palpable hostility and craziness in England—Rushdie's home. That's because of their tabloid press and the way that it works there; it's a unique situation. In France, for example, where it was the first Canadian film to be #1, there was some controversy and discussion about cinema and sex, but it was a reasonable kind of controversy. What happened in England, however, was nuts and kind of scary—the need for sensation piled upon sensation. They have eight papers and they each have four editions a day, each one of which has to top the other, and they work people into constant hysteria. There's always something to be hysterical about—the last time I was there it was what they called “Frankenstein foods”—genetically modified foods. You can't have a rational debate there—all you can talk about is danger and hysteria and conspiracy by scientists. I think it's very damaging because it ends rational discussion before it can begin.

*The government became involved in England with efforts to ban Crash.*

Governments do act, the government got pushed into action, knowing that it's nuts, but it was pushed into it because of popular opinion. It's the worst use of the press that I've ever seen in a democracy. Very unpleasant. Although the new movie wasn't a reaction to *Crash*, I've had other experiences. I've been censored, I've been banned.

*It's ironic that you got into such a morass in England, since Canada, particularly Ontario, was always known for its stringent censorship. But the Canadians seem to have loosened up recently.*

Yeah, I had much more trouble in the States than in Canada. *Crash* was the #1 film in Canada as well and no one crashed into anybody, unlike what Ted Turner thought

would happen. I got even worse censorship here, even though it was unofficial, because of Ted Turner. The U.S. was a big disappointment for me, just in terms of the movie not really having a chance to get out to its audience.

*Why do you think there was such a negative reaction? It was almost as if people were responding to what they had read about the film rather than the film itself.*

In England, there was a ridiculous, hysterical review by Alexander Walker. Most of the press that was running on about it hadn't seen it. That's the theme of *eXistenZ*—creation of reality. There are many ways to do it, it's always by force of human will—somebody's force, somebody's creative will, whether it's the press or politicians. There was a constant campaign against *Crash* for a year before it came out. There wasn't one day when at least one newspaper or one radio show didn't mention *Crash*. People probably got so sick of this that they felt that they'd seen it already. Of course they hadn't—they had no idea what it really was about. There's a sort of phantom version of my movie floating around in people's minds in England and most of them never actually got to see the real thing.

*From my vantage point, Crash is more like an Antonioni film than lurid sci-fi.*

I take that as a compliment. I wouldn't disagree. It obviously touched some nerves, it was talking about sex and death in a very specific way that people don't want to think about. If you look at the movie frame by frame, you wouldn't find anything particularly disturbing or explicit or that you couldn't see somewhere else—in many other films or stills in magazines.

*And there weren't the shock effects of some of your previous films, such as the head exploding in Scanners.*

No, so I have to assume that it was a conceptual thing. It was the ideas—my God, what a thought!—that disturbed people. I suppose that's quite an accomplishment these days, because most movies don't have any ideas anyway, and the ones that do tend to be very cowardly and middle of the road. The cinema today tends to be the cinema of comfort—formulaic stuff that makes you feel good because it's familiar.

*Even though there's a certain amount of humor, often black, in all of your films, eXistenZ is noteworthy for its very self-conscious, playful humor. What was the impetus for the barrage of gags and jokes?*

I don't really know. One of the delightful things, if you write your own stuff, is that you don't know what's going to happen. It just happened, it just sort of formed itself as I worked through the things we were just talking about—shifting from here to here and getting into the game. The humor just sort of got stronger and rose to the top. I wasn't



going to fight it. I think that all of my movies, even *Crash*, are funny at moments. This one seemed to get funnier and funnier and it wasn't unbalancing anything since it was integrated into the narrative.

Although the humor was in the script, when we got on the set we had some actors who were very good and could run with it. For example, in the script I didn't have the game players assuming accents. Once we got into accents, because I wanted to stress the role-playing elements of certain things in the movie, another dimension was added. It developed on its own in a very organic way. I certainly didn't sit down and think, "Now I'm going to write a comedy."

*What seems to link eXistenZ and your previous films, including Crash, is the emphasis on the interaction between technology and the body. But the dynamic seems a bit different in the current film; perhaps it's not precisely more optimistic, but there's at least more ambiguity about the immersion into another reality.*

I've never been pessimistic about technology—this is a mistaken perception. It's probably the audience's fears that are being tapped, but I think that I look at the situation fairly coldly—in the sense of neutral. I'm saying that we are doing some extreme things, but they are things that we are compelled to do. It is part of the essence of being human to create technology, that's one of the main creative acts. We've never been satisfied with the world as it is, we've messed with it from the beginning. Most technology can be seen as an extension of the human body, in one way or another, and I show this literally in the film with the references to the bioports. I think that there is as much positive and exciting about it as there is dangerous and negative. That is a very impartial observation of all of our technology: you can see it any day of the week.

*This is certainly true of computers.*

With computers, but also with Stealth fighters. They talk about those planes like Allegra talks about her pods. We absorb it into our nervous systems and into our concepts of reality and into our bodies. I think that our bodies are, even literally, quite different than they were a thousand years ago. I'm not even sure that we could mate with the people of a thousand years ago, we might be a completely different species. We've changed so much biochemically, when you factor in electromagnetic waves and everything else, which we take into our bodies. I'm just noticing in a conscious way that we've taken control of our evolution. We no longer evolve in the old Darwinian ways—other species may, but we don't. We've seized control of our evolution. None of the old survival-of-the-fittest mechanisms work with us anymore. We're only dimly conscious of this, although it has been written about a bit. In terms of a physical evolution as a species, everything has changed in the last couple of hundred years since the Industrial Revolution.

Look at sex, as I do in *Crash* and the current film. Even such a basic thing as sex is not what it used to be. We no longer need it to reproduce the species. We could call a

moratorium on sex. This is the first time in history that we could say, "Sex is causing too many problems, it's just too complicated. Let's just not have any for a hundred years and see what happens." We could literally do that, it wouldn't mean that the race would die out. In a weird way, we have done that because we're redefining what sex is. It's up for grabs. Even though *eXistenZ* doesn't have much literal sex, it's full of techno-sex.

*In other words, the game itself is sexual.*

Yeah. Why not have new sexual organs? We can do that surgically, we can do that neurologically. We could invent a new version of sex. People would probably like it, they'd buy it, it would sell, it could become a commodity. Sex has become a commodity, as well as a political weapon, in an unprecedented way. It's many things besides just reproduction. I don't feel a particular nostalgia for old sex or old technology. It's as exciting as it is scary.

*Would you characterize the anti-Allegra conspirators in eXistenZ—the "Realists"—as Luddites?*

I'd say so. I let the Realist have their say, but if you allowed them to have total power it would mean the end of art. It would be the end of a lot of other things as well, which would put the brakes on what we've become as a species.

*There are some groups that actually agree with the "Realist" perspective—the so-called 'Neo-Primitivists,' for example.*

Absolutely. There are also some religions that prohibit the creation of art using human imagery, because God made man in the image of himself and it's sacrilege to portray God and therefore it's also sacrilege to portray man. There are some sects from the Middle Ages that forbade all that stuff. There are many approaches to that kind of suppression. But it's hopeless, it's against the momentum of where the species is heading. It's a last-ditch nostalgia for something that's long gone.

*Your reference to technology being an extension of the body is quite reminiscent of McLuhan.*

Definitely. We come from the same town and the same university. Unfortunately, I didn't study with him. There he was, just around the corner, and I never even attended one of his classes. But I did read everything he wrote. Even though some of his stuff is dated and tinged with the Sixties, there's still so much truth there. *The Gutenberg Galaxy* is still an absolutely brilliant book.

*There also seem to be real echoes of Philip Dick in eXistenZ.*

Absolutely. I have a little homage to Dick in the film. When they're in the motel and there's a close-up of Jude Law reaching for a potato chip, in the background you'll see a bag with the words "Perky Pats." Perky Pats is from

Dick's *The Three Stigmata of Palmer Eldritch*; that's my acknowledgment of Dick. I don't know if he's an influence. I actually read Philip Dick quite late in life. At one point, I was involved in *Total Recall* and wrote a lot of drafts—none of which ended up being used for the movie.

*Of course, that film completely distorted Dick's story, "We Can Remember It For You Wholesale."*

Completely. I wanted to do something else entirely. So there are elements of Phil Dick in *eXistenZ*—whether this was an influence, whether we both came together, or whether he crystallized certain things that interested me, I don't know. His best work is terrific, his worst work is really awful. He wrote so fast and he wrote so much.

*He's not a stylist like Nabokov.*

Or Burroughs either—there's no comparison. I've never been really able to accept the notion that, since science-fiction writers' ideas are great, you have to forgive them the bad writing. I've never been able to get past the bad writing, but with Phil Dick I sort of can, because, for one thing, it's not always bad. He was capable of some wonderful writing. It's not ideas in the abstract, it's much more tangible—some of his characters are wonderful. One of his constant themes, of course, was different levels of reality and who was controlling which level of reality and who was actually creating it.

*His obsession with addiction and the schizophrenic blurring of reality and fantasy surfaces in eXistenZ.*

Yeah, but there's not much of the drug element in *eXistenZ*. This is one of the things that I very quickly subtracted from the film to avoid the standard virtual-reality movie. I have to confess that I was thinking, more than I usually like to, of what people would expect. People may have thought that they were coming to see a typical sci-fi movie about game playing and different levels of reality. When I write, I try to be very naive and divest myself of worrying about expectation and who's doing what film. But I had to with this film, especially since I ended up making it three years later than I thought I would—I thought I would make it before *Crash*. One of the things that you would expect would be the *Blade Runner* city, which has become its own movie reality—every sci-fi movie has a *Blade Runner* city. I decided not to have computer screens, not even TV sets. One of the other things I eliminated, but haven't thought about much until now, is the addiction theme, because that's also a cliché of VR movies.

*If the Allegra character isn't actually addicted to game playing, she certainly has a tremendous emotional investment in it.*

That's different, she's allowed to. After all, it's her game, she created it. Allegra is not just another game player. She's an artist and this is her creation; she's worried about

it being destroyed. She's allowed to be a little more obsessed. She's not an addict, since she has a rational and emotional reason for wanting to keep playing that game. A movie about the addictive nature of game playing would be completely different.

*How calculated were the self-referential elements in the film—the scenes featuring characters commenting on the plot twists?*

That somehow took me by surprise too. But it's definitely there and I'm definitely talking about moviemaking at one remove since the character is a game designer. Certainly when Allegra says, "The world of games is in kind of a trance . . . people are programmed to accept so little, but the possibilities are so great," that's me talking about the state of cinema. People are programmed to accept so little in cinema and the possibilities are so great. The programmers are all in Hollywood. I don't think it's a deliberate conspiracy or anything like that, but I really think that the success of the Hollywood template has been very destructive for any other kind of filmmaking. I feel that my audience is dwindling: by that I mean an audience that has some context, some way of accessing and interpreting a movie that is unlike a Hollywood film.

I felt that very much with *Crash*. *Crash* looked something like a Hollywood movie and it had Hollywood actors in it. But nothing else about it—including the way the characters spoke, the emotionality, the subject, the narrative, or the use of music—was like a Hollywood movie. It confused people, they couldn't deal with it. I felt this was kind of sad. When you think of what's around in fiction and literature, there are so many modes. There's Danielle Steel, but there's Joyce as well.

*Isn't that the irony of contemporary cinema? As the technology has progressed, the esthetic stance has become increasingly conservative.*

Absolutely. I don't want to sound like an old fart and talk about the Sixties and the Golden Era of the Art Film. But, my God, there was *Last Year at Marienbad* and it really wasn't like a Hollywood movie and it had subtitles, had an influence, and played in Toronto. I don't know if it would get made now. The Hollywood format is so insidious—it's just not narrative, it's just not action films. It's the whole approach to character and the matter of linearity. When my films were rejected for not being linear, that was Hollywood in a nutshell. Just take the way the characters are dealt with in *eXistenZ*—they're almost not characters or they're characters who are other characters. They're not necessarily sympathetic and they may be kind of hard to identify with for an average audience.

*Many of your characters could be described as shape-shifters.*

Yeah. That's a scary and subtle thing for Hollywood—the fact that you have characters who shift. There are some layers of self-reference there without it being, I hope, 'deconstructionist' and cute. It's not *Shakespeare in Love*.

*Could the opening, featuring Allegra's presentation of the game, be also viewed as a parody of market research?*

Sure, a parody of test previews. When Allegra says, "This is my favorite part," you can tell that she's hating it. She's very shy and doesn't enjoy the presentation. That's not exactly me, but it is the process. I could have gotten more into test previews. It was rather funny when Miramax wanted to test preview it. At the end of the movie, he's talking about a focus group and then the lights would come up and there'd be an announcement, "Now the focus group."

*Of course, this is a serious issue, which goes back many years. Since the preview audience hated *The Magnificent Ambersons*, that became one justification for cutting it.*

Yeah. It's the tail wagging the dog, the audience telling the filmmaker what film they want to see. Well, then you're limited solely by what that audience can do and understand and what they've seen. The film director, in the old tradition, is supposed to be the prophet, the seer who sees things that they don't see, taking them someplace where they can't go. But here they are saying, "I don't want to go there—and I don't want anybody else who sees this movie to go there either." It's a dire, weird looping effect. I suppose that if you're designing a Mercedes Benz it makes sense up to a point, but there still has to be that stunning design that your test audience couldn't have designed themselves.

*Do you have casting ideas in mind when you write a script?*

No, I really try hard not to, because there's a danger of shaping the character to fit the actor. Not that that's a terrible thing, but I prefer to let the characters go where they want to go. I'm not saying that I wouldn't do a little rewriting once I knew who was playing a part.

*If that's true, it seems that Allegra's combination of personal shyness and professional self-assurance was nonetheless very well-suited to Jennifer Jason Leigh's screen personality.*

I've had my eye on her for years and it turned out that she had her eye on me, too. We liked each other's work and I thought that she could really add to and develop this character. She's a fantastic actress, but she pays a price because she's very uncompromising about the roles that she plays and, when she plays them, she plays them to the hilt. She doesn't hold back. It's interesting what she did with *Washington Square*, which was made by Hollywood a long time ago as *The Heiress*. The character is supposed to be an unattractive heiress, and when Jennifer plays plain and unattractive, you can be sure that she will be, by God—and awkward, too! In Hollywood, of course, the glamorous Olivia de Havilland is the version of the unattractive heiress that you get.

*You seem to prefer underplaying to, say, Vincent Price's hammy style.*

Yes, I've never been a genre buff. People said, "Of course, you'll have Vincent Price do a cameo in *The Fly*," and I said, "Absolutely not." He's wonderful and all of that, but that would have destroyed the movie. Part of the art of casting is that there's an inner dynamic and, if you transgress it, you destroy your film. Some people have asked me if there's a certain kind of actor that I like. Well, of course, you don't always get to choose exactly who you want because sometimes they don't want to work with you or they're not available or you can't afford them or whatever. But I do think it's true that if you put all of the actors that I've ever worked with in a room, it would look like a convention of some weird family. It's hard to say—Chris Walken really doesn't look like Jimmy Woods—but, somehow, there's some connection. There are actors who I see and think are wonderful, but it would never occur to me to have them in one of my movies because somehow they don't seem to fit.

*Was it important for this film to employ tangible props instead of the usual blue screen used for sci-fi special effects?*

Yeah. There are some things that you have to do other ways, but even though this is the first film I've done which has any computer effects at all, they're almost all enhancements of things rather than computer creations. There are one or two shots that are almost one hundred per cent created by the computer and even those were kind of fun to do. Because I work in a very sculptural, physical way on set, too, I'm a bit like the actors in that I like to have the real stuff there. I want to have the real clothes and the real props before I say what the shot is. I can't even say what lens I'm going to use until I see that stuff. For me there's no question of doing storyboards, I can't relate to that at all. I need the real stuff there and I need to work with its plasticity.

*You've remarked in previous interviews that you could never do the same amount of preproduction planning that Hitchcock was known for.*

No, but I think that he exaggerated that. The legions of film students who think that they must storyboard everything down to the last detail are ridiculous. Of course, you don't even have to know how to draw. They get you a guy who has little instruments that tell you what the lens and perspective should be. The moment something doesn't work, those kids fall apart completely—and that's usually by the second shot. I'd hate to have worked everything out. You need the juice, the excitement, and I want the freedom to absorb what's happening on the set at the moment.

In a weird way, when I'm shooting it's almost a documentary of that moment. There's a scene in *eXistenZ* when Jennifer is eating this weird Chinese food and she looks quite sick. Well, she *was* sick; she had the flu and was vomiting. It was the perfect scene for her to use that. Rather than say, "Take the day off," we said, "Let's use that." That's a perfect example of something you couldn't storyboard.



*It's not a matter of improvisation.*

No, I'm not asking the actors to rewrite the script. They know up front that I don't want them to improvise the dialog, although I will change the rhythms if there's something that just doesn't sit right with them. They have to prove that there's something better. But that's not all that there is to acting—the way that the lines are delivered and the choreography of the scene and the body language and all kinds of stuff is up for grabs.

*Peter Suschitzky has been your cinematographer since Dead Ringers. How has the collaboration with him been crucial in determining the look of the later films?*

I think it's really helped me mature. He's so subtle. He's a European from beginning to end—his mother was Hungarian, his father was Austrian and he was born and raised in England. His references are very exhilarating, they're not Hollywood or American pop culture. The way he lights is incredibly subtle, but not dogmatic. He doesn't have an agenda, which you do get from other cinematographers who will run over you in order to make a statement about lighting. Peter doesn't do that, he works from the inside out and works for the movie instead of for himself.

*Do you see eXistenZ as a continuation of some of the themes concerning technology and the body developed in earlier films, particularly Videodrome?*

Yes and no. As we've said, I hadn't done the self-reflexive stuff. I have this deep pool of imagery that I keep fishing in and it's just there for whatever reason. My films are bodycentric. For me, the first fact of human existence is the body and the further we move away from the human body the less real things become and have to be invented by us. Maybe the body is the only fact of human existence that we can cling to. And yet it seems to be much ignored in movie making, although maybe not in art generally. One thinks of a lot of strange, interesting performance artists and painters like Francis Bacon. But in movie making there still seems to be this flight from the body in a weird way.

*Do these preoccupations come out of reading contemporary philosophy?*

I think it's just a personal awareness that's developed in my life. I do read a lot of philosophy. In fact, the stuff that I read before I write now is almost all philosophy. Schopenhauer, for example—*The World as Will and Representation*. You could almost give this movie that title. It's about will and re-presentation.

*The title seems Heideggerian.*

Yeah. The irony is that when this movie was shown at the Berlin Film Festival, where it was first screened, that was the only country where the title was spelled correctly. The

joke wasn't there except for the big X and the big Z. It was funny because it wasn't meant to be a German word, but there they thought that it was spelled fine.

But, yes, it's a Heideggerian reference. In fact, when Jude Law says, "I don't want to be here, we're just stumbling around in this unformed world not knowing what the rules and objectives are—or if there even are any—and we're being attacked by unknown forces that we don't understand," that's Heidegger in a nutshell. It refers to his description of what life is, being thrown into the world. I'd like to be making a philosophical cinema, but I'm looking for metaphors and imagery that will express some of these things. When you're dealing with the body and the way it's being transformed, it seems very logical to end up with the kind of movies that I make.

*Atom Egoyan commented that you found your niche initially in horror films because some of these themes were very well-suited to that genre.*

As I've said about the pitch meeting for *The Fly*, if it's not a horror film, you're saying that it's about these two intelligent, eccentric people who fall in love, and then the guy gets this horrible wasting disease and she kind of watches as he dies and then helps him to commit suicide. That's a very tough sell. But if it's a horror, sci-fi film, it's fine. So I have felt protected by the genre and I suppose that's why I was drawn to it in the first place.

At the time that I made *Shivers* (which was called *They Came From Within* in the U.S.), a low-budget horror film might have seemed like a clever, and even classical, move for a young filmmaker. But actually in Canada at that time it was impossible, it was the worst thing because there was no tradition of horror filmmaking whatsoever. I could have gotten an art film or a naturalistic film about fishermen in the Maritimes financed in Canada without any problem. There was the National Film Board documentary tradition. But wanting to make a horror film was considered repulsive, they had no way of dealing with it. It took years to get it financed, the genre didn't help me in the beginning but eventually it did.

As I said, this kind of imagery is almost native to horror films and sci-films, so it was a natural fit. I didn't even think of myself as genre-specific. I knew that I was making a horror film when I made *Shivers*, but it's still a philosophical film for me. I think it's very evident when you look at it and listen to the dialog and so on that it's that, despite having all the horror-film trappings. The genre is a living thing. You can use the horror film to express anything—*From Caligari to Hitler* proved that.

*Given your admiration for Nabokov, were you ever tempted to adapt one of his novels?*

I discovered Nabokov very early on; *Pale Fire* is still one of my favorite novels. Nabokov was definitely an influence when I was trying to write fiction. I just came up

with Nabokovian pastiche. I don't know how much it influenced my filmmaking; he's part of my nervous system's basic repertoire.

I must confess that when I heard that Adrian Lyne was going to do *Lolita*, I felt a kind of proprietary anger. Not because of Lyne, but because I felt, "Shouldn't I be doing that?" And shouldn't I be doing that from Nabokov's own screenplay, which is quite lovely and doable? I think that I would have never done it, for a lot of reasons, so I'm glad that Lyne did it instead of me. I thought that he nailed two things really well that Kubrick hadn't. One was the child's sexuality and the other was the incredible sense of loss.

Things have gotten so weird and repressive now that it's obviously an even worse time to make that movie than when Kubrick filmed it. The whole child abuse thing has become so politicized; in Kubrick's day, it was just sex that was a problem, although the age of Sue Lyon was a problem. But there wasn't that whole militant thing going on about child abuse, which is justified up to a point but can go way over the top and become sort of fascistic. It shows up in the fact that people are trying to get *Lolita* out of the schools and the libraries. They can't see it as anything else but a story of child abuse.

*Could we interpret the injection of certain Yiddish words such as Haimische in eXistenZ as autobiographical references to your Jewish background?*

It's true that my mother did teach me some Yiddish, although I don't speak it fluently. I like Yiddish—to me it's Jewish, while Israel is not Jewish. European Jewry is the culture that I relate to. I was using *Haimische* self-consciously, although the actor uses a kind of corny Irish accent which, in a way, makes it even better.

*Until recently, Toronto seemed like a pretty WASPy city.*

Yeah, but not to me. In fact, Toronto was Presbyterian Scottish, which perhaps doesn't quite qualify as WASP, although at a distance it does. But for me it was always, as we say, a very multicultural city. It's governmental policy now for the city to be multicultural, which is very controversial for all the usual reasons.

Where I grew up in Toronto—Crawford and College Street—there were successive waves of immigrants. The Jews were just about leaving, there were still some Irish around, Turks and Italians were coming in. After that, there were Greeks and now I think that the neighborhood is Portuguese. On my street, there were all kinds of different languages. Maybe that's why I felt separated from the power structure in Toronto and Canada, inasmuch as I never thought that you could make a movie because movies came from someplace else. I never once considered politics: that was also something that came from above. There was a huge WASP power structure in Toronto that ran things—the political machine, the financial machine. It's still strong there.

*The political reception of your work has been rather peculiar, because, on the one hand, the right has denounced films like Crash, while leftists like Robin Wood have been harsh critics of your work.*

It was a while ago that Wood said those things. I don't know where he would stand on those issues now. We had some wonderful debates on stage in Toronto where he was wearing a T-shirt that said something like "Marxist, feminist, anti-patriarchal." I thought that I debated him rather well. He misunderstood *Shivers* completely. He thought that I was on the side of the people living in the apartment building and that these crazy people were, basically, him. I said that, on the contrary, the crew and I identified with the crazies because we were living in that apartment complex in Montreal, which was called Nuns' Island, and was so repressive and stifling. We wanted to, and sometimes did, run naked and screaming down the halls. We were the crazies and totally identified with them. I think that a smart genre audience would have also identified with them. They wouldn't have identified with the middle-class families living in those little boxes. I thought that he got it completely backwards.

It's only recently that I felt that I had any access to structures of power, both in terms of studio stuff and in terms of politics. I've become kind of a respected figure in Toronto somehow, now appointed President of the jury in Cannes. It's happened very naturally, but suddenly people want me to be on various boards, which I don't really understand, and they want my input into the reorganization of this or that. I still feel rather separated from all that. I feel that I'm definitely leftist, but have the Canadian curse of seeing the validity of all points of view, which supposedly makes us good negotiators.

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**Additional coverage of Cronenberg's life and career is contained in the following source published by the Gale Group: *Contemporary Authors Online*.**



# Don DeLillo

## 1936-

(Also wrote under the pseudonym Cleo Birdwell) American novelist and playwright.

### INTRODUCTION

Regarded as one of the finest novelists—and sharpest social critics—of contemporary American life, DeLillo writes in a postmodernist vein that also includes such writers as John Barthes, Thomas Pynchon, and Kurt Vonnegut. Ranging from *Americana* (1971) to *The Body Artist* (2001), his novels are satirical yet penetrating portraits of contemporary American society—its rampant paranoia and malaise, its vitality on the brink of chaos, its myths, obsessions, and manias. In his satire DeLillo exploits the discrepancy between appearance and reality, targeting the power of mass media, the spread of cultural politics and crowd psychology, and the excesses of consumer culture. Stylistically experimental, DeLillo's fiction features terse prose, displaced bits of dialogue, and fast-paced, episodic narration instead of conventional plotting, devices typical of literary postmodernism but which also underscore his preoccupation with the ritualistic aspects of words, the nature of language, and its myriad uses. Critics have enthusiastically responded to the intelligence and wit of each of DeLillo's novels, with many citing his perceptible fascination with the meaning and usage of words as a particular source of pleasure. Generally attracting a small but decent readership for most of his career, DeLillo vaulted to bestseller status with the publication of *Libra* (1988) and *Underworld* (1997), which has not only enhanced his reputation in general but also renewed critical interest in his earlier works.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

The son of Italian immigrants, DeLillo was born November 20, 1936, in the Bronx borough of New York City. He grew up in an Italian-American neighborhood, attending Cardinal Hayes High School and later enrolling at Fordham University, where he majored in communication arts. After graduating in 1958, he briefly worked during the early 1960s as a copywriter at Ogilvy and Mather, an advertising agency. About 1967, DeLillo started writing what later became his first novel, *Americana*. Over the next seven years he published five more novels—*End Zone* (1972), *Great Jones Street* (1973) *Ratner's Star* (1976), *Players* (1977) and *Running Dog* (1978). Despite a warm and hearty endorsement from reviewers, DeLillo failed to attract a popular audience, developing instead a

small but devoted readership. However, beginning with *The Names* (1982), which received more prominent reviews than any of his other novels, DeLillo has cultivated a wider audience as his reputation steadily rose throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Consequently, he has won several prestigious awards, including the National Book Award for *White Noise* (1985) and the PEN/Faulkner Award for *Mao II* (1991). In addition, both *Libra* and *Underworld* received nominations for the National Book Critics Circle Award. In 2001 DeLillo published *The Body Artist*, his twelfth novel.

### MAJOR WORKS

Mass media, government conspiracies, and the human costs of consumerism name common themes of DeLillo's fiction, which presents a composite of contemporary American society verging on chaos but prevented by the benefits of language, the only human means DeLillo considers capable of imposing order on random events. This linguistic approach toward resolution of the narrative conflict informs each of DeLillo's works. *Americana* recounts the odyssey of a television-advertising executive who embarks on a cross-country journey, partly to escape an unsatisfying job and marriage but mainly to discover his identity. *End Zone*, DeLillo's first novel to attract substantial critical notice, chronicles one playing season in the life of a running back on the Logos College football team whose two consuming passions are football and nuclear war. Superficially a satire on the American obsession with the violence of organized sports, *End Zone* uses football as a metaphor for nuclear war, implying that the ultimate consequence of such organized violence is total annihilation. A parable for the counterculture of the 1960s, *Great Jones Street* centers on a rock star, whose retreat from public performances accompanies his slide into drugs and paranoia as he joins a search for a potent new experimental narcotic. Loosely modeled on Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Ratner's Star* is esoteric science fiction, in which the first half of the narrative is mirrored in reverse in the second half. The novel concerns a fourteen-year-old mathematics prodigy, who decodes messages sent from space for a government agency that authorizes him to answer, rather than decipher, the star's message. Evocative portraits of contemporary street culture, both *Players* and *Running Dog* focus on hip city-dwellers trying to escape the tyranny of ennui through espionage, pornography, and terrorist activities. In these novels the protagonist's behavior connotes broader, spiritual symptoms of a hollowness in contemporary American society. *The Names* is simultaneously a penetrat-

ing investigation of the enigmatic nature of language and an accurate characterization of contemporary American mores. The narrative entails the quest of a corporate risk analyst to discover the motives of a mysterious cult that ritualistically kills people whose names bear the same initials as the place where the murders are committed. A novel about mortality, technology, and the numbing impact of the American media, *White Noise* highlights the obsessive fear of dying, a very common but rarely talked about fear. This novel recounts the events in the life of a death-obsessed professor of Hitler Studies at a midwestern university and his wife, following an industrial accident that releases toxic insecticide into their neighborhood. After he is exposed, the professor discovers that his wife is taking an illegal drug—which she committed adultery to procure—that eliminates the fear of death, so he desperately begins a search to get the drug for himself. Generally considered DeLillo's masterpiece, *Libra* combines historical and invented characters and events in the story of Lee Harvey Oswald and the circumstances leading to his assassination of President John F. Kennedy. The novel weaves two non-synchronous narratives—one tracing Oswald's life from childhood to death and the other detailing the plan of a right-wing conspiracy to murder the president—to illustrate how random factors can propel an individual into ignominious posterity. An exploration of nihilism and isolation in contemporary society, *Mao II* incorporates such actual events as the student demonstration in Beijing's Tiananmen square, the ayatollah's funeral in Teheran, and the mass wedding of Moonies at Yankee Stadium to address terrorism, international politics, and the writer's role in the world. In this novel a reclusive writer, unable to finish a novel since his retreat twenty-odd years earlier, uncharacteristically lets a woman publish her photograph of him, which enmeshes the former recluse in a Middle Eastern hostage intrigue involving another writer. A sprawling epic of the people, places, and events that defined the second half of the twentieth century as "the nuclear age," *Underworld* traces the rise and fall of the Cold War mentality from the perspective of a professional garbage collector. One of DeLillo's shorter works, *The Body Artist* explores the nature of time, the grieving process, and the aesthetics of crisis—all in typical relation to the effects of language on each—in a story about a young widow living in a rented seaside house who "channels" dead spirits. DeLillo's other works include several plays, ranging from *Amazons* (1980), a farce about the first woman to play in the National Hockey League and written by the pseudonymous Cleo Birdwell, to *Valparaiso* (1999), another farce about a traveler who mistakenly arrives in the Indiana town that shares its name with his intended destination in Chile.

## CRITICAL RECEPTION

Recognized as a masterful satirist with a linguist's appreciation of words, DeLillo is also considered a serious social critic whose black humor and apocalyptic vision has led many to dub him "the chief shaman of the paranoid school of American fiction." Commentators consistently

identify the clipped, sound-bite quality of his dialogue, the evocative moods of his descriptions of places and events, and the poignancy of his depiction of American-styled fear and paranoia as the hallmarks of DeLillo's fiction. On the other hand, detractors often use these same elements to characterize his protagonists as mere left-wing mouthpieces, his dialogues as little more than rhetorical equivocation, and his plots as nothing better than contrivances. However, despite their ideological diversity, reviewers universally applaud DeLillo's fascination with the meaning and usage of words and his knack for explaining the metaphysical implications of everyday matters. As a result, his literary style often draws comparisons to other so-called "metafictionist" novelists, a quintessentially postmodern movement concerning experimental narrative techniques that counts Pynchon and Vonnegut among its practitioners. Since the mid-1990s, academic interest in DeLillo's writings has surged, causing an explosion of explication in a variety of contexts. Scholars have framed his themes in religious, feminist, or political terms, investigated his characterization in terms of psychological notions of identity and alienation, and studied his style for implications bearing on the art of narration, both past and future. A number of critics have detected in DeLillo's writings certain affinities with romantic or pastoral literature, in contrast to the general critical consensus, which hails DeLillo's work as seminally postmodern.

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## PRINCIPAL WORKS

*Americana* (novel) 1971  
*End Zone* (novel) 1972  
*Great Jones Street* (novel) 1973  
*Ratner's Star* (novel) 1976  
*Players* (novel) 1977  
*Running Dog* (novel) 1978  
*The Engineer of Moonlight* (drama) 1979  
*Amazons* (drama) 1980  
*The Names* (novel) 1982  
*White Noise* (novel) 1985  
*The Day Room* (drama) 1986  
*Libra* (novel) 1988  
*Mao II* (novel) 1991  
*Underworld* (novel) 1997  
*Valparaiso* (drama) 1999  
*The Body Artist* (novel) 2001

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## CRITICISM

**Don DeLillo with Adam Begley (interview date Fall 1992)**

SOURCE: "Don DeLillo," in *Paris Review*, Vol. 35, No. 128, Fall, 1993, pp. 274–306.

[In the following interview, originally conducted in late 1992, DeLillo discusses the early beginnings of his writing career, his present writing habits and practices, a range of thematic and character developments in his major works, and the relation between his fiction and various American cultural phenomena.]

A man who's been called "the chief shaman of the paranoid school of American fiction" can be expected to act a little nervous.

I met Don DeLillo for the first time in an Irish restaurant in Manhattan, for a conversation he said would be "deeply preliminary." He is a slender man, gray haired, with boxy brown glasses. His eyes, magnified by thick lenses, are restless without being shifty. He looks to the right, to the left; he turns his head to see what's behind him.

But his edgy manner has nothing to do with anxiety. He's a disciplined observer searching for details. I also discovered after many hours of interviewing spread out over several days—a quick lunch, a visit some months later to a midtown gallery to see an Anselm Kiefer installation, followed by a drink at a comically posh bar—that DeLillo is a kind man, generous and thoughtful, qualities incompatible with the reflexive wariness of the paranoid. He is not scared; he is attentive. His smile is shy, his laugh sudden.

Don DeLillo's parents came to America from Italy. He was born in the Bronx in 1936 and grew up there, in an Italian-American neighborhood. He attended Cardinal Hayes High School and Fordham University, where he majored in "communication arts," and worked for a time as a copywriter at Ogilvy & Mather, an advertising agency. He now lives just outside New York City with his wife.

*Americana*, his first novel, was published in 1971. It took him about four years to write. At the time he was living in a small studio apartment in Manhattan. After *Americana* the novels poured out in a rush: five more in the next seven years. *End Zone* (1972), *Great Jones Street* (1973), *Ratner's Star* (1976), *Players* (1977) and *Running Dog* (1978) all received enthusiastic reviews. They did not sell well. The books were known to a small but loyal following.

Things changed in the eighties. *The Names* (1982) was more prominently reviewed than any previous DeLillo novel. *White Noise* (1985) won the National Book Award. *Libra* (1988) was a bestseller. *Mao II* his latest, won the 1992 PEN/Faulkner Award. He is currently at work on a novel, a portion of which appeared in *Harper's* under the title "*Pafko at the Wall*." He has written two plays, *The Engineer of Moonlight* (1979) and *The Day Room* (1986).

This interview began in the fall of 1992 as a series of tape-recorded conversations. Transcripts were made from eight hours of taped material. DeLillo returned the final, edited manuscript with a note that begins, "This is not only the meat but the potatoes."

Begley: Do you have any idea what made you a writer?

DeLillo: I have an idea but I'm not sure I believe it. Maybe I wanted to learn how to think. Writing is a concentrated form of thinking. I don't know what I think about certain subjects, even today, until I sit down and try to write about them. Maybe I wanted to find more rigorous ways of thinking. We're talking now about the earliest writing I did and about the power of language to counteract the wallow of late adolescence, to define things, define muddled experience in economical ways. Let's not forget that writing is convenient. It requires the simplest tools. A young writer sees that with words and sentences on a piece of paper that costs less than a penny he can place himself more clearly in the world. Words on a page, that's all it takes to help him separate himself from the forces around him, streets and people and pressures and feelings. He learns to think about these things, to ride his own sentences into new perceptions. How much of this did I feel at the time? Maybe just an inkling, an instinct. Writing was mainly an unnameable urge, an urge partly propelled by the writers I was reading at the time.

Did you read as a child?

No, not at all. Comic books. This is probably why I don't have a storytelling drive, a drive to follow a certain kind of narrative rhythm.

As a teenager?

Not much at first. *Dracula* when I was fourteen. A spider eats a fly, and a rat eats the spider, and a cat eats the rat, and a dog eats the cat, and maybe somebody eats the dog. Did I miss one level of devouring? And yes, the *Studs Lonigan* trilogy, which showed me that my own life, or something like it, could be the subject of a writer's scrutiny. This was an amazing thing to discover. Then, when I was eighteen, I got a summer job as a playground attendant—a parkie. And I was told to wear a white T-shirt and brown pants and brown shoes and a whistle around my neck—which they provided, the whistle. But I never acquired the rest of the outfit. I wore blue jeans and checkered shirts and kept the whistle in my pocket and just sat on a park bench disguised as an ordinary citizen. And this is where I read Faulkner, *As I Lay Dying* and *Light in August*. And got paid for it. And then James Joyce, and it was through Joyce that I learned to see something in language that carried a radiance, something that made me feel the beauty and fervor of words, the sense that a word has a life and a history. And I'd look at a sentence in *Ulysses* or in *Moby-Dick* or in Hemingway—maybe I hadn't gotten to *Ulysses* at that point, it was *Portrait of the Artist*—but certainly Hemingway and the water that was clear and swiftly moving and the way the troops went marching down the road and raised dust that powdered the leaves of the trees. All this in a playground in the Bronx.

Does the fact that you grew up in an Italian-American household translate in some way, does it show up in the novels you've published?



It showed up in early short stories. I think it translates to the novels only in the sense that it gave me a perspective from which to see the larger environment. It's no accident that my first novel was called *Americana*. This was a private declaration of independence, a statement of my intention to use the whole picture, the whole culture. America was and is the immigrant's dream, and as the son of two immigrants I was attracted by the sense of possibility that had drawn my grandparents and parents. This was a subject that would allow me to develop a range I hadn't shown in those early stories—a range and a freedom. And I was well into my twenties by this point and had long since left the streets where I'd grown up. Not left them forever—I do want to write about those years. It's just a question of finding the right frame.

*What got you started on Americana?*

I don't always know when or where an idea first hits the nervous system, but I remember *Americana*. I was sailing in Maine with two friends, and we put into a small harbor on Mt. Desert Island. And I was sitting on a railroad tie waiting to take a shower, and I had a glimpse of a street maybe fifty yards away and a sense of beautiful old houses and rows of elms and maples and a stillness and wistfulness—the street seemed to carry its own built-in longing. And I felt something, a pause, something opening up before me. It would be a month or two before I started writing the book and two or three years before I came up with the title *Americana*, but in fact it was all implicit in that moment—a moment in which nothing happened, nothing ostensibly changed, a moment in which I didn't see anything I hadn't seen before. But there was a pause in time, and I knew I had to write about a man who comes to a street like this or lives on a street like this. And whatever roads the novel eventually followed, I believe I maintained the idea of that quiet street if only as counterpoint, as lost innocence.

*Do you think it made a difference in your career that you started writing novels late, when you were approaching thirty?*

Well, I wish I had started earlier, but evidently I wasn't ready. First, I lacked ambition. I may have had novels in my head but very little on paper and no personal goals, no burning desire to achieve some end. Second, I didn't have a sense of what it takes to be a serious writer. It took me a long time to develop this. Even when I was well into my first novel I didn't have a system for working, a dependable routine. I worked haphazardly, sometimes late at night, sometimes in the afternoon. I spent too much time doing other things or nothing at all. On humid summer nights I tracked horseflies through the apartment and killed them—not for the meat but because they were driving me crazy with their buzzing. I hadn't developed a sense of the level of dedication that's necessary to do this kind of work.

*What are your working habits now?*

I work in the morning at a manual typewriter. I do about four hours and then go running. This helps me shake off one world and enter another. Trees, birds, drizzle—it's a

nice kind of interlude. Then I work again, later afternoon, for two or three hours. Back into book time, which is transparent—you don't know it's passing. No snack food or coffee. No cigarettes—I stopped smoking a long time ago. The space is clear, the house is quiet. A writer takes earnest measures to secure his solitude and then finds endless ways to squander it. Looking out the window, reading random entries in the dictionary. To break the spell I look at a photograph of Borges, a great picture sent to me by the Irish writer Colm Tóibín. The face of Borges against a dark background—Borges fierce, blind, his nostrils gaping, his skin stretched taut, his mouth amazingly vivid; his mouth looks painted; he's like a shaman painted for visions, and the whole face has a kind of steely rapture. I've read Borges of course, although not nearly all of it, and I don't know anything about the way he worked—but the photograph shows us a writer who did not waste time at the window or anywhere else. So I've tried to make him my guide out of lethargy and drift, into the otherworld of magic, art and divination.

*Do your typed drafts just pile up and sit around?*

That's right. I want those pages nearby because there's always a chance I'll have to refer to something that's scrawled at the bottom of a sheet of paper somewhere. Discarded pages mark the physical dimensions of a writer's labor—you know, how many shots it took to get a certain paragraph right. Or the awesome accumulation, the gross tonnage, of first draft pages. The first draft of *Libra* sits in ten manuscript boxes. I like knowing it's in the house. I feel connected to it. It's the complete book, the full experience containable on paper. I find I'm more ready to discard pages than I used to be. I used to look for things to keep. I used to find ways to save a paragraph or a sentence, maybe by relocating it. Now I look for ways to discard things. If I discard a sentence I like, it's almost as satisfying as keeping a sentence I like. I don't think I've become ruthless or perverse—just a bit more willing to believe that nature will restore itself. The instinct to discard is finally a kind of faith. It tells me there's a better way to do this page even though the evidence is not accessible at the present time.

*Athletes—basketball players, football players—talk about “getting into the zone.” Is there a writer's zone you get into?*

There's a zone I aspire to. Finding it is another question. It's a state of automatic writing, and it represents the paradox that's at the center of a writer's consciousness—this writer's anyway. First you look for discipline and control. You want to exercise your will, bend the language your way, bend the world your way. You want to control the flow of impulses, images, words, faces, ideas. But there's a higher place, a secret aspiration. You want to let go. You want to lose yourself in language, become a carrier or messenger. The best moments involve a loss of control. It's a kind of rapture, and it can happen with words and phrases fairly often—completely surprising

combinations that make a higher kind of sense, that come to you out of nowhere. But rarely for extended periods, for paragraphs and pages—I think poets must have more access to this state than novelists do. In *End Zone* a number of characters play a game of touch football in a snowstorm. There's nothing rapturous or magical about the writing. The writing is simple. But I wrote the passage, maybe five or six pages, in a state of pure momentum, without the slightest pause or deliberation.

*How do you imagine your audience?*

When my head is in the typewriter the last thing on my mind is some imaginary reader. I don't have an audience; I have a set of standards. But when I think of my work out in the world, written and published, I like to imagine it's being read by some stranger somewhere who doesn't have anyone around him to talk to about books and writing—maybe a would-be writer, maybe a little lonely, who depends on a certain kind of writing to make him feel more comfortable in the world.

*I've read critics who say that your books are bound to make people feel uncomfortable.*

Well, that's good to know. But this reader we're talking about—he already feels uncomfortable. He's very uncomfortable. And maybe what he needs is a book that will help him realize he's not alone.

*How do you begin? What are the raw materials of a story?*

I think the scene comes first, an idea of a character in a place. It's visual, it's Technicolor—something I see in a vague way. Then sentence by sentence into the breach. No outlines—maybe a short list of items, chronological, that may represent the next twenty pages. But the basic work is built around the sentence. This is what I mean when I call myself a writer. I construct sentences. There's a rhythm I hear that drives me through a sentence. And the words typed on the white page have a sculptural quality. They form odd correspondences. They match up not just through meaning but through sound and look. The rhythm of a sentence will accommodate a certain number of syllables. One syllable too many, I look for another word. There's always another word that means nearly the same thing, and if it doesn't then I'll consider altering the meaning of a sentence to keep the rhythm, the syllable beat. I'm completely willing to let language press meaning upon me. Watching the way in which words match up, keeping the balance in a sentence—these are sensuous pleasures. I might want *very* and *only* in the same sentence, spaced a particular way, exactly so far apart. I might want *rapture* matched with *danger*—I like to match word endings. I type rather than write longhand because I like the way the words and letters look when they come off the hammers onto the page—finished, printed, beautifully formed.

*Do you care about paragraphs?*

When I was working on *The Names* I devised a new method—new to me, anyway. When I finished a paragraph, even a three-line paragraph, I automatically went to a

fresh page to start the new paragraph. No crowded pages. This enabled me to see a given set of sentences more clearly. It made rewriting easier and more effective. The white space on the page helped me concentrate more deeply on what I'd written. And with this book I tried to find a deeper level of seriousness as well. *The Names* is the book that marks the beginning of a new dedication. I needed the invigoration of unfamiliar languages and new landscapes, and I worked to find a clarity of prose that might serve as an equivalent to the clear light of those Aegean islands. The Greeks made an art of the alphabet, a visual art, and I studied the shapes of letters carved on stones all over Athens. This gave me fresh energy and forced me to think more deeply about what I was putting on the page. Some of the work I did in the 1970s was off-the-cuff, not powerfully motivated. I think I forced my way into a couple of books that weren't begging to be written, or maybe I was writing too fast. Since then I've tried to be patient, to wait for a subject to take me over, become part of my life beyond the desk and typewriter. *Libra* was a great experience that continues to resonate in my mind because of the fascinating and tragic lives that were part of the story. And *The Names* keeps resonating because of the languages I heard and read and touched and tried to speak and spoke a little and because of the sunlight and the elemental landscapes that I tried to blend into the book's sentences and paragraphs.

*Your dialogue is different from other people's dialogue.*

Well, there are fifty-two ways to write dialogue that's faithful to the way people speak. And then there are times when you're not trying to be faithful. I've done it different ways myself and I think I concentrated on dialogue most deeply in *Players*. It's hyperrealistic, spoken by urban men and women who live together, who know each other's speech patterns and thought patterns and finish each other's sentences or don't even bother because it isn't necessary. Jumpy, edgy, a bit hostile, dialogue that's almost obsessive about being funny whatever the circumstances. New York voices.

*Has the way you handle dialogue evolved?*

It has evolved, but maybe sideways. I don't have a grand, unified theory. I think about dialogue differently from book to book. In *The Names* I raised the level of intelligence and perception. People speak a kind of idealized café dialogue. In *Libra* I flattened things out. The characters are bigger and broader, the dialogue is flatter. There were times with Oswald, with his marine buddies and with his wife and mother when I used a documentary approach. They speak the flat prose of *The Warren Report*.

*You mentioned early short stories. Do you ever write stories anymore?*

Fewer all the time.

*Could the set piece—I'm thinking of the Unification Church wedding in *Mao II* or the in-flight movie in *Players*—be your alternative to the short story?*

I don't think of them that way. What attracts me to this format is its non-short-storyness, the high degree of stylization. In *Players* all the major characters in the novel appear in the prologue—embryonically, not yet named or defined. They're shadowy people watching a movie on an airplane. This piece is the novel in miniature. It lies outside the novel. It's modular—keep it in or take it out. The mass wedding in *Mao II* is more conventional. It introduces a single major character and sets up themes and resonances. The book makes no sense without it.

*We talked a little about Americana. Tell me about your second novel—what was your idea for the shape of End Zone?*

I don't think I had an idea. I had a setting and some characters, and I more or less trailed behind, listening. At some point I realized there had to be a structural core, and I decided to play a football game. This became the centerpiece of the novel. The same thing happens in *White Noise*. There's an aimless shuffle toward a high-intensity event—this time a toxic spill that forces people to evacuate their homes. Then, in each book, there's a kind of decline, a purposeful loss of energy. Otherwise I think the two books are quite different. *End Zone* is about games—war, language, football. In *White Noise* there is less language and more human dread. There's a certain equation at work. As technology advances in complexity and scope, fear becomes more primitive.

*Plot, in the shape of shadowy conspiracy, shows up for the first time in your third novel, Great Jones Street. What brought you to write about the idea of a mysterious drug possibly tied to government repression?*

It was in the air. It was the way people were thinking. Those were the days when the enemy was some presence seeping out of the government, and the most paranoid sort of fear was indistinguishable from common sense. I think I tried to get at the slickness connected with the word *paranoia*. It was becoming a kind of commodity. It used to mean one thing and after a while it began to mean everything. It became something you bought into, like Club Med.

*Were you looking for a plot?*

I think the plot found me. In a book about fear and paranoia, a plot was bound to assert itself. It's not the tightest sort of plotting—more like drug fantasies, seeing dead relatives come out of the walls. What we finally have is a man in a small room, a man who has shut himself away, and this is something that happens in my work—the man hiding from acts of violence or planning acts of violence, or the individual reduced to silence by the forces around him.

*The most lyrical language in Great Jones Street is reserved for the last chapter. Bucky Wunderlick, deprived of the faculty of speech, is wandering the streets of lower*

*Manhattan. Why did you apply such poetic beauty to these scenes of dereliction?*

I think this is how urban people react to the deteriorating situation around them—I think we need to invent beauty, search out some restoring force. A writer may describe the ugliness and pain in graphic terms but he can also try to find a dignity and significance in ruined parts of the city, and the people he sees there. Ugly and beautiful—this is part of the tension of *Great Jones Street*. When I was working on the book there were beggars and derelicts in parts of the city they'd never entered before. A sense of failed souls and forgotten lives on a new scale. And the place began to feel a little like a community in the Middle Ages. Disease on the streets, insane people talking to themselves, the drug culture spreading among the young. We're talking about the very early 1970s, and I remember thinking of New York as a European city in the fourteenth century. Maybe this is why I was looking for a ruined sort of grandeur in the language at the end of the book.

*There's a three-year period between Great Jones Street and your next book, Ratner's Star. Did it take you all that time to write it?*

It took a little over two years of extremely concentrated work. I'm amazed now that I was able to do the book in that period of time. I was drawn to the beauty of scientific language, the mystery of numbers, the idea of pure mathematics as a secret history and secret language—and to the notion of a fourteen-year-old mathematical genius at the center of all this. I guess it's also a book of games, mathematics being chief among them. It's a book in which structure predominates. The walls, the armature, the foundation—I wandered inside this thing I was building and sometimes felt taken over by it, not so much lost inside it as helpless to prevent the thing from building new connections, new underground links.

*What got you so interested in mathematics?*

Mathematics is underground knowledge. Only the actual practitioners know the terms and references. And I was drawn to the idea of a novel about an enormously important field of human thought that remains largely unknown. But I had to enter as a novice, a jokesmith, with a certain sly deference. I had to sneak up on my subject. No other book I've done was at the same time such fun and such labor. And all the time I was writing the book I was writing a shadow book in another part of my mind—same story, same main character but a small book, a book the size of a children's book, maybe it was a children's book, less structure, less weight—four characters instead of eighty-four or a hundred and four.

*What you actually wrote is very different from your first three books.*

Somebody said that *Ratner's Star* is the monster at the center of my work. But maybe it's in orbit around the other books. I think the other books constitute a single compact unit and that *Ratner's Star* swings in orbit around this unit at a very great distance.



Your next book was *Players*.

Structure again but in a completely different way. Structure as something people need in their lives. It's about double lives. The second life is not only the secret life. It's the more structured life. People need rules and boundaries, and if society doesn't provide them in sufficient measure, the estranged individual may drift into something deeper and more dangerous. Terrorism is built on structure. A terrorist act is a structured narrative played out over days or weeks or even years if there are hostages involved. What we call the shadow life of terrorists or gun runners or double agents is in fact the place where a certain clarity takes effect, where definitions matter, and both sides tend to follow the same set of rules.

Owen Brademas, a character in *The Names*, makes some interesting remarks about the novel. At one point he says, "If I were writer, how would I enjoy being told the novel is dead. How liberating to work in the margins outside the central perception. You are the ghoul of literature."

The novel's not dead, it's not even seriously injured, but I do think we're working in the margins, working in the shadows of the novel's greatness and influence. There's plenty of impressive talent around, and there's strong evidence that younger writers are moving into history, finding broader themes. But when we talk about the novel we have to consider the culture in which it operates. Everything in the culture argues against the novel, particularly the novel that tries to be equal to the complexities and excesses of the culture. This is why books such as *JR* and *Harlot's Ghost* and *Gravity's Rainbow* and *The Public Burning* are important—to name just four. They offer many pleasures without making concessions to the middle-range reader, and they absorb and incorporate the culture instead of catering to it. And there's the work of Robert Stone and Joan Didion, who are both writers of conscience and painstaking workers of the sentence and paragraph. I don't want to list names because lists are a form of cultural hysteria, but I have to mention *Blood Meridian* for its beauty and its honor. These books and writers show us that the novel is still spacious enough and brave enough to encompass enormous areas of experience. We have a rich literature. But sometimes it's a literature too ready to be neutralized, to be incorporated into the ambient noise. This is why we need the writer in opposition, the novelist who writes against power, who writes against the corporation or the state or the whole apparatus of assimilation. We're all one beat away from becoming elevator music.

Could you tell me about the passage in *White Noise* in which Jack listens to his daughter Steffie talking in her sleep, and she is repeating the words *Toyota Celica*?

There's something nearly mystical about certain words and phrases that float through our lives. It's computer mysticism. Words that are computer generated to be used on products that might be sold anywhere from Japan to

Denmark—words devised to be pronounceable in a hundred languages. And when you detach one of these words from the product it was designed to serve, the word acquires a chantlike quality. Years ago somebody decided—I don't know how this conclusion was reached—that the most beautiful phrase in the English language was *cellar door*. If you concentrate on the sound, if you disassociate the words from the object they denote, and if you say the words over and over, they become a sort of higher Esperanto. This is how *Toyota Celica* began its life. It was pure chant at the beginning. Then they had to find an object to accommodate the words.

Tell me about the research you did for *Libra*.

There were several levels of research—fiction writer's research. I was looking for ghosts, not living people. I went to New Orleans, Dallas, Fort Worth and Miami and looked at houses and streets and hospitals, schools and libraries—this is mainly Oswald I'm tracking but others as well—and after a while the characters in my mind and in my notebooks came out into the world.

Then there were books, old magazines, old photographs, scientific reports, material printed by obscure presses, material my wife turned up from relatives in Texas. And a guy in Canada with a garage full of amazing stuff—audiotapes of Oswald talking on a radio program, audiotapes of his mother reading from his letters. And I looked at film consisting of amateur footage shot in Dallas on the day of the assassination, crude powerful footage that included the Zapruder film. And there were times when I felt an eerie excitement, coming across an item that seemed to bear out my own theories. Anyone who enters this maze knows you have to become part scientist, novelist, biographer, historian and existential detective. The landscape was crawling with secrets, and this novel-in-progress was my own precious secret—I told very few people what I was doing.

Then there was *The Warren Report*, which is the *Oxford English Dictionary* of the assassination and also the Joycean novel. This is the one document that captures the full richness and madness and meaning of the event, despite the fact that it omits about a ton and a half of material. I'm not an obsessive researcher, and I think I read maybe half of *The Warren Report*, which totals twenty-six volumes. There are acres of FBI reports I barely touched. But for me the boring and meaningless stretches are part of the experience. This is what a life resembles in its starkest form—school records, lists of possessions, photographs of knotted string found in a kitchen drawer. It took seven seconds to kill the president, and we're still collecting evidence and sifting documents and finding people to talk to and working through the trivia. The trivia is exceptional. When I came across the dental records of Jack Ruby's mother I felt a surge of admiration. Did they really put this in? The testimony of witnesses was a great resource—period language, regional slang, the twisted syntax of Marguerite Oswald and others as a kind of

improvised genius and the lives of trainmen and stripteasers and telephone clerks. I had to be practical about this, and so I resisted the urge to read everything.

*When **Libra** came out, I had the feeling that this was a magnum opus, a life accomplishment. Did you know what you would do next?*

I thought I would be haunted by this story and these characters for some time to come, and that turned out to be true. But it didn't affect the search for new material, the sense that it was time to start thinking about a new book. **Libra** will have a lingering effect on me partly because I became so deeply involved in the story and partly because the story doesn't have an end out here in the world beyond the book—new theories, new suspects and new documents keep turning up. It will never end. And there's no reason it should end. At the time of the twenty-fifth anniversary one newspaper titled its story about the assassination "The Day America Went Crazy." About the same time I became aware of three rock groups—or maybe two rock groups and a folk group—touring at the same time: the Oswalds, the Jack Rubies and the Dead Kennedys.

*How do you normally feel at the end of writing a novel? Are you disgusted with what you've done? Pleased?*

I'm usually happy to finish and uncertain about what I've done. This is where you have to depend on other people, editors, friends, other readers. But the strangest thing that happened to me at the end of a book concerns **Libra**. I had a photograph of Oswald propped on a makeshift bookshelf on my desk, the photo in which he holds a rifle and some left-wing journals. It was there for nearly the entire time I was working on the book, about three years and three months. When I reached the last sentence—a sentence whose precise wording I knew long before I reached the final page, a sentence I'd been eager to get to and which, when I finally got to it, I probably typed at a faster than usual rate, feeling the deepest sort of relief and satisfaction—the picture started sliding off the shelf, and I had to pause to catch it.

*There was a passage in a critical work about you that disturbed me a bit—I don't know if it came from an interview you gave or just a supposition on the writer's part—in which it was claimed that you don't particularly care about your characters.*

A character is part of the pleasure a writer wants to give his readers. A character who lives, who says interesting things. I want to give pleasure through language, through the architecture of a book or a sentence and through characters who may be funny, nasty, violent or all of these. But I'm not the kind of writer who dotes on certain characters and wants readers to do the same. The fact is every writer likes his characters to the degree that he's able to work out their existence. You invent a character who pushes his mother down a flight of stairs, say. She's an old lady in a wheelchair and your character comes

home drunk and pushes her down a long flight of stairs. Do you automatically dislike this man? He's done an awful thing. But I don't believe it's that simple. Your feelings toward this character depend on whether or not you've realized him fully, whether you understand him. It's not a simple question of like or dislike. And you don't necessarily show your feelings toward a character in the same way you show feelings to real people. In **Mao II** I felt enormous sympathy toward Karen Janney, sympathy, understanding, kinship. I was able to enter her consciousness quickly and easily. And I tried to show this sympathy and kinship through the language I used when writing from her viewpoint—a free-flowing, non-sequitur ramble that's completely different from the other characters' viewpoints. Karen is not especially likable. But once I'd given her a life independent of my own will, I had no choice but to like her—although it's simplistic to put it that way—and it shows in the sentences I wrote, which are free of the usual constraints that bind words to a sentence in a certain way.

*Did you try with **Libra** for a larger audience than you had achieved at the time of **The Names**?*

I wouldn't know how to do that. My mind works one way, toward making a simple moment complex, and this is not the way to gain a larger audience. I think I have the audience my work ought to have. It's not easy work. And you have to understand that I started writing novels fairly late and with low expectations. I didn't even think of myself as a writer until I was two years into my first novel. When I was struggling with that book I felt unlucky, unbled by the fates and by the future, and almost everything that has happened since then has proved me wrong. So some of my natural edginess and pessimism has been tempered by acceptance. This hasn't softened the tone of my work—it has simply made me realize I've had a lucky life as a writer.

*I can see how **Mao II** would come naturally out of **Libra** from a thematic point of view—the terrorist and the man in the small room. But I'm curious as to why, after **Libra**, you went back to the shape and feel of your previous novels. There's something about the wandering in **Mao II** that goes back to **Players** or **Running Dog**.*

The bare structure of **Mao II** is similar to the way **Players** is set up, including a prologue and an epilogue. But **Mao II** is a sort of rest-and-motion book, to invent a category. The first half of the book could have been called "The Book." Bill Gray talking about his book, piling up manuscript pages, living in a house that operates as a kind of filing cabinet for his work and all the other work it engenders. And the second half of the book could have been called "The World." Here, Bill escapes his book and enters the world. It turns out to be the world of political violence. I was nearly finished with the first half of the book before I realized how the second half ought to be shaped. I was writing blind. It was a struggle up to that point, but once I understood that Bill had to escape his

handlers—the most obvious things tend to take the form of startling revelations—I felt a surge of excitement because the book had finally revealed itself to me.

*We talked briefly about men in small rooms. Bill Gray the writer. Lee Oswald the plotter. Owen Brademas in the old city of Lahore. Bucky Wunderlick blown off the concert stage and hiding out. But what about the crowd? "The future belongs to crowds," you wrote in **Mao II**. That sentence gets quoted a lot.*

In **Mao II** I thought about the secluded writer, the arch individualist, living outside the glut of the image world. And then the crowd, many kinds of crowds, people in soccer stadiums, people gathered around enormous photographs of holy men or heads of state. This book is an argument about the future. Who wins the struggle for the imagination of the world? There was a time when the inner world of the novelist—Kafka's private vision and maybe Beckett's—eventually folded into the three-dimensional world we were all living in. These men wrote a kind of world narrative. And so did Joyce in another sense. Joyce turned the book into a world with *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. Today, the world has become a book—more precisely a news story or television show or piece of film footage. And the world narrative is being written by men who orchestrate disastrous events, by military leaders, totalitarian leaders, terrorists, men dazed by power. World news is the novel people want to read. It carries the tragic narrative that used to belong to the novel. The crowds in **Mao II**, except for the mass wedding, are TV crowds, masses of people we see in news coverage of terrible events. The news has been full of crowds, and the TV audience represents another kind of crowd. The crowd broken down into millions of small rooms.

*One of the funnier moments in **Mao II**—it's a typically grim funny moment—is when Bill Gray has been run over by a car, and he approaches a group of veterinarians to try to determine the extent of his damage. Where did that come from?*

I said something earlier about going from simple to complex moments. This is one of those instances. I wanted to reveal the seriousness of Bill Gray's physical condition, but it seemed ridiculously simple to have him walk into a doctor's office. Partly because he didn't want to see a doctor—he feared the blunt truth—but mainly because I wanted to do something more interesting. So I took an indirect route and hoped for certain riches along the way. I wanted to make basic medical information an occasion for comic dialogue and for an interesting play of levels. What I mean is that Bill pretends to be a writer—of course, he is a writer—doing research on a medical matter he wants to put into his book. This happens to be exactly what I did before writing the passage. I talked to a doctor about the kind of injury Bill suffered when the car hit him and what the consequences might be and how the effects of the injury might manifest themselves. And I played his answers back through the medium of three tipsy British

veterinarians trying to oblige a stranger who may actually be gravely ill and isn't sure how he feels about it. Bill the writer becomes his own character. He tries to shade the information, soften it a bit, by establishing a kind of fiction. He needs this for a book, he tells them, but it turned out to be my book, not his.

*There are a number of characters in your work who discover that they are going to die sooner than they thought, though they don't know exactly when. Bucky Wunderlick isn't going to die, but he's been given something awful, and for all he knows the side effects are deadly; Jack Gladney, poisoned by the toxic spill, is another obvious example; and then we come to Bill Gray with his automobile accident. What does this accelerated but vague mortality mean?*

Who knows? If writing is a concentrated form of thinking, then the most concentrated writing probably ends in some kind of reflection on dying. This is what we eventually confront if we think long enough and hard enough.

*Could it be related to the idea in **Libra** that—*

—all plots lead toward death? I guess that's possible. It happens in **Libra**, and it happens in **White Noise**, which doesn't necessarily mean that these are highly plotted novels. **Libra** has many digressions and meditations, and Oswald's life just meanders along for much of the book. It's the original plotter, Win Everett, who wonders if his conspiracy might grow tentacles that will turn an assassination scare into an actual murder, and of course this is what happens. The plot extends its own logic to the ultimate point. And **White Noise** develops a trite adultery plot that enmeshes the hero, justifying his fears about the death energies contained in plots. When I think of highly plotted novels I think of detective fiction or mystery fiction, the kind of work that always produces a few dead bodies. But these bodies are basically plot points, not worked-out characters. The book's plot either moves inexorably toward a dead body or flows directly from it, and the more artificial the situation the better. Readers can play off their fears by encountering the death experience in a superficial way. A mystery novel localizes the awesome force of the real death outside the book, winds it tightly in a plot, makes it less fearful by containing it in a kind of game format.

*You've said that you didn't think your books could be written in the world that existed before the Kennedy assassination.*

Our culture changed in important ways. And these changes are among the things that go into my work. There's the shattering randomness of the event, the missing motive, the violence that people not only commit but seem to watch simultaneously from a disinterested distance. Then the uncertainty we feel about the basic facts that surround the case—number of gunmen, number of shots and so on. Our grip on reality has felt a little threatened. Every revela-



tion about the event seems to produce new levels of secrecy, unexpected links, and I guess this has been part of my work, the clandestine mentality—how ordinary people spy on themselves, how the power centers operate and manipulate. Our postwar history has seen tanks in the streets and occasional massive force. But mainly we have the individual in the small room, the nobody who walks out of the shadows and changes everything. That week in Maine, that street I saw that made me think I had to write a novel—well, I bought a newspaper the same day or maybe later in the week, and there was a story about Charles Whitman, the young man who went to the top of a tower in Austin, Texas and shot and killed over a dozen people and wounded about thirty more. Took a number of guns up there with him. Took supplies with him, ready for a long siege, including underarm deodorant. And I remember thinking, Texas again. And also, underarm deodorant. That was my week in Maine.

*One of the other things that's very important in **Libra** is the existence of a filmed version of the assassination. One of the points you make is that television didn't really come into its own until it filmed Oswald's murder. It is possible that one of the things that marks you as a writer is that you're a post-television writer?*

Kennedy was shot on film, Oswald was shot on TV. Does this mean anything? Maybe only that Oswald's death became instantly repeatable. It belonged to everyone. The Zapruder film, the film of Kennedy's death, was sold and hoarded and doled out very selectively. It was exclusive footage. So that the social differences continued to pertain, the hierarchy held fast—you could watch Oswald die while you ate a TV dinner, and he was still dying by the time you went to bed, but if you wanted to see the Zapruder film you had to be very important or you had to wait until the 1970s when I believe it was shown once on television, or you had to pay somebody thirty thousand dollars to look at it—I think that's the going rate.

The Zapruder film is a home movie that runs about eighteen seconds and could probably fuel college courses in a dozen subjects from history to physics. And every new generation of technical experts gets to take a crack at the Zapruder film. The film represents all the hopefulness we invest in technology. A new enhancement technique or a new computer analysis—not only of Zapruder but of other key footage and still photographs—will finally tell us precisely what happened.

*I read it exactly the opposite way, which may be also what you're getting around to. It's one of the great ironies that, despite the existence of the film, we don't know what happened.*

We're still in the dark. What we finally have are patches and shadows. It's still a mystery. There's still an element of dream-terror. And one of the terrible dreams is that our most photogenic president is murdered on film. But there's something inevitable about the Zapruder film. It had to happen this way. The moment belongs to the twentieth century, which means it had to be captured on film.

*Can we even go further and say that part of the confusion is created by the film? After all, if the film didn't exist it would be much harder to posit a conspiracy theory.*

I think every emotion we felt is part of that film, and certainly confusion is one of the larger ones, yes. Confusion and horror. The head shot is like some awful, pornographic moment that happens without warning in our living rooms—some truth about the world, some unspeakable activity people engage in that we don't want to know about. And after the confusion about when Kennedy is first hit, and when Connally is hit, and why the president's wife is scrambling over the seat, and simultaneous with the horror of the head shot, part of the horror, perhaps—there's a bolt of revelation. Because the head shot is the most direct kind of statement that the lethal bullet was fired from the front. Whatever the physical possibilities concerning impact and reflex, you look at this thing and wonder what's going on. Are you seeing some distortion inherent in the film medium or in your own perception of things? Are you the willing victim of some enormous lie of the state—a lie, a wish, a dream? Or, did the shot simply come from the front, as every cell in your body tells you it did?

*From David Bell making a film about himself in **Americana** to the Führer-bunker porno film in **Running Dog**, to the filmmaker Volterra's mini-lecture in **The Names**, you return incessantly to the subject of movies. "The twentieth century is on film," you wrote in **The Names**, it's "the filmed century."*

Film allows us to examine ourselves in ways earlier societies could not—examine ourselves, imitate ourselves, extend ourselves, reshape our reality. It permeates our lives, this double vision, and also detaches us, turns some of us into actors doing walk-throughs. In my work, film and television are often linked with disaster. Because this is one of the energies that charges the culture. TV has a sort of panting lust for bad news and calamity as long as it is visual. We've reached the point where things exist so they can be filmed and played and replayed. Some people may have had the impression that the Gulf War was made for television. And when the Pentagon censored close coverage, people became depressed. All that euphoria drifting through the country suddenly collapsed—not because we weren't winning but because they'd taken away our combat footage. Think about the images most often repeated. The Rodney King videotape or the Challenger disaster or Ruby shooting Oswald. These are the images that connect us the way Betty Grable used to connect us in her white swimsuit, looking back at us over her shoulder in the famous pinup. And they play the tape again and again and again and again. This is the world narrative, so they play it until everyone in the world has seen it.

*Frank Lentricchia refers to you as the type of writer who believes that the shape and fate of the culture dictates the shape and fate of the self.*

Yes, and maybe we can think about **Running Dog** in this respect. This book is not exactly about obsession—it's

about the marketing of obsession. Obsession as a product that you offer to the highest bidder or the most enterprising and reckless fool, which is sort of the same thing in this particular book. Maybe this novel is a response to the war in Vietnam—this is what I’m getting at—and how the war affected the way people worked out their own strategies, how individuals conducted their own lives. There’s a rampant need among the characters, a driving urge that certain characters feel to acquire the book’s sacred object, a home movie made in Hitler’s bunker. All the paranoia, manipulation, violence, all the sleazy desires are a form of fallout from the Vietnam experience. And in *Libra* of course—here we have Oswald watching TV, Oswald working the bolt of his rifle, Oswald imagining that he and the president are quite similar in many ways. I see Oswald, back from Russia, as a man surrounded by promises of fulfillment—consumer fulfillment, personal fulfillment. But he’s poor, unstable, cruel to his wife, barely employable—a man who has to enter his own Hollywood movie to see who he is and how he must direct his fate. This is the force of the culture and the power of the image. And this is also a story we’ve seen updated through the years. It’s the story of the disaffected young man who suspects there are sacred emanations flowing from the media heavens and who feels the only way to enter this holy vortex is through some act of violent theater. I think Oswald was a person who lost his faith—his faith in politics and in the possibility of change—and who entered the last months of his life not very different from the media-poisoned boys who would follow.

*In The New York Review of Books you were dubbed “the chief shaman of the paranoid school of American fiction.” What does this title mean to you, if anything?*

I realize this is a title one might wear honorably. But I’m not sure I’ve earned it. Certainly there’s an element of paranoia in my work—*Libra*, yes, although not nearly so much as some people think. In this book the element of chance and coincidence may be as strong as the sense of an engineered history. History is engineered after the assassination, not before. *Running Dog* and *Great Jones Street* may also have a paranoid sheen. But I’m not particularly paranoid myself. I’ve drawn this element out of the air around me, and it was a stronger force in the sixties and seventies than it is now. The important thing about the paranoia in my characters is that it operates as a form of religious awe. It’s something old, a leftover from some forgotten part of the soul. And the intelligence agencies that create and service this paranoia are not interesting to me as spy handlers or masters of espionage. They represent old mysteries and fascinations, ineffable things. Central intelligence. They’re like churches that hold the final secrets.

*It’s been said that you have an “ostentatiously gloomy view of American society.”*

I don’t agree, but I can understand how a certain kind of reader would see the gloomy side of things. My work doesn’t offer the comforts of other kinds of fiction, work

that suggests that our lives and our problems and our perceptions are no different today than they were fifty or sixty years ago. I don’t offer comforts except those that lurk in comedy and in structure and in language, and the comedy is probably not all that soothing. But before everything, there’s language. Before history and politics, there’s language. And it’s language, the sheer pleasure of making it and bending it and seeing it form on the page and hearing it whistle in my head—this is the thing that makes my work go. And art can be exhilarating despite the darkness—and there’s certainly much darker material than mine—if the reader is sensitive to the music. What I try to do is create complex human beings, ordinary-extraordinary men and women who live in the particular skin of the late twentieth century. I try to record what I see and hear and sense around me—what I feel in the currents, the electric stuff of the culture. I think these are American forces and energies. And they belong to our time.

*What have you been working on recently?*

Sometime in late 1991 I started writing something new and didn’t know what it would be—a novel, a short story, a long story. It was simply a piece of writing, and it gave me more pleasure than any other writing I’ve done. It turned into a novella, “*Pafko at the Wall*,” and it appeared in *Harper’s* about a year after I started it. At some point I decided I wasn’t finished with the piece. I was sending signals into space and getting echoes back, like a dolphin or a bat. So the piece, slightly altered, is now the prologue, to a novel-in-progress, which will have a different title. And the pleasure has long since faded into the slogging reality of the no-man’s-land of the long novel. But I’m still hearing the echoes.

*Do you have any plans for after the novel-in-progress?*

Not any specific plans. But I’m aware of the fact that time is limited. Every new novel stretches the term of the contract—let me live long enough to do one more book. How many books do we get? How much good work? The actuaries of the novel say twenty years of our best work, and after that we’re beachcombing for shiny stones. I don’t necessarily agree, but I’m aware of fleeting time.

*Does that make you nervous?*

No, it doesn’t make me nervous, it just makes me want to write a little faster.

*But you’ll keep on writing?*

I’ll keep writing something, certainly.

*I mean, you couldn’t take up gardening?*

No, no, no, no, no.

*Handball?*

Do you know what a Chinese killer is? It's a handball term—when you hit the ball right at the seam of the wall and the ground, and the shot is unreturnable. This used to be called a Chinese killer.

**Mark Edmundson (essay date April 1995)**

SOURCE: "Not Flat, Not Round, Not There: Don DeLillo's Novel Characters," in *Yale Review*, Vol. 83, No. 2, April, 1995, pp. 107–24.

[In the following essay, Edmundson examines the revisions of conventional ways of representing characters in *Mao II*, *Libra*, and *White Noise* in terms of contemporary notions of self-identity.]

On October 15, 1897, Sigmund Freud, then a little-known physician, wrote a letter to his friend and confidant Wilhelm Fleiss in which he put forth a daring speculation. "A single idea of general value dawned on me," Freud writes. "I have found in my own case too, [the phenomenon of] being in love with my mother and jealous of my father, and I now consider it a universal event in early childhood." Freud refers of course to the oedipal complex, the cornerstone of psychoanalysis and perhaps the central mode for conceiving character in the twentieth-century West. The Freudian image is itself an installment in a long tradition, one that reaches back if not to Sophocles, as Freud's designation suggests, then at least to Shakespeare.

But this long-standing manner of conceiving the self may be waning. For there is rising up in a variety of cultural areas a different notion of selfhood, of the possibilities for the way the self tells stories about itself in the present. This relatively recent conception has many sources, but it is, I think, present nowhere more persuasively than in the novels of Don DeLillo. In his last three brilliant books DeLillo offers many things, but not the least important is a telling assault on conventional ways of representing character and a bitter, superbly rendered vision of contemporary self.

"Here they come," DeLillo begins his latest novel, *Mao II*, "marching into American sunlight. They are grouped in twos, eternal boy-girl, stepping out of the runway beyond the fence in left-center field. The music draws them across the grass, dozens, hundreds, already too many to count." The scene is a Moonie mass wedding in Yankee Stadium as taken in by Rodge—"he's got a degree and a business and a tax attorney and a cardiologist and a mutual fund and whole life and major medical"—who is searching for his daughter, Karen, in the throng. Rodge is busy holding tight to his old version of Karen: "healthy, intelligent, twenty-one, serious-sided, possessed of a selfness, a teeming soul, nuance and shadow, grids of pinpoint singularities they will never drill out of her."

Rodge thinks Karen is *his* daughter, the product of life in their family, a firm identity (underneath it all) like himself, forged in love and strife. She'll be strong enough, some

day, to maintain a business, a tax attorney, a cardiologist. But Rodge—as the deadpan, mocking voice that filters his thoughts and supplies his background implies—has it wrong. Karen isn't a member of his or any family. Like Lee Harvey Oswald and his mother, Marguerite, in *Libra*, like Heinrich, the twelve-year-old connoisseur of chaos in *White Noise*, Karen lacks a true or deep self. Like them she's a conductor, a relay point amid numberless others, for currents of force that are subtly, comprehensively penetrating. The gospel of the Reverend Moon—a salient instance of such bizarrely suffusing force—enters his acolytes and becomes them: "He is part of the structure of their protein"; "they know him at molecular level."

These characters, as well as the blankly impersonal narrating voices that DeLillo frequently uses, give Don DeLillo's fiction much of its uncanny power, its power to seem both close to home and outrageous in its rendering of where America is and where it's going. For DeLillo is a novelist with a vision. His scope is large. DeLillo remarked of his third novel, *Great Jones Street*, a story about, and more than about, a big-time rock star, Bucky Wunderlick, who is trying to relinquish fame and put his life on hold, that the situation seemed to provide perfect metaphors for America in the 1970s.

Every DeLillo novel seems to take off from a comparable intuition. He's perpetually gambling that his books will act as cultural seismographs, devices that find in particular upheavals a key to the lay of, and the pressures coming invisibly to bear on, the American landscape overall. As Frank Lentricchia, author of a sequence of brilliant essays on DeLillo, puts it, Don DeLillo is one of those writers who "conceive their vocation as an act of cultural criticism (in the broadest sense of the terms); who invent in order to intervene; whose work is a kind of anatomy, an effort to represent their culture in its totality." With this account DeLillo seems fully to concur. In a recent *Paris Review* interview he says, "We have a rich literature. But sometimes it's a literature too ready to be neutralized, to be incorporated into the ambient noise. This is why we need the writer in opposition, the novelist who writes against power, who writes against the corporation or the state or the whole apparatus of assimilation. We're all one beat away from becoming elevator music."

Large designs are already perceptible in the title and range of DeLillo's first book, *Americana*, published in 1971. DeLillo began relatively late as a novelist; he was in his mid-thirties when *Americana* appeared, but since then he's worked at a remarkable pace. In the seven years after his first novel he finished five more: *End Zone* (1972), *Great Jones Street* (1973), *Ratner's Star* (1976), *Players* (1977), and *Running Dog* (1978). All got good reviews, all sold badly. In 1982 he published *The Names*, then followed with the three books on which his reputation now largely rests, *White Noise* (1985), which won the National Book Award, the best-selling *Libra* (1988), and PEN/Faulkner winner *Mao II* (1992). His latest major publication is a surprisingly sweet-tempered performance, "*Pafko*



*at the Wall*,” a baseball reminiscence (among other things) that appeared in *Harper's Magazine*.

Over the past twenty years, DeLillo has honed his art and enlarged his take on American life to the point where he is quite conceivably our premiere novelist, in stature not unlike what Saul Bellow, a splendidly Dickensian comic writer, came to be in the 1970s and early 1980s. DeLillo is funny, but not in Bellow's mode: for DeLillo, wild humor is inevitably mixed with terror. To see these two impulses as currently compatible is part of DeLillo's achievement, and it's part of what makes figures like Lee, Marguerite, Karen, and Heinrich, who are at once comic and unnerving, as engaging as they are, as hard to forget.

DeLillo's originality in representing character implicitly proposes that we are at the end of an era, the era in certain ways epitomized by Rodge and by another figure in *Mao II*. Bill is the novelist as imperial self. He's a throwback to Hemingway and Faulkner: a hard-drinking individualist who's plagued with a smothering case of writer's block. In an especially telling moment in *Mao II*, a Greek professor with terrorist connections, having run a few conversational rings around Bill, tells Bill that he'd write better books and faster if he'd buy himself a word-processor and throw out the old manual typewriter, which is, naturally, something of an image for Bill himself. (DeLillo mentions in the *Paris Review* that he chops along on a manual machine.)

What exactly does it mean that DeLillo is challenging established ways of representing character as it's epitomized in figures like Bill, offering us a version of selfhood that may be more true to our moment than those we're accustomed to encountering in novels? What is he challenging? And perhaps more important, how believable is the innovation? How, if at all, does it illuminate experience in its current form?

In the representation of character our literary legacy is, as Harold Bloom has lately, with customary verve and acuity, been arguing, in many ways Shakespearean. Shakespeare, more than any other author, has established the assumptions we hold about character in literature and perhaps, too, in life. Freud is the most influential twentieth-century theorist of the self in part—as I'll be suggesting—for the canniness with which he recasts Shakespeare. To the sense of character in many ways originated by Shakespeare and revised by Freud, Don DeLillo, acting in concert with other strong tendencies in culture and society, offers a challenge.

Character in Christopher Marlowe, Shakespeare's most significant predecessor, unfolds: it rarely develops. With every scene Barabas, Marlowe's Jew of Malta, becomes more intensely what we took him to be at the start of the play—a maniacal egotist, like Marlowe's Tamburlaine and his Faustus, avid to possess the world. All of Barabas's energies flow in the same direction. The emotion of ambivalence, in which one simultaneously loves and hates

the same object, is by and large foreign to Marlowe's characters. Yet ambivalence is central to most of Shakespeare's major figures, just as, for Freud, it is the inescapable fact of psychological life.

Shakespeare's characters change, often suddenly. When Hamlet returns from England in the fifth act of the play, he is a different man from the one we knew. He has acquired a preternatural detachment, a poised stoicism comparable in certain ways to Montaigne's. In the final movement of the play, Hamlet stops the unpredictable sliding from antic glee to melancholy his encounter with the ghost has initiated. Yet Hamlet has achieved equanimity through strife. He has struggled with his mother, with Claudius, Ophelia, and Polonius, and, most painfully because most ambivalently, with the image of his dead father. Should he be the noble killer his father was and cut Claudius down? Or is Hamlet a different order of man, one who can renounce revenge and the culture that sanctions it? By the fifth act, near his own death, Hamlet has worked through this harsh conflict of ambivalence and can hand himself over to fate: "Since no man, of aught he leaves, knows what is't to leave betimes, let be." If he hasn't achieved a full triumph over his father's bloody code, he hasn't capitulated to it either.

To describe Hamlet as working through a conflict of ambivalence with his father is to use Freud's terminology, and it has become very hard not to see Shakespeare through Freud's lens, rather than looking, as perhaps we should, at Freud as Shakespeare's most brilliant student. What Freud does to Shakespeare, to put it crudely, is to transfer some of his central dramatic conceptions from the stage to the psyche. From a comedy such as *As You Like It*, which, by way of the extended flirtation between Rosalind (disguised as Ganymede) and Orlando, seems to insist on homosexual attraction as a necessary stage to heterosexual binding, Freud might have found strong confirmation for his intuitions about the natural human inclination to bisexuality. Then, too, the play would corroborate his theory of narcissism as an early (and never quite surpassed) developmental stage. From *Antony and Cleopatra*, with its contrast between the voluptuous Egyptian world and cold, marmoreal Rome, Freud would have found ample inspiration for the dialectic between culture and eros developed in *Civilization and Its Discontents*. But surely no play was more central to Freud than *Hamlet*.

In Shakespeare's rendition the ghost of Hamlet's father exists in a liminal space: he's seen by others besides Hamlet—sometimes, but not always. Is he a "creature of hell" with an independent being or of Hamlet's tortured conscience? The play will not resolve the question. Unequivocally Freud places the ghostly father within the self. He's manifest in the psyche as the superego, the agency of inner authority which, unlike Christian conscience, is often unconscious and capable of punishing unjustly for what one imagines doing against its dictates, as well as for the transgressions one actually commits. It is in the theater of psychoanalytic therapy that the father's

ghost can be flushed out, brought to center stage. Through transference the analyst can act the role of the father—and of his interior stand-in, the superego—and the patient enter into a dialogue with his or her own indwelling agent of authority.

That dialogue is not altogether unlike the one undertaken by Hamlet on the battlement. But there is a crucial difference. Shakespeare is obsessed with family plots: his plays burst from the compressed energies of family love and hate, family ambivalence. But when, in his tragedies and elsewhere, Shakespeare renders families, they are often royal families. *Hamlet*, like all the tragedies, is a political play. It is, among many things, a meditation on kingship. Who, one is compelled to ask, is the better qualified to rule, the vicious, efficient Claudius or Hamlet, paragon of men, superior by every humane standard, yet incapable of deciding on a course of action?

When Freud rewrites Shakespeare, he erases politics from the page. (The director of a recent production of *Hamlet* referred to the protagonist as the child of a dysfunctional family, sad testimony to Freud's success.) Yet where Shakespeare and Freud significantly concur is in their conception of power. Both assume that power emanates from a strong, unified source, whether the king, the father, or the superego. Salutary change is the result of entering into a conflict—always a conflict of ambivalence—with the figure of authority and transforming one's relations to it. (In *Henry IV*, Prince Hal both identifies with and placates his father while also surpassing him: he succeeds nearly unequivocally in a task not unlike Hamlet's.) This conflict of ambivalence with a relatively fixed antagonist is, I think, a—if not the—crucial element in Western versions of character.

Friedrich Nietzsche, a devoted admirer of the agonistic self, dismissed Eastern meditative passivity with a supercilious reduction: of course, they're prone to tranquil meditation, so would you be on a rice diet of four hundred or so calories a day. In fact, the meditative temperament plays an important role in the West: Keats speaks of wise passiveness, Eliot tells of the writer's necessary laziness, Tennyson is equivocal laureate of the lotus world. One could go on. But the needs of dramatic plot, which Aristotle said must have an agon, and the requisites of capitalism, where one is compelled to strive or go under, concur, with multiple other corroborating factors, to bring the agonistic self to the fore. And the product of victorious agon is the gorgeously armored "I," the Western self. As Camille Paglia observes, "Western personality is hard, impermeable, intractable." "The West makes personality and history numinous objects of contemplation. Western personality is a work of art, and history is its stage."

"Man," says Emerson, "is a stupendous antagonism, a dragging together of the poles of the universe." We are, Emerson thinks, most vital in the moments when we confront fate with self-generated power. In such rugged encounters, he says, souls are born. Similarly Keats, in his

famous letter on the vale of soul-making, speaks of "how necessary a world of pains and trouble is to school an intelligence and make it a soul." The sentiment is manifest in Hegel's dialectical theory of the spirit's development; in Marx's notion of how an ascending class struggles with and supplants another; in Nietzsche's vision of the will to self-overcoming, in which the inner obstacle is what he calls the spirit of revenge (though Nietzsche's endorsement of the eternal recurrence, in which the will must cease rebelling against the past and, in effect, fall in love with its fate, enjoins a complex play of exertion and passivity that brings the opposition of the two terms into doubt).

Then there are the great novelists of the age: Balzac, Stendhal, Dickens, who depict the development of character from the dialectics of force, though frequently for them the limiting force is manifest not in an opposing self, or in an oppositional faction of the inner life, but in resistant social forms. And those social forms have a determinate existence. Dickens, D.A. Miller's provocative arguments to the contrary, used *Bleak House* to represent the Court of Chancery as a monolithic institution that might be changed for the good of all.

Granted, exceptions to the agonistic mode of Western character, even at its nineteenth-century apogee, are numerous. Granted, too, that art and reflection have made conspicuous use of numberless other categories besides the contest to illuminate selfhood. My interest here lies in economies of self-representation, in how the self is figured as existing in fields of force and as exerting power in its turn. To bring across the view I find implicit in DeLillo—that the possibilities for interior economics have dramatically shifted—it seems worthwhile to compress the case, to place the disjunction that DeLillo renders in the foreground and to make less of the continuities between his art and what comes before it, and less, too, of the disparities within the tradition he is challenging.

In the worlds of DeLillo's major novels dialectical encounter is impossible. Crudely put, the king is dead, the father, too. In DeLillo's world coercive power is pervasive, but it is not the property or prerogative of any individual or group. Power, in DeLillo, has a life of its own: it is the first and inescapable fact of life in Western society, just as eros braided with aggression was for Freud.

Take, for example, DeLillo's vision of the Kennedy assassination in what is perhaps his best book to date, *Libra*. With singular prowess DeLillo enters the mind of Kennedy's assassin, placing Lee Oswald among a swirling, disjointed collection of plots, dreams, and fantasies that achieve their sudden deadly concentration in the murder of the president. The point of the novel is not, in the manner of Oliver Stone's *JFK*, to deploy one more conspiracy theory. Rather, DeLillo is trying to put the event into an imaginative context that dramatizes the multiple forces, both interanimating and contradictory, that circulate through American society and issue in events like

the assassination. There is no single node of power—no king, no godfather—from which the order descends to kill Kennedy. It's not Castro or Hoover, the KGB or the CIA.

*Libra* presents circuitries of power: currents of force pass through rogue government agents, Cuban “freedom fighters,” cranks on the Left and on the Right, through innocent wives and passive bystanders. These currents are given form by media-made fantasies trafficking in adventure, intrigue, and omnipotence, which are in turn transformed in individual consumption; then, when the individual erupts, as Lee Oswald does, fed back into the image-flow again to produce other disasters, other murderers: Sirhan, Manson, Calley.

*Libra*, then, is only ostensibly a theory of who did it: more accurately, it's an analogue for how it happened. The book seeks to reveal the contemporary form power takes, a form in which—as Lentricchia suggests in his remarkable essay on *Libra*—no rulers issue autonomous decrees but in which, with a life almost its own, power passes rapidly and insidiously, flooding through the porous networks of a society made both unbearably intimate and alien by the conductive powers of postmodern communications technology. *Libra* renders a dramatic image of the power that, as Michel Foucault puts it, “traverses and produces things . . . induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse” and “needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body.”

DeLillo has been derided as a paranoid novelist, someone with a neurotic, perhaps sociopathic, vision of a world ruled by conspiracies. But this is nearly the opposite of the truth. DeLillo's novels *anatomize* paranoia. They demonstrate how agents, terrorists, intelligence men, gun runners, and the like create and play out narrow stratagems with which they hope to change the world, or at least control some significant corner. In fact, DeLillo continually shows such schemes up as pointless and pathetic, frightened gropings for order. The relative plotlessness of his novels, which tend to have a rich meandering flow, contrasts with the rage for order that possesses many of his characters. Unlike, say, Alfred Hitchcock, who plots his films with the dexterity that his cleverest murderers deploy, DeLillo refuses to endorse his characters' plotting with tight, ingenious structures of his own.

The kind of power DeLillo renders exists everywhere and nowhere. It is impossible to confront. You can never stand face to face with the man behind the scenes and take him to task, break him down, or fracture his jaw. Fathers can't function as stand-ins for repressive authority in DeLillo's world because children aren't raised by fathers now—they are raised by power and images. Dialectical encounter, the struggle with fate in which souls are born, if you like, is impossible in such a culture in that people who carry the title of father are as much functions of power as the people who are supposedly their children. DeLillo's is a culture in which influence is pervasive but in which influence anxiety

is free-floating. (The overall atmosphere of a DeLillo novel, the feeling I at least get while reading him, is of anxiety without a readily ascertainable source.) There is no social equivalent to Harold Bloom's precursor on whom to levy one's love-hate; no moment in which the internalized quest that characterizes High Romanticism from William Blake to Norman Mailer precipitates an encounter between inspired devil and killing conformist angel, or hipster and square.

Such dialectical endeavors, which Blake calls instances of mental fight, need not be schematic. As Richard Poirier observes in his superb book on Mailer, “He is quite unable to imagine anything except in oppositions, unable even to imagine one side of the opposition without proposing that it has yet another opposition within itself. Thus, it is not merely dialectical oppositions which are essential to the activities and movements of Mailer's imagination but the further complication that there be within each side a sense of internal embattlement.” And, surely, the potential is there for further division, further encounter and change. Yet however intricate the dialectical elaborations, however minute the discriminations of energy, the procedure is informed by a faith in renewal absent from DeLillo's world. There dialectical encounter is understood to be as obsolete as quest Romance and the internalization of that quest that to some comprises High Romanticism.

Yet it is for such defining dialectical moments that Lee Oswald searches. He is forever putting on what he hopes will be a strong selfhood, struggling to create an identity by placing himself in firm alliances and potentially defining opposition. Lee is obsessive in his claims for a true, deep identity: “He wanted subjects and ideas of historic scope, ideas that touched his life, his true life, the whirl of time inside him.” But whenever Lee claims an identity—as a spy for the Soviets, as a source for the FBI, as a public advocate for Cuba—invisible and random forces, not ultimate authorities, shape his actions. Thus his inevitable flight toward new potentially defining forms, other authorities.

Lee has a propensity for seeing himself from the outside, as when he narrates his suicide attempt in a Moscow hotel: “somewhere, a violin plays, as I watch my life whirl away.” He's hoping to find a self by positing an audience, observers who can see him from without, recognize him and fix his identity. Something similar is true of Lee's mother, Marguerite. The most poignant moments in *Libra* come when she, in the supposed privacy of her mind, makes speeches to an invisible judge, presiding in a nonexistent court:

I cannot say enough how hard it is to raise boys without a father. I was sitting pretty in our American slang, managing Princess Hosiery, when Mr. Ekdahl proposed in the car. I made him wait a year and he was a Harvard man. I have always seemed to make a home against the odds. I have often been complimented on my appearance and my little bright touches here and there and now I am thinking we will go to Texas again to be with [Lee's] brother Robert, to be a family again, in Fort Worth, so this boy can be with his brother.



Marguerite is in quest, like her son, for some principle of authority whose verdict will give her life substantial weight. But the pronouncement never comes: God, the judge, the father, the superego are all departed from this world of diffuse and insinuating power. Freud said that the paranoid brings forward the voices of the superego to rebel against them. In DeLillo, unfixed characters bring forward the fantasized presence of authority in hopes of creating a self, however momentarily, against the background of its judgments.

Part of DeLillo's genius in *Libra* lies in not allowing the novel's narrating voice to become a principle of stable authority, a superego substitute in its own right. DeLillo's voice tends to be arch, merging in complexly ironic ways with the voices of the characters. It penetrates everywhere, sees all, and defines each character by expeditious reporting—as though the relevant computer file were on hand—of his or her secrets. The narrating voice is often, in other words, a verbal image for the anonymous normative powers of surveillance that the novel depicts.

In DeLillo's vision society has developed means of surveillance and of pleasurable coercion that are so sophisticated and pervasive that they are impossible to defend against: and with the texture of his prose he induces one to feel that condition. Information has become intelligence; security is surveillance. In my view at least, this vision speaks eloquently of and to a society in which 70 percent of corporations use electronic monitoring to control their workers. It speaks to a culture in which a prosperous citizen has passed through an endless sequence of accrediting and maintaining institutions and generated reams of dossier material: test scores, health reports, psychological profiles, recommendations, assessments; and where a poor citizen, just to get by, has to submit to numberless diagnoses from wave on wave of helping professionals. In the universities, scholars in the social and natural sciences work like factories to produce more and better terminologies for establishing what is normal, healthful, productive, good.

And all of this normalizing technology is exacerbated, in DeLillo's vision, by the absence of a strong interior life accustomed from early on to struggle. Character in such an environment is, as Nietzsche foresaw in his bitter ruminations on the Last Man—the Man who avoids quarrels, hops and blinks, and credits himself with the invention of happiness—rendered weightless. Such a culture, if you can call it that, is the breeding ground for Lee and Marguerite, *Mao II*'s Karen, and Heinrich of *White Noise*.

Heinrich inhabits something only superficially akin to the American nuclear family. He's a twelve-year-old connoisseur of chaos, a student of disasters, who finds himself transported into his true element, the world for which he, in collaboration with a good deal of contemporary culture, has been preparing, when the Airborne Toxic Event arrives in the small town where his father, Jack, teaches Hitler studies at the College on the Hill. There's something hol-

low about Heinrich, an absence where, by conventional standards, his character ought to be, but it's not quite right to say that nobody is home.

Rather everybody and everything seem to be invited into temporary residence. Asking Heinrich a question is like turning on a preternatural receiving device that channels even as it flattens (most of what Heinrich says is in double quotation marks) a spectrum of cultural languages: sales, scientific expertise, talk show, pedagogy. Here he explains the Toxic Event to a group of cowed, admiring adults:

"What you're probably all wondering is what exactly is this Nyodene D. we keep hearing about? A good question. We studied it in school, we saw movies of rats having convulsions and so on. So, okay, it's basically simple. Nyodene D. is a whole bunch of things thrown together that are byproducts of the manufacture of insecticide. The original stuff kills roaches, the byproducts kill everything left over. A little joke our teacher made."

Heinrich's instructional mode is pure put-on, except that there's nothing in place that it's working to disguise. As Theodor Adorno observes in *Minima Moralia*, his fusion of Marxist and Freudian intelligence with nearly Proustian sensibility, "Narcissism, deprived of its libidinal object by the decay of the self, is replaced by the masochistic satisfaction of no longer being a self, and the rising generation guards few of its goods so jealously as its selflessness, its communal and lasting possession."

Like Heinrich, Karen, the "partially deprogrammed Moonie" of *Mao II*, *Libra*'s Marguerite Oswald, and Lee himself are eerily selfless. They are recording and transmitting devices, not characters in Tolstoy's mode, not even Freudian psyches. Nor are they what conservative critics of DeLillo have maintained, flat failed attempts to provide the sort of round characters commended by E.M. Forster. DeLillo's most extreme figures aren't flat or round; they aren't, strictly speaking, present at all.

What these figures record and broadcast is what's out there in the mass-culture ether, virtually unqualified, uncut, by private critical response. Thus Karen watching TV: "She was thin-boundaried. She took it all in, she believed it all, pain, ecstasy, dog food, all the seraphic matter, the baby bliss that falls from the air. . . . She carried the virus of the future." Karen, Heinrich, Lee, and Marguerite are, DeLillo suggests, America in its purest form, children of contemporary public culture, not of mom and dad.

Where is papa in DeLillo? He's anything but the potent ghost abiding on the battlement or in the psyche. Lee's father abandons him at birth; Karen's loses control early; Heinrich's is surely the most intriguing case of the lot. Jack Gladney, professor of Hitler studies and chair of the department, what values might he represent? No one who has read *White Noise* is likely to forget the duet performed by Jack and the Manhattan émigré, Murray, on the subject of Hitler and Elvis Presley. Both mamma's boys, both

myth-makers, flown high by their powers over the crowd, Hitler and Presley merge for a moment in a grotesque composite. Fan, one remembers as the duet proceeds, is shorthand for fanatic. But what makes that commonplace burn with renewed energy is the fascination for murderous celebrity the duet stirs up. The students jump to their feet in awe. The lecture scene, and the reading of it, becomes an intoxicant, a rally of noxious passions.

In *White Noise* papa, as Paul Cantor shows in a perceptive essay on the novel, contributes to the flattening effect of an image culture. Here, through the magic of film and verbal montage, anything can be equated with anything else, and values lose their pith. Father in DeLillo is an active agent in the dissolution of the culture he's traditionally supposed to embody. Is it much wonder that a child can't come into his or her own—become a “selfness, a teeming soul, nuance and shadow”—in relation to someone like Chairman Jack?

Another element of DeLillo's challenge to conventional character lies in his treatment of the erotic. DeLillo, from early on in his novelistic career, has never much cared about sex. This attitude contrasts with that of many American writers who have, in a manner that owes something to Walt Whitman, used sexual experience as a replacement for spiritual experience. They've wagered that if Judeo-Christian ideas about the life of the soul are no longer tenable, then maybe the depth of feeling stirred by erotic encounter can give life meaningful weight.

But DeLillo has never bought into that notion (“lust chilling” Daniel Aaron rightly called his sex scenes). In the age of AIDS, and when relaxation in censorship has probably led the culture's erotic imagination not toward greater richness but toward a commercialized homogeneity, liberation and erotic adventure can't be considered synonymous. Something about the equation one finds in writers as different as Adrienne Rich and Norman Mailer between the erotic self and the deep self rings false. Following one's erotic instincts now won't, as the thinking of the 1960s and 1970s sometimes assumed, put one in righteous rebellion against oppressive forms. The kind of dialectical encounter sex provides can't register such victories to the contemporary imagination. Character in DeLillo is posterotic, postfamilial, and in the main it's a function of the image industry/political apparatus at its most insinuating and attractive.

It's instructive to compare DeLillo's mode of representing character with the conventions operative in what one might call contemporary identity novels. The first sentence of Richard Ford's *Wildlife* effectively conveys the flavor of such fiction: “In the fall of 1960, when I was sixteen and my father was for a time not working, my mother met a man named Warren Miller and fell in love with him.” Almost the entire plot of the novel is compressed here, along with a number of its key suppositions. To wit: If you're going to tell the story of a life, however wild, your first reflex is to get into family drama. Character here, to

recall Freudian wisdom, is a precipitate of crisis encounters in the home, and in Ford's beginning you can see the standard oedipal triangle opening up to form the lines of a plot, and a boxy, schematic plot at that: mother, father, Warren, and me, a plot, in fact, with some of the same personae we find in *Hamlet*.

The intimation of Ford's tone in *Wildlife* is that he's faced the worst and assimilated it. It's made him what he is. And doing something of the same would, presumably, be salutary for the reader, too. The therapeutic dimension of books like Ford's (and there are lots of them: think of Amy Tan, Jay McInerney, Anne Tyler) lies in asking the reader to equate the author and the main character and in assuming that what worked for him or her can work for you. These are less novels than blueprints for self-construction.

From the vantage of DeLillo's novels, identity novelists are working overtime to shore up superannuated stories about the self. They are finding ways to create identity so as to make their readers comfortable, to shield them from registering the force of a complex, burgeoning network of social power. As publishing houses fall into the hands of conglomerates, American writers are increasingly pressed to produce novels that will sell quickly and well. And it's easiest, apparently, to sell books that work by flattery, books that warm readers by making them feel good about themselves, after teaching them to construct the self on which to lavish their affections. So it's the identity novelists, not Don DeLillo, whose books one sees stacked in towering is at Waldenbooks and Brentano's.

The entrenched conservatism in representing character that one finds in the identity novels is, I think, good backhanded testimony to the possibility that existing options for the self may be shifting. A lot of American fiction, instead of testing out that hypothesis, has joined in a rear-guard action to shut it out. Literary prowess aside, there's little difference in the ways Ford and Hemingway conceive character. Is there much difference between the possibilities for a subject now and the possibilities when Hemingway wrote? DeLillo persuades us to entertain the idea that there is.

Yet although DeLillo's most recent novels may touch on genius, one isn't compelled to accept their vision as determinate. In fact, I take DeLillo to be in many ways nostalgic for the kind of strong self-identity whose demise he's busy chronicling and thus unresponsive to the possibility that there are options between going Bill's way and going Karen's or Lee's. That nostalgia seems to me evident in the heroic pathos that DeLillo attributes to Bill, the novelist in *Mao II*. When we first meet Bill, he's being visited by a young woman named Brita, a Swedish photographer whose project it is to travel the world taking pictures of writers. They're an endangered species, this century's dodoes.

The plot seems to be stacked high against Bill from the start. When, egged on by his publisher, the novelist travels to Europe to help negotiate the release of a French poet

held hostage in Beirut, you see his expansive American ego repeatedly deflated. Bill ultimately dies on the way to Lebanon, where, trying to negotiate the Frenchman's release, he'd probably have become a hostage in turn.

But the overall dramatic effect isn't exactly what we'd expect. The author—DeLillo's image for integrity and the power to begin anew—isn't quite a relic. In the book's last scene Brita, having stopped photographing writers, is now in Beirut going head-on (bravely, quixotically, in the imperial American style) against a factional chieftain outside whose window children, including his son, are drilling like automatons. Enough of Bill's energies are alive, DeLillo seems to be indicating, transferred through his life and art and the works of those like him, so that the future doesn't yet entirely belong to crowds. In fact, the encounter Brita has with the warlord is a version of the old dialectical collision in which identity is won and lost, in which, as Mailer likes to put it, you either grow or perish a little for failing to win. DeLillo won't abandon agonistic character. By displacing what has been a conventionally male form of self-making onto a woman, he—perhaps nostalgically—strains to keep it alive.

One senses that DeLillo is an all-or-nothing writer. If the future doesn't belong to the fully autonomous self, the author, then it will have to belong to the crowds. And for the most part his voice and his technique affirm that it does. In figures like Lee, Heinrich, Marguerite, and Karen, we have images of what newly evolving modes of power, entirely uncut by ego-resistance or critical response, might generate. You don't have to take these figures literally (I don't know anyone they remind me of, and you probably don't either) to be impressed by them as brilliant hyperboles, prophetic warnings of the way culture might be tending.

And yet, given that DeLillo is right, that power is dispersed and intricate, not compressed, available, dense, it does not mean that fate is all and freedom nothing, that Karen and Lee are the inevitable products of cultural evolution. (Nor does it mean that there will never come another moment for which dialectical versions of change will be fitting.) What it does suggest is that there may be few if any heroic encounters in this culture but many, many small encounters in which the minute techniques of normalization can be challenged one at a time. When lawyers, scientists, academics, social workers, judges, writers—all who work the means of production that now turn out not only commodities but, in some measure, subjects—can view their activities with a critical eye and struggle against their own roles in the system of normalization, much will have been achieved. As readers of DeLillo, those of us who wield institutional power, however small, can come to see that life is not going to offer us moments of transcendent encounter, when the force of oppression will show a clear face. Rather, we'll see many small opportunities, ways of transforming the format of the recommendation, the grade, the psychiatric report, the TV documentary, the lesson plan, so that they will be less in line with the conforming imperative of productive power.

When the disadvantaged come to see that normative power may defeat them one small stroke at a time, not for the most part in cataclysmic instants, they may be better able to fight it. And when we all can entertain the hypothesis that, under the current dispensation, we are often prone to vacillate from observer to observed, force of irrational limitation to victim of needless limits, we will have gone some distance in putting Don DeLillo's vision to work.

DeLillo's, in other words, is not a vision that ought to teach us to laugh away Emersonian self-reliance. Rather, to keep to Emerson's terms for a moment, DeLillo has given us a version of fate or experience that brilliantly addresses the current predicament. He has done for our moment something of what Emerson did for his when he found in the extant modes of cultivated gentility a softly tyrannical force that had solidified and hemmed in life. But the promise exists, now as then: "Fate has its lord; limitation its limits." The prospect of a world in which small victories comprise most of the consequential ones may appall a writer who has individual ambitions of the scope that Don DeLillo maintains, but for some people it will be enough. DeLillo has given us a brilliant, hyperbolic vision of the contemporary form power takes; he's gone a long way to solve the problem we confront when we wonder why such an ostensibly free society should so frequently be dull and conformist. Now that the terrain is mapped, we might commence some engagements.

#### Gregory Salyer (essay date September 1995)

SOURCE: "Myth, Magic and Dread: Reading Culture Religiously," in *Literature and Theology: an International Journal of Theory, Criticism and Culture*, Vol. 9, No. 3, September, 1995, pp. 261–77.

[In the following essay, Salyer explicates the religious dimension of American cultural phenomenon represented in *White Noise*, contrasting the novel's mythical and mystical elements with those of Leslie Marmon Silko's novels *Ceremony* and *Almanac of the Dead*.]

I have been asked to reflect upon the values and assumptions that inform my teaching and writing as a professor working in the area of religion and literature. My first response is to thank David Jasper and the contributors to this issue for even raising the question. All too often those of us who are trained to analyze texts and arguments are the most blind to the assumptions that pervade our own work as individuals and scholars working within the academy. I am not going to make the argument that we can unpack our assumptions, lay them out on the table, and then consider our self-reflective work to be finished. My point is, rather, that we tend to turn our critical lenses outwardly much more eagerly and vigorously than we do inwardly. While any assumptions that we deign to expose will always be informed by deeper, antecedent assumptions, the process of looking inward is valuable, even



necessary I would argue, if we are to be critics in the fullest sense of the word. The special issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* entitled 'Settled Issues and Neglected Questions in the Study of Religion' (Winter 1994) is a step in this direction. The initial discussion that gave rise to the present issue began at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Washington DC in 1993. The conversation, however, took place not in a session but in a Thai restaurant somewhere in the city. We must have made quite a sight: several people engaged in an intense discussion of theology, religion, and literature over curried chicken and wine. That the conversation took place outside the formal confines of the conference is a shame; that it took place at all indicates to me that many of us do want to create a context for self-reflective discussions of what we do, how we do it, and why.

Gayatri Spivak has noted that scholars are the disc jockeys of culture, spinning hits like Shakespeare, Milton, and Toni Morrison to which our students and other audiences are supposed to dance. She is partly right of course, but we are also much more. We are interpreters of culture in all of its expressions and dynamics. We are critics who constantly pull apart the threads in the fabric of culture. We point out the tears and even attempt to patch the holes. As scholars of religion and literature we occupy a privileged position in this analysis because we concern ourselves with the construction and interpretation of meaning and value. We observe and participate in the processes of meaning-making, and we both supervise and lament the passing of meaning as it flickers and dies. We also ask about the meaning of meaning of meaning and interrogate the products of culture through discourses such as religion and literature.

To help focus my discussion, I will use three novels by two different writers: Leslie Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* and *Almanac of the Dead* and Don DeLillo's *White Noise*. *Ceremony* is one of the most acclaimed American novels of this century and is one of a quartet of Native American novels (along with N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, James Welch's *Winter in the Blood*, and Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*) that defines the Native American 'renaissance' of the last half of this century. *Almanac* is Silko's *tour de force* and presents her vision of the future and of the past in an historiographic rumination on the end of white history and the reconstitution of native peoples on the land that bore them. DeLillo's *White Noise* is in my view the best articulation of the American mythos in the late twentieth century. It is a sustained yet fragmented meditation upon plots, technology, death, and other cultural phenomena. These three novels represent well the issues that I seek to engage as a religious reader of American culture. *White Noise* offers a world that calls for iconoclasm and for the realization of the motives behind interpretation as language approaches myth and technology approaches magic. Silko's two novels offer a very different picture of how myth and magic can overcome the dread that pervades *White Noise*. What emerges from these readings are diverse strategies for doing the work of a

religion and literature critic, and these strategies all focus on the processes and products of meaning.

Early in the novel *White Noise* we are introduced to The Most Photographed Barn in America, a tourist attraction somewhere in New England that draws amateur and professional photographers from around the country. After some contemplation of the scene surrounding the most photographed barn in America, Murray, a wacked-out semiotician and cultural critic, observes cryptically, 'No one sees the barn.' He explains by noting that 'Once you've seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn'.<sup>1</sup> A marvellous example of poststructuralist theory in action, this scene in *White Noise* depicts more than the tyranny of the sign and the illusions of presence. For me it presents the challenges of cultural criticism: the opportunity to see behind the masks of our cultural icons, the opportunity to resist the built-in interpretation of ideas and images that are manufactured for public consumption, and the opportunity to observe the dynamics of interpretation that flow in, around, and through the hermeneutic material of culture. As cultural critics we offer strategies of resistance to the pre-packaged interpretations that are delivered to us in the guises of what is valuable, meaningful, and true. In being iconoclasts we open new channels of interpretation of the sacred. We are negative theologians: negative in our iconoclasm, theological in our exploration of the sacred.

The most photographed barn in America is lost beneath the palimpsest of signs that precede and announce it. Murray the critic is able to peel off these layers and gaze upon the emptiness beneath. Murray is a self-conscious interpreter and thus knows that even he is the product of strategies, assumptions, and beliefs that are themselves palimpsests and open to critical interpretation. Like Murray, religious readers know that they are always participants in the process of interpretation. This process creates a conversation; it keeps knowledge fluctuating and moving; it empowers interpreters while promising nothing. There is little or no conversation among the tourists who gaze upon the (non-) spectacle of the barn because the image has contained within it a monologic stop that resists interpretation and demands only to be seen. We know better than to accept this presentation. Murray dissolves the power of the image by deconstructing its inherent interpretation and by speculating upon its source. 'We're not here to capture an image', he notes, 'we're here to maintain one' (12). The search for origins, Derrida has taught us, is ultimately fruitless in terms of finding an original presence. The result of that search, however, is a deconstructive process that opens up the 'text' and invades our individual interpretive space by challenging us to view our own creations born of hermeneutic naiveté.

The religious reader of culture asks why we fall for the illusion of capturing something when it can be shown that we are creating and maintaining it in the process. This need for hermeneutic stasis speaks to our incessant desire for a meaning which will stand still and be analyzed. But

any meaning that stands still for an interpreter is not sacred, though sacredness is precisely the rhetoric that is used to sell meaning to a public all too willing to surrender to it. Even Murray knows that the barn scene calls for a religious reading. He remarks, 'Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender. We see only what the others see . . . A religious experience in a way, like all tourism' (12). Cultural critics resist that surrender while imaginatively participating in it. Herein lies the age-old dilemma of studying religion and/or any sort of cultural signifying system. One needs to be inside to appreciate the experience and yet outside to escape the seductive power of the text or image. Frank Kermode's observation in *The Genesis of Secrecy* is appropriate here. We are all both insiders and outsiders, and being inside an event or text is simply a more elaborate way of being outside<sup>2</sup>. As cultural critics and interpreters, we centre our work on the nothingness of the sacred that lies just on the other side of language. While language is both mythical and magical, the hollow centre that we seek evokes dread. In Western culture at least, language was thought to stand between us and the world. In the late twentieth century, we know that language creates the world. That knowledge, or that crucial fiction at least, does not satisfy our thirst for meaning any more than the other theories of language do. We desire more than mirrors and windows; we seek meaning outside the prison-house of language. As Thomas Altizer explains, we seek nothingness, and our search is a religious one: 'Is religious studies now truly assuming its ultimately priestly role, a role of deeply sanctioning our nothingness, and sanctioning it by knowing it as reality itself, and not only as reality, but as an ultimate reality, and an ultimate reality which is sanctioned by way of bestowing upon it the aura of religion itself?'<sup>3</sup> Religious interpretation is an exercise in nihilism, an attempt to peel off the layers of language in order to discover the nothing beneath.

The protagonist in *White Noise*, Jack Gladney, observes, 'What we are reluctant to touch often seems the very fabric of our salvation' (31). We are always outsiders to our own salvation, but the desire for meaning keeps us searching. As the Buddha explained, desire causes suffering, and our desire for meaning creates many problems. Among these are distance and difference. Cultural icons like the most photographed barn in America create distance and otherness under the illusion of narrative cohesiveness and *communitas*. As cultural critics in general and as religion and literature critics in particular, we can offer interpretive strategies that dissolve the otherness that cultural icons create as we criticize the very desire to construct mass-produced and advertised pseudo-communities that empower the generators of the idols while fragmenting the culture as a whole.

The failure to find community does not hamper the search for it. Myth, magic, and ritual persist despite (or perhaps because of) the hole in the centre of existence that draws us in but stops us from entering. We tell stories in order to mythicize our experiences, to make them community property, and thereby to make some connection to the

world and to those who live in it. Our stories appear more frequently now and with less depth and breadth, but they all centre on absence or loss. 'Storytelling is always after the fact, and it is always constructed over a loss' notes J. Hillis Miller in *Fiction and Repetition*. Stories hover around the absences that we call the sacred; they weave themselves around the hole in an effort to achieve wholeness. They do not stick but are sloughed off as newer and possibly more meaningful stories appear. I think especially of how the Vietnam War is uninterpretable for thinking Americans to this day. We consistently fail to tell the story in a satisfactory way, and so we keep telling stories that attempt to weave themselves around the event, to bring its many strands together in a meaningful way. We want a coherent story, not necessarily a story with a happy ending, but at least a story that provides some orientation, even if it is temporary. What we need is myth, and there are few to be found and none that last.

What happens when the icons of mass culture are demythologized or undermythologized is that the common and everyday becomes the stuff of the imagination and is elevated to the status of mythic material. As Jack Gladney says in *White Noise*. 'The world is full of abandoned meanings. In the commonplace I find unexpected themes and intensities' (184). Because his interpretive acumen has revealed the paucity of traditional mythical and magical material, he turns to other elements of the world to find meaning. Like many of us, Jack Gladney was 'ready to search anywhere for signs and hints, intimations of odd comfort'. His search takes place literally under the cloud of the Airborne Toxic Event, a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* in the form of a plume that erupts from a punctured tanker car. The cloud produces what Jack describes as 'a sense of awe that bordered on the religious'. The nearby town is evacuated, and Jack has the opportunity to reflect upon a new situation that offers new data to analyze and another attempt to find a story or some magical formula that will produce a meaningful experience. He finds it. As the huddled evacuees sleep, Jack pulls up a chair to observe his children and hears Steffie muttering something. Jack is convinced that she is revealing something important from the recesses of the collective unconscious, 'fitting together units of stable meaning . . . words that seemed to have a ritual meaning, part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant'. The words that he finally understands Steffie to be mumbling are *Toyota Celica*. The truth of the cliché only amazed him more. He discovers a moment of 'splendid transcendence' in his daughter's unconscious repetition of an advertisement. Jack discovers his meaning, his experience of the sacred in an apotheosis of the profane. White noise has been elevated to the level of myth and magic.

For Gladney meaning appears in unexpected connections between disparate things (magic) and in the construction of meaning around these events through language (myth). 'It was these secondary levels of life, these extrasensory flashes and floating nuances of being, these pockets of rapport forming unexpectedly, that made me believe we were

a magic act, adults and children together, sharing unaccountable things' (34). The secondary levels of life are mined for meaning because the primary levels are exhausted by interpretation. Like the barn, they are layers of programmed responses around a core of nothing.

Our cultural critic/semiotician Murray is the best example of such searching for meaning in the commonplace. He is the sniffer of grocery items, the one open to letting waves and radiation flow through him in hopes of discerning some pattern. One of Murray's favourite fetishes is of course television. He speaks of it as the channel to the sacred.

You have to learn how to look. You have to open yourself to the data. TV offers incredible amounts of psychic data. It opens ancient memories of world birth, it welcomes us into the grid, the network of little buzzing dots that make up the picture pattern . . . The medium practically overflows with sacred formulas if we can remember how to respond innocently and get past our irritation, weariness and disgust.

(51)

The data is there; all that is lacking is an interpretative strategy that will make it come alive. So the question of finding meaning in a world exhausted by interpretation and commodification centres on the will to interpretation and on the availability of viable hermeneutic modes, an inexhaustible supply of which exists in *White Noise*.

To Murray's list of hindrances to seeing the psychic data, I would add one other—dread. We dread interpretation precisely because it is an exercise of working toward absence, which produces the ultimate sense of being outside. The temptation we all face is to interpret passively by accepting the commodified meaning of things. Active interpretation is hard work and leads ultimately to absence. It is much better, we seem to think, to live with the illusions of presence and with our inside/outside dualities than to face the faceless countenance of nothing. How much easier and even rewarding it is to let interpretation happen to us. In doing so we help to maintain the images that are static, commodified, and empty of meaning, like that of the most photographed barn in America. Murray sees this idea evident in the psychic data that presents itself in the grocery store, which for him is a version of heaven.

Everything is concealed in symbolism, hidden by veils of mystery and layers of cultural material. But it is psychic data, absolutely. The large doors slide open, they close unbidden. Energy waves, incident radiation. All the letters and numbers are here, all the colors of the spectrum, all the voices and sounds, all the code words and ceremonial phrases. It is just a question of deciphering, rearranging, peeling off the layers of unspeakability. Not that we would want to, not that any useful purpose would be served. This is not Tibet. Even Tibet is not Tibet anymore.

(38)

Murray, while calling for active interpretation, nonetheless promises nothing. The key phrase here is Murray's disclaimer 'not that we would want to, not that any useful purpose would be served'. Active interpretation gets you nowhere; it serves no useful purpose. There is no end to interpretation just as there is no Tibet. And yet we interpret anyway, deciphering, rearranging, making meaning if we can. It is a necessary and futile endeavour. 'All plots tend to move deathward. This is nature of plots . . . We edge nearer death every time we plot. It is like a contract that all must sign, the plotters as well as those who are the targets of the plot' (26). So says Jack Gladney in one of his lectures on Hitler. Plotting is structuring events through language; it is the first stage of myth-making, and it leads towards death.

Technology itself creates difference and disorientation. It is our Frankenstein, a creation turning on its creators and living a life of its own. It evokes both life and death. Like plotting, which we learn is movement of life toward death, technology promises immortality and extinction in the same breath.

You could put your faith in technology. It got you here, it can get you out. This is the whole point of technology. It creates an appetite for immortality on the one hand. It threatens universal extinction on the other. Technology is lust removed from nature.

(285)

Lust removed from nature, meaning removed from experience, the sacred expelled from the profane, the insiders placed outside: all these ideas are connected and all move toward the same end, which is death. While technology, like the cultural icon, appears to offer immortality and hope, it also extracts not only lust from nature but also responsibility from history. Military technology turns murder into a video game while other technologies consume the world around us as they substitute a plethora of virtual worlds. As Gladney remarks, 'Man's guilt in history and in the tides of his own blood has been complicated by technology, the daily seeping falsehearted death' (22). And difference is there too, wedging itself between humans and their experiences, the ultimate sort of fall that derives from the desire to 'be like God'. Jack notices at his doctor's office that 'A network of symbols has been introduced, an entire awesome technology wrested from the gods. It makes you feel like a stranger in your own dying' (142).

This incredible sense of bifurcation and disorientation produced by technology has to do with the mimetic qualities of magic and myth. The magic of technology and the mythic dimensions of language pretend to show us something beyond us when in fact they are only reflecting each other. Roland Barthes, in one of the most underutilized discussions of myth, shows that myth transforms history into nature by stealing language from one context then restoring it in another so that it appears like something 'wrested from the gods' when in fact it is simply recycled language.



What the world supplies to myth is an historical reality, defined . . . by the way in which men have produced or used it; and what myth gives in return is a *natural* image of this reality . . . [I]n [myth] things lose the memory that they once were made . . . A conjuring trick has taken place; it has turned reality inside out, it has emptied it of history and has filled it with nature, it has removed from things their human meaning so as to make them signify a human insignificance. The function of myth is to empty reality; it is, literally, a ceaseless flowing out, a hemorrhage, or perhaps an evaporation, in short a perceptible absence<sup>4</sup>.

The corollary of Barthes' axiom that myth transforms history into nature is that nature is simply the layering on of myth. Derrida writes that there is nothing outside the text; Barthes' version is that there is no nature on the other side of myth. The natural is simply a function of the prevailing myth, if there is one. If there is not one, then the natural is undecidable and distance and alienation take its place.

The most moving example of the result of technological mimesis, the mirroring of myth and nature, occurs when Babette, Jack Gladney's wife, appears on television while the rest of the family is watching. The family has not expected to see her on television, and the response is 'a silence as wary and deep as an animal growl. Confusion, fear, astonishment spilled from our faces. What did it mean?' (104). Jack attempts to come to grips with the fact that representation has invaded reality and this suggests to him that Babette is 'a walker in the mists of the dead'. He considers that if she is not dead, then he is. Wilder, the secret protagonist of the novel and the Gladney's youngest child, a toddler, is the only one who sees life in the image. He mumbles to his mother, or to the image of his mother, approaches the set, and touches her 'leaving a handprint on the dusty surface of the screen'. Technology places a wedge of distance and difference between ourselves that interpretation has difficulty overcoming. Our attempts to get outside of language are like Wilder's handprint on the television screen. In our search for meaning we simply leave traces on the margins of our existence.

I am learning that there are other ways to employ myth and magic or language and technology without producing the dread that dominates the characters in *White Noise*. I am learning these things from a Laguna Pueblo writer named Leslie Marmon Silko. Silko does not believe that myth is an endless deferral of sacred meaning, nor that the magic of technology has to be ultimately fragmenting and disorienting. For Silko the centre that we seek is the very earth that is both womb and tomb for humanity. Storytelling can spin webs around otherness and loss in ways that are creative, meaningful, and ultimately healing. Both otherness and narration are processes and thus are always in flux, always shifting. But storytelling works to dissolve the difference that otherness entails. Storytelling is grandmother spider spinning her web, encompassing otherness into the larger creation of the story.

One of the ways Silko portrays otherness is through an alienated male named Tayo in her most acclaimed novel *Ceremony*. Tayo is a man who is deeply ill both physically

and spiritually. His constant vomiting and urinating seem to be attempts to purge from his body the experiences that soldiering, displacement, and death in World War II have given him. While a prisoner of war and while walking the Bataan Death March, Tayo curses the jungle rain, the rain that turns the skin green and that poured down upon the body of his dear cousin Rocky after a Japanese soldier smashed Rocky's skull with the butt of his rifle. Tayo's curse has produced a drought back in Laguna, New Mexico, a drought that not only serves to write Tayo's spiritual desiccation on the broadest canvas but also threatens Laguna communal life and represents mother earth's disfavour with her children who are engaged in a world war. For Tayo the ritual use of language releases tremendous power that can work toward creation or destruction.

Tayo's problem does not centre on assimilation into the white demarcations of difference and a loss of native understandings of wholeness as we might expect. Rather, Tayo's sickness comes from being unable to forget that wholeness when then world demands that he follow the dictates of otherness. When Tayo is ordered to shoot Japanese soldiers, he is unable to follow this command because he sees his beloved Uncle Josiah's face in the place of the Japanese soldiers' faces. Even after Rocky turns over a Japanese corpse and forces Tayo to look into the eyes, all he can see is his uncle lying dead. For Tayo there is no *difference* between the soldiers and his uncle, and that lack of difference prevents Tayo from carrying out the orders he receives. Tayo is haunted by connections and relationships that no one else seems to see.

Later Tayo understands just why he could not appropriate the interpretation that was required to kill the soldiers. Betonie, a Navajo healer who uses contemporary repositories of information like telephone books and calendars, tells Tayo that he saw the Japanese for what they are, namely, relatives of Native Americans. He remarks, 'Thirty thousand years ago they were not strangers. You saw what the evil had done: you saw the witchery ranging as wide as this world'<sup>5</sup> Difference is the result of witchery; wholeness is the way things are.

The Army psychiatrist who treats Tayo immediately after his return seeks to reinforce Tayo's individuality through difference. Tayo considers himself to be invisible, white smoke. The doctor sees Tayo's condition as pathological, but for Tayo his invisibility is a desperate attempt to integrate himself into the world of white culture. For Tayo, ' . . . [W]hite smoke had no consciousness of itself. It faded into the white world of their bed sheets and walls' (14). Tayo's psychiatric treatment is enforced by the introduction of difference to the degree that Tayo becomes separated from himself. The doctor's relentless questions batter him until the split is achieved and Tayo hears himself speaking to the doctor in the third person saying, 'He can't talk to you. He is invisible. His words are formed with an invisible tongue, they have no sound' (15). Tayo ends this exchange between himself and the doctor by

vomiting, a persistent symptom of his illness, and by proclaiming to the doctor, 'Goddamn you, look what you have done' (16). What he has done is forced Tayo into distinctions of otherness and made those distinctions definitive. It is the same sentiment that Jack Gladney feels when he remarks that he feels like a stranger in his own dying. What the doctor has not done is to provide Tayo with a story that can envelope those distinctions and hold them coherently so that the distinctions are not definitive or ultimate but fade in the larger perspective of the story. Such stories, writes Silko, have the strength and fragility of a spider's web. Tayo needs a ceremony of integration, not a dissertation on otherness and difference.

Old Ku'oosh, the Laguna healer, knows about ceremonies and about the strength and fragility of stories. When he first comes to Tayo, his instruction is on the nature of language. The medicine man speaks softly and with a dialect 'full of sentences that were involuted with explanations of their own origins, as if nothing the old man said were his own but all had been said before and he was only there to repeat it' (34). The old man tells Tayo bluntly that this world is fragile. And here I want to quote at length what is perhaps the most often quoted passage from *Ceremony*.

The word he chose to express 'fragile' was filled with the intricacies of a continuing process, and with a strength inherent in spider webs woven across paths through sand hills where early in the morning the sun becomes entangled in each filament of web. It took a long time to explain the fragility and intricacy because no word exists alone, and the reason for choosing each word had to be explained with a story about why it must be said this certain way. That was the responsibility that went with being human, old Ku'oosh said, the story behind each word must be told so there could be no mistake in the meaning of what had been said; and this demanded great patience and love.

(35-6).

Words are filaments in the web of stories, and all the stories are connected. This is their strength and their weakness, the strength and fragility of a spider web. Ku'oosh reminds Tayo that it takes only one person to tear away the delicate strands for the world to be injured. And Betonie confirms this idea for Tayo during his ceremony and reminds him that the ceremony is for the fragile world, not just for him.

Other men in *Ceremony*, notably Tayo's friends who have also returned from the war, do not have Tayo's problem. They are able to maintain the interpretative strategies that were taught to them through white culture and thereby forget the wholeness narrated through Laguna legends. While the war itself shifted the terms of otherness toward the Japanese on a national scale, life after the war finds the men in search of other differences through which to channel their power. These men view women as an extension of World War II, the war that suddenly made them equal with their white comrades. White women are the

ultimate conquest for Emo, Harley, and Leroy, and their stories of conquest at one point appropriate the form of the Laguna legends that Silko weaves into the novel in verse form. She even has these men banging beer bottles like drums as they tell these stories, as if they were sacred chants. It is as if to say that stories of conquest turn upon women in the post-war life of these men. While the stories become the myths they live by, they only enrage Tayo and make him sicker. In fact he ends up disrupting one of these stories by stabbing Emo with a broken beer bottle. Tayo seems to know that he cannot be healed by continued conquest, that is, by the extension of otherness into different areas; what he needs instead is to bring some coherence to the many shards of his existence. Difference creates the possibility of conquest; storytelling creates the possibility of coherence.

A significant aspect of Tayo's cure concerns his ability to overcome the gender differences that his friends perpetuate. While Tayo is not like them in terms of their need to make women an extension of the war, neither is he inhabiting any sense of narrative wholeness with regard to women. His mother deserted him when he was young and left him with his Aunt who treated him like an outcast. One element of the ceremony that Betonie discerns for Tayo has to do with simply 'a woman'. While Tayo encounters several women in his ceremony, it is clear that they are all in a mythological sense one woman, and she is the earth.

The Night Swan appears before Tayo goes off to war but serves to foreshadow the ceremony he will need afterwards. The Night Swan is a lover of Tayo's beloved Uncle Josiah, and she mysteriously appears in Cubero, at the foot of Mt. Taylor, and disappears after Josiah's death. Tayo goes to meet her to inform her that Josiah cannot make their appointment, and there and then she introduces him to mysteries of rain and love. The Night Swan is associated with the blue of Mt. Taylor, which in Laguna is called Tse pi'na or Woman Veiled in Rain Clouds. She is the blue of the mountain and synecdochally the blue of the west, of rain and wind. The rain envelopes them as they make love, and the text reads, 'She moved under him, her rhythm merging into the sound of the rain in the tree. And he was lost somewhere, deep beneath the surface of his own body and consciousness, swimming away from all his life before that hour' (99). They part in the midst of the smell of damp earth, and she says to Tayo, 'You don't have to understand what is happening. But remember this day. You will recognize it later. You are a part of it now' (100). Grandmother spider is beginning to spin her web.

Tayo does recognize this day later when he meets Ts'eh, a woman who lives on Mt. Taylor. She is surrounded by the colour yellow and thus is connected to the corn mother, pollen, and the Yellow Woman stories of Laguna mythology and lore that involves sacred and sexual abduction. Tayo is not physically abducted but does feel powerfully drawn to her. She feeds him corn the night before he rises to meet a dawn 'spreading across the sky like yellow

wings' (189). Like Yellow Woman, Ts'eh is both lover and mother, and is mother earth as well. When Tayo dreams of making love with Ts'eh, the description indicates that he is being absorbed into the earth: 'He felt the warm sand on his toes and knees; he felt her body, and it was warm as the sand, and he couldn't feel where her body ended and the sand began' (232). Tayo's healing involve ritualized union with female expressions of mother earth.

The evil and the witchery at work in Tayo and in the world function by separation, the placement of cultural, ideological, and historical space between people. That space, moreover, is negatively charged; it is the site of an exercise of power. The delineation of otherness carries an implicit hegemony and hierarchy. As Simone de Beauvoir notes in *The Second Sex*:

No subject will readily volunteer to become the object, the inessential; it is not the Other who, in defining himself as the Other, establishes the One. The Other is posed as such by the One in defining himself as the One. But if the Other is not to regain the status of being the One, he must be submissive enough to accept this alien point of view.<sup>6</sup>

De Beauvoir's depiction of otherness is relevant to Silko's presentation of it in her work. But de Beauvoir did not have the benefit of Silko's native understanding of otherness, and thus we also read in *The Second Sex* that Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought as primordial as consciousness itself and found even in the most 'primitive' of societies. While we certainly find otherness in DeLillo's virtual world, Silko encounters this notion throughout her fiction.

For Silko there are two ways of being in the world. In one humans are at odds with themselves, their creations, and their environment separated by fragmenting and disorienting interpretations. In another human beings are centered in a multiplying reflection of the cosmos whose focus is not the individual but the dynamic relationship of all things connected by stories. The former are called destroyers, and the latter are creators. Both destroyers and creators use technology. For the destroyers their tools exist outside themselves and are simply means to a particular disingenuous end. For the creators technology is integrated into the very fabric of existence itself and serves to enhance and extend life.

In Silko's most recent novel, the labyrinthine and copious *Almanac of the Dead* (763 pages), each understanding of technology mirrors the other as the plot, which is history itself, works its way to a semi-apocalyptic end. This novel offers a different version of technological mimesis. Where creators see connections; destroyers see differences. Images of blood dominate the novel and serve to depict the Native concept of networking, which is countered on the Euro-American side by electricity and of course computer networks. For Native people all over the world, the earth spirits communicate through the blood of their children. Damballah, Quetzalcoatl, and Spider Woman all speak to

those who are connected by blood and stories and instruct them in the coming revolution. Those who do not get the message are technophiles of various kinds consumed by such things as gunrunning, the sale of body parts taken from homeless people, torture videotapes, an array of sexual experimentation including a Tucson Judge and his favorite basset hound, and—almost anticlimactically—drugs.

*Almanac of the Dead* works to dissolve the differences wrought by Euro-American technology through a narration that encompasses both types of technology in a story about the end of white culture and the reconstitution of the earth and her native peoples. The mirroring of Native and Western uses and abuses of technology is especially telling in the setting of Tuxtla, Mexico. In Tuxtla Tacho is a native person who serves as a chauffeur for Menardo, an effete Mexican who has garnered his wealth by providing security services for the rich and powerful in Tuxtla, read CIA. Tacho is privy to special information in his ability to gamble and to interpret Menardo's dreams, but he never gives Menardo the complete story. He cannot do so because Menardo is an assassination target of local Marxists who have placed Tacho there in order to gather intelligence on Menardo and his clients until the appropriate time for the assassination. Menardo, in the meantime, has become obsessed with security technology, in particular one bullet-proof vest that one of his American Mafia clients has given to him. Ultimately, the vest becomes a fetish for him, and he prefers reading the technical information about the vest to the presence of his wife. Menardo eventually comes to wear the vest constantly, even during sex and sleep. Now thoroughly obsessed, Menardo devises a scheme to exhibit the power of his new fetish. He arranges to have Tacho fire a 9mm pistol at him just as his CIA friends arrive at the club. Menardo will pull off a marvellous practical joke, which is a notorious rite of passage for this group, and will also demonstrate how the man in charge of security is the most secure person in the elite group. As the men arrive, Menardo loudly commands Tacho to fire so that all may hear, and, of course, the vest fails. The assassination is effected by Menardo himself, and Tacho's innocence is guaranteed. Unlike the Mexican blankets that are woven so tight that water beads up on them in the rain, the bullet-proof vest proves to be woven too loosely. This scene enacts a powerful ironic reversal of the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890 where Ghost Dance shirts worn by the Lakota failed to protect them from the soldiers' bullets as they assumed. The technology of the destroyers becomes the tool of their own destruction as the negative force of otherness begins to implode. In *Almanac of the Dead*, Euro-American culture is unravelling thread by thread in both its spirituality and its technology. In Native cultures, on the other hand, technology is used both to thwart the otherness of Euro-American culture and to spin a web of stories that offers Native peoples all over the world a way to see how land, history, and technology all cohere into a reconstituted world where Native people take back their lands from Alaska to Chile.



The technology portrayed in *Almanac of the Dead* is tied to the revisionist history that Silko offers. It is a history with a future, and that future includes the restoration of all tribal lands to native people from Alaska to Chile. Silko is not reticent about announcing this agenda and neither are the Native Americans who continue to work toward this end. In a coffee-table book titled *A Circle of Nations* that includes photographs and writings from prominent Native American artists, Silko writes the following in her preface titled 'The Indian with A Camera':

The Indian with a camera is an omen of a time in the future that all Euro-Americans unconsciously dread: the time when the indigenous people of the Americas will retake their land.<sup>7</sup>

The opening pages of *Almanac of the Dead* are not text but a map with Tucson at the centre. Boxes of information on the map function as interpretive guides. In one of these boxes we read the following statement:

Sixty million Native Americans died between 1500 and 1600. The defiance and resistance to things European continue unabated. The Indian Wars have never ended in the Americas. Native Americans seek nothing less than the return of all tribal lands.

(17)

Leslie Marmon Silko is neither shy nor cryptic regarding the future or the past. She relentlessly details the diverse crimes, whether legal or cultural, committed against Native Americans and the Laguna Pueblo to this day. And she does so with the calm persistence of a person who knows her past and her future as well as her place and mission in the present. Native Americans will take back their lands; the process is already underway. And that process is driven by storytelling, by narrating otherness out of a dominant position in the ideology of the invaders and replacing it with a narrative cohesion that is both strong and fragile.

An Alaskan medicine woman in *Almanac of the Dead* represents well how storytelling and technology or myth and magic weave a web that overcomes witchery and dread. A satellite television is installed in her Yupik village, and most of the villagers ignore it or fall asleep in front of it. A pelt made of fur and hair is sacred to the old woman and becomes the channel she uses to lock in on the spirits of the ancestors. The television enhances the power of the pelt by the appropriation of the satellite signals. Silko writes:

The old woman had gathered great surges of energy out of the atmosphere, by summoning spirit beings through the recitations of the stories that were also indictments of the greedy destroyers of the land. With the stories the old woman was able to assemble powerful forces flowing from the spirits of the ancestors.<sup>8</sup>

The old Yupik woman uses her pelt, her stories, and a weather map on the television screen successfully to crash an airplane that is carrying surveyors and equipment from

American oil companies. When the insurance adjuster arrives and someone suggests that the number of airplane crashes in the area could be explained by the same forces at work in the Bermuda Triangle, he replies, 'None of that stuff is true. It can all be explained' (160).

Indeed it can, and that is the problem of history and of the future as Silko paints them. Americans have been developing the capacity for explanation for so long that they have been hypnotized by their own accounts and measurements and can no longer see anything else. Like the most photographed barn in America, commodified meaning creates a lack of vision, an inability to see larger relationships, the larger story. Blind and greedy officials lead blind and greedy citizens into the end of history in *Almanac of the Dead*.

Meanwhile, Native people are reconstituting themselves through the ancient connection of blood and stories and are slowly but surely beginning the process of taking back the land.

*Almanac of the Dead* ends on just this note. Sterling, one of the main characters, returns to his Laguna home where he walks out to the uranium mine and surveys the destruction. Silko writes:

Ahead all he could see were mounds of tailings thirty feet high, uranium waste blowing in the breeze, carried by the rain to springs and rivers. Here was the new work of the Destroyers; here was the destruction and poison. Here was where life ended.

(760)

Or where it would end if there were no creators in the world. In recent years a stone formation has emerged in the shape of a great snake. Only the traditionals can see this snake, and to most whites it is completely undetectable. But for Sterling it is a sign of life among the ruins of white culture. And while it remains invisible to that dominant culture, it nonetheless arises from the rubble, solid and secure. Further, the great stone snake points the way to the future, which is in the south and from which will come a horde of Native people led by the heroic twins of myth and legend. The history of blood and earth is the history that will survive, while the destroyers are already passing away.

Silko's fiction works to show a deeper technology than that which continually enchants Western culture, especially in the late twentieth century. The earth has always been networked, she argues, through the energies of blood and spirits and through human beings who seek not to destroy but to create. The witchery of the Destroyers always turns upon itself while the creators wait patiently in the web of the earth. In fact Silko herself is a creator since she employs the technology of writing and the publishing industry in order to disseminate the stories that will energize the reclamation of the land.

What emerges from Silko's narration is that storytelling is not only a process of dissolving the rigid differences upon which Euro-American culture depends, it is also a process

of decolonization. While pre-contact storytelling knit the tribe together under shifting conditions, post-contact and contemporary narration functions as the web and as the spider, and the spider is also known for her bite. For Silko storytelling encompasses difference by spinning its web around the holes of otherness causing us to focus instead on the interconnections: the network of words, land, and life.

I have read *White Noise* against *Ceremony* and *Almanac of the Dead* in the hope that different ways of reading culture religiously will appear. In *White Noise* we saw the implications for interpretation in a culture that has painted itself into a corner philosophically and religiously. With Silko's work we can see a consistent use of storytelling and ritual that seeks to overcome the difference and dread that is occasioned by interpreting toward nothingness. Two characters seem to encompass these ideas in provocative ways.

*White Noise* ends with Wilder riding his tricycle across several lanes of expressway traffic as adults watch helplessly. He survives, and it becomes another moment of splendid transcendence in Jack Gladney's life. Yet Wilder represents something that none of the other characters in the novel can have—innocence. Wilder's innocence is a result of his inability to speak. His piercing and seemingly unending cry earlier in the novel is the only real expression he is able to evoke. As Nietzsche observed, language and consciousness are concurrent, and Wilder's lack of language makes him the embodiment of the unconscious spaces where the sacred is dimly perceived, but never really found. He is the silence that exists at the center of interpretation. His innocence is prelapsarian and beyond the reach of the adults. Wilder is on the other side of interpretation.

Contrasted with Wilder's innocence is Tayo's experience. Tayo's fall comes about through the introduction of white ideas of language and truth that create difference and fragmentation in Tayo's life. By living out the stories from Laguna mythology and by participating in the magic of the ceremony, Tayo experiences both convergence and emergence. The patterns of the constellation that Betonie reveals, the woman on Mount Taylor, and the experiences of war all converge through the ceremony so that Tayo emerges whole at the end. The stories spin the webs that hold the interpretation together.

What we have, then, are two ways of reading religiously. Both employ myth, magic, and dread but with very different results. The person who learns to read religiously is attuned to both otherness and wholeness, both fragmentation and coherence, both myth and magic in their constantly shifting manifestations.

#### Notes

1. Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York: Penguin, 1984), p. 12.
2. Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1979), p. 27.

3. Thomas J.J. Altizer, 'The Challenge of Nihilism'. JAAR. LXII (Winter 1994) 1021.
4. Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957), pp. 142–3.
5. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (New York, Penguin), p. 124.
6. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, in Bowie, Michael and Solomon, eds *Twenty Questions: An Introduction to Philosophy*. 2nd Ed. (New York, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1992), p. 562.
7. Leslie Marmon Silko, 'Forward: The Indian with a Camera', in John Gattuse, ed. *A Circle of Nations: Voices and Visions of American Indians*. (Hillsboro, Oregon: Beyond Words Publishing, 1993), p. 6.
8. Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead* (New York: Penguin, 1991), p. 156.

#### David Cowart (essay date Winter 1996)

SOURCE: "For Whom Bell Tolls: Don DeLillo's *Americana*," in *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. XXXVII, No. 4. Winter, 1996, pp. 602–19.

[In the following essay, Cowart analyzes the oedipal dimension of *Americana*, focusing on the novel's narrator in terms of postmodern concepts of identity and alienation.]

Don DeLillo's 1971 novel *Americana*, his first, represents a rethinking of the identity or alienation theme that had figured with particular prominence in the quarter century after the close of World War II. The theme persists in DeLillo, but the self becomes even more provisional. The changing social conditions and imploding belief systems that alienate a Meursault, a Holden Caulfield, or a Binx Bolling do not constitute so absolute an epistemic rupture as the gathering recognition—backed up by post-Freudian psychology—that the old stable ego has become permanently unmoored. Whether or not he would embrace Lacanian formulations of psychological reality, DeLillo seems fully to recognize the tenuousness of all "subject positions." He knows that postmodern identity is not something temporarily eclipsed, something ultimately recoverable. DeLillo characters cannot, like Hemingway's Nick Adams, fish the Big Two-Hearted to put themselves back together. Thus David Bell, the narrator of *Americana* remains for the reader a slippery, insubstantial personality—even though he claims to be able to engage with his self whenever he looks in a mirror (13/11).<sup>1</sup> Bell in fact stumbles through life, waiting for some change, some new dispensation, to complete the displacement of the old order, in which the fiction of a knowable, stable identity enjoyed general credence.

In psychoanalytic theory, one's sense of self originates, at least in part, in the early relationship with the mother. DeLillo, like Freud or Lacan, extends this idea beyond individual psychology. He knows that Americans col-

lectively define themselves with reference to a land their artists frequently represent, in metaphor, at least, as female. In *Americana* DeLillo represents this female land as maternal—a trope common enough in Europe (where nationalists often salute “the Motherland”) but seldom encountered on this side of the Atlantic. The author thereby makes doubly compelling the theme of the land violated, for he presents not the familiar drama of rapacious Europeans despoiling a landscape represented as Pocahontas, but the more appalling tragedy of the American Oedipus and his unwitting violation of a landscape that the reader gradually recognizes as Jocasta.<sup>2</sup>

By means of these and other allegorizing identifications, DeLillo participates in and wields a certain amount of control over the profusion of images by which America represents itself. More than any other contemporary writer, DeLillo understands the extent to which images—from television, from film, from magazine journalism and photography, from advertising, sometimes even from books—determine what passes for reality in the American mind. Unanchored, uncentered, and radically two-dimensional, these images constitute the discourse by which Americans strive to know themselves. DeLillo’s protagonist, a filmmaker and successful television executive, interacts with the world around him by converting it to images, straining it through the lens of his sixteen-millimeter camera. He attempts to recapture his own past by making it into a movie, and much of the book concerns this curious, Godardesque film in which, he eventually discloses, he has invested years. Thus one encounters—two years before the conceit structured *Gravity’s Rainbow*—a fiction that insists on blurring the distinctions between reality and its representation on film. Film vies, moreover, with print, for readers must negotiate a curiously twinned narrative that seems to exist as both manuscript and “footage”—and refuses to stabilize as either. *Americana*, the novel one actually holds and reads, seems to be this same narrative at yet a third diageitic remove.

In his scrutiny of the mechanics of identity and representation in the written and filmed narratives of David Bell, especially as they record an oedipal search for the mother, DeLillo explores the America behind the Americana. What the author presents is a set of simulacra: manuscript and film and book mirroring a life and each other, words and images that pretend to mask a person named David Bell. But of course David Bell is himself a fictional character—and six years too young to be a stand-in for DeLillo (though one can recast the conundrum here as the attempt of this other subject—the author—to trick the simulacra into yielding up a modicum of insight into the mysteries of the ego’s position within the Symbolic Order). DeLillo makes of his shadow play a postmodernist exemplar, a dazzling demonstration of the subject’s inability to know a definitive version of itself. Thus Bell’s film begins and ends with a shot of Austin Wakely, his surrogate, standing in front of a mirror that reflects the recording camera and its operator, the autobiographical subject of the film. A

perfect piece of hermeticism, this shot announces an infinite circularity; it suggests that nothing in the rest of the film will manage to violate the endless circuit of the signifying chain. It suggests, too, the complexity—indeed, the impossibility—of determining the truly authentic subject among its own proliferating masks.

One can resolve some of the difficulties of DeLillo’s first novel by searching for coherent elements amid the larger obscurity of its action and structure. The central events of the narrative evidently take place some time after the Kennedy assassination (the American century’s climacteric) and before the Vietnam War had begun to wind down. Recollecting the second year of his brief marriage, terminated five years previously, Bell remarks that the conflict in Southeast Asia “was really just beginning” (38/35), and subsequently the war is a pervasive, malign presence in the narrative. Inasmuch as the hero is twenty-eight years old and apparently born in 1942 (his father in the film mentions that the birth occurred while he was overseas, shortly after his participation in the Bataan Death March), the story’s present would seem to be 1970. Yet occasionally Bell intimates a much later vantage from which he addresses the reader. He seems, in fact, to be spinning this narrative at a considerable remove in time, for he refers at one point to “the magnet-grip of an impending century” (174/166). He is also remote in space: like another great egotist who embodied the best and worst of his nation, Bell seems to have ended up on an “island” (16/14, 137/129) off “the coast of Africa” (357/347).

DeLillo structures the novel as a first-person narrative divided into four parts. In the first of these Bell introduces himself as a jaded television executive in New York. Presently he collects three companions and sets out on a cross-country trip—ostensibly to meet a television film crew in the Southwest, but really to look in the nation’s heartland for clues to himself and to the American reality he embodies. In part 2, through flashbacks, the reader learns about Bell’s relations with his family (mother, father, two sisters) and about his past (childhood, prep school, college). In part 3, Bell stops over in Fort Curtis, a midwestern town, and begins shooting his autobiographical film with a cast composed of his traveling companions and various townspeople recruited more or less at random. This part of the story climaxes with a long-postponed sexual encounter with Sullivan, the woman sculptor he finds curiously compelling. Subsequently, in part 4, he abandons his friends and sets off alone on the second part of his journey: into the West.

Bell’s “post-Kerouac pilgrimage,” as Charles Champlin calls it (7), takes him from New York to Massachusetts to Maine, then westward to the sleepy town of Fort Curtis, in a state Bell vaguely surmises to be east (or perhaps south) of Iowa. After his stay in Fort Curtis he undertakes a “second journey, the great seeking leap into the depths of America,” heading “westward to match the shadows of my image and my self” (352/341). A hitchhiker now, picked up “somewhere in Missouri” (358/348), he travels with the



generous but sinister Clevenger, himself a remarkable piece of Americana, through Kansas, through “a corner-piece of southeastern Colorado,” across New Mexico, and on into Arizona. Significantly, he never gets to Phoenix. Instead, he visits a commune in the Arizona desert before rejoining Clevenger and heading “east, south and east” (372/362), back across New Mexico to the west Texas town of Rooster (where DeLillo will locate Logos College in his next novel, *End Zone*). Parting with Clevenger for good, Bell hitchhikes to Midland, where he rents a car and drives northeast, overnight, to Dallas, honking as he traverses the ground of Kennedy’s martyrdom. In Dallas he boards a flight back to New York.

In his end is his beginning. Seeking the foundational in self and culture, Bell travels in a great circle that is its own comment on essentialist expectations. His circular journey seems, in other words, to embody the signifying round, impervious to a reality beyond itself. In this circle, too, readers may recognize elements of a more attenuated symbolism. As an emblem of spiritual perfection, the circle suggests the New World promise that Fitzgerald and Faulkner meditate on. As an emblem of final nullity, it suggests America’s bondage to historical process—the inexorable *corsi* and *ricorsi* described by Vico (whom Bell briefly mentions). DeLillo teases the reader, then, with the circle’s multiple meanings: vacuity, spiritual completeness, inviolable link in the chain of signification, historical inevitability.

That history may be cyclical affords little comfort to those caught in a civilization’s decline. Like his friend Warren Beasley, the Jeremiah of all-night radio, Bell knows intimately the collapse of America’s ideal conception of itself. He speaks of “many visions in the land, all fragments of the exploded dream” (137/129). The once unitary American Dream, that is, has fallen into a kind of Blakean division; and DeLillo—through Bell—differentiates the fragments embraced by “generals and industrialists” from what remains for the individual citizen: a seemingly simple “dream of the good life.” But this dream, or dream fragment,

had its complexities, its edges of illusion and self-deception, an implication of serio-comic death. To achieve an existence almost totally symbolic is less simple than mining the buried metals of other countries or sending the pilots of your squadron to hang their bombs over some illiterate village. And so purity of intention, simplicity and all its harvests, these were with the mightiest of the visionaries, those strong enough to confront the larger madness. For the rest of us, the true sons of the dream, there was only complexity. The dream made no allowance for the truth beneath the symbols, for the interlinear notes, the presence of something black (and somehow very funny) at the mirror rim of one’s awareness. This was difficult at times. But as a boy, and even later, quite a bit later, I believed all of it, the institutional messages, the psalms and placards, the pictures, the words. Better living through chemistry. The Sears, Roebuck catalog. Aunt Jemima. All the impulses of all the media were fed into the

circuitry of my dreams. One thinks of echoes. One thinks of an image made in the image and likeness of images. It was that complex.

(137–38/130)

This passage is an especially good example of the DeLillo style and the DeLillo message. DeLillo’s writing, like Thomas Pynchon’s, is keyed to the postmodern moment. Inasmuch as this is prose that strives to become as uncensored and as shadow-driven as the peculiarly American psychological and social reality under scrutiny, one glosses it only at the risk of violating the author’s studied indirection. But one can—again, without pretending to exhaust its ambiguity and indeterminacy—hazard a modest commentary.

“Almost totally symbolic,” the dream of the good life is subject to “complexities” from which powerful ideologues are free. Focused, single-minded, exempt from doubt, the military and industrial powerful confront the “larger madness” of political life in the world (and especially in the twentieth century) with a singleness of purpose that, however misguided, at least enjoys the distinction, the “harvests,” of “purity” and “simplicity.” The reader who would convert these abstractions into concrete terms need only recall how for decades a Darwinian economic vision and a passionate hatred of Communism made for an American foreign policy that was nothing if not “simple.” The irony, of course, is that simplicity is the last thing one should expect of dealings between nations, especially when those dealings take the form of war. But DeLillo evinces little interest in attacking the monomania of Lyndon Johnson and Robert McNamara or Richard Nixon and Melvin Laird. By 1971, their obtuseness had been exposed too often to afford latitude for anything fresh in a literary sense—and DeLillo has the good sense to know the fate of satiric ephemera like *MacBird!* (1966) and the contemporaneous *Our Gang* (1971). In *Americana*, by contrast, DeLillo explores the far-from-simple mechanics of life in a culture wholly given over to the image. The citizen of this culture, however seemingly innocent and uncomplicated, exists as the cortical nexus of a profoundly complex play of advertisements, media bombardments, and shadow realities that manage, somehow, always to avoid or postpone representation of the actual, the “something black . . . at the mirror rim of one’s awareness.” DeLillo, then, chronicling this “existence almost totally symbolic,” sees the American mass brain as “an image made in the image and likeness of images.”

But the real lies in wait, says the author, whose thesis seems to complement Lacanian formulations of the subject position and its problematic continuity. The subject cannot know itself, and language, the Symbolic Order, discovers only its own play, its own energies, never the bedrock reality it supposedly names, glosses, gives expression to. Hence DeLillo actually echoes Lacan—not to mention Heidegger, Derrida, and others—in speaking of “interlinear notes” to the text of appearances, a presence at the edges of mirrors, a “truth beneath the symbols.” *Americana* is

the record of an attempt to break out of the endlessly circular signifying chain of images replicating and playing off each other to infinity. As such it is also the record of a growing awareness of the complexity with which a consumer culture imagines itself. For the author, this awareness extends to knowledge of the social reality beneath what Pynchon, in *The Crying of Lot 49*, characterizes as “the cheered land” (180).

Part of the agenda in the Pynchon novel, one recalls, is to bring to the surface of consciousness the disinherited or marginalized elements of the American polity. *The Crying of Lot 49* functions in part to remind readers that enormous numbers of Americans have been omitted from the version of the country sanctioned by the media and other public institutions, and that is one way to understand what DeLillo is doing when a reference to Aunt Jemima follows a cryptic remark about “the presence of something black (and somehow very funny) at the mirror rim of one’s awareness.” For years, one encountered no black faces in that cornucopia of middle-class consumerism, the Sears, Roebuck catalog, but the semiotics of breakfast-food merchandising could accommodate a black domestic like Aunt Jemima. The reference to a familiar and venerable commercial image affords a ready example of a reality that the sixties, in one of the decade’s more positive achievements, had brought to consciousness—the reality of an American underclass that for years could be represented only as comic stereotype. Thus the reader who needs a concrete referent for what DeLillo is talking about here need go no further than a social reality that was, in 1970, just beginning to achieve visibility.

Aunt Jemima metonymically represents the world of advertising, a world dominated by that especially resourceful purveyor of the image, Bell’s father (the familial relationship reifies the idea that television is the child of advertising). The father’s pronouncements on his calling complement the book’s themes of representational form and substance. He explains that advertising flourishes by catering to a desire on the part of consumers to think of themselves in the third person—to surrender, as it were, their already embattled positions as subjects. But the person who laments “living in the third person” (64/58) is his own son, this novel’s narrating subject. “A successful television commercial,” the father remarks, encourages in the viewer a desire “to change the way he lives” (281/270). This observation mocks and distorts the powerful idea Rilke expresses in his poem “Archaischer Torso Apollos”: “*Du musst dein Leben ändern*” (313).<sup>3</sup> The poet perceives this message—“You must change your life”—as he contemplates the ancient sculpture. He suggests that the work of art, in its power, its perfection, and (before the age of mechanical reproduction) its uniqueness, goads viewers out of their complacency. The artist—Rilke or DeLillo—confronts torpid, passionless humanity with the need to seek a more authentic life; the advertiser, by contrast, confronts this same humanity with a spurious, even meretricious need for change. The impulse behind this narrative, interestingly enough, is precisely that need

to change a life one has come to see as empty—the need to return from the limbo of third-person exile, the need to recover, insofar as possible, a meaningful subjectivity.

Like the questers of old, then, Bell undertakes “a mysterious and sacramental journey” (214/204): he crosses a threshold with a supposedly faithful band of companions (Sullivan, Brand, Pike), travels many leagues, and descends into a Dantean underworld with the Texan, Clevenger, as cicerone. Indeed, the nine-mile circumference of Clevenger’s speedway seems palpably to glance at the nine-fold circles of Dante’s Hell (especially as Bell imagines, back in New York, a “file cabinet marked *pending return of soul from limbo*” [345/334]). When, from here, Bell puts in a call to Warren Beasley, who has “fore-suffered almost all” (243/232), he modulates from Dante to Odysseus, who learns from Tiresias in the underworld that he must “lose all companions,” as Pound says, before the completion of his quest. Alone and empty-handed, without the boon that traditionally crowns such efforts, Bell is a postmodern Odysseus, returning not to triumph but to the spiritual emptiness of New York before ending up in solitude on a nameless island that would seem to have nothing but its remoteness in common with Ithaca. Indeed, announcing toward the end of his story that he will walk on his insular beach, “wearing white flannel trousers” (358/348), he dwindles finally to Prufrock, the ultimate hollow man.

In attempting to understand the reasons for Bell’s failure, the reader engages with DeLillo’s real subject: the insidious pathology of America itself, a nation unable, notwithstanding prodigies of self-representation, to achieve self-knowledge. The novelist must represent the self-representation of this vast image culture in such a way as to reveal whatever truth lies beneath its gleaming, shifting surfaces. But the rhetoric of surface and depth will not serve: America is a monument to the ontological authority of images. DeLillo seeks at once to represent American images and to sort them out, to discover the historical, social, and spiritual aberrations they embody or disguise.

DeLillo focuses his analysis on the character of David Bell, a confused seeker after the truth of his own tormented soul and its relation to the larger American reality. One makes an essential distinction between DeLillo’s engagement with America and that of his character, who becomes the vehicle of insights he cannot share. Marooned among replicating images, Bell loses himself in the signifying chain, as doomed to “scattering” as Pynchon’s Tyrone Slothrop. In his attempts to recover some cryptic truth about his family and in his manipulation of filmic and linguistic simulacra, Bell fails to see the extent to which he embodies an America guilty of the most abhorrent of violations—what the Tiresias-like Beasley calls the “national incest.” David Bell’s existential distress seems to have an important oedipal dimension, seen in his troubled memories of his mother and in his relations with other women in his life. I propose to look more closely, therefore, at just how the relationship between David Bell and his mother ramifies symbolically into the life of a nation.

The emphasis, in what follows, on the Freudian view of the Oedipus complex is not intended to imply an argument for its superiority to those post-Freudian (and especially Lacanian) views invoked elsewhere in this essay. When the subject is postmodern identity, one naturally opts for Lacan's refinements of Freudian thought, but insofar as Lacan took little interest in pathology per se, and insofar as DeLillo's emphasis is on a nation's sickness, the critic may legitimately gravitate to the older psychoanalytic economy and its lexicon. It is a mistake to think that entry into the Symbolic Order precludes all further encounters with the Imaginary, and by the same token we err to view Freud's system as wholly displaced by that of his successor. Indeed, Lacan resembles somewhat the messiah who comes not to destroy the law but to fulfill it, and just as the theologian illustrates certain points more effectively out of the Old Testament than out of the New, so does the critic need at times to summon up the ideas of the Mosaic founder of psychoanalysis.

Throughout his narrative, Bell strives to come to terms with some fearsome thing having to do with his mother—something more insidious, even, than the cancer that takes her life. She grapples with a nameless anomie that becomes localized and explicable only momentarily, as in her account of being violated on the examining table by her physician, Dr. Weber (one recalls the similarly loathsome gynecologist in *The Handmaid's Tale*, Margaret Atwood's meditation on another rape of America). Neurasthenic and depressed, Bell's mother evidently lived with a spiritual desperation that her husband, her children, and her priest could not alleviate. Bell's recollections of his mother and his boyhood culminate as he thinks back to a party given by his parents, an occasion of comprehensive sterility that owes something to the gathering in Mike Nichols's 1968 film *The Graduate*, not to mention the moribund revels of "The Dead." The party ends with the mother spitting into the ice cubes; subsequently, the son encounters her in the pantry and has some kind of epiphany that he will later attempt to re-create on film. This epiphany concerns not only the mother's unhappiness but also the son's oedipal guilt, for Bell conflates the disturbing moments at the end of the party with his voyeuristic contemplation, moments earlier, of a slip-clad woman at her ironing board—a figure he promptly transforms, in "the hopelessness of lust" (117/109), into an icon of domestic sexuality: "She was of that age which incites fantasy to burn like a hook into young men on quiet streets on a summer night" (203).

Perhaps the remark of Bell's sister Mary, who becomes the family pariah when she takes up with a gangland hit man, offers a clue to this woman's misery: "there are different kinds of death," she says. "I prefer that kind, his kind, to the death I've been fighting all my life" (171/163). Another sister, Jane, embraces this death-in-life when she opts for Big Bob Davidson and suburbia. Bell's father completes the pattern: like the man he was forced to inter in the Philippines, he is "buried alive" (296/285). The death that his mother and sisters and father know in their different ways is also what David Bell, like Jack Gladney in *White*

*Noise*, must come to terms with. The pervasive references to mortality reflect the characterization of death in the line from Saint Augustine that Warburton, the "Mad Memo-Writer," distributes: "And never can a man be more disastrously in death than when death itself shall be deathless" (23/21). Later, when Warburton glosses these words, he does not emphasize the spiritual imperative represented by death so much as the simple fact itself: "man shall remain forever in the state of death" because "death never dies" (108/101).

Bell's charm against death and social paresis may be his recurrent recollection of Akira Kurosawa's 1952 film *Ikiru*, especially the famous scene in which its protagonist, an old man dying of cancer, sits swinging in a nocturnal park amid drifting snowflakes.<sup>4</sup> Though he does not mention it, Bell must know that *ikiru* is Japanese for "living." Certainly he understands in the image something redemptive, something related to the fate of that other victim of cancer, his mother. In his own film he includes a sequence in which Sullivan, playing her, sits swinging like old Watanabe. In another, the amateur actor representing his father recalls that during his captivity in the Philippines the prisoners had filed by an old Japanese officer who sat in a swing and, moving to and fro, seemed to bless them with a circular motion of his hand. This detail may reflect only Bell's desire to graft certain intensely personal emblems onto the imagined recollections of his father, but he seems in any event curiously intent on weaving Kurosawa's parable into his own story of familial travail.

The submerged content of DeLillo's Kurosawa allusions suggests the larger meanings here. Kurosawa's character struggles within an enormous, implacable bureaucracy to drain a swamp (symbol of Japanese corruption and of his own part in it) and build a children's park. David Bell speaks of "the swamp of our own beings" (122), and, indeed, DeLillo's swamp and Kurosawa's represent the same discovery: that personal and national corruption prove coextensive. Like Kurosawa, too (or for that matter Saint Augustine), DeLillo understands that *ikiru*, living, can never be pursued outside the process of dying. The power of Kurosawa's conclusion, in which, dying, the protagonist sits in the swing, has to do with just how much his modest achievement has come to signify: it is what one can do with the life that gives the film its title. But this insight remains inchoate for Bell, who seems half-fatalistically to relish the knowledge that his own culture clears swamps only to achieve greater regularity—more straight lines, more utilitarian buildings—in a landscape progressively purged of graceful features that might please children. As an American, he knows that the clearing of "what was once a swamp" merely facilitates erection of some monument to transience and sterility: the "motel in the heart of every man" (268/257).

The reification of this place, a motel near the Chicago airport, provides the setting in which Bell and his ex-wife's cousin, Edwina, commit what she refers to as "some medieval form of incest" (273/261). This jocular reference



contributes to a more substantial fantasy of incest at the heart of the book, a fantasy or obsession that figures in other fictions of the period, notably Louis Malle's witty and daring treatment of incestuous desire, *Un souffle au coeur* (1971), and the starker meditations on the subject in Norman Mailer's *An American Dream* (1965) and Roman Polanski's *Chinatown* (1974). If *Americana* had been written a generation later, at the height of controversy over repressed memory retrieval, it might, like Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres*, involve the revelation of literal incest. Bell, however, seems guilty of transgressing the most powerful of taboos only in spirit.

But he transgresses it over and over, nonetheless, for almost every woman he sleeps with turns out to be a version of his mother. In his relations with women he enacts an unconscious search for the one woman forbidden him, at once recapitulating and reversing the tragically imperfect oedipal model: as he was rejected, so will he reject successive candidates in what occasionally amounts to a literal orgy of philandering and promiscuity. Meanwhile he suffers the ancient oedipal betrayal at the hands of one surrogate mother after another. Thus when Carter Hemmings steals his date at a party, Bell spits in the ice cubes—a gesture that will make sense only later, when Bell describes his mother's similar (and perhaps similarly motivated) expression of disgust. Bell thinks Wendy, his college girlfriend, has slept with Simmons St. Jean, his teacher. Weede Denney, his boss, exercises a kind of seigneurial *droit* with Binky, Bell's secretary. And even Sullivan turns out to have been sleeping with Brand all along.

In Sullivan, at once mother and "mothercountry," Bell recognizes the most significant—and psychologically dangerous—of these surrogates. When she gives Brand a doll, she replicates a gesture made by Bell's mother on another occasion. To Bell himself she twice tells "a bedtime story" (332/320, 334/322). He characterizes three of her sculptures as "carefully handcrafted afterbirth" (114/106). Her studio, to which Bell retreats on the eve of his journey westward, was called the Cocoon by its former tenant; swathed in a "membranous chemical material" (116/108) that resembles sandwich wrap, it is the womb to which he craves a return. Here he curls up, goes to sleep, and awakens to the returning Sullivan: "A shape in the shape of my mother . . . forming in the doorway" (118/110), "my mother's ghost in the room" (242/230). Bell's attraction to this central and definitive mother figure is so interdicted that it can only be described in negative terms; indeed, the climactic sexual encounter with Sullivan, a "black wish fulfilled" (345/334), is remarkable for its sustained negative affect: "mothercountry. Optional spelling of third syllable" (345).—"Abomination" (331/319, 344/333), he keeps repeating, for symbolically he is committing incest.

Sullivan's narratives, the bedtime stories she tells the filial Bell, represent the twin centers of this novel's public meanings—the heart of a book otherwise wedded to superficialities and resistant to formulations of psychological, sociologi-

cal, or semiotic depth (here the play of simulacra retreats to an attenuated reflexivity: one story is told *in* Maine, the other *about* Maine). Sullivan's first story concerns an encounter with Black Knife, aboriginal American and veteran of the campaign against Custer; the other concerns the discovery of her patrilineage. The subject of these stories, encountering the Father, complements the larger narrative's account of coming to terms with the Mother.

Black Knife, one-hundred-year-old master ironist, describes the strange asceticism that drives Americans to clear their world of annoying, wasteful clutter: "We have been redesigning our landscape all these years to cut out unneeded objects such as trees, mountains, and all those buildings which do not make practical use of every inch of space." The idea behind this asceticism, he says, is to get away from useless beauty, to reduce everything to "[s]traight lines and right angles" (126/118), to go over wholly to the "Megamerica" of "Neon, fiber glass, plexiglass, polyurethane, Mylar, Acrylite" (127/119). Black Knife hopes that we will "come to terms with the false anger we so often display at the increasing signs of sterility and violence in our culture" (127/119)—that instead we will "set forth on the world's longest march of vulgarity, evil and decadence" (128/120). These imagined excesses would reify a vision like that of the Histriones in Jorge Luis Borges's story "The Theologians" or the Dolcinians of Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*—heretics who seek to hasten the Apocalypse by committing as many sins as possible. Black Knife looks to the day when, "having set one foot into the mud, one foot and three toes," we will—just maybe—decide against surrendering to the swamp and pull back from our dreadful course, "shedding the ascetic curse, letting the buffalo run free, knowing everything a nation can know about itself and proceeding with the benefit of this knowledge and the awareness that we have chosen not to die. It's worth the risk . . . for . . . we would become, finally, the America that fulfills all of its possibilities. The America that belongs to the world. The America we thought we lived in when we were children. Small children. Very small children indeed" (128–29/120–21). We would, that is, repudiate the swamp in favor of an environment friendly to children—a park like the one created by that Japanese Black Knife, the Watanabe of Kurosawa's *Ikiru*.

The second bedtime story, which parallels the interview with Black Knife, concerns Sullivan's misguided attempt to recover her patrimony. In a sailing vessel off the coast of Maine, Sullivan and her Uncle Malcolm contemplate "God's world" (336/324), the land the Puritans found when they crossed the sea: America in its primal, unspoiled beauty. The voyage, however, becomes Sullivan's own night-sea journey into profound self-knowledge—knowledge, that is, of the intersection of self and nation. The vessel is the *Marston Moor*, named for the battle in which the Puritans added a triumph in the Old World to complement the success of their brethren in the New. The vessel's master is himself an avatar of American Puritanism, with roots in Ulster and Scotland. What Sullivan

learns from her Uncle Malcolm immerses her—like Oedipus or Stephen Dedalus or Jay Gatsby or Jesus Christ—in what Freud calls the family romance. The child of a mystery parent, she must be about her father's business. She dramatizes the revelation that Uncle Malcolm is her real father in language that evokes by turns Epiphany and Pentecost and Apocalypse—the full spectrum of divine mystery and revelation.

The imagery here hints further at Sullivan's identification with the American land, for the heritage she discovers coincides with that of the nation. Described originally as some exotic ethnic blend and called, on one occasion, a "[d]aughter of Black Knife" (347/336), Sullivan proves also to be solidly Scotch-Irish, like so many of the immigrants who would compose the dominant American ethnic group. In that her spiritual father is a native American, her real father a north country Protestant, she discovers in herself the same mixture of innate innocence and passionately eschatological Puritanism that figures so powerfully in the historical identity of her country.

The perfervid descriptions of the wild Maine coast and the travail of the seafarers recall nothing so much as the evocations of spiritualized landscape in Eliot's *Four Quartets* (Sullivan is not so many leagues distant from the Dry Salvages, off Cape Ann). In the present scene, as in Eliot, the reader encounters a meditation on the way eternity subsumes the specific history of a place, a meditation in which deeply felt religious imagery intimates meanings that strain the very seams of language. Yet the mystery proves ultimately secular, and the only direct allusion to Eliot is from "Gerontion," one of his poems of spiritual aridity. Sullivan's shipmate, appalled at the absence of "Christ the tiger" (342/330) in the apocalyptic scene into which he has steered, also sees into the heart of things, and an unquoted line from the same poem may encapsulate both their thoughts: "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?"

The allusion to "Gerontion," like the other Eliot allusions in *Americana*, recalls the reader to an awareness of the spiritual problem of contemporary America that the book addresses. The climax of the sailing expedition occurs when a boy with a lantern appears on the shore: he is a sign, a vision at once numinous and secular. He disappoints Uncle Malcolm, who seems to have expected a vision more palpably divine. As Sullivan explains him, his shining countenance reveals certain truths of the human bondage to entropy—yet he also embodies an idea of innocence and the generative principle: "the force of all in all, or light lighting light" (342/330). He is, in short, the child that America has long since betrayed, the principle of innocence that sibylline Sullivan, glossing Black Knife's parable, suggests America may yet rediscover—and with it salvation.

DeLillo conceived *Americana* on a visit to Mount Desert Island, a place that moved him unexpectedly with its air of American innocence preserved.<sup>5</sup> Sullivan and her compan-

ion are off the island when the boy with the lantern appears. Though the moment bulks very small in the overall narrative, it will prove seminal as DeLillo recurs in subsequent novels to an idea of the redemptive innocence that survives, a vestige of Eden, in children. The boy with the lantern, an almost inchoate symbol here, will turn up again as the linguistically atavistic Tap in *The Names* and as Wilder on his tricycle in *White Noise*.

When Sullivan, in her valedictory, calls Bell "innocent" and "sick" (348/336), she describes the American paradox that he represents, but DeLillo defines the canker that rots the larger American innocence in terms considerably stronger. Bell's sister Mary, as played by Carol Deming in the film, remarks that "there are good wombs and bad wombs" (324/312), and the phrase recurs to Bell as he contemplates the southwestern landscape from Clevenger's speeding Cadillac (363/353). In other words, the mother he repeatedly violates is more than flesh and blood. DeLillo conflates and subverts a familiar icon of American nationalism: mother and country. In doing so he augments and transforms the traditional symbolism of the American land as the female victim of an ancient European violation. Fitzgerald, in *The Great Gatsby*, reflects on Dutch sailors and "the fresh green breast of the New World." Hart Crane, in *The Bridge*, and John Barth, in *The Sot-Weed Factor*, imagine the land specifically as Pocahontas. But DeLillo suggests that the real violation occurs in an oedipal drama of almost cosmic proportions: not in the encounter of European man with the tender breast of the American land but in the violation of that mother by their oedipal progeny. "We want to wallow," says Black Knife, "in the terrible gleaming mudcunt of Mother America" (127/119). Like Oedipus, then, Bell discovers in himself the source of the pestilence that has ravaged what Beasley calls "mamaland" (243/231). The American Oedipus, seeking to understand the malaise from which his country suffers, discovers its cause in his own manifold and hideous violations of the mother, the land that nurtures and sustains. Physical and spiritual, these violations take their place among the other Americana catalogued in DeLillo's extraordinary first novel.

#### Notes

1. In preparing the 1989 Penguin edition of *Americana*, DeLillo made numerous small cuts in the text, and, generally speaking, the gains in economy improve the novel. For the most part, the author simply pares away minor instances of rhetorical overkill. For example, he deletes a gratuitously obscene remark about the spelling of "mothercountry," and he reduces the space devoted to the relationship of Bell and his ex-wife Meredith. Occasionally (as in the former instance), the author cuts a detail one has underlined in the 1971 edition, thereby affording the reader a glimpse into a gifted writer's maturing sense of decorum and understatement. Thus a minor motif like that of the woman ironing (it contributes to the reader's grasp of Bell's oedipal obsession) becomes a little less extravagant in the longer of the two pas-

sages in which it appears. Elsewhere, one applauds the excision of the syntactically tortured and the merely pretentious—for example, unsuccessful descriptions of film's epistemological and ontological properties. At no point, however, does DeLillo add material or alter the novel's original emphases—and I have only occasionally found it necessary or desirable to quote material that does not appear in both versions of the text. Except in these instances, I give page numbers for both editions—the 1971 Houghton Mifflin version first, the 1989 Penguin version second.

2. Though *Americana* remains the least discussed of DeLillo's major novels, an oedipal dimension has been noted by both Tom LeClair and Douglas Keeseey, authors of the first two single-authored books on DeLillo. Neither, however, foregrounds this element. LeClair, in his magisterial chapter on this novel (which he names, along with *Ratner's Star* and *The Names*, as one of DeLillo's "primary achievements" [33]), represents the oedipal theme as largely ancillary to the proliferating "personal, cultural, and aesthetic . . . schizophrenia" (34) that he sees as pervasive in the life of David Bell and in the culture of which he is a part. Thus LeClair explores the dynamics of what Gregory Bateson and R.D. Laing call "the double bind" in "the system of communications in Bell's family," which, "understood in Bateson's terms, establishes the ground of Bell's character and presents a microcosm of the larger cultural problems manifested in *Americana*", (35–36). Keeseey, by contrast, takes a feminist view of Bell's personality and life problems. Keeseey is especially interesting on the oedipal relationship between Bell and his father, and on the idea that Bell, in his film, is striving unsuccessfully to recover the mother's "way of seeing" the world—a way lost to him when he embraced the values expressed in his father's "ads for sex and violence" (23).
3. Rilke's "Der Panther," by the same token, may lie behind the desire Bell's fellow traveler Pike expresses to encounter a mountain lion face to face.
4. The only substantial discussion of the *Ikiru* allusions is that of Mark Osteen, who acutely suggests that Bell sees himself in the film's moribund main character, Watanabe, and "fears his own living death" (463). The recurrent references to the scene on the swing represent "David's attempt to generate the kind of retrospective epiphany that Watanabe undergoes" (462–63).
5. In a *Paris Review* interview, DeLillo describes the genesis of this novel in a positive evocation of *Americana*:

I was sailing in Maine with two friends, and we put into a small harbor on Mt. Desert Island. And I was sitting on a railroad tie waiting to take a shower, and I had a glimpse of a street maybe fifty yards away and a sense of beautiful old houses and rows of elms

and maples and a stillness and wistfulness—the street seemed to carry its own built-in longing. And I felt something, a pause, something opening up before me. It would be a month or two before I started writing the book and two or three years before I came up with the title *Americana*, but in fact it was all implicit in that moment—a moment in which nothing happened, nothing ostensibly changed, a moment in which I didn't see anything I hadn't seen before. But there was a pause in time, and I knew I had to write about a man who comes to a street like this or lives on a street like this. And whatever roads the novel eventually followed, I believe I maintained the idea of that quiet street if only as counterpoint, as lost innocence.

(279)

This recollection dictates not only the scene off Mount Desert Island but also and more clearly the scene in picturesque Millsgate, the little town on Penobscot Bay where the travelers pick up Brand. Here, at the end of part 1, Bell conceives the idea for his film—just as DeLillo, in a similar setting, conceived the idea of *Americana*.

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#### Paul Maltby (essay date Summer 1996)

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[In the following essay, Maltby identifies Romantic qualities of the "visionary moment" in *White Noise*, *The Names*, and *Libra*, comparing those qualities to the critical consensus that characterizes DeLillo's works as quintessentially postmodern writing.]



What is the postmodern response to the truth claims traditionally made on behalf of visionary moments? By “visionary moment,” I mean that flash of insight or sudden revelation which critically raises the level of spiritual or self-awareness of a fictional character. It is a mode of cognition typically represented as bypassing rational thought processes and attaining a “higher” or redemptive order of knowledge (gnosis). There are, conceivably, three types of postmodern response which merit attention here.

First, in recognition of the special role literature itself has played in establishing the credibility of visionary moments, postmodern writers might draw on the resources of metafiction to parodically “lay bare” the essentially literary nature of such moments. Baldly stated, the visionary moment could be exposed as a literary convention, that is, a concept that owes more to the practice of organizing narratives around a sudden illumination (as in, say, the narratives of Wordsworth’s *Prelude* or Joyce’s *Dubliners*) than to real-life experience. Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* is premised on this assumption. Pynchon’s sleuth-like protagonist, Oedipa Maas, finds herself in a situation in which clues—contrary to the resolution of the standard detective story—proliferate uncontrollably, thereby impeding the emergence of a final enlightenment or “stelliferous Meaning” (82). It is a situation that not only frustrates Oedipa, who is continually tantalized by the sense that “a revelation . . . trembled just past the threshold of her understanding” (24), but which also mocks the reader’s expectation of a revelation that will close the narrative.

A second postmodern response might be to assess the credibility of the visionary moment in the light of post-structuralist theory. Hence the representation of a visionary moment as if it embodied a final, fast-frozen truth, one forever beyond the perpetually unstable relationship of signifier to signified, would be open to the charge of “logocentrism” (where the transient “meaning effects” generated by the endless disseminations of language are mistaken for immutable meanings). Moreover, implied here is the subject’s transcendent vantage point in relation to the visionary moment. For the knowledge that the “moment” conveys is always apprehended in its totality; there is no current of its meaning that escapes or exceeds this implicitly omnipotent consciousness. As if beyond the instabilities and surplus significations of language, the subject is assumed to be the sole legislator of meaning. (All of which is to say nothing of any *unconscious* investment in the meaning of the visionary moment.)

A third postmodern response might deny the very conditions of possibility for a visionary moment in contemporary culture. The communication revolution, seen by sociologists like Baudrillard to be the key constitutive feature of our age, has aggrandized the media to the point where signs have displaced their referents, where images of the Real have usurped the authority of the Real, whence the subject is engulfed by simulacra. In the space of simulation, the difference between “true” and “false,” “actual” and “imaginary,” has imploded. Hence Romantic and

modernist conceptions of visionary moments—typically premised on metaphysical assumptions of supernal truth—are rendered obsolete in a culture suffused with simulacra; for under these “hyperreal” conditions, the visionary moment can only reproduce the packaged messages of the mass media.

What these three responses to the truth claims of the visionary moment share is a radically antimetaphysical stance. We see the visionary moment, with all its pretensions to truth and transcendence, exposed as (1) a literary convention, (2) a logocentric illusion, and (3) a hyperreal construct. In short, the metaphysical foundations of traditional conceptions of the visionary moment cannot survive the deconstructive thrust of postmodern thinking.

This essay will examine the status of the visionary moment in particular, and of visionary experience in general, in three of Don DeLillo’s novels, namely, *White Noise* (1985), *The Names* (1982), and *Libra* (1988). DeLillo has been widely hailed as an exemplar of postmodernist writing. Typically, this assessment rests on readings that focus on his accounts of the postmodern experience of living in a hyperreality.<sup>1</sup> But to postmodernize DeLillo is to risk losing sight of the (conspicuously unpostmodern) metaphysical impulse that animates his work. Indeed, the terms in which he identifies visionary experience in his fiction will be seen to align him so closely with a Romantic sensibility that they must radically qualify any reading of him as a postmodern writer.

In part 2 of *White Noise*, the Gladney family shelters at a local barracks from the toxic cloud of a chemical spill. As Jack Gladney observes his children sleeping, he recounts a visionary moment. It begins as follows:

Steffie . . . muttered something in her sleep. It seemed important that I know what it was. In my current state, bearing the death impression of the Nyodene cloud, I was ready to search anywhere for signs and hints, intimations of odd comfort. . . . Moments later she spoke again. . . . but a language not quite of this world. I struggled to understand. I was convinced she was saying something, fitting together units of stable meaning. I watched her face, waited. . . . She uttered two clearly audible words, familiar and elusive at the same time, words that seemed to have a ritual meaning, part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant.

*Toyota Celica.*

(154–55)

Before I continue the quotation, consider the following issues. Up to this point, DeLillo has manipulated his readers’ expectations; what we expect from Gladney’s daughter, Steffie, is a profound, revelatory utterance. Instead, we are surprised by (what appears to be) a banality: “Toyota Celica.” Here it looks as if DeLillo is mocking the traditional faith in visionary moments or, more precisely, ironically questioning the very possibility of such moments in a postmodern culture. After all, a prominent feature of that culture is the prodigious, media-powered

expansion of marketing and public relations campaigns to the point where their catchwords and sound bites colonize not just the public sphere but also, it seems, the individual unconscious. Henceforth, even the most personal visionary experience appears to be constituted by the promotional discourses of a consumer society. However, the irony of this apparently postmodern account of a visionary moment proves to be short-lived as Gladney immediately recounts his response to Steffie's words:

A long moment passed before I realized this was the name of an automobile. The truth only amazed me more. The utterance was beautiful and mysterious, gold-shot with looming wonder. It was like the name of an ancient power in the sky, tablet-carved in cuneiform. It made me feel that something hovered. But how could this be? A simple brand name, an ordinary car. How could these near-nonsense words, murmured in a child's restless sleep, make me sense a meaning, a presence? She was only repeating some TV voice. . . . Whatever its source, the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence.

(155)

The tenor of this passage is not parodic; the reader is prompted by the analytical cast and searching tone of Gladney's narration to listen in earnest. Gladney's words are not to be dismissed as delusional, nor are they to be depreciated as those of "a modernist displaced in a post-modern world" (Wilcox 348). The passage is typical of DeLillo's tendency to seek out transcendent moments in our postmodern lives that hint at possibilities for cultural regeneration. Clearly, the principal point of the passage is not that "Toyota Celica" is the signifier of a commodity (and as such has only illusory significance as a visionary utterance), but that *as a name* it has a mystical resonance and potency: "It was like the name of an ancient power in the sky," a name that is felt to be "part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant." For what is revealed to Gladney in this visionary moment is that names embody a formidable power. And this idea is itself the expansive theme, explored in its metaphysical implications, of *The names*, the novel that immediately preceded *White Noise*. Indeed, when read in conjunction with *The Names*, the metaphysical issues of *White Noise* can be brought into sharper relief.

*The Names* addresses the question of the mystical power of names: secret names (210, 294), place names (102–3, 239–40), divine names (92, 272).<sup>2</sup> For DeLillo wants to remind us that names are often invested with a significance that exceeds their immediate, practical function. Names are enchanted; they enable insight and revelation. As one character explains: "We approach nameforms warily. Such secret power. When the name is itself secret, the power and influence are magnified. A secret name is a way of escaping the world. It is an opening into the self" (210).

Consider the remarkable ending of *The Names*—an extract from the manuscript of a novel by Tap, the narrator's (James Axton's) nine-year-old son, replete with misspellings. In Tap's novel, a boy, unable to participate in the

speaking in tongues at a Pentecostal service, panics and flees the church: "Tongue tied! His fait was signed. He ran into the rainy distance, smaller and smaller. This was worse than a retched nightmare. It was the nightmare of real things, the fallen wonder of the world" (339). These lines conclude both Tap's novel and *The Names* itself. "The fallen wonder of the world" connotes the failure of language, in its (assumed) postlapsarian state, to invest the world with some order of deep and abiding meaning, to *illuminate* existence. More specifically, the language that has "fallen" is the language of name, the kind of pure nomenclature implied in Genesis where words stand in a necessary, rather than arbitrary, relationship to their referents.<sup>3</sup> The novel follows the lives of characters who seek to recover this utopian condition of language. For example, people calling themselves "abecedarians" (210) form a murder cult whose strategy is to match the initials of their victims' names to those of the place names where the murders occur—all in a (misguided) effort to restore a sense of the intrinsic or self-revealing significance of names. And note Axton's response to the misspellings in his son's manuscript:

I found these mangled words exhilarating. He'd made them new again, made me see how they worked, what they really were. They were ancient things, secret, reshapable.

. . . The spoken poetry in those words. . . . His . . . misrenderings . . . seemed to contain curious perceptions about the words themselves, second and deeper meanings, original meanings.

(313)

The novel suggests that the visionary power of language will only be restored when we "tap" into its primal or pristine forms, the forms that can regenerate perception, that can *reveal* human existence in significant ways. Hence the novel's inquiry into "original meanings," the concern with remembering "the prototype" (112–13), whence "[i]t was necessary to remember, to dream the pristine earth" (307). The "gift of tongues" is also understood as a primal, and hence visionary, language—"talk as from the womb, as from the sweet soul before birth" (306)—and, as such, it is revered as "the whole language of the spirit" (338), the language by which "[n]ormal understanding is surpassed" (307). (And far from DeLillo keeping an ironic distance from such mystical views of glossolalia, he has endorsed them in interviews.)<sup>4</sup> Moreover, one can hardly miss the novel's overall insistence on the spoken word—especially on talk at the familiar, everyday, pre-abstract level of communication—as the purest expression of primal, visionary language:

We talked awhile about her nephews and nieces, other family matters, commonplaces, a cousin taking trumpet lessons, a death in Winnipeg. . . . The subject of family makes conversation almost tactile. I think of hands, food, hoisted children. There's a close-up contact warmth in the names and images. Everydayness. . . .

This talk we were having about familiar things was itself ordinary and familiar. It seemed to yield up the mystery that is part of such things, the nameless way in

which we sometimes feel our connections to the physical world. *Being here*. . . .Our senses are collecting at the primal edge. . . .I felt I was in an early stage of teenage drunkenness, lightheaded, brilliantly happy and stupid, knowing the real meaning of every word.<sup>5</sup>

(31–32)

The affirmation of a primal, visionary level of language which, moreover, finds its purest expression in “talk” (glossolalia, conversation) is vulnerable to postmodern critique on the grounds that it is premised on a belief in original and pure meanings. Suffice it to say here, such meanings are assumed to exist (as in some transcendent realm) outside the space of intertextuality, or beyond the “logic of supplementarity” whereby, according to Derrida, “the origin . . . was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin” (*Of Grammatology* 61).

The idea that language has “fallen” or grown remote from some pure and semantically rich primal state is characteristically (though not exclusively) Romantic, and most reminiscent of views held by, among others, Rousseau and Wordsworth. In his “Essay on the Origins of Languages” and *Confessions*, Rousseau identified speech, as opposed to writing, as the natural condition of language because it “owes its form to natural causes alone” (“Essay” 5). In the face of a culture that conferred greater authority on writing than on speech, he affirmed the priority of the latter on the grounds that “Languages are made to be spoken, writing serves only as a supplement to speech” (qtd. in Derrida 144). While writing “substitut[es] exactitude for expressiveness” (“Essay” 21), the bias of speech is toward passionate and figurative expression which can “penetrate to the very depths of the heart” (9). Indeed, “As man’s first motives for speaking were of the passions, his first expressions were tropes. . . .[Hence] [a]t first only poetry was spoken; there was no hint of reasoning until much later” (12). Moreover, it was “primitive,” face-to-face speech—as opposed to the sophistications of writing, and especially the tyranny made possible by the codification of laws—that, according to Rousseau’s anthropology, once bound humans together naturally in an organic, egalitarian community. And recall that in his “Preface” to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth deplored the “arbitrary and capricious habits of expression” of poets who, following urbane conventions of writing, had lost touch with the elemental language of rustics. The latter, by virtue of their “rural occupations” (that is, their regular intercourse with nature) are “such men [who] hourly communicate with the best objects from which the best part of language is *originally* derived” (emphasis added). Furthermore, this is “a far more philosophical language” than that used by poets (735). Of course, all this is not to suggest that DeLillo would necessarily endorse Rousseau’s or Wordsworth’s specific claims. But what all three share in is that familiar Romantic myth of some primal, pre-abstract level of language which is naturally endowed with greater insight, a pristine order of meaning that enables unmediated understanding, community, and spiritual communion with the world around.

If we return to Jack Gladney’s visionary moment, we should note that while “Toyota Celica” may be a brand name, Gladney perceives it as having an elemental, incantatory power that conveys, at a deeper level, another order of meaning. He invokes a range of terms in an effort to communicate this alternative meaning: “ritual,” “spell,” “ecstatic,” “mysterious,” “wonder,” “ancient” (155). Similarly, for Murray Siskind, Gladney’s friend and media theorist, the recurring jingle “*Coke is it, Coke is it*” evokes comparisons with “mantras.” Siskind elaborates: “The medium [that is, television] practically overflows with sacred formulas if we can remember how to respond innocently” (51). DeLillo highlights the paradox that while so much language, in the media society, has degenerated into mere prattle and clichés, brand names not only flourish but convey a magic and mystical significance. Hence they are often chanted like incantations: “Toyota Corolla, Toyota Celica, Toyota Cressida” (155); “Tegrin, Denorex, Selsun Blue” (289); “Dacron, Orlon, Lycra Spandex” (52).

Earlier passages in *White Noise* derive their meaning from the same Romantic metaphysics of language as Gladney’s “moment of splendid transcendence.” First, consider Gladney’s response to the crying of his baby, Wilder (and note, by the way, the typically Romantic impression of the mystique of desolate spaces, and the appeal to “the mingled reverence and wonder” of the Romantic sublime):

He was crying out, saying nameless things in a way that touched me with its depth and richness. This was an ancient dirge. . . .I began to think he had disappeared inside this wailing noise and if I could join him in his lost and suspended place we might together perform some reckless wonder of intelligibility. . . .

. . . .Nearly seven straight hours of serious crying. It was as though he’d just returned from a period of wandering in some remote and holy place, in sand barrens or snowy ranges—a place where things are said, sights are seen, distances reached which we in our ordinary toil can only regard with the mingled reverence and wonder we hold in reserve for feats of the most sublime and difficult dimensions.

(78–79)

And, for Siskind, “Supermarkets this large and clean and modern are a revelation to me”; after all, “Everything is concealed in symbolism, hidden by veils of mystery and layers of cultural material. But it is psychic data, absolutely. . . .All the letters and numbers are here, . . . all the code words and ceremonial phrases” (38, 37–38). Evidently, for DeLillo, language operates on two levels: a practical, denotative level, that is, a mode of language oriented toward business, information, and technology, and a “deeper,” primal level which is the ground of visionary experience—the “second, deeper meanings, original meanings” that Axton finds in Tap’s childishly misspelled words; the “ancient dirge” that Gladney hears in Wilder’s wailing; the “language not quite of this world” that he hears in Steffie’s sleep-talk; the “psychic data” that Siskind finds beneath white noise.

In communications theory, “white noise” describes a random mix of frequencies over a wide spectrum that



renders signals unintelligible. DeLillo applies the metaphor of a circumambient white noise to suggest, on the one hand, the entropic state of postmodern culture where in general communications are degraded by triviality and irrelevance—the culture of “infotainment,” factoids, and junk mail, where the commodity logic of late capitalism has extended to the point that cognition is mediated by its profane and quotidian forms. Yet, on the other hand, DeLillo suggests that within that incoherent mix of frequencies there is, as it were, a low wavelength that carries a flow of spiritually charged meaning. This flow of meaning is barely discernible, but, in the novel, it is figured in the recurring phrase “waves and radiation” (1, 38, 51, 104, 326)—an undercurrent of invisible forces or “nameless energies” (12) that have regenerative powers. And how do we “tune in” to this wavelength? Siskind says of his students, who feel alienated from the dreck of popular television, “they have to learn to look as children again” (50), that is to say, to perceive like Gladney’s daughter, Steffie, or Axton’s son, Tap, are said to perceive. In an interview, DeLillo has observed, “I think we feel, perhaps superstitiously, that children have a direct route to, have direct contact to the kind of natural truth that eludes us as adults” (“Outsider” 302). The boy protagonist of *Ratner’s Star* (1976) is considered, by virtue of his minority, more likely than adults to access the “primal dream” experience of “racial history,” of “pure fable, myth, archetype”; as one character tells him, “you haven’t had time to drift away from your psychic origins” (264–65). And here it must be remarked that this faith in the insightfulness of childhood perception is a defining feature of (but, of course, not exclusive to) that current of Romantic writing which runs from Rousseau’s *Emile* (1762), through the writings of Blake and Wordsworth, to De Quincey’s *Suspiria de Profundis* (1845). For Coleridge, “To carry on the feelings of childhood into the powers of manhood; to combine the child’s sense of wonder and novelty with the appearances which every day for perhaps forty years had rendered familiar . . . this is the character and privilege of genius” (49). And recall, especially, the familiar lines from Wordsworth’s “Intimations of Immortality” which lament the (adult’s) loss of the child’s “visionary gleam,” that “master-light of all our seeing”; which celebrate the child as a “Seer blest! / On whom those truths do rest, / Which we [adults] are toiling all our lives to find, / In darkness lost” (460–61). In *The Prelude*, Wordsworth also argued that adult visionary experience is derived from childhood consciousness, the “seedtime [of] my soul,” a consciousness that persists into adulthood as a source of “creative sensibility,” illuminating the world with its “auxiliary light” (498, 507).

The Romantic notion of infant insight, of the child as gifted with an intuitive perception of truth, sets DeLillo’s writing apart from postmodern trends. For, of all modes of fiction, it is postmodernism that is least hospitable to concepts like insight and intuition. Its metafictional and antimetaphysical polemic has collapsed the “depth model” of the subject (implied by the concept of *inner* seeing) and, audaciously, substituted a model of subjectivity as the

construct of chains of signifiers. In such fiction as Robert Coover’s *Pricksongs and Descants*, Walter Abish’s *In the Future Perfect*, and Donald Barthelme’s *Snow White*, for example, we find subjectivity reconceived as the conflux of fragments of texts—mythical narratives, dictionaries and catalogues, media clichés and stereotypes.

In an interview, DeLillo has said of *White Noise* that “Perhaps the supermarket tabloids are . . . closest to the spirit of the book” (“I Never Set Out” 31). What one might expect from any critique of postmodern culture is a satirical assault on the tabloids as a debased and commodified form of communication. Yet the frequency with which DeLillo cites tabloid news stories—their accounts of UFOs, reincarnation, and supernatural occurrences (see, for example, *White Noise* 142–46)—suggests that there is more at issue than simply mocking their absurd, fabricated claims. For he recognizes our need for a “weekly dose of cult mysteries” (5), and that, by means of tabloid discourse, “Out of some persistent sense of large-scale ruin, we kept inventing hope” (146–47). In *White Noise*, the tabloids are seen to function as a concealed form of religious expression, where extraterrestrials are substituted for messiahs and freakish happenings for miracles. In short, on a wavelength of which we are virtually unconscious, the tabloids gratify our impulses toward the transcendental; “They ask profoundly important questions about death, the afterlife, God, worlds and space, yet they exist in an almost Pop Art atmosphere” (“I Never Set Out” 31).

*White Noise* abounds with extensive discussions about death and the afterlife (38, 99, 196–200, 282–92, and elsewhere), a concern of the book that is surely symptomatic of a nostalgia for a mode of experience that lies *beyond* the stereotyping and banalizing powers of the media, a mode of experience not subject to simulation. In a culture marked by an implosive de-differentiation of the image and its referent, where “Once you’ve seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn” (12), the nonfigurability of death seems like a guarantee of a domain of human experience that can transcend hyperreality.

In another visionary experience, Gladney has mystical insight into the force—a huge, floating cloud of toxic chemicals—that threatens his life:

It was a terrible thing to see, so close, so low. . . . But it was also spectacular, part of the grandness of a sweeping event. . . . Our fear was accompanied by a sense of awe that bordered on the religious. It is surely possible to be awed by the thing that threatens your life, to see it as a cosmic force, so much larger than yourself, more powerful, created by elemental and willful rhythms.

(127)

This “awed,” “religious” perception of a powerful force, which seems in its immensity capable of overwhelming the onlooker, is characteristic of that order of experience explored by the Romantics under the name of “the Sublime.” The concept of the sublime has had a long and

complex evolution since Longinus's famous treatise on the subject, and here it must suffice to note just one key statement that has served as a foundation for the notion of the Romantic sublime. In his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), Edmund Burke advanced the following definition: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (39). Burke identified the *sources* of "terrifying" sublimity in such attributes as "power," "vastness," "infinity," and "magnificence," and among the effects of the *experience* of the sublime, he identified "terror," "awe," "reverence," and "admiration." It is remarkable that Gladney's experience of the sublime yields almost identical terms: "terrible," "grandness," "awed," "religious," "cosmic," "powerful." Moreover, such terms are familiar to us from descriptions of sublime experience in Romantic literature. For example, in *The Prelude*, in such accounts as his epiphany at the Simplon Pass and the ascent of Mount Snowdon (535–36, 583–85), Wordsworth frequently invokes impressions of the "awful," the "majestic," "infinity," and "transcendent power" to convey his sense of the terrifying grandeur of nature. In the violent, turbulent landscape of the Alps, he perceived "Characters of the great Apocalypse, / The types and symbols of Eternity, / Of first, and last, and midst, and without end" (536). Wordsworth's invocation of "Apocalypse," like the sense, in *White Noise*, of a life-threatening "cosmic force," reveals a defining property of the experience of the sublime: the subject's anxious intimation of a dissolution of the self, of extinction, in the face of such overwhelming power. "[T]he emotion you feel," says Burke of such "prodigious" power, is that it might "be employed to the purposes of . . . destruction. That power derives all its sublimity from the terror with which it is generally accompanied" (65). And here it should be added that the experience is all the more disturbing because such immense power defies representation or rational comprehension (hence the recourse of Wordsworth, DeLillo, and others to hyperbole—"cosmic," "infinite," "eternal," and so on).<sup>6</sup>

The Romantic-metaphysical character of DeLillo's rendering of sublime experience is evident in the pivotal place he gives to the feeling of "awe." Not only is the term repeated in Gladney's description of his feelings toward the toxic cloud, but it is used three times, along with the kindred terms "dread" and "wonder," in a later account of that characteristically Romantic experience of the sublime, namely, gazing at a sunset:<sup>7</sup>

The sky takes on content, feeling, an exalted narrative life. . . . There are turreted skies, light storms. . . . Certainly there is awe, it is all awe, it transcends previous categories of awe, but we don't know whether we are watching in wonder or dread. . . .

(324)

Given the Romantics' valorization of "I-centered" experience (in respect of which, *The Prelude* stands as a preeminent example), the feeling of awe has received special attention in their literature. After all, that overwhelming feeling of spellbound reverence would seem like cogent testimony to the innermost life of the psyche, an expression of what Wordsworth, in "Tintern Abbey" and *The Prelude*, called the "purer mind" (164, 506). However, that deep-rooted, plenitudinous I-centered subject of awe is a far cry from postmodern conceptions of the self as, typically, the tenuous construct of intersecting cultural codes. As noted earlier, this is the model of the self we find in the quintessentially postmodern fiction of Abish, Barthelme, and Coover, among others. It is a model which accords with Roland Barthes's view of the "I" that "is already itself a plurality of other texts, of codes which are infinite. . . . [Whence] subjectivity has ultimately the generality of stereotypes" (10). Evidently, DeLillo's awe-struck subjects contradict the postmodern norm.<sup>8</sup> Finally, why create such subjects at all? Perhaps they may be regarded as an instance of DeLillo's endeavor to affirm the integrity and spiritual energy of the psyche in the face of (what the novel suggests is) late capitalism's disposition to disperse or thin out the self into so many consumer subject positions (48, 50, 83–84). In short, we might say that sublimity is invoked to recuperate psychic wholeness.

Studies of *Libra*, which identify it as a postmodernist text, typically stress its rendering of Lee Harvey Oswald as the construct of media discourses and its focus on the loss of the (historical) referent and the constraints of textuality.<sup>9</sup> And yet for all its evident postmodern concerns, there is a current of thinking in the novel that is highly resistant to any postmodernizing account of it. Consider, for example, this observation by David Ferrie, one of the book's anti-Castro militants:

Think of two parallel lines. . . . One is the life of Lee H. Oswald. One is the conspiracy to kill the President. What bridges the space between them? What makes a connection inevitable? There is a third line. It comes out of dreams, visions, intuitions, prayers, out of the deepest levels of the self. It's not generated by cause and effect like the other two lines. It's a line that cuts across causality, cuts across time. It has no history that we can recognize or understand. But it forces a connection. It puts a man on the path of his destiny.

(339)

Observations of this type abound in *Libra*: elsewhere we read of "patterns [that] emerge outside the bounds of cause and effect" (44); "secret symmetries" (78); "a world inside the world" (13, 47, 277); "A pattern outside experience. Something that *jerks* you out of the spin of history" (384). Clearly, repeated invocations of invisible, transhistorical forces which shape human affairs do not amount to a *post-modern* rejection of empiricist historiography. Rather, this is the stuff of metaphysics, not to say the occult. Indeed, in a discussion of *Libra*, published in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, DeLillo seriously speculates on supernatural interventions in human history:

But Oswald's attempt on Kennedy was more complicated. I think it was based on elements outside politics and, *as someone in the novel says, outside history*—things like dreams and coincidences and even the movement or the configuration of the stars, which is one reason the book is called *Libra*. . .

. . . When I hit upon this notion of coincidence and dream and intuition and the possible impact of astrology on the way men act, I thought that *Libra*, being Oswald's sign, would be the one title that summarized what's inside the book.

("Outsider" 289, 293–94; emphasis added)

I also cite this interview as evidence that DeLillo is more likely to endorse his characters' beliefs in transcendent realities than to dismiss them as, in the words of one commentator, a "fantasy of secret knowledge, of a world beyond marginalization that would provide a center that would be immune to the play of signification" (Carmichael 209).

*Libra* appeals to the truth and sovereignty of "the deepest levels of the self," that is, the levels of "dreams, visions, intuitions" (339). Indeed, alongside those readings of the novel that point to its postmodern rendering of the subject without psychic density—"an effect of the codes out of which he is articulated" (Carmichael 206); "a contemporary production" (Lentricchia, "*Libra*" 441)—we must reckon with the book's insistent focus on "another level, . . . a deeper kind of truth" (260), on that which "[w]e know . . . on some deeper plane" (330), on that which "speaks to something deep inside [one]. . . the life-insight" (28). Such appeals to insight or intuition are common in Romantic literature and conform with Romanticism's depth model of subjectivity. That model is premised on the belief that truth lies "furthest in," that is, in the domain of the "heart" or "purer mind"; the belief that truth can only be accessed by the "inner faculties" (Wordsworth), by "inward sight" (Shelley), or, recalling the American Romantics, by "intuition." "[W]here," Emerson rhetorically inquired, "but in the intuitions which are vouchsafed us from within, shall we learn the Truth?" (182).<sup>10</sup> The comparisons may be schematic but, still, are close enough to indicate that the mindset of *Libra* is neither consistently nor unequivocally postmodern. No less emphatic than the book's evidence for a model of mind as an unstable "effect" of media codes is the evidence for a model of it as self-sufficient and self-authenticating, as an interior source of insight or vision.

What are the ideological implications of DeLillo's Romantic metaphysics? A common reading of Romanticism understands its introspective orientation in terms of a "politics of vision."<sup>11</sup> This is to say that, first, Romantic introspection may be seen as an attempt to claim the "inner faculties" as an inviolable, sacrosanct space beyond the domain of industrialization and the expanding marketplace. Second, the persistent appeal to the visionary "faculty" of "insight" or "intuition" or "Imagination" supplied Wordsworth, Blake, and others with a vantage point

from which to critique the utilitarian and positivist ethos of capitalist development. But the crucial component of the "politics of vision" is the concept of what M.H. Abrams has called "the redemptive imagination" (117–22). Abrams notes how Blake repeatedly asserts that the "Imagination . . . is the Divine Body of the Lord Jesus" (qtd. in Abrams 121) and quotes from *The Prelude* to emphasize that Wordsworth also substituted Imagination for the Redeemer:

Here must thou be, O Man!  
Strength to thyself; no Helper hast thou here;

The prime and vital principle is thine  
In the recesses of thy nature, far  
From any reach of outward fellowship[.]

(qtd. in Abrams 120)

What needs to be added here is that this faith in the "redemptive imagination" is premised on an idealist assumption that personal salvation can be achieved primarily, if not exclusively, at the level of the individual psyche. Indeed, this focus on salvation as chiefly a private, spiritual affair tends to obscure or diminish the role of change at the institutional level of economic and political practice as a *precondition* for the regeneration of the subject.<sup>12</sup> And it is a similar "politics of vision" that informs DeLillo's writing and that invites the same conclusion. DeLillo's appeals to the visionary serve to affirm an autonomous realm of experience and to provide a standard by which to judge the spiritually atrophied culture of late capitalism. Thus against the impoverishments and distortions of communication in a culture colonized by factoids, sound bites, PR hype, and propaganda, DeLillo endeavors to preserve the credibility of visionary experience and, in particular, to validate the visionary moment as the sign of a redemptive order of meaning. He has remarked, "The novelist can try to leap across the barrier of fact, and the reader is willing to take that leap with him as long as there's a kind of redemptive truth waiting on the other side" ("Outsider" 294). Yet, as we have already seen, that "leap" is into the realm of the transhistorical, where "redemptive truth" is chiefly a spiritual, visionary matter. And it is in this respect that his fiction betrays a conservative tendency; his response to the adverse cultural effects of late capitalism reproduces a Romantic politics of vision, that is, it is a response that obscures, if not undervalues, the need for radical change at the level of the material infrastructure.

The fact that DeLillo writes so incisively of the textures of postmodern experience, of daily life in the midst of images, commodities, and conspiracies, does not make him a postmodern writer. His Romantic appeals to a primal language of vision, to the child's psyche as a medium of precious insight, to the sublime contravene the antimetaphysical norms of postmodern theory. Moreover, while there is, to be sure, a significant strain of irony that runs through his fiction, it does not finally undercut his metaphysics. As Tom LeClair has noted in a discussion of *White Noise*, "DeLillo presses beyond the ironic, extracting from his initially satiric materials a sense of wonderment or mystery" (214). "Wonder" and "mystery," to say



nothing of “extrasensory flashes” (*White Noise* 34), are frequently invoked in DeLillo’s writing as signifiers of a mystical order of cognition, an affirmation that the near-global culture of late capitalism cannot exhaust the possibilities of human experience. But it is precisely this metaphysical cast of thinking that separates DeLillo’s fiction from the thoroughgoing postmodernism of, say, Walter Abish or Robert Coover, and that should prompt us to qualify radically our tendency to read him as an exemplary postmodern writer.

#### Notes

1. See, for example, Lentricchia, “Tales” and “*Libra*”; Frow; Messmer; and Wilcox.
2. Perhaps the choice of title for the novel is, among other things, calculated to evoke that long tradition of Neo-Platonist and medieval mysticism which meditated on divine names. One might cite the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius, author of *The Divine Names*, or the Merkabah mystics, early Kabbalists who speculated on the secret names of God and the angels. For such mystics, the way to revelation is through the knowledge of secret names.
3. This is precisely the theme of an early essay by Walter Benjamin, who, reflecting on the degeneration of language into “mere signs,” observed: “In the Fall, since the eternal purity of names was violated, . . . man abandoned immediacy in the communication of the concrete, name, and fell into the abyss of the mediateness of all communication, of the word as means, of the empty word, into the abyss of prattle” (120).
4. “I do wonder if there is something we haven’t come across. Is there another, clearer language? Will we speak it and hear it when we die? Did we know it before we were born? . . . Maybe this is why there’s so much babbling in my books. Babbling can be . . . a purer form, an alternate speech. I wrote a short story that ends with two babies babbling at each other in a car. This was something I’d seen and heard, and it was a dazzling and unforgettable scene. I felt these babies *knew* something. They were talking, they were listening, they were *commenting*. . . .Glossolalia is interesting because it suggests there’s another way to speak, there’s a very different language lurking somewhere in the brain” (“Interview” 83–84). And “Glossolalia or speaking in tongues . . . could be viewed as a higher form of infantile babbling. It’s babbling which seems to mean something” (“Outsider” 302). (Such comments help explain the significance of the crying of Baby Wilder in *White Noise* [78–79], an episode I shall discuss later.)
5. A little later we read: “People everywhere are absorbed in conversation. . . .Conversation is life, language is the deepest being” (52).
6. Kant formulated the following succinct definition: “We can describe the sublime in this way: it is an object (of nature) the representation of which determines the mind to think the unattainability of nature as a presentation of [reason’s] ideas” (qtd. in Weiskel 22).
7. Recall these lines from Wordsworth’s “Tintern Abbey”: “a sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused, / Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns” (164). I am indebted to Lou Caton, of the University of Oregon, for drawing my attention to a possible Romantic context for the sunsets in *White Noise*.
8. Here, I anticipate two likely objections. First, the “airborne toxic event” may seem like an ironic postmodern version of the sublime object insofar as DeLillo substitutes a man-made source of power for a natural one. Yet Gladney’s words emphasize that that power is experienced as a *natural* phenomenon: “This was a death made in the laboratory, defined and measurable, but we thought of it at the time in a simple and primitive way, as some seasonal perversity of the earth like a flood or tornado” (127). Second, I disagree with Arthur Saltzman (118–19) and others who see postmodern irony in the account of the sunset insofar as (to be sure) (1) the sunset has been artificially enhanced by pollution and (2) most observers of the spectacle “don’t know . . . what it means.” After all, the passage in question clearly insists on the sense of awe irrespective of these factors.
9. See, for example, Lentricchia, “*Libra*”; Carmichael; and Cain.
10. In his lecture “The Transcendentalist,” Emerson asserted, “Although . . . there is no pure transcendentalist, yet the tendency to respect the intuitions, and to give them, at least in our creed, all authority over our experience, has deeply colored the conversation and poetry of the present day” (207).
11. Jon Klancher notes that it was M.H. Abrams who tagged Romanticism as a “politics of vision.” However, he argues that insofar as Romanticism is an uncircumscribable, historically variable category, one whose construction alters in response to “institutional crises and consolidations,” its “politics of vision” can be, and has been, read as not only radical but also conservative (77–88).
12. It is often argued that social history gets repressed in Wordsworth’s “extravagant lyricizing of the recovered self” and in his “sense sublime” (Klancher 80).

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### Christian Moraru (essay date Spring 1997)

SOURCE: "Consuming Narratives: Don DeLillo and the 'Lethal' Reading," in *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, Vol. 27, No. 2, Spring, 1997, pp. 190–206.

[In the following essay, Moraru explores the ways DeLillo's novels thematize the contemporary production and reception of narrative art, focusing on readers's "negative" or "distorted" responses to the texts.]

He didn't really think he would have ended among the dead, injured or missing. He was already injured and missing. As for death, he no longer thought he would see it come from the muzzle of a gun or any other instrument designed to be lethal . . . Shot by someone. Not a thief or deer hunter or highway sniper but some dedicated reader.

(DeLillo, *Mao II* 196)

This excerpt from DeLillo's 1991 novel sets forth a poignant critique of the social response to narratives in an age that has integrated "aesthetic production" into "commodity production" (Jameson 4). Along with a whole series of contemporary writers from, say, Paul Auster to Mark

Leyner, DeLillo trades upon the predicament of narrative representation, showing how cultural objects in general and stories in particular are fetishized in the public arena. The “fate of narrative” in our time, DeLillo suggests, reflects the “clumsy transposition of art into the sphere of consumption” (Horkheimer and Adorno 135), a displacement bound to give rise to a “system of non-culture” (128). However, it is not quite the “debasement” of “high culture” in the hands of “the culture industry” that DeLillo deplores; the entire culture as a collective apparatus of narrative misreading is here pinned down.

At the same time, even though his work does not necessarily advocate resistance to *popular* culture, it nonetheless unveils an uncanny resistance to *popularity*. For DeLillo fame ranks among “mass delusion” phenomena, to recall Horkheimer and Adorno again. Insofar as it takes some kind of social performance, popularity is backfiring and treacherous, and creators should do their best to ward it off. For not only has the role of Baudelaire’s “hypocritical” reader grown throughout modernity; the consumer of stories, DeLillo suggests, has become somewhat burdensome and menacing. S/he no longer is the honest co-author *Rezeptionsästhetik* took for granted. The audience, the media, and the publishing industry now make up a whole machinery of voracious consumption, an entire demonology of domestication, control, and alienation. Ironically enough, it is while striving to preclude this alienation that the author alienates, isolates himself or herself. More ironically perhaps, this resistance to popularity, which DeLillo himself has for a while practiced (Lentricchia, “*Libra* as Postmodern Critique”; DeLillo, “An Outsider”), the refusal to give interviews, appear on late shows, make speeches, and even publish, enhances the legend of the author, foregrounding the capacity of cultural systems to contain and profitably “recycle” artistic dissent.

This essay delves into DeLillo’s imaginary of consumption, paying special attention to how his work thematizes the contemporary production as well as treatment of narratives. Following a closer look at *Mao II*’s model of fending off co-optation, I will specifically focus on instances of readerly reactions that characteristically garble, misuse and “abuse” stories. In doing so, these misreadings mount a “lethal” menace to cultural texts and their authors alike, eroding our inherited notions of textuality and authorship. Importantly, reading will here stand for a whole paradigm of cultural metabolism as nontextual narratives can be “read,” too. Whether as a metaphor of domination through “plotting” and “perusing” of private lives (especially in *Libra* and *Running Dog*) or a paradoxical symbol of aesthetic insensitivity, reading stands out as a master motif in DeLillo. Again, it is the “wrong,” “distorting,” even “malefic” reading that I shall primarily deal with.

As my article’s epigraph reveals, *Mao II* bestows a particular emphasis on such a “negative” response. Novelist Bill Gray’s predicament is illuminating in this respect. A main character in *Mao II*, he vanished from society after publishing two acclaimed books. New editions of

these volumes, however, as well as his reclusiveness itself have meanwhile enlarged Gray’s mythic aura. There have also been rumors about his third book, whose publication he purposefully postpones by endless revisions. Now, for Gray revision is not a Flaubertian, ever incomplete and perpetually recommenced “smoothing” of the “style.” As Charlie, Gray’s publisher, suspects, Gray keeps “revising” and “rewriting” to defer publishing, that is, circulation and assimilation. Naive yet not pacific readers (he received a finger in the mail from one of them!), greedy publishing houses and inquisitive media assail his privacy, conspiring to turn him into a marketable icon.<sup>1</sup> It is true, Gray managed to “contain” the most diehard reader’s endeavors to bring him into the open, “absorbing” Scott into his own recluse existence (Scott became Gray’s “assistant”); he cannot withstand, however, his publisher’s efforts to coax him into “reappearing.”

Gray’s “comeback” brings together key themes in DeLillo: the glamour of media iconography and the authorial “appearance” (“publication”) it enforces, the ritual of reading, terror, and death, which is characteristically linked up with an intriguing notion of plot. Charlie tries to “upgrade” the novelist’s myth by convincing him to read on TV French poems by Jean-Claude, a Swiss writer held as a hostage in Beirut. As we eventually come to understand, Gray is ultimately supposed to take Jean-Claude’s place, which event should prepare the “market” for his third book. To secure Gray’s involvement in this scenario and thereby to entangle him in what will turn out to be, by implication, the plot of the novelist’s own death, Charlie suggests that Brita, a famous photographer, take the author’s picture. Gray gives in at last, but for a different reason:

Bill had his picture taken not because he wanted to come out of hiding but because he wanted to hide more deeply, he wanted to revise the terms of his seclusion, he needed the crisis of exposure to give him a powerful reason to intensify his concealment. Years ago there were stories that Bill was dead, Bill was in Manitoba, Bill was living under another name, Bill would never write another word. These were the world’s oldest stories and they were not about Bill so much as people’s need to make mysteries and legends. Now Bill was devising his own cycle of death and resurgence. . . . Bill’s picture was a death notice. His image hadn’t become public yet and he was already gone. This was the crucial turn he needed in order to disappear completely. . . . The picture would be a means of transformation. It would show him how he looked to the world and give him a fixed point from which to depart. Pictures with our likeness make us choose. We travel into or away from our photographs.

(*Mao II* 140–41)

Gray’s assistant realizes that the “master” employs the photographs “as a kind of simulated death” (140). “Mao,” Scott reminds us, “used photographs to announce his return and demonstrate his vitality, to reinspire revolution” (141). Gray, as a “second Mao,” takes up the Chinese leader’s ploy, yet to effect the contrary: a complete “self-erasure.” If his legend has been paradoxically reinforced by his



photo's absence from newspapers and catalogues, the hundreds of photographs Brita shoots might "hide" him completely, consecrate his disappearance. Gray hopes that absolute exposure, the paroxysm of visibility, might provide a perfect hideaway. An allegory of his innermost self, the still unpublished story is thus ideally camouflaged in and through its author's photographic disclosure. As Scott owns, "the book disappears into the image of the writer" (*Mao II* 71), indefinitely putting off its consumption—its death in alien hands.

Another way of hinting at the private subject's "swallowing" by his or her picture in *Mao II* is the insistent focus on photographed crowds. They set off the "body common" (77), whose "millennial hysteria" foregrounds the twilight of the private ego, now "immunized against the language of the self" (8). The mass images featured in tabloids or on live TV speak to a tragic immolation of the individual. From the dust jacket, which displays twenty-four "photopaintings" from Andy Warhol's *Mao* series, to the large images of Chinese and Iranian crowds reproduced or described throughout the book, DeLillo's novel obsessively zeroes in on the masses. Hecatombs of privacy, these cannot offer Gray a solution. Easily manipulable by official iconography (see Mao's example), addicted to images and indiscriminate consumption, crowds are in actuality exactly what the writer flees. On the other hand, as the novelist himself anticipates, the attempted retreat through photographic self-give-away proves a sheer illusion. Allowing his portrait to be taken, Gray steps in the tragic world of plot, which means plotting his own death. Struggling to avoid beheading on the scaffold of the "market," he takes a fatal, downward—"deathward" (as *White Noise* puts it)—path, of which he is not unaware:

Something about the occasion [Gray tells Brita] makes me think I'm at my own wake. Sitting for a picture is morbid business. A portrait doesn't begin to mean anything until the subject is dead. This is the whole point. . . . The deeper I pass into death, the more powerful my picture becomes. Isn't this why picture-taking is so ceremonial? It's like a wake. And I'm the actor made up for the laying-out. . . . It struck me just last night these pictures are the announcement of my dying.

(*Mao II* 42–43)

Gray's analytic "development" of Brita's snapshots reaches even deeper. It brings out the destructive meaning of "photographic execution," which critics like Roland Barthes (6, *passim*) and Susan Sontag (64, *passim*) have also pointed up. "Everything around us," he contends, "tends to channel our lives toward some final reality in print or on film" (*Mao II* 43). We count only as virtual narratives, as "materials" for stories ("I've become someone's material.<sup>2</sup> Yours, Brita," Gray avows). We no longer stand as subjects, but solely "subject matter" awaiting its "heightened version": the cover story millions of readers will devour. In DeLillo's Baudrillardian universe indeed "nothing happens until it's consumed. . . . Nature has given away to aura. A man cuts himself shaving and someone is

signed up to write the biography of the cut. All the material in every life is channeled into the glow" (44). The spectacular narrative "double" gains the upper hand over the "original" beings or facts. Actually, in striking accord with the self-referential logic of the media so cogently unearthed by critics from McLuhan to Baudrillard, there are no facts in this representational inferno, but merely *events*. The hostage's release in Beirut "is tied to the public announcement of his freedom. You can't have the first without the second" (129). "Vampirized" and literally "consumed" by its "double," the epic account, life has been converted into, "ingested" and abolished by, "the consumer event" (43). The latter symbolically feeds on the flesh of its subject while apparently "promoting" it by concocting and spreading its "story."

Fictive or less so, stories are ominous inasmuch as they expose their subject (the authorial self in *Mao II*) to a *consuming*, "viral" publicity. Failing to hide in the negative of his portraits, as it were, Gray gets "developed," exposed, woven into a "plot." As it "develops" itself, this plot brings the writer closer to death and thereby confirms the gloomy logic on which a book like *Libra* particularly dwells. Photographic and narrative exposure in the media triggers off a lethal "unveiling" that "monstrous" reading will complete. DeLillo deals with the whole process in terms that strikingly recall Robert Escarpit's etymological speculations on the "act of publication" as "brutal exposure" and subsequent "willful violence" done to the author and his/her work (45–46). There is no wonder why, as a character of DeLillo's *Ratner's Star* has it, "the friction of an audience . . . drives writers crazy" (411). Fearing the "violence of reading," Gray ostensibly belongs to that "class of writers who don't want their books to be read," "express[ing]" in their works "the violence of [their] desire not to be read" (410). As Scott tells Brita, "for Bill, the only thing worse than writing is publishing. When the book comes out. When people buy it and read it. He feels totally and horribly exposed. They are taking the book home and turning pages. They are reading the actual words" (*Mao II* 53). Much like E.L. Doctorow's first-person narrator of *The Book of Daniel*, Gray dreads "the monstrous reader who goes on from one word to the next" (Doctorow 246).

It is essentially the "eventful story" that builds up the expectations of the "monstrous reader." Now, only very few writers can withstand this "sensationalist" narrative. As George, another intermediary between Gray and the terrorists, claims, "Beckett is the last writer to shape the way we think and see. After him, the major work involves midair explosions and crumbled buildings. This is the new tragic narrative" (*Mao II* 157). Remarkably, Beckett here designates the creator opposing cultural co-optation. After him, "the artist is absorbed, the madman in the street is absorbed and processed and incorporated" by the coins got in the street or by his or her being "put in a TV commercial" (157). Only the terrorist nowadays still remains "outside," for "the culture hasn't figured out how to assimilate him." And, surprisingly or not, the novelist is the

only one who sees that terrorism, the rhetoric of absolute “eventfulness,” speaks “precisely the language of being noticed, the only language the West understands” (157).

This strategy of holding back sociocultural incorporation lies, in various forms, at the core of DeLillo’s entire work. One can distinguish it in earlier novels such as *Great Jones Street*, *End Zone*, *Ratner’s Star* and *Running Dog*, or in later, more discussed texts like *White Noise* and *Libra*. In *Great Jones Street*, for instance, the artistic market becomes a major theme even more explicitly. It literally haunts the writers’ imagination, casting a spell on their lives. In this respect, Fenig, a “two-time Laszlo Pitakoff Murder Mystery Award nominee”—whose ironic name points to financial interest—is an emblematic character. Introducing himself to Wunderlick, he unfolds a whole market mythology:

I’m in my middle years but I’m going stronger than ever. I’ve been anthologized in hard cover, paperback and goddamn vellum. I know the writer’s market like few people know it. The market is a strange thing, almost a living organism. It changes, it palpates, it grows, it excretes, it sucks things and then spews them up. It’s a living wheel that turns and crackles. The market accepts and rejects. It loves and kills. . . . The market’s out there spinning like a big wheel, full of lights and colors and aromas. It’s not waiting for me. It doesn’t care about me. It ingests human arms and legs and it excretes vulture pus.

(27)

Figures of cultural consumption as immolation and ingestion of the author abound in DeLillo. Here, the corporeal metaphors of predation and digestion represent the market as a bestial body whose metabolism, as *Ratner’s Star*’s obsession with feces also suggests, sets forward an entire scatological economy (324, *passim*). Fenig suspects that he has lately ignored what Charlie calls in *Mao II* the “launching power of our mass-market capabilities” (127). In fact, Fenig considers himself a victim of the predatory “big wheel.” Failing to merchandise his new “brand of porno kid fiction” despite its “Aristotelian substratum” and the “lowest instincts” the genre caters to (*Great Jones Street* 49–50), Fenig switches to “fantastic terminal fiction” (222). Significantly, at this point he comes to fathom the importance of his “privacy” (222) as well as his having been “used” by the “market,”<sup>3</sup> reduced in his humanity and pushed toward “fascism.” “I failed at pornography,” he explains, “because it put me in a position where I the writer was being manipulated by what I wrote. This is the essence of living in P[orn]-ville,” he goes on. “It makes people easy to manipulate. . . . I the writer was probably more aware of this than whoever the potential reader might be because I could feel the changes in me, the hardening of mechanisms, the subservience to lust-making and lust-awakening. . . . Every pornographic work brings us closer to fascism. It reduces the human element. It encourages antlike response” (223–24).

Social feedback preoccupies rock-star Bucky Wunderlick, too. Characteristically, he struggles to escape the “antlike” reaction of “the crowd’s passion and wrath,” the “immense

. . . pressure of their response . . . blasting in with the force of a natural disaster” (14–15). Similarly to Gray, he no longer agrees to “sell” (perform, record, etc.), to give interviews or make the public appearances that would unavoidably enlarge his charisma. Remarkably, his manager does not ask him to play but solely to “appear” (198), always a symbolic ritual in DeLillo. His “silence strike” is another phenomenon of artistic rebellion that corporate giants such as Transparanoia or Happy Valley Farm Commune eventually manage to contain. Like the publishing house in *Mao II*, they want him just to show up, be merely seen in public and cynically respond to—or rather correspond with—the “need to be illiterate in the land of the self-erasing word” (139).

Literacy in media-saturated, market-oriented systems exerts a real fascination on DeLillo. The “digital” temple of contemporary society (Ruthrof 195–96; O’Donnell), the supermarket, brings to the fore in *White Noise* a new, “postcultural” *docta ignorantia*, which the author tackles with devastating irony. The hypnosis of the “consumerized space” (Wilson) and the ruthless media assault go hand in hand with the regression toward a new form of “brilliant” ignorance. “[T]here are full professors in this place who read nothing but cereal boxes” (*White Noise* 10), Murray Jay Siskind tells Gladney, the chairman of the “Hitler studies” department at the midwestern College-on-the-Hill. To be sure, not all consumers ought to be devout readers. Nonetheless, *White Noise* insists precisely on reading as consumption, on readers increasingly “created” and reacting as consumers, perusing more and more solely what they literally consume for survival or leisure. The fabulous supermarket articulates the emblematic narrative of post-modernity, maps out the symbolic site wherein consumption-based existence and reading overlap. More specifically, it is the place where the former drastically alters the latter. The huge store designates the *readable locus* of our time, the seemingly “easy-to-read” (“reader-friendly”) “catalogue”-space in which perusal is part of the mechanics of shopping and readers nonsensically “decipher” (shop for) elusive meanings. As Siskind contends, in the supermarket

Everything is concealed in symbolism, hidden by veils of mystery and layers of cultural material. But it is psychic data, absolutely. . . . All the letters and numbers are here, all the colors of the spectrum, all the voices and sounds, all the code words and ceremonial phrases. It is just a question of deciphering, rearranging, peeling off the layers of unspeakability. Not that we want to, not that any useful purpose would be served.

(37–38)

Reading here oddly hinges on significantly “non-spiritual” activities, “Eating and Drinking,” the “Basic Parameters” (171). Knowledge, expertise, and literacy have lost their original sense and object, and refocus on the superficial (or, as we shall see, “*surficial*”) world of consumption. Genres, practices, and domains traditionally treated as marginal in the economy of scholarly discourse and

academic interest now supply the core of sybi. What is more, teaching in a media-informed world has become teaching of the media. The means have swallowed up the initial goals and now constitute their own *telos*, as “coupon analysis” (*Ratner’s Star* 344) or “car crushing,” “Elvis,” and “Hitler studies” programs at the College-on-the Hill prove. People peruse food wraps and religiously watch food commercials between terrifying reports featuring natural catastrophes and massacres. In fact, a new, “post-modern” philology is about to arise from the relentless studying of “package narratives.” *White Noise* is perhaps DeLillo’s most devastating account of literacy’s predicament in a marketplace-dominated “postliterate” age (Jameson 17). As critic John Frow writes, “the supermarket is the privileged place for a phenomenology of surfaces” (427), which shapes into a glowing, alienating “labyrinth” (Pireddu 140). Here, the consumer faces his or her own consumption, a paradoxical disappearance not beneath surfaces but on them, which eliminates the difference between the consumer and the consumed. Symbolically, the mall and the media cannot be sorted out. “Full of psychic data” (*White Noise* 37), the former demarcates the very site of the ultimate “event”: consumers’ metamorphosis into media signifiers, their insertion in the commercial narrative as new, self-aware “products,” “exposed” and “featured” on the same glittering surfaces. As Gladney observes, there is an odd transfer of objectifying, immobile narcissism from the displayed goods—which looked “self-conscious,” “carefully observed, like four-color fruit in a guide to photography” (170)—to consumers. “My family,”<sup>4</sup> he notices, “gloried in the event. . . . I kept seeing myself unexpectedly in some reflecting surface. . . . Brightness settled around me. . . . Our images appeared on mirrored columns, in glassware and chrome, on TV monitors in security rooms” (84).

This image-becoming of the subject molds the whole life of academic exiles in the college town Blacksmith. It “reveal[s] precisely the epistemological crisis that affects contemporary reality” (Pireddu 129) once the opposition between commodities and customers, media objects and media watchers no longer holds. Yet simply because these distinctions have been blurred, the crisis is not merely epistemological, but also ontological. It is the copy that legitimates, if not engenders, reality. Again, much like in Baudrillard’s analysis of simulacra, the duplicate pre-dates—in all senses—its model, enjoys a socially higher significance. Babette, Gladney’s wife, for example, becomes suddenly far more interesting for her family when they see her on TV, when her body turns into an image, “second-order information” (King 72). Unlike Gray in *Mao II*, Babette must make a “detour” through the media in order to become “visible,” for her relatives and friends react to information “rather than to entities” (LeClair 209). In general, people are spellbound by the rhetoric of their appearance—not a new theme in DeLillo, as we know—because they live in a culture of spectacular narratives. Gladney, e. g., “automatically” puts his dark glasses on when entering the campus (*White Noise* 211). Similarly to Siskind working on “Elvis” in his own cultural studies

project, he treats Hitler like a star. Gladney’s “postmodern attitude toward history as a kind of museum” or “supermarket of human possibilities, where people are free to shop for their values and identities” (Cantor 41), takes Hitler as a paragon of *appearance*. In his courses, Gladney deals with the Führer as a celebrity (Conroy 107–8), drawing on superficial, anecdotal details of his biography. Accordingly, teaching—also teaching grounded in specific (mis)readings—represents another instance of aborted cultural response. Intriguingly enough, Babette herself teaches modes of “appearing.” Her odd course in “posture” illustrates a peculiar kind of “inscribing practice” (Hayles 156 ff). Most remarkably, it is the media that control this practice: people learn how to “appear,” to embody different postures, take on various positions and, by implication, sociocultural “positionalities” from TV, the archimodel of appearance. One can therefore claim that they have turned into “terminal identities” of sorts, to evoke Bukatman’s ambiguous title, that their bodies are gravely affected by, if not utterly turned into effects of, television.<sup>5</sup>

Generally speaking, teaching, reading, watching, and intellectual exchange are carried out within the circular universe of superficiality dominated by the autotelic logic of media narratives. Babette ritually reads out porno literature to her husband—an echo of *Running Dog*—and tabloid stories to her evening class of blind people. There is hardly any “analysis” or critical filtering involved in this act. According to Ben Agger, such a “passive,” “moronized” reading signals the “degradation of signification” (6–8) in “fast capitalism.” Symptomatically, “books become things provoking their thoughtless readings as things become books” (5). Thus one witnesses an all-pervasive “narrativization” of the surrounding world, which individuals make into a legible story, “People read,” Agger argues, “different things—television, popular magazines, money” (75–76). Reading and readable objects have changed indeed. Babette cannot help but peruse “the wrong things” (76), and even if she may still read “actual” narratives, she does it the “wrong way.” Overall, though, she prefers to pore over advertisements for “diet sunglasses,” cover stories strangely entitled “Life After Death Guaranteed with Bonus Coupons” or accounts of the “country’s leading psychics and their predictions for the coming year.” These are the new heroic epics, as they fit the pattern of the “eventful” story: UFOs invading Disney World, “dead living legend John Wayne . . . telepathically” helping President Reagan “frame U.S. foreign policy,” and superkillers surrendering “on live TV” (*White Noise* 146). Such materials are stories run by the media, but also, more or less, stories on the media and entertainment industry, and thereby part of the same self-referential strategy of establishing communication instruments as information. Furthermore, as Mark Conroy insists, tabloid stories’ omnipresence may indicate “the current fate of several traditional forms of cultural transmission” (97). “Master narratives,” whether “discursive” or “scriptive,” no longer provide the only “canonical” readings. The “iconographic” (107), in its multifarious forms, usually accompanies narrative information, catches the reader’s at-



tention, more often than not replacing reading with a sort of “blind” gaze lingering on surfaces, shapes, and colors.

There are at least two “catastrophic” results of these readings, DeLillo seems to suggest. First, they neglect “real,” aesthetically valid narratives, replacing them with “trashy” or simply trivial materials. Second, reading as a traditionally conceived and completed process collapses, is reduced to mere repetition/recital of texts. Moreover, it carries negative overtones, being sensed as an act of manipulation, political control, and intrusion. In this view, it is noteworthy, e.g., that Gladney’s “first and fourth” wife, while working “part-time [!] as a spy,” also reviews “fiction for the CIA, mainly long serious novels with coded structures” (*White Noise* 213). For one thing, she performs a very “special” kind of reading. This does not differ considerably, though, from what Selvy, a secret agent in *Running Dog*, does. He is a “reader,” too (*Runnine Dog*, 54)—he “reads” (that is, surveils) Senator Percival (28): when Selvy gets a new, “temporary assignment,” he also receives copious “reading matter” (156). CIA “readers” in *Running Dog* and *Libra* can even use Kafkian-looking “reading machines,” which scan people’s most intimate stories, translate their private meanings into “readable” graphics.

DeLillo’s pungent critique of “late capitalist” reading practices ultimately points to a, say, “postmodern” crisis of the classic notion of literacy. Nonetheless, while tackling this crisis, DeLillo resists gesturing nostalgically toward some Romantic myth or cult of authorship. Nor is he deploring the post-World War II crumbling away of modernism’s “Great Divide,” which, according to critics like Andreas Huyssen, separated high art and mass culture. He is rather taking aim at an expanding mode of consumption that loses sight of the “differential” nature of the consumed objects. His work is carrying out a critique of contemporary reading habits and literacy, a critique emphasizing the importance of *local*, non-homogenizing reading practices which are likely to value, enhance, indeed incorporate the defining differences between various types of texts read. In other words, DeLillo seems to be working out, from within postmodernism itself, a critical analysis of styles and scenarios of cultural absorption that appear to undercut postmodernism’s largely recognized celebration of “regional” responses and differentiated practices of representation, production, and reception. Again, it is the social discount of such a contextual, nuanced treatment of narratives, to wit, postmodernism’s failure to engender modes of consumption in tune with its own modes of production, that has brought about this crisis.

This cultural impasse may be more serious than we think. Most of DeLillo’s readers are “intelligent and literate” but somewhat “deprived of the deeper codes and messages that mark [our] species as unique.” Even when they “turn against the medium” (*White Noise* 50), fighting off the “mystical” experience of TV-watching, the “lethal” exposure and the “contamination” of the mind this experi-

ence induces persist. In this view, there is no substantial difference between TV “events” and the “toxic airborne event,” between the media and Blacksmith’s environmental catastrophe, finally, between any broadcasted narrative and a nuclear accident. All are devices of the same “terminal” rhetoric of delusive surfaces, of the same “fake” consumption that actually leads to reality’s consumption by simulation, its voracious and usurping double.

The whole apparatus of “unnatural,” mechanical reading, of false appropriation of narratives is even more meticulously decomposed in *Libra*. To be sure, while it is always highly relevant what and how DeLillo’s people read, Lee H. Oswald’s readings deserve particular scrutiny. They exemplify that type of narrative misreading which highlights and aggravates the character’s fallacious perception and self-perception. One could argue that his readings carry the responsibility for his acts, that Oswald has *misread himself* into the “lone gunman” story. He has furnished the ideal materials for “his own fabrication in the name of a given desired effect” (Michael 151) pursued by the real plotters. Win Everett actually “understands that there is no difference between the scripted Oswald and the ‘real thing’” (Mott 139), or, in Frank Lentricchia’s words, between the “assassin as writer” (“*Libra* as Postmodern Critique” 447) and the assassin *written* by Everett. Win “reads” and uses in his turn Oswald’s misreadings, which reveal themselves as self-misreadings since the texts Oswald “peruses” give him a false image of himself. “My boy Lee loves to read,” Lee’s mother acknowledges (*Libra* 107). “Reading Marx as a teenager,” as Lentricchia maintains, “altered [Oswald’s] room, charged it with meaning, propelled him into a history shaped by imagination” (“*Libra* as Postmodern Critique” 447). Marx and Engels, Trotsky, George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, H. G. Wells, or military manuals have devastating effects. It is not that “revolutionary,” “anarchistic” or “utopian” literature “victimizes” him by its content, but that Oswald simply reads “wrong,” literally, “following the text with his index finger, word by word by word” (*Libra* 49). His comprehension is rudimentary and procrustean. He unconsciously indulges in “affective” or “factual” fallacies, one could say, while “struggling” to grasp the opaque material—and failing:

The books were struggles. He had to fight to make some elementary sense of what he read. But the books had come out of struggle. They had been struggles to write, struggles to live. It seemed fitting to Lee that the texts were often masses of dense theory, unyielding. The tougher the books, the more firmly he fixed a distance between himself and others.

He found enough that he could understand. He could see the capitalists, he could see the masses. They were right here, all around him, every day.

(34–35)

“Forbidden,” “hard to read” books alert Lee to “the drabness of his surroundings, his own shabby clothes were explained and transformed by these books. He saw himself

as part of something vast and sweeping" (41), performing "night missions that required intelligence and stealth" (37). This is another instance of narcissistic perception, when the reader unwittingly bestows upon himself a new, heroic identity. Oswald gradually becomes his own narrative project, "plots" himself, as it were, and therefore stages his own death. Like *Running Dog's* "project" or *White Noise's* and *Mao II's* obsession with "deathward" plots (*White Noise* 26, 199; *Mao II* 200), Oswald's "over-readings" lay the premises for the actual plotters' "extending the fiction into the world" (*Libra* 50). Most notably, these readings supply Win Everett with essential epic material, with the "pocket litter" (50) necessary to credibly "construct" (Carmichel) Lee as a "lone assassin." *The Communist Manifesto* and similar pieces get woven into the plotters' strategy of narrative "make-believe" (term used as such by Win); Oswald is just another "character in the plot" (*Libra* 78), the narcissistic reader turned, by his false readings and his cunning "readers" alike, into a character of a (literally) homicidal story. Thus Oswald has unwittingly helped his "readers" to "write" him, to *script* and in-scribe him and his readings in a deadly intertextual scenario (a textual *crypt*), in a "realistic-looking thing" (119).

The simulated realism of writing-as-plotting rules out any real explanation, any accurate account of what happened in Dallas on November 22, 1963. Nicholas Branch, "a retired senior analyst of the Central Intelligence Agency, hired on contract to write the secret history of the assassination of President Kennedy" (15), has to deal exactly with this simulative writing if he wants to "rewrite" and eventually dislodge the "real story." Branch is another writer-in-the-text, a fictive narrator who duplicates "en abyme" the figure of the author. Likewise, the writing of his story takes an enormous amount of reading. Before narrating his own version of the Dallas "event," Branch has to go through the "historical record," to recall the "author's note" on *Libra's* last page. He is literally flooded with information—both real and fabricated—on the assassination, provided by the Agency to help him put together a "history [that maybe] no one will read" (60). This (hi)story, Branch thinks, "is the megaton novel James Joyce would have written if he'd moved to Iowa City and lived to be a hundred," the Joycean Book of America . . . the novel in which nothing is left out" (181–82). It follows that the indefinite "branching off" of Branch's story, its failure to "furnish factual answers" (see again the mentioned "author's note"), is also already "programmed" through his readings in another way: these supply him with "entropic" information whose excess obliterates the real data that may have yielded a coherent "story." The abundance of narratives, records, reports, and testimonies clearly blocks out the "facts." The "revelatory" tale overflows and grows more and more complicated, winding up in the swamp of language:

Everything is here. Baptismal records, report cards, postcards, divorce petitions, canceled checks, daily timesheets, tax returns, property lists, postoperative x-rays, photos of knotted string, thousands of pages of

testimony, of voices droning in hearing rooms in old courthouse buildings, an incredible haul of human utterance. It lies so flat on the page, hangs so still in the lazy air, lost to syntax and other arrangement, that it resembles a kind of mind-spatter, a poetry of lives muddled and dripping in language.

(181)

As we can notice, the endless, sterile reading of unextinguished, "censored" or dubious sources reinforces the same "superficial" phenomenology at play in *White Noise* and other works by DeLillo. Despite or, better put, because of the amount of readings, Branch gets stuck on the surface of things, entangled in the huge narrative archive. Significantly, the novel does not present him in the act of story-writing or story-telling, but rather as a custodian of available files, photographs, and books, a "librarian" lost in *Libra's* Borgesian library. An extreme case in DeLillo's inquiry into narrative consumption, Branch is just another consumer of supplied texts, a virtual author condemned to remain a reader. The epic version he is assigned is bound to merely further the extant "Dallas narrative," to cast him in a safely fictitious part of the ever-expanding text. We may expect Branch to "disappear," to be "digested" by his own project while trying to digest himself the information he is provided with and nourishing the illusion that he will ever tell his own story. Yet, due to his "programmed" failure as a reader, he stands no chance to become a true author. DeLillo's drama of narrative authorship and reception has come full circle.

#### Notes

1. As Fredric Jameson points out, in postmodern culture the commodification of objects and the commodification of human subjects are similar. The latter "are themselves commodified and transformed into their own images" (11).
2. In his essay on "the economics of publishing," Dan Lacy talks about the writer's own transformation into a "material" of the "communication industries" (408). See Newman for a more recent critique of "the preemption by the media of the writer as *celebrity*" (616). For a full account of the media's role in DeLillo, see Keesey.
3. See Osteen (170) for the ethics of "mastering commerce" in *Great Jones Street*.
4. Robert E. Lane sees shopping as "an intrinsically rewarding family experience" (539 ff). Unlike Lane, DeLillo hints at the lack of "reward" such a glorious "family event" entails. Also see Ferraro's essay, "Whole Families Shopping at Night," for DeLillo's view of "the contemporary American family" (15).
5. See Duvall for a full-fledged analysis of television in *White Noise*.

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#### Lou F. Caton (essay date September 1997)

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[In the following essay, Caton posits that DeLillo's characterization of Jack Gladney in *White Noise* epitomizes Romantic sensibilities despite the postmodern tenor of the novel's themes.]

A critical exploration of romanticism in Don DeLillo's eighth novel *White Noise* may initially seem misguided or odd.<sup>1</sup> And yet, some of the values and topics commonly



associated with popular notions of romanticism, like sympathy, unity, authenticity, and an interest in the “unknown,” do emerge in this supposedly postmodern novel. They emerge not from overarching themes but rather from the common thoughts and desires associated with the novel’s viewpoint character, Jack Gladney. By judging such characterization as romantic, that is, supportive of these broad transhistorical values, I find a deeply qualified postmodernism within *White Noise*.

Granted, in spite of these observations, a first response to DeLillo’s fiction is probably not romantic; after all, his novels frequently show contemporary society struggling with a nostalgic palimpsest of old-fashion values that have been layered over by the textual, semiotic materialism of marketing, commodification, and computer codes. Cited as quintessentially postmodern, DeLillo reportedly writes a novel of simulacra with an endless regress of mediation. John Frow portrays DeLillo’s curiosity here about simulation and iteration as “a world of primary representations which neither precede nor follow the real but are themselves real. . . .”<sup>2</sup> Bruce Bawer has gone so far as to claim that DeLillo merely presents “one discouraging battery after another of pointless, pretentious rhetoric. [DeLillo] does not develop ideas so much as juggle jargon.”<sup>3</sup> Paul Cantor directly calls sections of *White Noise* “self-reflexive” and “mediated;” a bit later, he claims *White Noise* transforms the “autonomous self” into the “inauthentic self.”<sup>4</sup>

Clearly such declarations portray DeLillo as uninterested in old-fashion romantic notions like a mysterious unknown or authenticity and sympathy.<sup>5</sup> However, this sentiment centers itself on DeLillo’s cultural critiques, his novel’s “messages,” while disregarding the possibility of any romantic human nature in his characters. For instance, John Kucich quickly looks past the psychology of DeLillo’s male characters by stating only that they “persist” in the outdated belief that “oppositional stances can be differentiated and justified.”<sup>6</sup> Kucich, in other words, sees DeLillo’s characters naively embracing the tired belief that cultural difference can be adjudicated, that a truth-system of correspondences can still order the arbitrary nature of reality. Such views by these characters must be devalued, according to Kucich, because DeLillo’s larger postmodern message denies the possibility of truth statements; the supposed central idea of *White Noise* is that a romantic, nostalgic character like Jack Gladney is only deceiving himself. The novel forecloses on a character’s romantic desires as it erects a technological society where metaphysical truth is replaced by the materialistic codes of media and capitalism. The hard truth for DeLillo, Kucich and others seem to say, is that Gladney’s romantic belief in a unified, shared definition of cultural truth no longer exists.<sup>7</sup>

What such an argument misses, though, is that DeLillo’s romantic characterizations turn what might otherwise be thought of as an already clearly developed ideological position into a complex problem. Kucich is certainly right

in stating that Gladney does believe in the unfashionable notion of an orderly universe; however, such a belief operates in healthy opposition to the postmodern anxiety within *White Noise*. Gladney’s romantic assumptions regarding family unity and sympathy must be analyzed on their own merits; such views are more than mere foils for the novel’s worries about mediation and representation.

In effect, I am contesting Frank Lentricchia’s observation that DeLillo is a political writer who “stands in harsh judgment against American fiction of the last couple of decades, that soft humanist underbelly of American literature. . . .”<sup>8</sup> This “humanist” tradition that DeLillo supposedly critiques is, among other things, a tradition that invokes transhistorical notions of consciousness (thus, romantic as well as humanist notions are being maligned here). According to Lentricchia, DeLillo’s mind is made up; he advocates a contemporary political position which dismantles the mystified rhetoric of universals and timeless values about human nature:

But the deep action of this kind of fiction [the non-DeLillo, old-fashion, transhistorical kind] is culturally and historically rootless, an expression of the possibilities of “human nature,” here, now, forever, as ever. This is realism maybe in the old philosophical sense of the word, when they affirmed that only the universals are real.<sup>9</sup>

Lentricchia presents DeLillo as already convinced, the problem of the romantic (i.e. transhistorical beliefs) and the postmodern having already been resolved; DeLillo becomes a cultural worker writing within a skeptical, anti-nomian tradition that prevents “readers from gliding off into the comfortable sentiment that the real problems of the human race have always been about what they are today.”<sup>10</sup>

Lentricchia is wrong here; DeLillo’s novels *question* rather than *endorse* this historicist stance. The transhistorical perspective entangles the historical; their supposed separate spheres, I intend to demonstrate, rely on rather than compete against each other.<sup>11</sup> Jack Gladney the naive sentimentalist, foil of the postmodernist (who still insists on universals, human nature, and the mythology of a human nature), recognizes but mourns the emergence of a constructed political postmodern culture (which rejects any universal subjectivity and sees all knowledge as interested and ideological). In appreciation of this conflict, DeLillo maintains a romantic uncertainty throughout *White Noise*.

Each of the following three scenes presents evidence for this uncertain romanticism composing the character of Jack Gladney. On the one hand, he is a traditionally unified character: a romantic who questions society but all along deeply values his personal relations and family. He is a communal person who desires to tell a simple story about a man trying to understand the eternal human questions of life. His is, as DeLillo describes him, “a reasonable and inquiring voice—the voice of a man who seeks genuinely to understand some timeless human riddle” (194).

Colliding with that, however, is his other growing awareness: that the world is turning him into a post-industrial, computer generated individual, someone who is slowly gaining a “non-authentic self” which is socially constructed, essentially valueless, and enveloped by an unstable matrix of material goods. This becomes clear to him when the SIMUVAC attendant reminds Jack that he is only “the sum total of [his] data. No man escapes that” (141).

Jack Gladney, then, is both “timelessly” searching for unification and arbitrarily fragmented. This double-self, a self both materially *constructed* by a fragmented, commercial community and one authentically trying to *construct* a unified community, reflects the movement of the introductory scene. The novel’s first paragraph uses the possessions of a college student to enact this clash of values about identity formation.

DeLillo’s vision of cars as a stream of machines slowly weaving through a pastoral landscape implies that these students are products of an assembly-line culture. The opening procession of station wagons doubles as a mechanical pilgrimage or industrial wagon train (3). Similar to a metallic snake sliding and easing itself into the center of the university, the focus here is on the mechanical residue from the industrial age. Indeed, even the students appear to be machine-like as they “spring” out of their vehicles. Moreover, these students and parents seem not to stand in opposition to their possessions but, instead, to be themselves erected by these very same objects. Accenting their hard opacity, DeLillo refuses to give these students emotional and personal details; instead they are defined by the things that surround them. A college student seems, in this scene at least, to be a constructed product, not a transcendent being: “The stereo sets, radios, personal computers; small refrigerators and table ranges; the cartons of phonograph records and cassettes; the hairdryers and styling irons. . .” (3).

And on and on. Eighteen lines of clothing, sporting equipment, electronics, grooming aids, and junk food, from nondescript “books” to specific “Kabooms” and “Mystic mints,” the student becomes another commodity built from commodities. Even the parents seem propped up by this commercial world. They have “conscientious suntans” and “well-made faces” (3).

However, these families do not simply add up to the products of an empty consumerism. DeLillo complicates the social constructivism of this scene with romantic, community matters; he sees the current obsession with materialism as ironically satisfying a deeper, spiritual urge. DeLillo completes the scene by brashly joining this consumerism with a unity provided by spiritual and communal rhetoric: “The conscientious suntans. The well-made faces and wry looks. They feel a sense of renewal, of communal recognition . . . they are a collection of the likeminded and the spiritually akin, a people, a nation” (3–4).

DeLillo here folds into the scene a dimension of spiritual identity. Our transcendent sense of who we are, the romantic desire to experience ourselves as part of a greater whole, strives for identity within the dynamics of capitalism. Even though the earlier emphasis on machinery would appear to devalue spiritual issues, DeLillo’s combined use of religious and communal terms at the end of the scene reinstates these more metaphysical concerns. Instead of reading this mixture of social construction and spirituality as an ironic comment on the inferior position of religion in a postmodern world, one should interpret the scene as emphasizing the undying force of spiritual and communal urgings, whether fashionably inferior or not.

As things and students spill out, parents feel both renewed in a supersensible manner and materially affirmed; on the one hand, the virtuous and almost sacred gestalt of children and parents separating translates itself into the terms of material goods. Parents and students objectify this exalted moment. The parents are commodified by financial interests. DeLillo claims “something about them suggesting massive insurance coverage” (3). Their money and things blend with all the other station wagons until they “earn” a sense of spiritual collectivism. And yet, on the other hand, students and parents do not uniquely accept this elite position of “buying” a college education; they also experience it as a celebratory, communal moment. The gathering of the wagons becomes almost a religious ceremony: “more than formal liturgies or laws” (4). The upper-middle class has cashed in their material possessions for a taste of something which might have been denied them without the money to buy it: community and spirituality. The romantic desire for community may exist only ironically, only in this tainted capitalistic and privileged fashion; however, it still exists, resisting commodification and vying for its own legitimacy.

In the same manner of sensing spiritual desires among material possessions, DeLillo presents his viewpoint character, Jack Gladney, as being both essentially authentic and culturally constructed. Jack’s narrative role as the story-teller infuses his cultural observations with a personal authority that makes it impossible to separate society’s ills from Jack’s personality. That is, DeLillo recognizes the influence of a psychological, unified ego, but simply sends it to the edges of the narrative; in its place a constructed, commodified lead character stalks center stage.

Jack Gladney speaks of himself only at the end of this first scene. His voice, seemingly of a single consciousness, feels subordinate, inferior to the grand reporting of the materiality of common things which preceded it. Indeed, even the description of the town takes precedence over any desire to humanize the ego of the only interior voice of the novel. In fact, the town itself is de-personalized, divested of any particular character; this dreary city called Blacksmith is home to a narrating voice as flat and common as the city itself.

Nothing seems very remarkable in Blacksmith. What details DeLillo gives are the details of sameness, of any small, college town: “There are houses in town. . . .There

are Greek revival and Gothic churches. There is an insane asylum with an elongated portico, ornamented dormers and a steeply pitched roof. . . . There is an expressway. . . ." (4). Not only does the town seem boring and sleepy but the method of using "there is" and "there are" is equally gloomy and uninspired. And yet such arid prose belies a deeper issue.

DeLillo counters this deadness with a brief, almost hidden recognition of the possibility of a mysterious, spiritual unknown. As the expressway traffic speeds by, it develops into "a remote and steady murmur around our sleep, as of dead souls babbling at the edge of a dream" (4). Here the dead are mythically revived, muttering and rippling at the edge of consciousness. Their voices belong to past storytellers who have refused to be silenced. They represent an imaginary over-soul that resists this culture's particular ideology. The reference to souls and dreams babbling suggests an unknowable world of rivers and voices that refuses to be reified by the marketplace ethics of station wagons and stereos. The socially constructed world of commodification meets the myth of an universal consciousness that will not die.

This is the introductory conflict between matter and spirit embodied in the character of Jack Gladney. The immediate introduction of this viewpoint character is not metaphysical, philosophical, or even psychological but occupational: he is the chairman of Hitler studies. DeLillo offers a practical, materialistic definition of this narrator: he is what he produces; we are what our jobs say we are. However, like before, this recognition of material reality does not stand alone. DeLillo undercuts it with a closing sentimental, one might say "romantic," paragraph regarding lost dogs and cats. The concluding image in Jack Gladney's introduction arises in the crude, primitive vision of innocent youth. As the mechanized police in their "boxlike vehicles" prowl the streets, children cry for the intimacy of domestic animals: "On telephone poles all over town there are homemade signs concerning lost dogs and cats sometimes in the handwriting of a child" (4).

DeLillo ends this first scene with one of the many romantic collisions that erupt throughout the novel. In this particular configuration the question is as follows: how can the desire to live in an innocent world persevere while at the same moment we experience ourselves as isolated, socially constructed, economic units? DeLillo retains this question, along with others, in order to inject a romantic mystery into *White Noise*.

A version of this same conflict reappears a few pages later when Jack and Murray visit the most photographed barn in America. Jack accompanies Murray as a student to a teacher. They approach the barn after seeing several signs declaring this barn to be "THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED." Only the teacher talks; Jack listens silently to Murray's explanation as to why no one sees the "real" barn. For Murray, the commercial interests of marketing have replaced any natural, original, or unique qualities that

the barn may have had: "Once you've seen the signs about the barn," Murray instructs, "it becomes impossible to see the barn" (12). Speaking like a McLuhan disciple, Murray claims that one can never see the barn; one can only experience it as a consumer. Its marketplace representation as a commodity overrides any hopes of seeing the original, unaffected, unadulterated "barn." Murray's declaration that perception is predicated on economic forces links the viewer to that collective consciousness of consumerism. As with the students and parents in the previous scene above, forms of mass-marketing construct how we experience the world. And yet this selling and buying motif continually collides with Jack's spiritual desires.

In the post-Christian era, we religiously embrace whatever image popular culture devises for us; in this case, DeLillo's characters see themselves as consumers. They are financially essential, not only targeted but coveted by business strategists. Our objectified, exchange-value lives are sacred in the world of commerce. And that world of profit-and-loss commodification becomes the world from which they define themselves, according to Murray. It is one's information-age identity. Murray glories in this obscene recognition of a capitalistic spirituality:

"Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender. We see only what the others see. The thousands who were here in the past, those who will come in the future. We've agreed to be part of a collective perception. This literally colors our vision. A religious experience in a way, like all tourism."

(12)

Business and tourist interests merge into a spiritual and collective recognition of consumerism: "We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura. Can you feel it. Jack? An accumulation of nameless energies" (12).

Murray's "nameless energies" are the combined forces of spiritual desire and advertizing expertise. The barn represents a new-age mix of spirituality, media, and cultural constructions. Murray accelerates his pitch until his voice becomes that of a postmodern preacher; he basks in his realization that the contemporary consciousness has been manipulated and formed by advertising executives. We are what advertisements have made us: "'We can't get outside the aura,' Murray exclaims gleefully. 'We're part of the aura. We're here, we're now.' He seemed immensely pleased by this" (13).

The economic representation has itself *become* the object. In fact, the conventional ontological object, the barn as a romantic object, dissolves. Jack is left only with perception. Frank Lentricchia contends that this scene presents a "strange new world where the object of perception is perception itself. What they view is the view of the thing."<sup>12</sup> The experience of a correspondence between an object and its mental image has been altered; a single representative activity has faded into a fascination for an endless egress of images that forever occlude the original object.



Murray's upbeat mood regarding these disclosures underscores by contrast Jack's silence. Rather than jubilation, Jack registers caution and a death-like voicelessness. After all, this play involving the real versus the simulation also implies a loss, a kind of moral fall. For Murray, the primacy of simulation brilliantly bankrupts any urge to locate an original, romantic object. For Jack, however, the moment is less celebratory. His reticence implies a resistance to this contemporary account of a world empty of stable realities and non-commodified experiences. Jack's behavior later in the novel will confirm that, for him, the commodification of culture's self-referring systems of codes and arbitrary signifiers has not replaced or destroyed the spiritual myths of community and authenticity. Indeed, it is Jack's recognition of the potential, divine loss involved with Murray's analysis that propels the narrative toward these romantic themes.

Finally, I want to use my last scene to highlight how the romantic and communal base of Jack's personality challenges any totalized vision of a postmodern relativistic universe. In this third scene, DeLillo moves to his largest question: How can one communicate in a radically indeterminate world? Jack's exchange with his son Heinrich demonstrates the emotional cost around such a crucial contemporary dilemma.

Jack begins this scene in the role of an empiricist. The world can be known and trusted, he seems to say; it is not fundamentally a theoretical construct but, instead, a knowable and physical environment displaying somewhat predictable natural laws. He enters into a confrontation with his son in an effort to answer a simple question: Is it or is it not raining? The replies lead to a comic, and sometimes absurd, interchange while Jack drives Heinrich to school:

"It's raining now," I said.

"The radio said tonight. . . ."

"Look at the windshield," I said. "Is that rain or isn't it?"

"I'm only telling you what they said."

"Just because it's on the radio doesn't mean we have to suspend belief in the evidence of our senses."

(22-3)

Heinrich's responses are deeply skeptical and distrustful; his answer to the question depends not on what he can see or assume but on the meteorologist speaking through the radio, an expert who clearly claims that it will rain later, not now. Thus, Heinrich defers his answer to Jack's question as to whether or not it is raining at that exact moment: "I wouldn't want to have to say" (23), he demurely replies.

Heinrich's non-answer frustrates Jack. His desire to gain assent from his son in regards to this banal but ingenuous question represents a common fatherly effort to meet with

a son in conversation. For Jack, the question has little to do with rain but more to do with his romantic desire to join with his son in an appreciation of an intimate and shared physical event. Heinrich, instead, plays the mixed role of relativist, materialist, and cynical skeptic. He views the question not as a social, communal event but as a request for exact information, for verifiable data. Jack, however, pushes him to informally affirm the rain in order to achieve a simple, everyday, familial union; he wants confirmation of their common ground. Why not meet through the faith in our universal human situation, our shared physical senses, Jack seems to ask. Heinrich answers as a doubtful contemporary critic, not a son: "Our senses? Our senses are wrong a lot more often than they're right. This has been proved in the laboratory" (23).

The dialogue continues in this vein; Heinrich meets each of Jack's desires for affirmation and community with the well-known skepticism and undecidability of the postmodern theorist. In the age of deconstruction, all we can know is our inability to know. Even the common social bonding implied in a father and son conversation about the weather has been subverted into an academic debate about the principle of uncertainty:

"You're so sure that's rain. How do you know it's not sulfuric acid from factories across the river? How do you know it's not fallout from a war in China? You want an answer here and now. Can you prove, here and now, that this stuff is rain? How do I know that what you call rain is really rain? What is rain anyway?"

(24)

Heinrich denies Jack the romantic bond of community between a father and son. This great theme of romance, the dialectic of love and union between a father and a son, becomes a nostalgic, outdated, dream for a naive world that no longer exists. And yet Jack's hunger to experience this common ground never dies in *White Noise*; in fact, it only gains authority as the novel progresses to its tragicomical ending.

#### Notes

1. Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985). Further citations will appear parenthetically in the text.
2. John Frow, "The last Things Before the Last: Notes on *White Noise*," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 89.2 (1990): 421.
3. Bruce Bawer, "Don DeLillo's America," *The New Criterion* 3.8 (1985): 40.
4. Paul Cantor, "Adolf, We Hardly Knew You," *New Essays on White Noise*, ed. Frank Lentricchia (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) 42-3.
5. This postmodern desire to undercut any stable definitions of the "real" and the authentic I claim are themselves already undercut by the romantic desires of DeLillo's viewpoint character, Jack Gladney.

6. John Kucich, "Postmodern Politics: Don DeLillo and the Plight of the White Male Writer," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 27.2 (1988): 337.
7. Posing the romantic against the postmodern also suggests a commonsense antagonism. For example, Kathy Acker has noted, "I might not know what the postmodern means but I *know* it isn't romanticism" (personal conversation, May 4, 1993).
8. Frank Lentricchia, introduction, *New Essays on White Noise*, ed. Frank Lentricchia (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991) 5.
9. Lentricchia, *New* 6.
10. Lentricchia, *New* 6.
11. Lentricchia does admit that since DeLillo "insists . . . upon a comprehensive cultural canvas . . . there remains . . . a space for the poetry of mystery, awe, and commitment." The caveat, though, is that these possible universals die rapidly; they are, according to Lentricchia, quickly "laid to waste by contemporary forces" (*New* 7).
12. Frank Lentricchia, "Don DeLillo," *Raridan* 8.4 (1989): 8.

**David Remnick (essay date 15 September 1997)**

SOURCE: "Exile on Main Street," in *The New Yorker*, Vol. 73, No. 27, September 15, 1997, pp. 42–8.

[In the following essay, Remnick provides an overview of DeLillo's life and career in relation to the publication of *Underworld*.]

In the spring of 1988, the editors of the New York *Post* sent a pair of photographers to New Hampshire with instructions to find J.D. Salinger and take his picture. If the phrase "take his picture" had any sense of violence or, at least, violation left in it at all, if it still retained the undertone of certain peoples who are convinced that a photographer threatens them with the theft of their souls, then it applied here. There is no mystery why the *Post* pursued its prey. For whatever reasons (and one presumes they are not happy reasons), Salinger stopped publishing long ago—his last story, "Hapworth 16, 1924," appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1965—and he has lived a reclusive life ever since. His withdrawal became for journalists a story demanding resolution, intervention, and exposure. Inevitably, the *Post* got its man. The journalists took Salinger's picture. ("We're sorry. But too bad. He's a public figure.") The paper ran a photograph on the front page of a gaunt, sixty-nine-year-old man recoiling, as if anticipating catastrophe. In that instant, the look in Salinger's eyes was one of such error that it is a wonder he survived it. "CATCHER CAUGHT" the headline screamed in triumph.

On the day Salinger's picture appeared in the *Post*, another novelist of stature, Don DeLillo, began thinking about the inescapable and mystical power of the image in the media

age, and, closer to home, about his own half-hearted attempts to keep his distance from the mass-media machinery. From the start, he had been shy of exposure outside the exposure of the work itself. When he published his first novel, *Americana*, in 1971, he had asked that the author's note on the jacket read, simply, "Don DeLillo lives and works in New York City." No offense intended, but he preferred to keep it that way.

After living in the Bronx and Manhattan for many years, DeLillo and his wife, Barbara Bennett, eventually settled a half hour's train ride north of the city, in Westchester County. They live in a green, quiet place lousy with lawyers, doctors, editors, and bankers. They both work at home: DeLillo as a novelist in his upstairs study, Bennett as a landscape designer. (She used to be an executive at Citibank.) DeLillo does not teach, he rarely gives readings, and he keeps interviews to a minimum. When friends would ask his credo, DeLillo would say he lived by the words of Stephen Dedalus: "Silence, exile, cunning—and so on."

But what DeLillo learned from the picture in the *Post*, and what he has very likely learned through his friendship with Thomas Pynchon, is that the price of complete withdrawal is even greater than the price of media whoredom. Not long after seeing the picture of Salinger, DeLillo began writing *Mao II*, a book with a novelist named Bill Gray at its center. At one point, Gray says, "When a writer doesn't show his face, he becomes a local symptom of God's famous reluctance to appear. . . . People may be intrigued by this figure but they also resent him and mock him and want to dirty him up and watch his face distort in shock and fear when the concealed photographer leaps out of the trees."

There was a time when people who aspired to be a part of something called "the American reading public" felt vaguely obliged to buy, and even read, the fiction of the moment. One felt guilty about missing *A Perfect Day for Bananafish*, *The Adventures of Augie March*, or *The Group*. There is now more anxiety, probably, about missing "Pulp Fiction" a month after its release than about never reading the latest Saul Bellow novel. Occasionally, a serious novel carries with it a sense of popular urgent appeal and elbows its way past the bilge and onto the best-seller list. The most recent example is Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon*—a phenomenon that may have as much to do with the author's long silence and the exquisite packaging of the book as with the novel itself. Twenty-five years ago, a novel like Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* would have been thought unmissable. No more.

It will be interesting to see what happens with DeLillo's new novel, *Underworld*, to be published next month. DeLillo is sixty, and this, his eleventh book, is his longest, most ambitious, and most complicated novel—and his best. The length is in excess of eight hundred pages; the ambition is to portray the American psyche during its Cold War ascendancy, beginning with Bobby Thomson's home

run to win the 1951 National League pennant at the Polo Grounds for the New York Giants and ending with an underground explosion on the plains of Kazakhstan after the collapse of the Soviet empire. At the center of the novel is a man named Nick Shay, who, as a teen-ager, shot and killed a waiter in the Bronx; the novel follows Shay, and America, from Thomson's homer, that singular moment of citywide postwar joy, to a jaundiced maturity. Shay grows up to be an executive specializing in the management of waste. Just as DeLillo's 1988 novel, *Libra*, was a kind of fictional biography of Lee Harvey Oswald, "Underworld" also contains imagined public characters, a wealth of them, including J. Edgar Hoover, Frank Sinatra, Jackie Gleason, and Lenny Bruce, as well as Cold War artifacts like a "longlost" film by Sergei Eisenstein called *Unterwelt*, the subway graffiti and murals of inner-city guerrilla painters, a documentary on the Rolling Stones, satellite photographs, and the play-by-play monologue of the Giants broadcaster Russ Hodges.

In the labelling process that passes for popular criticism, DeLillo has been called "the chief shaman of the paranoid school of American fiction"—and not without reason. Even DeLillo allows that the thread running through his books is about "living in dangerous times," about plots and conspiracies, about troubled men inhabiting small rooms. But, for all the cramped spaces and sweaty foreboding in the novels, *Underworld* included, what's missing from the critical work about DeLillo is the humor, the way the language undercuts, even redeems, the darkness of the landscapes. *Underworld* is the black comedy of the Cold War; it is full of sentences that capture, with the choice of the odd word, a moment in American history. Here is Shay in a contemporary restaurant:

The waitress brought a chilled fork for my lifestyle salad. Big Sims was eating a cheeseburger with three kinds of cheddar, each described in detail on the menu. There was a crack in the wall from the tremor of the day before and when Sims laughed I saw his mouth cat's-cradled with filaments of gleaming cheese.

Although DeLillo has never had a best-seller, Scribner paid nearly a million dollars for *Underworld*, and Scott Rudin, the producer of *Clueless* and *The First Wives' Club*, has bought the movie rights. With a mixture of amusement and resignation, DeLillo has agreed to do his public part, but he has tried to keep things within reason. When he and I first talked on the phone to arrange a meeting at his house, DeLillo said, "I'd ask that you not tell anyone where I live, specifically speaking. You can say Westchester." We met, then, on a summer morning at the agreed-upon hour at the agreed-upon unmentionable train station.

To meet DeLillo, at first, is to meet someone who seems to have sanded away all trace of authorial ego or personal affect: his voice is a flat, wry monotone with just a trace of Bronx; he wears enormous and very thick glasses; his clothes tend toward mail-order jeans, denim work shirts, chinos. His life is equally Dionysian: four hours of writing in the morning, a few miles around a local high-school

track at midday ("trees, birds, drizzle"), and then more writing, on into the early evening. Sometimes he will go see a movie. Sometimes he will rent one. DeLillo once said, "A writer takes earnest measures to secure his solitude and then finds endless ways to squander it." He has learned not to squander it much, if at all. When DeLillo started writing, in the mid-sixties, he worked sporadically, and it was only over time that he developed his athlete's focus and rigor, the sense of responsibility, that has allowed him to publish so steadily since *Americana*.

"I didn't become serious about fiction for a long time," he said as we settled into his spare living room. The room is decorated with a few antiques, a few books, some CDs, and fresh flowers. "I didn't have the ambition, the sense of discipline. I had no idea what was demanded of a writer who wanted to be serious about his work, and it took me a long, long time to develop this. It didn't occur to me then that much more was demanded out of me, and much more was at stake in day-to-day work. You know, you become a better writer by getting older, by living longer."

DeLillo did not map out the architecture of *Underworld* and then begin. The process was much more intuitive, mysterious, floundering. There was never an outline. The writing began with a twenty-five-thousand-word burst—a set piece, which became the novel's prologue. It opens with a black kid named Cotter Martin sneaking into the Polo Grounds and then, like a movie camera that widens its focus, takes in the crowd. The opening, which first appeared as a novella called *Pafko at the Wall* in *Harper's*, is one of the most extraordinary performances in contemporary American fiction. DeLillo is able to get the wise-guy interplay among the Hollywood biggies in Leo Durocher's private box (Gleason vomiting on Sinatra's lisle socks), the fears and pleasure of Cotter in his fugitive seat, the animal movements of the crowd, the action on the field, the city's ecstatic reactions beyond, even J. Edgar Hoover surreptitiously studying a small reproduction of a Brueghel painting ("the meatblood colors and massed bodies"). Hoover, sitting in his box, knows that while the game is being played the Soviet Union is secretly testing a nuclear weapon in Kazakhstan, and he thinks, What secret history are they writing? DeLillo's focus, his camera, seems to career around the ballpark, from scene to scene, face to face, mind to mind, taking it all in, as if at once.

After the home run has been hit, he ends the set piece by focussing on Russ Hodges, the broadcaster:

This is the thing that will pulse in his brain come old age and double vision and dizzy spells—the surge sensation, the leap of people already standing, that bolt of noise and joy when the ball went in. This is the people's history and it has flesh and breath that quicken to the force of this old safe game of ours, and fans at the Polo Grounds today will be able to tell their grandchildren—they'll be the gassy old men leaning into the next century and trying to convince anyone willing to listen, pressing in with medicine breath, that they were here when it happened.



The raincoat drunk is running the bases. They see him round first, his hands paddling the air to keep him from drifting into right field. He approaches second in a burst of coattails and limbs and untied shoelaces and swinging belt. They see he is going to slide and they stop and watch him leave his feet.

All the fragments of the afternoon collect around his airborne form. Shouts, batcracks, full bladders and stray yawns, the sand-grain manyness of things that can't be counted.

It is all falling indelibly into the past.

While the Glants were playing the Dodgers for the '51 pennant, DeLillo was in a dentist's office on Crotona Avenue in the Bronx. He was, naturally, a Yankees fan, so he was mainly waiting it out to see who the next National League victim would be. Thomson's homer was not for him what it was for Giants fans. But forty years later, as he read an anniversary account of the game in the newspaper, he began to think about the event, how it seemed unrepeatable, the communal joy of it married, as it was on the front page of the *Times* in 1951, to the nuclear explosion in Kazakhstan. "Somebody seemed to be wanting to tell me something here," DeLillo said to me.

For a long time, DeLillo has been interested in the passage in John Cheever's journals where he wrote, after attending a ballgame at Shea Stadium, "The task of an American writer is not to describe the mis-givings of a woman taken in adultery as she looks out of a window at the rain but to describe 400 people under the lights reaching for a foul ball . . . [or] the faint thunder as 10,000 people, at the bottom of the eighth, head for the exits. The sense of moral judgments embodied in a migratory vastness."

"I had no idea this would be a novel," DeLillo said. "All I wanted to do was write a fictional account of this ballgame, and, for the first time ever, I was writing something whose precise nature I could not gauge. I didn't know whether I was writing a short story, a short novel, or a novel. But I did know that the dimensions of the Polo Grounds were my boundaries. I had no idea that I would go beyond this until after I finished.

"The prologue is written with a sort of super-omniscience. There are sentences that may begin in one part of the ballpark and end in another. I wanted to open up the sentence. They become sort of travel-happy; they travel from one person's mind to another. I did it largely because it was pleasurable. It was baseball itself that provided a kind of freedom that perhaps I hadn't quite experienced before. It was the game."

After the prologue, *Underworld* cuts to 1992 and begins to work backward through the years of the Cold War, so that the day of the game, October 3, 1951, and the day Nick Shay shoots the waiter, October 4, 1951, are separated by forty years of narrative. The mechanical device that travels through the narrative as it weaves back and forth in time is the baseball—the baseball that Bobby Thomson hit into

the seats at the Polo Grounds, the ball that Cotter Martin grabs and takes home, the ball that collectors, Nick Shay included, covet as a talisman of history. The ball is a kind of grail. Many of DeLillo's old themes are in *Underworld*: the increasing power of the image and the media in the modern world; the uncertainty of American life after the Kennedy assassination; a sense of national danger; men and women who live outside the mainstream of ordinary life and language. There is even the whiff, here and there, of that most singular DeLillo trademark: paranoia. But, more often, *Underworld* is a darkly funny satire of postwar language, manner, and obsessions.

DeLillo takes a Nabokovian delight in the American language. Just as the names of American schoolchildren are catalogued in *Lolita* as if they were Homeric ships, DeLillo lists the words of the fifties—"breezeway," "crisper," "sectional," "broadloom," "stacking chairs," "scatter cushions," "storage walls"—and recounts the small tragedy of a housewife at that techno-crazed moment in history: "She'd recently bought a new satellite-shaped vacuum cleaner that she loved to push across the room because it hummed softly and seemed futuristic and hopeful but she was forced to regard it ruefully now, after Sputnik, a clunky object filled with self-remorse."

DeLillo's greatest feat of literary discipline until now was his ability to look away from his native ground, the Fordham section of the Bronx. It is hard to imagine a writer keeping such vivid local colors out of his work for so long. On a stifling, fly-blown morning this summer, DeLillo led me down Arthur Avenue, the heart of the Italian Bronx, past grocery stores and pasta joints, and said, "There was a Mob hit here when I was a kid—a mobster killed while he was buying fruit. I think it must have been a model for that scene in 'The Godfather' when Mario Puzo has Don Corleone getting shot while he's buying fruit in the street. He was a mobster from City Island who came here to shop. There were actually three events like that when I was growing up. One was the uncle of a kid I knew. And the other was in a liquor store." On feast days on Arthur Avenue, the women dressed in brown robes and pinned dollar bills to the plaster flanks of Jesus. On summer nights, the area was dense with games—stickball, softball, stoopball, bocce—and radios were playing and the fire hydrant sprayed and on the roof the women yelled down at the kids for killing the water pressure. Dion and the Belmonts lived up the street. John Garfield went to P.S. 45 when he was still Julius Garfinkle. The great Paddy Chayevsky script "Marty" was filmed in the neighborhood, and when it came out "we felt as if our existence had been justified," DeLillo said.

"I'll show you the old house," he said, and he headed to the corner of 182nd Street and Adams Place. The house is a narrow, three-story place with patchy asbestos shingles. DeLillo grew up here with his parents, both immigrants from Italy, his sister, his aunt and uncle, and their three kids. An old man was sitting on the front steps. He had a broad belly that stretched and belled out the T-shirt he was

wearing. It read, "You Idiot, Your Fly Is Open." Shy and friendly, DeLillo said hello and said he'd lived here many years ago.

"You wanna again?" the old man said, with a thick southern-Italian accent. "I sell you a hunnert twenny-five thousand."

DeLillo smiled and said, "See this brick gate? My father built that!"

"A hunnert twenny-five thousand," the man replied.

We were by now sweating, parboiled, but there was nothing much open. Finally, DeLillo found a pastry and coffee shop that featured working air-conditioning. After we sat down, I asked him why he'd waited until he had filled a substantial shelf with novels before turning to the Bronx in his fiction. In *Underworld*, Nick Shay grows up in an apartment building near DeLillo's old house.

"I needed to wait thirty years before writing about it to do it justice," DeLillo said. "I needed this distance. Also, I needed to write about it in a much larger context. I couldn't write a novel about a background and a place without putting it into a deeper setting. I plunged into the Bronx in my early stories, but the stories weren't very good. I wouldn't even care to look at them now. They were a kind of literary proletarian story. They were about working-class men under duress. I remember one was about a man who'd been evicted from his house, and he was outside sitting on the sidewalk surrounded by his possessions."

DeLillo went to Cardinal Hayes High School ("where I slept") and to Fordham University ("where I majored in something called 'communication arts'"). His father worked as a payroll clerk at Metropolitan Life, in Manhattan. "You know that Graham Greene book called *England Made Me*? New York made me," DeLillo said. "There's a sensibility, a sense of humor, an approach, a sort of dark approach to things that's part New York, and maybe part growing up Catholic, and that, as far as I'm concerned, is what shapes my work far more than anything I read. I did have some wonderful reading experiences, particularly 'Ulysses.' I read it first when I was quite young, and then again when I was about twenty-five. And this was important. I was very taken by the beauty of the language—particularly the first three or four chapters. I can remember reading this book in a part of my room that was usually sunny. It was a very strong experience. But I didn't read as a kid, and certainly no one read to us. This was not part of our tradition. People spoke, and yelled, but there wasn't much reading. I didn't take to nineteenth-century English material at all. It was a great struggle, a great burden, I couldn't concentrate on it. Once, I had to write a paper on a Dickens novel, and Dickens, of course, is easy. I just read the Classic Comics version and managed to get through. It's a struggle to emerge from a place like the Bronx and settle in a place like Manhattan. It represents an enormous journey that involves manners, language, what you wear, almost everything."

Today, Fordham is an easy train ride south for DeLillo, and when he was thinking about the Bronx sections that dominate the last few hundred pages of *Underworld* he would visit the neighborhood: the alleys of the apartment house where Nick Shay grew up, the projects a mile to the south, the cathedral-like Paradise movie theatre on the Grand Concourse, which has since been gutted and left to rot. DeLillo, like any New Yorker, talks about neighborhood in narrow terms. When we passed Bathgate Avenue, he pointed out the street sign and said, "I keep out of there. That's Doctorow's turf." There are still plenty of Italians along the spine of Arthur Avenue, but there are also blacks, Hispanics, Albanians, Bosnians. Walking these streets helped him summon the faces and the mortar of the place, but it also helped him remember the psyche of the times—the way people knew what they knew, the way they so rarely lived in the larger world, except when they took the Third Avenue El downtown into Manhattan and glimpsed other lives through open apartment windows. And since *Underworld* is about the greater world, about the Cold War, his trips helped him remember how he and his neighbors had lived in threatening times.

"In those days, the way you absorbed the news was different," he said over the hiss and gurgle of the espresso machine. "You would have to go to the movies to really see something. There would be a cartoon and a short on the explosion of the hydrogen bomb. It was part of the entertainment, somehow—an extension of the movie."

In 1959, after college, DeLillo moved to a tiny apartment in Murray Hill, the sort of place where the refrigerator is in the bathroom. At first, he had a fulltime job as a copywriter at Ogilvy, Benson & Mather. His friends were other copywriters, funny, sophisticated guys "who were like a combination of Jerry Lewis, Lenny Bruce, and Noël Coward." They went together to the Museum of Modern Art and the Village Vanguard, to the movies that were coming out of Italy and France at the time. In the meantime, DeLillo started work on "Americana."

It was a tentative start, but after a few years, once DeLillo got a handle on his novel and convinced himself that he was a real writer, he quit Ogilvy, Benson & Mather. To make a little money, he took freelance jobs writing copy for furniture catalogues, dialogue for a cartoon, a script for a television commercial. In 1971, *Americana* was published and was pronounced promising, and in 1975 he married Barbara Bennett. They have no children.

"It's a very lucky life for me," DeLillo said. "I've not been distracted by many of the things that other novelists are distracted by. I earn enough money to make a living at it, for one thing. I learned to live very, very cheaply. And family complications have not been a source of difficulty for me, as they are for almost everyone else."

DeLillo's early novels—*Americana*, *End Zone*, *Great Jones Street*, *Ratner's Star*, *Players*, and *Running Dog*—and then the triumphant run of *The Names*, *White Noise*,

*Libra*, *Mao II*, and *Underworld*, radiate a sensibility tempered in the sixties and seventies. But, unlike some of his contemporaries and friends, DeLillo has kept mainly to the political sidelines. "I took part in a number of war protests, but only as a sort of marcher in the rear ranks," he said. "I was very interested in rock music. At the same time, I have to say that I didn't buy a single record. I listened to it on the radio. I let the culture wash over me. I used marijuana, not frequently but more or less regularly. I found the sixties extremely interesting, and, at the same time that all this was happening—enormous social disruption—I also felt that there was a curious ennui, a boredom, which actually may be part of my first novel. I think it's something I sensed around me, which would seem to be completely at odds with what you were seeing and hearing in the streets. I suppose what I felt for much of this period was a sense of unbelonging, of not being part of any kind of official system. Not as a form of protest but as a kind of separateness. It was an alienation, but not a political alienation, predominantly. It was more spiritual."

When DeLillo was a young man in the city, he often went to look at the Abstract Expressionists at the Museum of Modern Art. This summer, we met one afternoon at the museum and walked through exhibits featuring the great Soviet poster artists of the twenties, the Stenberg brothers, a series of photographs by Cindy Sherman, and a history of the still-life that began with a Cézanne and ended with a flat white slab covered with milk, the sight of which caused DeLillo's brow to arch. "Nice milk," he said.

Later, over lunch at the museum restaurant, I asked him about the way those museum visits might have influenced his work; how, for that matter, all the excitements of his youth—Joyce, Italian and French movies of the sixties, bebop, and rock music—figured in his novels.

"That's very difficult for me to answer," he said. "But the influence is almost metaphysical. I don't think I could make any kind of direct connection. I think fiction comes from everything you've ever done, and said, and dreamed, and imagined. It comes from everything you've read and haven't read. It comes from all the things that are in the air. At some point, you begin to write sentences and paragraphs that don't sound like other writers'. And for me the crux of the whole matter is language, and the language a writer eventually develops. If you're talking about Hemingway, the Hemingway sentence is what makes Hemingway. It's not the bullfights or the safaris or the wars, it's a clear, direct, and vigorous sentence. It's the simple connective—the word 'and' that strings together the segments of a long Hemingway sentence. The word 'and' is more important to Hemingway's work than Africa or Paris. I think my work comes out of the culture of the world around me. I think that's where my language comes from. That's where my themes come from. I don't think it comes from other people. One's personality and vision are shaped by other writers, by movies, by paintings, by music. But the work itself, you know—sentence by sentence, page by page—it's much too intimate, much too private,

to come from anywhere but deep within the writer himself. It comes out of all the time a writer wastes. We stand around, look out the window, walk down the hall, come back to the page, and, in those intervals, something subterranean is forming, a literal dream that comes out of daydreaming. It's too deep to be attributed to clear sources."

I asked DeLillo if he recognized himself when he read academic criticism or journalistic reviews of his work.

"Not really," he said. "What's almost never discussed is what you and I have just been talking about: the language in which a book is framed. And there's a good reason. It's hard to talk about. It's hard to write about. And so one receives a broad analysis of, perhaps, the social issues in one's work but rarely anything about the way the writer gets there."

The most famous political critique of DeLillo came from the right, a barrage that began, in 1985, with Bruce Bawer writing in *The New Criterion* and was then backed up, double-barrelled, in the *Washington Post* by George Will and the paper's book critic, Jonathan Yardley.

In his essay "Don DeLillo's America," Bawer began with the dubious assertion that while one can always find DeLillo's books in stores it is very hard to find some titles by Fitzgerald, Hemingway, or Faulkner. Even more mystifying than the Barnes & Noble angle was Bawer's idea that DeLillo's novels are not believable novels but, rather, "tracts, designed to batter us, again and again, with a single idea: that life in America today is boring, benumbing, dehumanized." He went on, "It's better, DeLillo seems to say in one novel after another, to be a marauding, murderous maniac—and therefore a *human*—than to sit still for America as it is, with its air-conditioners, assembly lines, television sets, supermarkets, synthetic fabrics, and credit cards. At least when you're living a life of primitive violence, you're closer to the mystery at the heart of it all." A novel such as *White Noise*, Bawer wrote, is studied with cheap leftwing "Philosophy McNuggets."

Will, for his part, interrupted his ruminations on the 1988 Presidential race to take offense at *Libra*, a novel speculating on the character and responsibility of Lee Harvey Oswald, as "sandbox existentialism" and "an act of literary vandalism and bad citizenship." He treats DeLillo as if he were a dangerous crackpot, wielding an un-American weapon—a gift for prose. That DeLillo would dare call into question the veracity of the Warren Commission, or that he would speculate about the psychology of a murderer and the culture itself, "traduces an ethic of literature." And that DeLillo would describe the writer as an outsider in that culture is merely a "burst of sophomoric self-dramatization," because, after all, "Henry James, Jane Austen, George Eliot and others were hardly outsiders." Will went on, "DeLillo's notion of the writer outside the mainstream of daily life is so radical" that it "stops just a short step from declaring the writer as kin to Oswald, who, as a defector, was the ultimate outsider." Wow! Don DeLillo as *almost* kin to Lee Harvey Oswald.



"I don't take it seriously, but being called a 'bad citizen' is a compliment to a novelist, at least to my mind," DeLillo said. "That's exactly what we ought to do. We ought to be bad citizens. We ought to, in the sense that we're writing against what power represents, and often what government represents, and what the corporation dictates, and what consumer consciousness has come to mean. In that sense, if we're bad citizens, we're doing our job. Will also said I blamed America for Lee Harvey Oswald. But I don't blame America for Lee Harvey Oswald, I blame America for George Will. I don't think there is any sense in 'Libra' in which America is the motive force that sends Oswald up to that sixth-floor window. In fact, Oswald is interesting because he was, at least by his own rights, a strongly political man, who not only defected to the Soviet Union but tried to assassinate the right-wing figure General Walker about seven months before the assassination of President Kennedy. I think in that seven months his life unravelled. I think he lost a grip on his political consciousness, and on almost everything else around him. And I think he became the forerunner of all those soft white young men of the late sixties and early seventies, who went around committing crimes of convenience, shooting at whatever political figure or celebrity happened to drift into range." DeLillo said he didn't pretend to know the answer to the assassination riddle, though he thought there was probably a second gunman. When DeLillo visited the sixth floor of the Texas School Book Depository museum, he wrote in the guestbook, "Still waiting for the man on the grassy knoll."

DeLillo has no idea how *Underworld* will be absorbed into the culture, if at all. He seems not to worry about it. In fact, he doesn't think that the increasingly marginal status of the serious novelist is necessarily awful. By being marginal, he may end up being more significant, more respected, sharper in his observations. Not long ago, DeLillo wrote a letter to his friend the novelist Jonathan Franzen. Franzen is a younger writer, one with great verbal skill and narrative imagination, and DeLillo's letter sounds very much like reassurance to a successor:

The novel is whatever novelists are doing at a given time. If we're not doing the big social novel fifteen years from now, it'll probably mean our sensibilities have changed in ways that make such work less compelling to us—we won't stop because the market dried up. The writer leads, he doesn't follow. The dynamic lives in the writer's mind, not in the size of the audience. And if the social novel lives, but only barely, surviving in the cracks and ruts of the culture, maybe it will be taken more seriously, as an endangered spectacle. A reduced context but a more intense one. . . . Writing is a form of personal freedom. It frees us from the mass identity we see in the making all around us. In the end, writers will write not to be outlaw heroes of some underculture but mainly to save themselves, to survive as individuals.

P.S. If serious reading dwindles to near nothingness, it will probably mean that the thing we're talking about when we use the word "identity" has reached an end.

In *Libra*, in *Mao II*, and now in *Underworld*, DeLillo has increasingly brought the world of power and celebrity into his work—the world of contemporary history. It's likely that he will continue in that direction.

"I think the press of public events has got stronger in the last several decades," he told me. "It's the power of the media, the power of television. But also, I think, there's something in people that, perhaps, has shifted. People seem to need news, any kind—bad news, sensationalistic news, overwhelming news. It seems to be that news is a narrative of our time. It has almost replaced the novel, replaced discourse between people. It replaced families. It replaced a slower, more carefully assembled way of communicating, a more personal way of communicating. In the fifties, news was a kind of sinuous part of life. It flowed in and out in a sort of ordinary, unremarkable way. And now news has impact, largely because of television news. After the earthquake in San Francisco, they showed one house burning, over and over, so that your TV set became a kind of instrument of apocalypse. This happens repeatedly in those endless videotapes that come to life of a bank robbery, or a shooting, or a beating. They repeat, and it's as though they're speeding up time in some way. I think it's induced an apocalyptic sense in people that has nothing to do with the end of the millennium. And it makes us—it makes us consumers of a certain type. We consume these acts of violence. It's like buying products that in fact are images and they are produced in a massmarket kind of fashion. But it's also real, it's real life. It's as though this were our last experience of nature: seeing a guy with a gun totally separate from choreographed movie violence. It's all that we've got left of nature, in a strange way. But it's all happening on our TV set."

The day we were talking, television was filled with images of the fashion designer Gianni Versace shot dead on the street in Miami Beach. DeLillo was interested not so much in the fallen designer as in the instantaneous packaging of the murder, its sudden appearance on every screen and thus in millions of conversations. "People talk about the killing, but they don't talk about what it does to them, to the way they think, and feel, and fear," he said. "They don't talk about what it creates in a larger sense. The truth is, we don't quite know how to talk about this, I don't believe. Maybe that's why some of us write fiction."

*Underworld* ends with the fall of the Soviet Union and its conflict with the West. As DeLillo thinks about the era we're living in, and writing about it, he has also been thinking about a passage in Hermann Broch's novel *The Death of Virgil*. "He uses the term 'no longer and not yet,'" DeLillo said. "I think he's referring to the fact that his poet, Virgil, is in a state of delirium, no longer quite alive, and not yet dead. But I think he may also be referring to the interim between paganism and Christianity. And I think of this 'no longer and not yet' in terms of no longer the Cold War and not yet whatever will follow." But six months after finishing *Underworld*, he added, the germ of something really new has not yet shown itself.

On the way to the station to drop me off for the train back from Westchester County to the city, DeLillo said, "What happens in between is I drift, I feel a little aimless. I feel a little stupid, because my mind is at odds. It's not trained on a daily basis to concentrate on something, so I feel a little dumb. Time passes in a completely different way. I can't account for a day, a given day. At the end of a day, I don't know what I did."

**Paul Elie (review date 7 November 1997)**

SOURCE: "DeLillo's Surrogate Believers," in *Commonweal*, Vol. 124, No. 19, November 7, 1997, pp. 19–22.

[In the following review, Elie highlights the religious connotations of the language, themes, and imagery of *Underworld*.]

The reviewers of Don DeLillo's eleven novels have called him many things: a "systems novelist," the chief shaman of the "paranoid school of American fiction," a cultural critic who works in the form of the novel. Now he is being called one of the immortals. In the *New York Times Book Review*, Martin Amis, ducking the question about the new book, put DeLillo up where serious readers have placed him for years. "While *Underworld* may or may not be a great novel," Amis wrote, "there is no doubt that it renders DeLillo a great novelist."

No one as far as I know has called DeLillo a religious writer. Nevertheless, religious language, themes, and imagery are thick on the ground in his work. His last few novels directly address the role of faith in contemporary life. In particular, he has dramatized the notion that skeptical moderns look with a kind of gratitude to religious people, who serve as surrogate believers, keeping open the possibility of belief for those who themselves cannot believe.

DeLillo also has described the nature of fiction in religious terms. Fiction requires a kind of belief from the reader and offers a kind of consolation. As DeLillo explained in connection with *Libra* (1988), about the Kennedy assassination: "The novelist can try to leap across the barrier of fact, and the reader is willing to take that leap with him as long as there's a sort of redemptive truth waiting on the other side, a sense that we've arrived at a resolution." For the writer, DeLillo remarked recently, the solitary daily work of crafting fiction can be "a kind of religious fanaticism, with elements of obsession, superstition, and awe."

DeLillo's new novel, *Underworld*, is the best novel you'll have trouble remembering. For 600 pages you feel DeLillo is taking you somewhere major, even if you don't know where or how. But the novel gets away from the author, and it does so, in part, because he plays fast and loose with the ideas about religion that he has humanized more successfully in earlier books.

DeLillo was born in 1936, grew up in the Bronx, and went to Cardinal Hayes High School and Fordham there. In interviews he regularly brings up his old-school Italian Catholic background. "I think there is a sense of last things in my work that probably comes from a Catholic childhood," he remarked in 1991. "For a Catholic, nothing is too important to discuss or think about, because he's raised with the idea that he will die any minute now and that if he doesn't live his life in a certain way this death is simply an introduction to an eternity of pain. This removes a hesitation that a writer might otherwise feel when he's approaching important subjects, eternal subjects."

For this reader, the Catholic imprint in DeLillo's work is best discerned in the mystic wonder for the things of the world he expresses in his prose. As Mark Feeney pointed out in *Commonweal* (August 9, 1991), "In all DeLillo's books an almost medieval sense of immanence collides with a clinical delight in the amassing of data." Whereas so many contemporary writers dramatize a lack of meaning or a hunger for meaning, DeLillo sees a superabundance of meaning, and sees the artist's task—the human task—as that of identifying the competing meanings and figuring out how they fit together. For example, in DeLillo's work the suburban supermarket, with its profusion of brightly packaged and test-marketed goods, is not just a wasteland of fruitless diversions, but is a world of signs which, if we can decipher it, can tell us who we are.

In his recent novels, partly as a way to capture that sense of the superabundance of meaning, perhaps, DeLillo has described seemingly mundane aspects of contemporary culture in religious terms. The protagonist of *White Noise* (1984), Jack Gladney, is the chairman of a college department of Hitler studies. He is a kind of priest of the religion of popular culture, "the cults of the famous and the dead." But the works and pomps of popular culture and its attractive diversions cannot allay the more primordial fear of death, so Gladney has to commit a murder to banish it.

In *Libra*, the stand-in for the novelist is Nicholas Branch, who is writing a history of the assassination for the CIA twenty-five years after Kennedy's death. "There is much here that is holy," he cryptically reflects, "an aberration in the heartland of the real." Branch is depicted as a solitary figure "in the great sheltering nave of the Agency." His religion, so to speak, is not conspiracy theorizing but the sifting and ordering of all the data about the assassination. He is a mystic of the facts.

*Mao II* (1991) is a kind of skeleton key to DeLillo's work in which the art of fiction-making becomes a kind of religion itself. Standing apart from the modern crowd is the reclusive writer Bill Gray, who likens his own shyness to "God's famous reluctance to appear." As Gray sees it, a serious writer is like a terrorist or a religious fanatic in his need to assert his truth against a hostile or indifferent society. In the modern world, however, the writer has yielded his cultural power to headline-catching terrorists, and now he envies them their influence. "Who do we take seriously?" Gray's editor asks him. "Only the lethal believer, the person who kills and dies for faith."

As DeLillo finds religious impulses behind the appearances of contemporary life, he depicts religion itself as a game of appearances. A scene in *White Noise* suggests that it is the pretense of faith, not faith itself, that is the key to understanding the continuing power of religion in the modern world. At the climax of the novel, Jack Gladney shoots and wounds a drug addict named Willie Mink. After giving him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation—in a scene that is a kind of medieval tableau rendered in staccato, end-of-the-century English—Gladney takes him to “a place with a neon cross over the entrance.” It is head-quarters of a group of German nuns in black habits and heavy shoes. Their mission is “to embody old things.” However, they don’t possess real faith, they only pretend to. But they see nothing false in this. Rather, they see the pretense to faith as having a genuine dedication all its own. It too entails a serious life of poverty, chastity, and obedience. The head nun explains:

As belief shrinks from the world, people find it more necessary than ever that *someone* believe. Wildeyed men in caves. Nuns in black. Monks who do not speak. We are left to believe. . . . Those who have abandoned belief must still believe in us. They are sure that they are right not to believe but they know belief must not fade completely. Hell is when no one believes.

The nuns are DeLillo’s surrogate believers, keeping faith on behalf of the human race. This, I think, is a shrewd and uncanny insight into the way we live now. It helps to explain why religion is still so strong a force in our supposedly secular society, and why so many people nominally against religion have failed to eradicate it the way they have claimed they would for centuries now. And it goes a long way toward explaining the psychology of the legions of lapsed Catholics who no longer believe but remain emotionally bound to it.

This need for surrogate believers is apparently a key idea for DeLillo, for he develops it further in *Mao II* and *Underworld*. In *Mao II*, the photographer Britta Nilsson has traveled the world. She has photographed saints’ days in Spain, the Day of the Virgin in Mexico City, the Day of Blood in Tehran. “I need these people to believe for me,” Britta tells Bill Gray. “I cling to believers. Many, everywhere. Without them, the planet goes cold.” Now she photographs only writers, the implication being that writers are the next best thing to true believers—surrogate believers for rational and educated people in the West, making art of the religious impulses we don’t dare act on in our own lives.

In his latest novel, *Underworld*, DeLillo measures the effects of the long nuclear standoff between the United States and the Soviet Union. He insists that the cold war, surely the most metaphysical of political confrontations, called forth a parallel “underworld” culture of quasi-religious ritual and self-expression. “This is the supernatural underside of the cold war,” one character remarks. “Miracles and visions.” *Underworld* also dramatizes the idea that life during the cold war, life under the constant

threat of universal annihilation, engendered a world-spirit in which all people participate by virtue of their common dilemma. “Everything,” we are told, “is connected in the end.”

The novel’s action flows away from its remarkable prologue, set during the 1951 playoff game between the Brooklyn Dodgers and the New York Giants. All through the game, J. Edgar Hoover, Jackie Gleason, and Frank Sinatra banter back and forth; after the Giants win the pennant on Bobby Thomson’s “shot heard round the world,” a white businessman and a black teen-ager grapple for the home-run ball. What follows is a kind of “deep inward tunneling” into the seemingly random associations of American culture in search of the American soul.

For about 750 pages, the reader follows the ball—irradiated with the power of the past—as it shows up in the hands of various characters. The narrative rewinds from the present to the 1950s’ romance between Nick Shay (now a “waste analyst” who oversees landfills) and housewife Klara Sax (now a conceptual artist who paints decommissioned bombers). At the same time, in a series of long, ambitious set pieces, the novel dramatizes different aspects of the cold-war-era “underworld”: arms stockpiling in the Southwest, avant-garde art and film in SoHo, subway graffiti in the South Bronx.

None of the characters in these episodes is all that interesting or memorable. We learn a great deal about them as DeLillo takes us “inside the human works, down to dreams and routine rambling thoughts,” in the way of James Joyce. Still, they never really live on the page. DeLillo’s own prose style and organizational intelligence are so strong that the characters seem like themes with bodies and surnames.

In the past, DeLillo has countered this by devising strong, relentless plots. Not so this time. To tell the truth, in *Underworld* there isn’t much of a story. Rather, the material is organized thematically, with DeLillo relentlessly making the different episodes reprise one another and then piling them up, as in a landfill, or in memory. The “underworld,” it is clear, is also the shared past which shapes each of us.

For example, Moonman, a master subway graffiti artist from the 1970s, dedicates himself, in the 1990s, to painting a tableau of “angels”—visages of children murdered in the neighborhood—on a bombed-out building in the South Bronx. DeLillo is making a social point through this development, even suggesting the arc of his own writing over the past two decades. Moonman’s art of “wildstyle” personal expression, which mirrored the belligerence of the cold war, is now an art of public consolation.

In the neighborhood, Moonman meets Shay’s old grammar-school teacher, Sister Edgar, who now performs works of mercy on the streets. Edgar is the character who must bear the heaviest burden of symbolism in the novel. She is



called Edgar for no reason other than that the name makes her the symbolic “sister” to J. Edgar Hoover. Although her religious order has gone modern, she still wears “the old things with the arcane names, the wimple, cincture, and guimpe”—again, for no reason other than to represent “the old rugged faith,” the ideological twin to cold-war paranoia.

Dressing her up in the old garb also makes it possible—crucially—for DeLillo to have strangers recognize Edgar as a nun at the end of the book. A crowd has gathered, and they believe they have seen a miracle: a vision of a murdered girl flashing on a billboard. Seeing the nun nearby, they spontaneously embrace her. Skeptical at first, Sister Edgar comes to feel as if she has seen the miracle, too. “Everything feels near at hand, breaking upon her, sadness and loss and glory and an old mother’s bleak pity and a force at some deep level of lament that makes her feel inseparable from the shakers and the mourners.”

No less than the German nuns in *White Noise* Sister Edgar is a surrogate believer, whose visible presence and apparent faith are meant to reassure the faint of heart and keep the planet from going “cold.” However, whereas the nuns in *White Noise* appeared as walkons in a satire, Sister Edgar is a character in a realistic novel. Whereas they frankly introduced themselves as symbols, DeLillo wants us to take this walking symbol as a complicated human being.

What’s more, we are asked to identify with Sister Edgar at the climax of the novel. After 800 pages, it is as if DeLillo needs some kind of miracle to bring the novel to a satisfactory end. Making Sister Edgar see a miracle, DeLillo wants the reader, as it were, to see a miracle as well. She believes, so we are to believe with her.

But it doesn’t work. The fictional machinery creaks and groans: long sentences, stretched metaphors, hushed incantation, all straining for significance. DeLillo, so good at explaining the world, goes on to explain *Underworld* and the way he wants it to be read, manipulating the reader from behind Sister Edgar’s habit. Whereas in classical drama the *deus ex machina* was flown in from above, in *Underworld* the divine contraption that will save the day is brought in from below.

So it is that *Underworld*, DeLillo’s most exhaustive novel and in many ways his most hopeful, is also the one that offers the least consolation. Everything is connected in the end, yes, but the connections don’t emerge from the world we live in or the one depicted in the novel. They exist in the pattern the author has self-consciously elaborated.

Let me explain in DeLillo’s own terms. The trick of fiction, I think, is to make a complex premeditated plan seem surprising and inevitable, to find a pattern on the page that somehow resembles the patterns in the world outside the window or those inside our heads. To do this, the novelist, like the terrorist, must in some ways conceal his plan.

In *Underworld*, though, the plan is out in the open. Plan and pattern are the whole point of the book. It is as if DeLillo is saying to the reader, “Everything is connected in the end—watch me make the connections better than anybody, and leap into the ranks of the great novelists.” But his exertions get in the way of the realistic materials he is using to build his book. Where DeLillo seems to want us to share his awe in the face of contemporary life, we are distracted by his striving to create an awesome work. In the end, the reader—at least this reader—feels the lack not only of the redemptive truth DeLillo’s art has promised, but of interesting characters, a strong story, a whole and radiant design: all the homely things of fiction by which the novelist elicits the reader’s belief, the writer being, in the end, not a priest or a mystic or a fanatic, but only a novelist.

**James Gardner (review date 24 November 1997)**

SOURCE: A review of *Underworld*, in *National Review*, Vol. 49, No. 22, November 24, 1997, pp. 60–1.

[In the following review, Gardner summarizes the plot and themes of *Underworld*, faulting the scope and length of the novel.]

The problem with the New York Mets is that, instead of just trying to get to first base, which is a worthy and attainable goal, they always go for the home run and all too often strike out. The problem with much recent American fiction is that, instead of crafting a simple and compelling tale, many of our most respected authors aspire to write the Great American Novel—and they fall on their faces.

This baseball analogy is apt in the context of Don DeLillo’s latest novel, which begins at a baseball game and is shot through with meditations on our national pastime. Like his friend Thomas Pynchon, Mr. DeLillo has just come out with an eight-hundred-page book which, if we are to believe the publicists, is the last word on the American, if not the human, condition. But whereas Pynchon produced in *Mason & Dixon* what can only be called the Lousy American Novel, Don DeLillo’s *Underground* turns out to be the So-So American Novel. This status is itself no mean achievement, because, as I wrote in reviewing Pynchon’s latest book (NR, June 30), the thicker the novel, the more pointless the writing and the story tend to become. This cannot be said of *Underground*, a fundamentally serious work which never lapses into incoherence and which displays a tonic humility before the art of fiction.

*Underground* aspires to be a compte rendu of American society in the second half of the twentieth century, starting with Bobby Thomson’s pennant-winning homer in 1951 and ending in the radioactive aftermath of the Cold War. Though most of DeLillo’s characters are purely fictional, J. Edgar Hoover, Frank Sinatra, and Jackie Gleason are depicted with the same shrewdness that the author

displayed in *Libra*, an account of the Kennedy assassination. And yet, despite its obsession with recent history, *Underground* is no traditional historical novel, with all the nostalgia that the label implies. In its postmodernity, the book shares with much current culture an overwhelming consciousness of the approaching Millennium, and this consciousness transfigures the most common objects, from a baseball to a bowl of jello, into something ominously alien. Thus the actual ball that Thomson hits out of the Polo Grounds at the beginning of the novel becomes a totemic object, a Grail which is hunted down through the rest of the novel and which is supposed to symbolize the lost innocence of present-day America.

What is *Underground* about? Difficult to say. It is the Los Angeles of novels, a massive postindustrial sprawl with little discernible order and no real center; structuring a novel is something DeLillo, like many of his contemporaries, values so little that it hardly even occurs to him as an option. There is a general flatness to the novel's tone and action, an interchangeability, a movement back and forth among the decades, which never leads to anything quite so pedestrian as a climax or a denouement. Its structure consists uniquely in the recurrence of certain characters and themes: Marvin Lundy's search for Thomson's elusive home-run ball, or Klara Sax's attempts to succeed as an artist, or Lenny Bruce's mantra-like schtick, "We're all gonna die!"

The title of the novel refers to the obsession of physicist Nick Shay with the burial of nuclear wastes, subterranean testing of atomic bombs, and disposal of garbage in huge urban dumps. At a metaphorical level, it has to do with DeLillo's equal fascination with that part of present-day reality which is habitually overlooked by those who inhabit it. But none of these themes acquires momentum or builds to a really passionate resolution. This is not to say that the characters themselves lack intensity. They are forever bickering and forever trying to prove their little points, occasionally resorting to violence. But DeLillo's unflappable authorial voice suggests a valium-induced detachment from the situations he describes, and he never allows the reader to become involved in them either.

DeLillo has the weaknesses of his strengths. He is an expert observer of externalities. Like an urban archaeologist, he distances himself from the world in order to see it in an entirely new light, as in this description of a garbage dump: "Specks and glints, ragtails of color appeared in the stratified mass of covering soil, fabric scraps from the garment center, stirred by the wind." This passage, which goes on quite a bit longer, is undeniably excellent writing and keen observation. The problem here, as in DeLillo's earlier works, is that the accumulation of a million fine details no more captures the soul of a character or a situation than the million hairs and follicles of a stuffed lion can be said to render accurately its erstwhile vitality. Allied to this is a kind of finessing of the obvious. DeLillo has an excellent ear for dialogue. But he is so enamored of this gift that he enlists it beyond any conceivable service

to a given scene. A typical example is an exchange between a man and a woman:

"‘I think he knows,’ she said.

"‘What?’

"‘I think he knows.’

"‘He doesn’t know.’

"‘I think he knows.’"

This constant finessing brings up another issue that criticism consistently disregards these days: it is eminently possible for novels to be overlong. As the young Henry James asserted in a review of Hardy's *Far from the Mad-ding Crowd*. "Almost all [current] novels are greatly too long and the being too long becomes with each elapsing year a more serious offense." This opinion is a little odd coming from James, whose several virtues did not include concision. And surely there were greater offenders against the getting to the point, as he might put it, than Hardy. But in a general way James was right in his diagnosis of Victorian literature, and he would be only more correct in regard to some of our most esteemed contemporaries. *Underground* could have been cut to a third of its present length, losing none of its point and greatly enhancing such strengths as it has. But, of course, no self-respecting author who aspires to write the Great American Novel could ever be content with a measly three hundred pages. The bidding for that superlunary honor starts somewhere after page six hundred.

#### Dana Phillips (essay date 1998)

SOURCE: "Don DeLillo's Postmodern Pastoral," in *Reading the Earth: New Directions in the Study of Literature and Environment*, edited by Michael P. Branch, Rochelle Johnson, Daniel Patterson, and Scott Slovic, University of Idaho Press, 1998, pp. 235–46.

[In the following essay, Phillips characterizes *White Noise* as a "postmodern pastoral," studying the novel's representation of the natural world in general and the rural American landscape in particular.]

A decade after its publication, the contribution of Don DeLillo's *White Noise* to our understanding of postmodern cultural conditions has been thoroughly examined by literary critics (see, for example, the two volumes of essays on DeLillo's work edited by Frank Lentricchia). The novel has been mined for statements like "Talk is radio," "Everything's a car," "Everything was on TV last night," and "We are here to simulate"—statements that critics, attuned to our culture's dependence on artifice and its habit of commodifying "everything," immediately recognize as postmodern slogans. What has been less often noticed, and less thoroughly commented on, is DeLillo's portrait of the way in which postmodernity also entails the devastation of the natural world.

Frank Lentricchia, in his introduction to the *New Essays on White Noise*, has pointed out that “The central event of the novel is an ecological disaster. Thus: an ecological novel at the dawn of ecological consciousness” (7). But Lentricchia does not develop his insight about the “ecological” character of the novel. Neither does another reader, Michael Moses, who in his essay on *White Noise*, “Lust Removed from Nature,” argues that “postmodernism, particularly when it understands itself as the antithesis rather than the culmination of the modern scientific project, confidently and unequivocally banishes from critical discussion the questions of human nature and of nature in general” (82). Moses does not pursue this point, but I would argue that one of the great virtues of DeLillo’s novel is the thoroughgoing and imaginative way in which *White Noise* puts the questions not just of human nature but of “nature in general” back on the agenda for “critical discussion.”

The dearth of commentary on DeLillo’s interest in the fate of nature is explained, not just by the fact that contemporary literary critics tend to be more interested in the fate of culture, but also by the fact that one has to adjust one’s sense of nature radically in order to understand how, in *White Noise*, natural conditions are depicted as coextensive with, rather than opposed to, the malaise of postmodern culture. This adjustment is not just a task for the reader or critic: it is something the characters in the novel have to do every day of their lives.

As a corrective to the prevailing critical views of the novel, *White Noise* might be seen as an example of what I will call the *postmodern pastoral*, in order to foreground the novel’s surprising interest in the natural world and in a mostly forgotten and, indeed, largely bygone rural American landscape. At first glance the setting of the novel and its prevailing tone seem wholly unpastoral. But then the pastoral is perhaps the most plastic of modes, as William Empson demonstrated in *Some Versions of Pastoral*. The formula for “the pastoral process” proposed by Empson—“putting the complex into the simple” (23)—is one which might appeal to the main character and narrator of *White Noise*, Jack Gladney. Gladney is someone who would like very much to put the complex into the simple, but who can discover nothing simple in the postmodern world he inhabits, a world in which the familiar oppositions on which the pastoral depends appear to have broken down. And thus the postmodern pastoral must be understood as a *blocked* pastoral—as the expression of a perpetually frustrated pastoral impulse or desire. In qualifying my assertion that *White Noise* is an example of postmodern pastoral in this way, I am trying to heed Paul Alpers’s warning that “modern studies tend to use ‘pastoral’ with ungoverned inclusiveness” (ix). However, Alpers’s insistence that “we will have a far truer idea of pastoral if we take its representative anecdote to be herds-men and their lives, rather than landscape or idealized nature” (22) would prevent altogether the heuristic use of the term I wish to make here. With all due respect to herds-men, the interest of the pastoral for me lies more in the

philosophical debate it engenders about the proper relation of nature and culture and less in its report on the workaday details of animal husbandry or the love lives of shepherds.

Jack Gladney is not a shepherd, but a professor of Hitler Studies at the College-on-the-Hill, which is situated in the midst of an unremarkable sprawl of development that could be called “suburban,” except that there is no urban center to which the little town of Blacksmith is subjoined. Like almost everything else in *White Noise*, the town, to judge from Jack Gladney’s description of it, seems displaced, or more precisely, unplaced. Jack tells us that “Blacksmith is nowhere near a large city. We don’t feel threatened and aggrieved in quite the same way other towns do. We’re not smack in the path of history and its contaminations” (85). He proves to be only half-right: the town is, in fact, subject to “contaminations,” historically and otherwise. Jack’s geography is dated: Blacksmith is not so much “nowhere” as it is Everywhere, smack in the middle—if that is the right phrase—of a typically uncentered contemporary American landscape of freeways, airports, office parks, and abandoned industrial sites. According to Jack, “the main route out of town” passes through “a sordid gantlet of used cars, fast food, discount drugs and quad cinemas” (119). We’ve all run such a gantlet; we’ve all been to Blacksmith. It is the sort of town you can feel homesick for “even when you are there” (257).

Thus, despite a welter of detail, the crowded landscape in and around Blacksmith does not quite constitute a *place*, not in the sense of “place” as something that the characters in a more traditional novel might inhabit, identify with, and be identified by. Consider Jack’s description of how Denise, one of the Gladney children, updates her “address” book: “She was transcribing names and phone numbers from an old book to a new one. There were no addresses. Her friends had phone numbers only, a race of people with a seven-bit analog consciousness” (41). Consciousness of place as something that might be geographically or topographically (that is, locally) determined has been eroded by a variety of more universal cultural forms in addition to the telephone. Chief among them is television—Jack calls the TV set the “focal point” of life in Blacksmith (85). These more universal cultural forms are not just forms of media and media technology, however; the category includes such things as, for example, tract housing developments.

Despite the prefabricated setting of *White Noise* and the “seven-bit analog consciousness” of its characters, an earlier, more natural and more pastoral landscape figures throughout the novel as an absent presence of which the characters are still dimly aware. Fragments of this landscape are often evoked as negative tokens of a loss the characters feel but cannot quite articulate, or more interestingly—and perhaps more postmodern as well—as negative tokens of a loss the characters articulate, but cannot quite feel. In an early scene, one of many in which Jack Gladney and his colleague Murray Jay Siskind ponder the



“abandoned meanings” of the postmodern world (184), the two men visit “THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA,” which lies “twenty-two miles into the country around Farmington” (12). In his role as narrator, Jack Gladney often notes details of topography with what seems to be a specious precision. But the speciousness of such details is exactly the issue. Even though it is surrounded by a countrified landscape of “meadows and apple orchards” where fences trail through “rolling fields” (12), Farmington is not at all what its name still declares it to be: a farming town. The aptness of that placename, and of the bits of rural landscape still surrounding the barn, has faded like an old photograph. As Murray Jay Siskind observes, “Once you’ve seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn” (12). The reality of the pastoral landscape has been sapped, not just by its repeated representation on postcards and in snapshots, but also by its new status as a tourist attraction: by the redesignation of its cow paths as people-movers. The question of authenticity, of originality, of what the barn was like “before it was photographed” and overrun by tourists, however alluring it may seem, remains oddly irrelevant (13). This is the case, as Murray observes, because he and Jack cannot get “outside the aura” of the cultural fuss surrounding the object itself, “the incessant clicking of shutter release buttons, the rustling crank of levers that advanced the film” (13)—noises that drown out the incessant clicking of insect wings and the rustling of leaves that once would have been the aural backdrop to the view of the barn.

As the novel’s foremost authority on the postmodern, Murray is “immensely pleased” by THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA (13). He is a visiting professor in the popular culture department, known officially as American environments” (9), an official title that signals the expansion of the department’s academic territory beyond what was formerly considered “cultural.” Jack dismisses Murray’s academic specialty as “an Aristotelianism of bubble gum wrappers and detergent jingles” (9)—that is, as a mistaken attempt to uncover the natural history of the artificial. Jack finds the BARN vaguely disturbing.

But *White Noise* is about Jack’s belated education in the new protocols of the postmodern world in which he has to make his home. Jack learns a lot about those protocols from Murray and his colleagues, one of whom lectures a lunchtime crowd on the quotidian pleasures of the road (arguably a quintessentially postmodern American “place”). Professor Lasher sounds something like Charles Kuralt, only with more attitude:

“These are the things they don’t teach,” Lasher said. “Bowls with no seats. Pissing in sinks. The culture of public toilets. The whole ethos of the road. I’ve pissed in sinks all through the American West. I’ve slipped across the border to piss in sinks in Manitoba and Alberta. This is what it’s all about. The great western skies. The Best Western motels. The diners and drive-ins. The poetry of the road, the plains, the desert. The filthy stinking toilets. I pissed in a sink in Utah when it

was twenty-two below. That’s the coldest I’ve ever pissed in a sink in.”

(68)

Lasher’s little diatribe may seem to suggest that DeLillo is satirizing the much-heralded replacement of an older cultural canon by a newer one: Lasher would throw out the Great Books, if he could, in favor of “the poetry of the road.” But in *White Noise* it is not so much the replacement as it is the displacement of older forms by newer ones, and the potential overlapping or even the merger of all those forms in an increasingly crowded cultural and natural landscape, that DeLillo records. “The great western skies,” the “Best Western motels,” “the road, the plains, the desert”—all are features of a single, seamless landscape.

Because of their ability to recognize so readily the odd continuities and everyday ironies of the postmodern world, the contentious members of the department of American environments seem better-adapted than their more cloistered colleagues. Their weirdness is enabling. By pursuing their interest in and enthusiasm for things like the culture of public toilets, they collapse the distinction between the vernacular and the academic and shorten the distance between the supermarket, where tabloids are sold, and the ivory tower, where the library is housed. It is instructive that whenever one of their more extreme claims is challenged, members of the department tend to reply in one of two ways: either they say, “It’s obvious” (a refrain that runs throughout the novel), when of course it (whatever it may be) isn’t at all obvious. Or they simply shrug and say, “I’m from New York.” In *White Noise*, all knowledge is local knowledge, but one must understand how shaped by the global the local has become. We’re all from New York.

While it is true that we can “take in”—as the saying goes—a landscape, the literal ingestion of nature (that is, of discrete bits and selected pieces of it) is probably the most intimate and most immediate of our relations with it. In a telling passage from the opening pages of the novel, Jack and his wife Babette encounter Murray Jay Siskind in the generic food products aisle of the local supermarket:

His basket held generic food and drink, nonbrand items in plain white packages with simple labeling. There was a white can labeled CANNED PEACHES. There was a white package of bacon without a plastic window for viewing a representative slice. A jar of roasted nuts had a white wrapper bearing the words IRREGULAR PEANUTS.

(18)

What is striking about the contents of Murray’s cart is the way in which, despite the determined efforts of all those labels to say in chorus the generic word FOOD, they seem to be saying something else entirely. These “nonbrand items” actually seem to be all brand, nothing but brand; their categorical labels seem like mere gestures toward the idea of food, evocations of its half-forgotten genres. Remember UNCANNED PEACHES? Visible bacon? REGULAR PEA-

NUTS? The packaging and the labels do not resolve the question of contents. They raise it; that is, they heighten it, so that it seems more important than ever before.

The jar of IRREGULAR PEANUTS in particular has a disturbing, perhaps even slightly malign quality, as Murray explains: “‘I’ve bought these peanuts before. They’re round, cubical, pock-marked, seamed. Broken peanuts. A lot of dust at the bottom of the jar. But they taste good. Most of all I like the packages themselves. [. . .] This is the last avant-garde. Bold new forms. The power to shock’” (19). Siskind’s identification of the jar of peanuts as part of “the last avant-garde” suggests that cultural production has reached the *ne plus ultra* of innovation, that henceforward it will consist not in making things new, but in the repackaging of old things, of the detritus of nature and the rubble of culture. “Most of all,” Murray says, “I like the packages themselves.” So there will not be any more avant-gardes after this one—it is not the latest, but “the last.” Those IRREGULAR PEANUTS mark the end of history: more than just irregular, they are APOCALYPTIC peanuts. No wonder Murray savors them. Each is a bite-size reminder of the “end of nature” and the “end of history,” two of the postmodernist’s favorite themes.

The CANNED PEACHES, the invisible bacon, and the IRREGULAR PEANUTS also demonstrate very clearly how postmodern culture does not oppose itself to nature (as we tend to assume culture must always do). Instead, it tries to subsume it, right along with its own cultural past. But one would like to protest that despite all this repackaging and attempted subsumption, the fact is that peanuts—even IRREGULAR ones—do not result from cultural production, but from the reproduction of other peanuts. One wants to say that natural selection (plus a little breeding), and not culture, has played the central and determining role in the evolution of peanuts of whatever kind. But the role of nature as reproductive source, even as an awareness of it is echoed in certain moments of the novel, tends to get lost in the haze of cultural signals or “white noise” that Jack Gladney struggles and largely fails to decipher, probably because *all* noise is white noise in a postmodern world. Murray Jay Siskind, as a connoisseur of the postmodern, is sublimely indifferent to factual distinctions between, say, the natural and the cultural of the sort that still worry less-attuned characters like Jack Gladney.

That they must eat strange or irregular foods is only part of the corporeal and psychological adjustment Jack and his family find themselves struggling to make. At least they remain relatively *aware* of what they eat, in that they choose to eat it. But “consumption” is not necessarily always a matter of choice in *White Noise*: there are things that enter the orifices, or that pass through the porous membranes of the body, and make no impression on the senses. These more sinister invaders of the body include the chemicals generated by industry, many of them merely as by-products, chemicals that may or may not be of grave concern to “consumers”—not entirely the right term, of course, since few people willingly “consume” toxins. After

all, we do not have to eat the world in order to have intimate relations with it, since we take it in with every breath and every dilation of our pores. This suggests that the much-bewailed runaway consumerism of postmodern society is not the whole story: there are other kinds of exchange taking place that do not necessarily have to do with economics alone. The cash nexus is certainly economic, but the chemical nexus is both economic and ecological; the economy of by-products, of toxic waste, is also an ecology. Economic or ecological fundamentalism makes it hard to tell the whole story about postmodernism, as DeLillo is trying to do.

During the novel’s central episode, the “airborne toxic event,” Jack Gladney is exposed to a toxin called Nyodene Derivative (“derivative” because it is a useless by-product). Nyodene D and its possible effects are first described for Jack by a technician at the SIMUVAC (“SIMUVAC” is an acronym for “simulated evacuation”) refugee center: “‘It’s the two and a half minutes standing right in it that makes me wince. Actual skin and orifice contact. This is Nyodene D. A whole new generation of toxic waste. What we call state of the art. One part per million can send a rat into a permanent state’” (138–39). The technician’s last phrase is richly ambiguous: does “a permanent state” mean death or never-ending seizure or a sort of chemically induced immortality? This ambiguity terrifies Jack, and he begins to seek some surer knowledge of the danger he is in. At this point in the narrative, DeLillo’s novel speaks most clearly about the effect the postmodern condition has on our knowledge of our bodies (and thus on our knowledge of nature). Having crunched all Jack’s numbers in the SIMUVAC computer, the technician informs him, “I’m getting bracketed numbers with pulsing stars,” and he adds that Jack would “rather not know” what that means (140). Of, course, that is precisely what Jack would most like to know. The attempt at clarification offered by the technician at the end of their conversation does nothing to explain to Jack exactly when, why, and how he might die: “It just means that you are the sum total of your data. No man escapes that” (141).

The remainder of the novel is taken up with Jack Gladney’s attempt to escape the reductive judgment of his fate given by the SIMUVAC technician and his computer (whose bracketed numbers with pulsing stars “represent” Jack’s death, but do so opaquely, in a completely nonrepresentative way, rather like the white package marked BACON that conceals the supermarket’s generic pork product). As the repository of junk food and as a host for wayward toxins and lurking diseases, Jack’s body has become a medium, in much the same way that television or radio are media. His postmodern body is hard to get at in the same way that the nameless voices on television—the ones that throughout the novel say macabre things like “Now we will put the little feelers on the butterfly” (96)—cannot always be identified, much less questioned or otherwise engaged in dialogue. In *White Noise*, the body itself is mediated, occult, hard to identify, and unavailable for direct interrogation by any solely human agent or agency.

The postmodern body is, then, a curiously disembodied thing. It no longer makes itself known by means of apparent symptoms that can be diagnosed by a doctor, nor by means of feelings that can be decoded by the organism it hosts (it may be a little old-fashioned to think of this organism as a “person”). During his interview with Dr. Chakravarty, Jack utters a tortured circumlocution in response to the simple question, “How do you feel?” His carefully qualified reply, “To the best of my knowledge, I feel very well,” demonstrates how distant from him Jack’s body now seems (261). That this body just happens to be his own gives Jack no real epistemological advantage. In a postmodern world, technology and the body are merely different moments of the same feedback loop, just as the city and the country are merged in a common landscape of death. Because it is the place in which distinctions between bodies and machines, and between the city and country, have collapsed, “Autumn Harvest Farms” is an exemplar of postmodern pastoral space: at Autumn Harvest Farms, the machine not only *belongs* in the garden, it *is* the garden.

However confused he may be, and however paralyzed by his half-living, half-dead condition, Jack Gladney does seem to “feel,” at times, a certain lingering nostalgia about and interest in “nature in general.” This longing, if not for the prelapsarian world, then at least for some contact with a nature other than that of his own befuddled self, is apparent even in the lie Jack tells the Autumn Harvest Farms clinician in response to a question about his use of nicotine and caffeine: “Can’t understand what people see in all this artificial stimulation. I get high just walking in the woods” (279). The only time in the novel when Jack actually goes for something like a walk “in the woods” is when he visits a rural cemetery. Like everything else in the novel, this cemetery has an overdetermined quality: it is called “THE OLD BURYING GROUND,” and it is both authentic—actually an old burying ground, that is—and a tourist trap. It is both what it is and an image or metaphor of what it is. And so THE OLD BURYING GROUND seems uncanny, with the same kind of heightened unreality about it that gives Murray’s jar of IRREGULAR PEANUTS and THE MOST PHOTOGRAPHED BARN IN AMERICA their peculiar auras.

Nonetheless, it may be at the old burying ground that Jack comes closest to feeling some of the peace that the countryside can bring:

I was beyond the traffic noise, the intermittent stir of factories across the river. So at least in this they’d been correct, placing the graveyard here, a silence that had stood its ground. The air had a bite. I breathed deeply, remained in one spot, waiting to feel the peace that is supposed to descend upon the dead, waiting to see the light that hangs above the fields of the landscapist’s lament.

(97)

But in this remnant of an older, more pastoral landscape set in the midst of a contemporary sprawl—across the Lethean river separating the graveyard from the factories

in town, but still sandwiched between the town, the freeway, and the local airport—Jack does not quite have the epiphany he is so clearly seeking. His hope of living within the natural cycle of life and death suggested to him by his visit to THE OLD BURYING GROUND has already been foreclosed by events. Direct encounter with nature, “walking in the woods,” is no longer possible, not only because nature seems to have become largely an anecdotal matter of broadcast tidbits of information about animals (bighorn sheep, dolphins, etc.), but also because nature, like the body, has been ineluctably altered by technology. THE OLD BURYING GROUND, landscaped as it is, and given its purpose, is a crude example of this alternation, however comforting Jack finds it.

The supermarket is the place that the characters in the novel depend on most for a sense of order, pattern, and meaning, and thus it fulfills something of the cultural function that used to be assigned to the pastoral. The difference is that the supermarket has an obscure relationship to the rest of the world, particularly to the natural world whose products it presumably displays. The supermarket is a pastoral space removed from nature. Unfortunately, even this artificial haven is disturbingly altered by the novel’s end: “The supermarket shelves have been rearranged. It happened one day without warning. There is agitation and panic in the aisles, dismay in the faces of the older shoppers” (326). The “agitation and panic in the aisles” of the supermarket links the postmodern condition back to an older set of fears and confusions that predate the repose that the pastoral is supposed to offer. DeLillo makes this very clear earlier in the novel when he has Jack Gladney use the word “panic” to describe his anxiety upon awakening in the middle of the night: “In the dark the mind runs on like a devouring machine, the only thing awake in the universe. I tried to make out the walls, the dresser in the corner. It was the old defenseless feeling. Small, weak, deathbound, alone. Panic, the god of woods and wilderness, half goat” (224). Thus Jack finds himself in the wilderness even while he is supposedly safe at home in Blacksmith. The order and rationality, the civilized space, that modernity (like the pastoral) supposedly created seems to be no longer a feature of the postmodern landscape.

The postmodern pastoral, unlike its predecessors, cannot restore the harmony and balance of culture with nature, because the cultural distinctions that the pastoral used to make—like that between the city and the country—have become too fluid to have any force and are dissolved in the toxic fog of airborne events. Neither culture nor nature are what they used to be. But perhaps DeLillo’s point is that they never were, that the distinction between culture and nature cannot be taken as an absolute. As a novelist, he knows just how thoroughly “all of culture and all of nature get churned up again every day” (2), as Bruno Latour puts it in his appositely-titled book, *We Have Never Been Modern* (from which it follows that we cannot possibly be “postmodern” in the strict sense of the term). DeLillo is also aware of another point on which Latour insists: he realizes that the everyday churning up of nature



and culture is not just a matter of media representations. Latour argues that “the intellectual culture in which we live does not know how to categorize” the “strange situations” produced by the interactions of nature and culture because they are simultaneously material, social, and linguistic, and our theories are poorly adapted to them (3). They are not cognizant of what Latour likes to call “nature-culture.”

It seems to me that Latour—and DeLillo—are right, and that postmodernist theorists (unlike postmodern novelists, whose work is often finer grained than theory) have invested too much in the ultimately false distinction between nature and culture. They have tried to argue what amounts to a revision of Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis, first promulgated in his 1893 essay, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” Turner argued that the closing of the frontier and the disappearance of wilderness was a turning point in American culture; the postmodernists—especially the more radical or pessimistic postmodernists like François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard, or Fredric Jameson—argue that the disappearance of nature is a turning point in global culture. Postmodernism is a frontier thesis for the next millenium, more dependent on what has been called “the idea of wilderness” than its exponents have realized.

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#### Robert L. McLaughlin (review date January 1998)

SOURCE: “Shots Heard ’Round the World,” in *American Book Review*, Vol. 19, No. 2, January, 1998, pp. 20, 22.

[In the following review, McLaughlin assesses the narrative structure of *Underworld*, outlining combinations and juxtapositions of characters, historical events, and ideas that comprise the novel.]

We seem to be in a new age of big postmodern novels: Gass’s *The Tunnel*; Wallace’s *Infinite Jest*; Pynchon’s *Mason & Dixon*; and now Don DeLillo’s ambitious exploration of the second half of the American Century. *Underworld*. And *Underworld* is a big novel: big in its cast of characters, big in its historical sweep, big in its themes—baseball, the cold war, the uses and abuses of the past, waste in all its forms. It’s big, too, in what it accomplishes. *Underworld* masterfully brings together its characters, historical events, and ideas, putting them in surprising and challenging combinations and juxtapositions as a way of exploring the nature of the society we have created and the possibilities for living in it.

*Underworld* is structured in two intersecting narrative flows, one from the past into the present, the other from the present into the past. The first begins in the brilliant prologue, which describes the famous October 3, 1951, playoff game between the New York Giants and the Brooklyn Dodgers, the game miraculously won by the Giants in the bottom of the ninth when Bobby Thomson hit a one-out, three-run homer, dubbed by the next day’s *New York Times* as the Shot Heard ’round the World. DeLillo presents the game from a multitude of perspectives; the narrative shifts from Giants’ radio announcer Russ Hodges to the players and managers to the fans in the stands, including celebrities Frank Sinatra, Jackie Gleason, Toots Shore, and J. Edgar Hoover, to—most important—Cotter Martin, a black teenager, playing hooky, who scrambles and scratches and recovers the ball Thomson hit.

The forward-moving chapters trace the history of this ball as it is stolen, sold, bequeathed, bought, and finally displayed on the bookshelf of the novel’s main character, Nick Shay. For sixteen-year-old Nick, a Dodger fan listening to the game on a Bronx roof-top, that home run represents both the loss of certainty, the bad luck that makes his life meaningless, and a revelation that this bad luck results from a complex intersection of forces beyond his control. As he tries to explain, “It’s about the mystery of bad luck, the mystery of loss. . . .To commemorate failure.” The backward-moving chapters trace Nick’s life and the lives of his family, lovers, and friends, from 1992, when Nick is a successful executive at a Phoenix waste systems corporation, to the summer after the Giants-Dodgers game, when young Nick casually kills a friend with a sawed-off shotgun, another shot, heard ’round the Bronx if not ’round the world.

Within this backward and forward movement are drawn the pictures of our society and culture as they have developed over the past forty-six years. The societal picture focuses on the cold war and the confusing transition to a post-cold-war world. The same day Bobby Thomson hit his home run, the Soviet Union exploded its second atomic bomb, at a Kazakhstan test site: another shot heard ’round the world. The two stories shared the front page of the *New York Times*. This blast signals both the threat and the safety of the cold war: the threat, in that the two nations and the rest of the world balance precari-

ously at the edge of destruction, as is seen in the Cuban Missile Crisis chapters, which follow Lenny Bruce on a tour of one-night stands where he repeatedly shrieks, “*We’re all gonna die!*”; the safety, in that the superpower competition reduces the world to sets of binary oppositions, making it knowable and controllable. As one character explains, “You need the leaders of both sides to keep the cold war going. It’s the one constant thing. It’s honest, it’s dependable. Because when the tension and rivalry come to an end, that’s when your worst nightmares begin. All the power and intimidation of the state will seep out of your personal bloodstream. You will no longer be the main . . . point of reference. Because other forces will come rushing in, demanding and challenging. The cold war is your friend. You need it to stay on top.”

The novel’s two Edgars, Hoover and Sister Edgar, one of Nick’s teachers back in the Bronx, represent secular and religious faith in the totalized systems the cold war’s binaries offer. But this faith is shaken as the world proves too complex for the cold-war system to hold. In the sixties, Clyde Tolson, Hoover’s aide, laments the Kennedy years, “In which well-founded categories began to seem irrelevant. In which a certain fluid movement became possible. In which sex, drugs and dirty words began to unstratify the culture.” By the nineties, the cold war done and the culture even more unstratified, Hoover and Sister Edgar, now dead, meet not in heaven but in cyberspace, in “the grip of systems,” where “Everything is connected in the end.” This cyberspace, with its innumerable systems connecting, overlapping, deconstructing binaries, is offered as the paradigm for the contemporary world.

The novel’s cultural picture is of waste, garbage, especially the detritus of the cold war. The novel is filled with waste, with people’s concerns about what to do with waste, and with different attitudes about waste. In the prologue, crazed Giants’ fans inundate the Polo Grounds with waste—cups, napkins, pages of *Life* magazine—in their excitement over their team’s comeback. In the Bronx of the 1950s children turn garbage into playthings. By the nineties, the Bronx itself has become a junkyard. Huge corporations, like the one Nick works for, have come into existence to “manage” waste. People are so concerned with their garbage and what they’ll do with it that, as Nick says, they “saw products as garbage even when they sat gleaming on store shelves, yet unbought. We didn’t say. What kind of casserole will that make? We said, What kind of garbage will that make? Safe, clean, neat, easily disposed of? Can the package be recycled and come back as a tawny envelope that is difficult to lick closed?” Nick’s company seeks to close a contract with a Russian entrepreneur who plans to eliminate nuclear waste by blowing it up with atomic bombs at the same Kazakhstan test site where the October 3, 1951, bomb was exploded. DeLillo shows us a society that makes strange and sometimes unforgivable choices about what to value and what to dispose of. Nick pays over \$30,000 for the dirty and battered baseball Thomson hit, while Esmeralda, a homeless girl in the Bronx, is raped and thrown off a roof, thrown away like garbage.

The novel’s societal and cultural pictures come together in the deconstruction of the seemingly obvious opposition between valued things and garbage. In our cyberworld of instant information, infinite media outlets, ubiquitous advertising, anything can be turned into an object of desire or a source of entertainment and then be used up so quickly that it almost immediately becomes waste. The best example of this is Condomology, a store specializing in condoms—bought to fulfill a desire, used, flushed. Indeed, our economy is founded on the process of creating a need for a product, encouraging its consumption, and sanctioning the discarding of it, so that the process can be repeated. One of the characters explains why the Giants-Dodgers play-off game has assumed such an important place in the cultural memory: “The Thomson homer continues to live because it happened decades ago when things were not replayed and worn out and run down and used up before midnight of the first day. The scratchier an old film or an old audiotape, the clearer the action in a way. Because it’s not in competition for our attention with a thousand other pieces of action. Because it’s something that’s preserved and unique.”

Contrast this to a 1974 party where the host plays a bootleg copy of the Zapruder film of the Kennedy assassination on hundreds of television sets around his studio. The initial horror and awe are muted through repetition until the film is simply background to the party, white noise: “people stood around and talked, a man and a woman made out in a closet with the door open, remotely, and the pot fumes grew stronger, and people said, ‘Let’s go eat,’ or whatever people say when a thing begins to be over.” Move forward a decade or so to another murder, this one of a man driving his car, shot by the Texas Highway Killer and videotaped by a little girl looking out the back window of the car ahead. Not only is this murder repeated continually on the news “a thousand times a day . . . to provide our entertainment,” but it affects the world outside of itself: we’re told, “It is a famous murder because it is on tape”; the murderer becomes something of a celebrity calling in to newscasts; there is even possibly a copycat killer.

The novel suggests that in contemporary America the means of inspiring desire create, along with waste, a kind of wasted hyperreality. One of Nick’s waste systems colleagues, on his way to a New Jersey landfill, drives by the Newark Airport and sees “billboards for Hertz and Avis and Chevy Blazer, for Marlboro, Continental and Good-year, and he realized that all the things around him, the planes taking off and landing, the streaking cars, the tires on the cars, the cigarettes that the drivers of the cars were dousing in their ashtrays—all these were on the billboards around him, systematically in some self-referring relationship that had a kind of neurotic tightness, an inescapability, as if the billboards were generating reality.” The absurdity and the tragedy of all this comes together in the novel’s epilogue, when Esmeralda, the thrown-away girl, one of many wasted people in the novel, is suddenly valued when a vision of her face is seen in a billboard for Minute Maid orange juice. Dozens, then hundreds, then

thousands of people come to the blasted southern tip of the Bronx to wait for the moments when commuter trains' headlights hit the billboard and the girl's face appears. The billboard in this case is generating the desire for a miracle, for proof of a reality that transcends the hyperreality of the billboard-world, a desire that then creates its own reality—the crowds, the TV crews, the news stories—and is quickly used up: after a few days the billboard is papered over, "*Space Available*."

*Underworld* is an amazing achievement. In tracing Nick Shay's life, it traces the shape of a culture and the history of a country, asking how, as individuals and as a society, we should live in our time and with our past, asking what we value and what we throw away, and asking what the consequences are of the choices we make.

### Tony Tanner (essay date Spring 1998)

SOURCE: "Afterthoughts on Don DeLillo's *Underworld*" in *Raritan*, Vol. 17, No. 4, Spring, 1998, pp. 48–71.

[In the following review, Tanner faults DeLillo for neglecting the aesthetics of narrative art in favor of those of sensationalistic journalism in *Underworld*.]

"The true underground is where the power flows. That's the best-kept secret of our time. . . . The presidents and prime ministers are the ones who make the underground deals and speak the true underground idiom. The corporations. The military. The banks. This is the underground network. This is where it happens. Power flows under the surface, far beneath the level you and I live on. This is where the laws are broken, way down under, far beneath the speed freaks and cutters of smack."

—*Great Jones Street*

"All plots tend to move deathward. This is the nature of plots. Political plots, terrorist plots, lovers' plots, narrative plots, plots that are part of children's games. We edge nearer death every time we plot. It is like a contract that all must sign, the plotters as well as those who are the targets of the plot."

Is this true? Why did I say it? What does it mean?

—*White Noise*

"You think the stories are true?"

"No," Eric said.

"Then why do you spread them?"

"For the tone of course."

"For the edge."

"For the edge. The bite. The existential burn."

—*Underworld*

Some years ago—it must be about a dozen—I was sitting in an airport, flipping through *Time* magazine, and I came across a brief news item to the effect that the American

writer, Don DeLillo, was working on a novel about the Kennedy assassination. My heart, as they say, sank. I had been reading DeLillo's novels with growing admiration and excitement—but how could even he, for all his wonderfully strange ways of getting at what he generically calls "the American mystery" (for which read "the mystery of America"), avoid being beset and distracted by all the clichés of paranoia and conspiracy theory which swarmed to the event as flies to honey. I need not, of course, have worried. *Libra* is a triumph; all the possible pitfalls, as I see it, brilliantly by-passed or side-stepped. Let me remind you of his concluding "Author's Note":

In a case in which rumors, facts, suspicions, official subterfuge, conflicting sets of evidence and a dozen labyrinthine theories all mingle, sometimes indistinguishably, it may seem to some that a work of fiction is one more gloom in a chronicle of unknowing.

But because this book makes no claim to literal truth, because it is only itself, apart and complete, readers may find refuge here—a way of thinking about assassination without being constrained by half-facts or overwhelmed by possibilities, by the tide of speculation that widens with the years.

You may remember the concluding meditation of Nicholas Branch, the retired CIA analyst, hired to write a secret history of the assassination (and thus, in part, a DeLillo stand-in):

If we are on the outside, we assume a conspiracy is the perfect working of a scheme. Silent nameless men with unadorned hearts. A conspiracy is everything that ordinary life is not. It's the inside game, cold, sure, undistracted, forever closed off to us. . . . All conspiracies are the same taut story of men who find coherence in some criminal act.

But maybe not. Nicholas Branch thinks he knows better. He has learned enough about the days and months preceding November 22, and enough about the twenty-second itself, to reach a determination that the conspiracy against the President was a rambling affair that succeeded in the short term due mainly to chance. Deft men and fools, ambivalence and fixed will and what the weather was like.

Amidst swamps of temptations, and against pretty high odds, DeLillo keeps his poise, not to say his sanity, and does not succumb to the darkly glamorous seductiveness of the murderously appealing material he is handling. But by the time of his next novel, *Mao II*, something has gone wrong.

From a recent New Yorker profile by David Remnick, we learn that DeLillo has for a long time been interested in a passage in John Cheever's journals where he wrote, after a ballgame at Shea Stadium: "The task of the American writer is not to describe the misgivings of a woman taken in adultery as she looks out of the window at the rain but to describe 400 people under the lights reaching for a foul ball. . . . The faint thunder as 10,000 people, at the bottom of the eighth, head for the exits. The sense of moral judg-



ments embodied in a migratory vastness.” So—no more pottering about with old Flaubert, groping for his miserable mot juste; but off to the ballgame with Whitman, and “the city’s ceaseless crowd” in which Whitman rejoiced (as he rejoiced in baseball: “it’s our game: that’s the chief fact in connection with it: America’s game: has the snap, go, fling, of the American atmosphere”). DeLillo has long been fascinated by crowds (and Elias Canetti’s *Crowds and Power*)—at least since *Great Jones Street* (“The people. The crowd. The audience. The fans. The followers.”)—so perhaps it is not surprising that he starts *Mao II*, very arrestingly, with a powerful description of the vast undifferentiated horde of a Moonie mass wedding at Yankee Stadium. (Also not surprising that he starts *Underworld* with a swirling, hundred-eyed account of a famous baseball game.) The crowd motif is taken up with references to the Hillsborough football disaster and Khomeini’s funeral, with Mao’s Chinese millions milling in the background. “The future belongs to crowds”—so the introductory section blankly, bleakly concludes.

So much might be prophecy, or warning, or simply downhearted sociology; but, of itself, it does not generate narrative. Accordingly we have some (concluding, as it turns out) episodes from the life of an intensely reclusive writer named Bill Gray—who incorporates, I imagine, a glance at J.D. Salinger, a nod to Thomas Pynchon, and perhaps a wink from DeLillo himself (“When I read Bill I think of photographs of tract houses at the edge of the desert. There’s an incidental menace.” That “incidental menace” fits; and the desert features in nearly all of DeLillo’s novels as a sort of “end zone” of meaning—silent, nonhuman, absolute, ultimate). Bill Gray tells us things that DeLillo’s fiction has been telling us from the start: “There’s the life and there’s the consumer event. Everything around us tends to channel our lives toward some final reality in print or film.” When David Bell sets out on his questing journey in *Americana* looking for origins, he isn’t sure if he is discovering his real, unmediated family and country, or just so much print and film. America—or Americana? What kind of “real” life people can shape for themselves in a mediated, consumer culture swamped in images and information, is an abiding concern. But Bill Gray also has some things to say about the novel and the novelist which bear thinking about.

The novel used to feed our search for meaning. Quoting Bill. It was the great secular transcendence. The Latin mass of language, character, occasional new truth. But our desperation has led us toward something larger and darker. So we turn to the news, which provides an unrelenting mood of catastrophe. This is where we find emotional experience not available elsewhere. We don’t need the novel. Quoting Bill

Quoting Bill, not Don. Certainly. But here is David Remnick quoting Don:

I think there’s something in people that, perhaps, has shifted. People seem to need news, any kind—bad news, sensationalistic news, overwhelming news. It seems to

be that news is a narrative of our time. It has almost replaced the novel, replaced discourse between people. It replaced families. It replaced a slower, more carefully assembled way of communicating, a more personal way of communicating.

When Bill Gray is on a ship bound for Lebanon, he appreciates the families crowded on deck, together making “the melodious traffic of a culture.” In *The Names*, James Axton relishes the gregarious, sociable street life in Athens.

People everywhere are absorbed in conversation. Seated under trees, under striped canopies in squares, they bend together over food and drink. . . . Conversation is life, language is the deepest thing. . . . Every conversation is a shared narrative, a thing that surges forward, too dense to allow space for the unspoken, the sterile. The talk is unconditional, the participants drawn in completely. This is a way of speaking that takes such pure joy in its own openness and ardor that we begin to feel these people are discussing language itself.

So to the concluding paragraph of the novel (prior to the Epilogue), at the Parthenon:

People come through the gateway, people in streams and clusters, in mass assemblies. No one seems to be alone. This is a place to enter in crowds, seek company and talk. Everyone is talking. I move past the scaffolding and walk down the steps, hearing one language after another, rich, harsh, mysterious, strong. This is what we bring to the temple, not prayer or chant or slaughtered rams. Our offering is language.

Clearly this kind of crowd, and this way of conversing are, alike, admirable and much to be desired. But it is not entirely churlish to point out that the American onlookers cannot be assumed to have understood a word that was spoken. This is communicating community as exotic (and idealized) spectacle. Or perhaps we might say that it is like a Catholic mass, where it doesn’t matter to the experience if the communicants do not understand the Latin words. The point here is that back in DeLillo’s America where people do understand the words, there is precious little communicating—or communing. “Discourse between people” has gone; “families” have gone; as a result, following DeLillo’s line of thinking, the novel has become, effectively, redundant. “So we turn to the news”—which is just what DeLillo has done in *Underworld*.

I’ll come back to this, but I want to call on some more of Bill’s pronouncements about the novelist. There’s a curious knot that binds novelists and terrorists. Years ago I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated. . . . What terrorists gain, novelists lose. The degree to which they influence mass consciousness is the extent of our decline as shapers of sensibility and thought. The danger they represent equals our own failure to be dangerous. . . . Beckett is the last writer to shape the way

we think and see. After him, the major work involves midair explosions and crumbled buildings. This is the new tragic narrative.

Quoting Bill—I know. But I feel that DeLillo is standing dangerously close to him. *Libra* was only the culmination of a long-standing—and perfectly legitimate—fascination with terrorism and terrorists (just such an interest gave us *The Secret Agent* and *Under Western Eyes*); but Bill's proposition that the novelist once was a fully operative terrorist who now, in his neutered state, has ceded his ground to real terrorists, is, when thought about, ridiculous. Henry James may be said, I would suppose, to have "altered the inner life of the culture," yet it would be absurd to make of him even a metaphorical terrorist. In *Americana* the (failed) writer, Brand, wants to write a novel that will "detonate in the gut of America like a fiery bacterial bombshell." But he didn't; and anyway, it wouldn't. This is all metaphor. With much "Blasting" and fulminating gnashing of teeth, Wyndham Lewis tried to demolish the difference between literary and literal terrorism; and, rebarbatively enough, failed. Perhaps DeLillo might consider giving him a careful, pensive read. And to suggest that midair explosions and crumbling walls are the novels de nos jours is, really, mad if meant seriously (silly if not). Owen Brademas, seemingly privileged as wise in *The Names*, aphoristically muses: "In this century the writer has carried on a conversation with madness. We might almost say of the twentieth-century writer that he aspires to madness." To the real, loony, Moonie, Khomeini, Red Guard thing? Aspire to that? Come now.

Bill Gray betakes himself to the Middle East, now engaged in some of that clandestine activity so important in DeLillo's fiction. (In a *Rolling Stone* article of 1983 DeLillo suggested that the great leaps in science and technology had helped to create a kind of "clandestine mentality. We all go underground to some extent. In an era of the massive codification and storage of data, we are all keepers and yielders of secrets." It is the mentality of many of his characters.) But he succumbs to a "helpless sense that he was fading into thinness and distance." So he does—and so does the novel. It isn't going anywhere, so it just peters out—as they used to say when a vein of ore came to an end. The best of novelists can produce a disappointing book (Pynchon gave us *Vineland*), and it would be gross to go on belaboring *Mao II*. But I do think the book opens up certain problems which become rather important in *Underworld*, and in this connection I fear I must make a final negative comment.

An ancillary character named Karen (an ex-Moonie) figures in the book. Drifting around New York, she comes upon a "tent city" in a park. It is a shantytown abode of the down-and-outs, the thrown-aways, the insulted and the injured, the despised and rejected—the human junk of the modern city. We get it itemized. "There was a bandshell with bedding on the stage, a few bodies stirring, a lump of inert bedding suddenly wriggling upward and there's a man on his knees coughing blood. . . .Stringy blood loop-

ing from his mouth." And so on. Karen goes into a nearby tenement. "In the loft she went through many books of photographs, amazed at the suffering she found. Famine, fire, riot, war. These were the never ceasing subjects. . . .It was suffering through and through." A voice says "It's just like Beirut." At the end, a photographer is driving through the real Beirut. "The streets run with images. . . .The placards get bigger as the car moves into deeply cramped spaces, into many offending smells, open sewers, rubber burning, a dog all ribs and tongue and lying still and gleaming with green flies. . . ." No one doubts the reality of unspeakable suffering and squalor; but just heaping it up in a novel in this way seems a bit easy, even opportunistic, and, by the same token, slightly distasteful. It begins to read like a form of atrocity tourism. I suppose that if you think that people "need bad news" and "don't need the novel," then you may as well give them lists of horrors to sup on. But, even then, it doesn't work like "news." A direct report from Beirut by Robert Fisk of the *London Independent* has far more impact than anything in DeLillo's novel. But "news" is what we get in *Underworld*.

News is, of course, "bad news, sensationalistic news, overwhelming news"; and, in the relative absence of significant characters or narrative plot (matters to which I will return), the book presents us with a string of more or less sensationalist news items or crises from 1951 to, presumably, the present day—as another way of getting at "the American mystery." The shock of Sputnik, the Cuban missile crisis, the Kennedy assassination, the Madison anti-Vietnam riot, civil rights marches and police brutality, the midair explosion of the Challenger space shuttle, the Texas Highway murders, the great New York blackout, J. Edgar Hoover, AIDS, and so on—and over everything the shadow of "the bomb" ("they had brought something into the world that out-imagined the mind." Again, it seems as if the novelist is ceding his imaginative rights to a superior power). There is also a certain amount of atrocity tourism—"They saw a prostitute whose silicone breast had leaked, ruptured and finally exploded one day, sending a polymer whiplash across the face of the man on top of her. . . .They saw a man who'd cut his eyeball out of its socket because it contained a satanic symbol." Near the end, a visit to a "Museum of Mishapens" in Russia, which houses damaged fetuses and victims of radiation from near the early test sites, allows DeLillo to present us with a gallery of grotesques ("there is the cyclops. The eye centered, the ears below the chin, the mouth completely missing. Brain is also missing"), and a clinic full of "disfigurements, leukemias, thyroid cancers, immune systems that do not function." I don't know if such a place exists, but in DeLillo's dark world it seems plausible. And that's the agenda. Bad news, and "suffering through and through."

As I am sure readers know, DeLillo presents his "news" items in a roughly reverse order. After the opening ballgame in 1951, there are six sections which run—Spring 1992; Mid 1981s to early 1990s; Spring 1978; Summer 1974; Selected Fragments Public and Private in 1950s and 1960s (twenty-one of these, discontinuous and unrelated);

Fall 1951 to Summer 1952; and an Epilogue with a more or less presentday—or timeless—feel to it. Two things to say about this. Of course novelists can and often should disrupt and rearrange unilinear chronology—think only of the scrambled narrative of Conrad's *Nostromo*. And of course, something is bound to happen if you juxtapose apparently unrelated fragments—you might sense an uncanny similarity, or register an ironic parallelism (Henry in his court; Falstaff in his tavern); or you might experience a shock of cognitive dissonance, or a disorienting sense of incongruity. But in a work of art, unless it is avowedly or manifestly aleatory, you usually feel that the scramblings and wrenched juxtapositionings have some point. Conrad was certainly getting at late Victorian attitudes to history and progress in a very corrosive way. But—it may of course be my obtuseness—I just did not see the point of DeLillo's randomizings. He has admitted to being strongly influenced by the cinematic techniques of Jean-Luc Godard, and in an interview with Tom LeClair (referred to in LeClair's very interesting book on DeLillo called *In the Loop*), DeLillo said that the cinematic qualities which influenced his writing were “the strong image, the short ambiguous scene . . . the artificiality, the arbitrary choices of some directors, the cutting and editing.” These qualities are all evident in *Underworld*, and the phrase I would hold on to in particular is “arbitrary choices.” At the end of the opening account of the ballgame, a drunk is running the bases and leaps into a slide. “All the fragments collect around his airborne form. Shouts, bat-cracks, full bladders and stray yawns, the sand-grain manyness of things that can't be counted.” In an over eight hundred-page book, you may be sure that DeLillo has quite a go at “the sand-grain manyness of things,” and the sheer voracious energy of his appetitive attention is genuinely impressive. But the fragments do not collect around anything—unless you think that “Cold War America” will do the gathering-in work of the airborne drunk.

DeLillo must feel, I suppose, that he is assembling some of what he calls “those distracted events that seemed to mark the inner nature of the age.” Where the novelist can go crucially one better than the news reporter is, presumably, in imaginatively illuminating the “underground network” of society, intimating the unofficial history of the period, tracing out some of those power flows, “under the surface, far beneath the level you and I live on.” Surface events may seem random and discrete enough—a ballgame here, an atom-bomb test therebut, ah! what if they are in some way connected? DeLillo's fiction has long concerned itself with what Axton, in *The Names*, calls “Complex systems, endless connections,” and that last word is used to exhaustion in *Underworld*. Indeed it would not be entirely facetious to say that if anything does connect the fragments of American “manyness” that pack the book, it is the word connection. Far-flung listeners to the ballgame commentary are “connected by the pulsing voice on the radio”; “The Jesuits taught me to examine things for second meanings and connections”; “technology . . . connects you in your well-pressed suit to the things that slip through the world otherwise unperceived”; “I wrote down

all the occult connections that seemed to lead to thirteen”; “the feel of a baseball in your hand, going back a while, connecting many things”; “They sensed there was a connection between this game and some staggering event that might take place on the other side of the world” (There you are!); “she drew News and Rumors and Catastrophes into the spotless cotton pores of her habit and veil. All the connections intact” (this is a nun); “‘Knowing what we know.’ ‘What do we know?’ Simms said. . . . ‘That everything's connected,’ Jesse said.” The baseball which, as I am sure you know, “passes through” the novel from owner to owner, is said to make “connections.” “He was surrounded by enemies. Not enemies but connections, a network of things and people”; “He felt he'd glimpsed some horrific system of connections in which you can't tell the difference between one thing and another”; “Because everything connects in the end, or only seems to, or seems to only because it does.” “Find the links. It's all linked” (that's J. Edgar Hoover). Then, finally, on the world wide web: “There is no space or time out there, or in here, or wherever she is. There are only connections. Everything is connected. . . . Everything is connected in the end.” There is lots more about “undividable patterns”; “something . . . saying terrible things about forces beyond your control”; “underground plots,” not to mention a Conspiracy Theory Cafe; and—of course—paranoia. “There's genuine paranoia. That's the only genuine anything I can see here.” “He thought of the photograph of Nixon and wondered if the state had taken on the paranoia of the individual or was it the other way around?”; “Paranoid. Now he knew what it meant, this word that was banded and bruited so easily, and he sensed the connections being made around him, all the objects and shaped silhouettes and levels of knowledge—not knowledge exactly but insidious intent. But not that either—some deeper meaning that existed solely to keep him from knowing what it was.” There are so many forms and manifestations of paranoid consciousness (or paranoid voices) in this novel that I abandoned my list of examples since it promised to be not much shorter than the book itself. It may be claimed that paranoia is as American as violence and apple pie (as I believe they used to say), but in the case of *Underworld* it gives the book a rather wearingly uniform paranoid texture. Even figures who say they aren't paranoid, pretend to be. This is the significance of my third epigraph. Matt and Eric do secret underground work at a missile site, and Eric enjoys spreading “astounding rumours” about terrible things happening to workers at the Nevada Test Site who lived “downwind” of the aboveground shots and were exposed to fallout: “here and there a kid with a missing limb or whatnot. And a healthy woman that goes to wash her hair and it all comes out in her hands. . . . Old Testament outbreaks of great red boils. . . . And coughing up handfuls of blood. You look in your cupped hands and you see a pint of raddled blood.”

“You think the stories are true?”

“No,” Eric said.

“Then why do you spread them?”

“For the tone, of course.”



"For the edge."

"For the edge. The bite. The existential burn."

This sounds like playing at dread, thereby devaluing it; and you may feel that it would be better kept for the real thing. Now it may be reprehensible on my part, but in Eric's answers I hear DeLillo. It certainly gives his work its "tone," ever alert to hints of "insidious intent"; but finally the paranoia comes to seem factitious and manufactured, we weary at the iterated insistence on never-explained "connections," and the "existential burn" fades.

At the risk of repeating what may have been already endlessly pointed out, in all this DeLillo is engaged in a prolonged and repetitious quoting, or reworking, of Pynchon (for whose work he has stated his admiration). Just to remind you—in *Gravity's Rainbow* Pynchon diagnosed two dominant states of mind—paranoia and anti-paranoia. Paranoia is, in terms of the book, "nothing less than the onset, the leading edge of the discovery that everything is connected, everything in the Creation, a secondary illumination—not yet blindingly one, but connected." Of course, everything depends on the nature of the connection, the intention revealed in the pattern; and just what it is that may connect everything in Pynchon's world is what worries his main characters, like Slothrop. Paranoia is also related to the Puritan obsession with seeing signs in everything, particularly signs of an angry God. Pynchon makes the connection clear by referring to "a Puritan reflex of seeking other orders behind the visible, also known as paranoia." The opposite state of mind is anti-paranoia, "where nothing is connected to anything, a condition not many of us can bear for long." As figures move between the System and the Zone, they oscillate between paranoia and anti-paranoia, shifting from a seething blank of unmeaning to the sinister apparent legibility of an unconsoling labyrinthine pattern or plot. In *V* these two dispositions of mind are embodied in Stencil and Benny Profane, respectively (and behind them are those crucially generative figures for the western novel—Don Quixote and Sancho Panza). And there is the poignant figure of Oedipa Maas at the end of *The Crying of Lot 49*: "Either Oedipa in the orbiting ecstasy of a true paranoia, or a real Tristero. For there either was some Tristero beyond the appearance of the legacy of America, or there was just America and if there was just America then it seemed the only way she could continue, and manage to be at all relevant, was as an alien, unfurrowed, assumed full circle into some paranoia." Pynchon is a truly brilliant and richly imaginative historian and diagnostic analyst of binary, either—or thinking, and its attendant dangers. DeLillo, by contrast, rather bluntly disseminates a vaguely fraught atmosphere of defensive voices, sidelong looks, and intimations of impending eeriness. And, crucially, *Underworld* has no Tristero.

There is one character in *Underworld* who stoutly insists that he is free of all paranoid delusions. "I lived responsibly in the real. I didn't accept this business of life as a fiction. . . . I hewed to the texture of collective knowledge, took

faith from the solid and availing stuff of our experience. . . . I believed we could know what was happening to us. . . . I lived in the real. The only ghosts I let in were local ones." This is Nick Shay, intermittently a first-person narrator, and effectively the main figure in the book (the last section recreates his Bronx childhood—which must overlap with DeLillo's—and culminates with his shooting a man). But Nick is not your sane, well-rounded, genial empiricist. For a start, the local ghosts loom large, as his brother Matt explains, telling "how Nick believed their father was taken out to the marshes and shot, and how this became the one plot, the only conspiracy that big brother could believe in. Nick could not afford to succumb to a general distrust. . . . Let the culture indulge in cheap conspiracy theories. Nick had the enduring stuff of narrative, the thing that doesn't have to be filled in with speculation and hearsay." But this "narrative" is no more securely grounded than the conviction of the man who sees Gorbachev's birthmark as being a map of Latvia and thus a sign of the imminent collapse of the Soviet Union. Nick has simply put all his superstitions into one basket. Welcome to the club, Nick.

But as a character, Nick is just not there at all; and, more to the point, nor does he want to be. Like nearly all DeLillo's characters—call them voices—he seems to aspire to the condition of anonymity. "He was not completely connected to what he said and this put an odd and dicey calm in his remarks." This is said of a character in *Mao II*, but it applies to Nick, indeed across the board. Another figure in *Mao II* says: "If you've got the language of being smart, you'll never catch a cold or get a parking ticket or die," and defensive "smart language" is what Nick talks. It is a form of cultivated self-alienation, and is common in DeLillo's world. Lyle is one of the players in *Players*, and there is "a formality about his movements, a tiller-distinct precision" which preserves a "distance he's perfected." To keep himself at arm's length he engages in tough-guy routines at work. As does Nick. "I made breathy gutter threats from the side of my mouth. . . . Or I picked up the phone in the middle of a meeting and pretended to arrange the maiming of a colleague." Even, perhaps especially, when he has to convey something important—such as the fact that he has killed a man. "I had a rash inspiration then, unthinking, and did my mobster voice. 'In udder words I took him off da calendar.'" Invent-and-spread-the-bad-news Eric "affected a side of the mouth murmur," but that's the way to talk round here. A woman artist has "a tough mouth, a smart mouth"—pity anyone who hasn't.

"He gave me a flat-eyed look with a nice tightness to it"—compare the supremely "indifferent" work of Andy Warhol which "looks off to heaven in a marvelous flat-eyed gaze." Nice. Marvelous. Rub out the affect. Be "laconic"; go for "a honed nonchalance." Nick reads approvingly in a woman's eyes an "unwillingness to allow the possibility of surprise." Henry James spoke of "our blessed capacity for bewilderment," recognizing it as the essential precondition for true learning. Well forget that, all ye who enter DeLillo's world. The thing here is never to be caught off-guard or risk being wrong-footed. Seal yourself off. "We

talked on the phone. In monosyllables. We sounded like spies passing coded messages." It's as if it is too risky, no—impossible—to speak in a natural, unself-consciously communicating voice, such as Axton imagines he is hearing at the Parthenon. Intimacy seems not a possibility, perhaps not a desirability. Nick's father "always kept a distance. . . . Like he's somewhere else even when he's standing next to you." Nick is felt by his younger brother to have "the stature of danger and rage," but this hardly constitutes an identity. He admits "I've always been a country of one," maintaining "a measured separation." He uses an Italian word to explain his temperament to his wife: "lontananza. Distance or remoteness, sure. But as I use the word, as I interpret it, hard-edged and finegrained, it's the perfected distance of the gangster, the syndicate mobster—the made man. Once you're a made man, you don't need the constant living influence of sources outside yourself. You're all there. You're made. You're a sturdy Roman wall." It's not clear that anything in the book would disapprove of, or regret, this aspiration to cultivate just such a hard, self-dehumanizing remoteness. Indeed, at the very end, Nick says: "I long for the days of disorder . . . when I was alive on the earth . . . heedless . . . dumb-muscled and angry and real.. when I walked real streets and did things slap-bang and felt angry and ready all the time, a danger to others and a distant mystery to myself." Nothing wrong with this, if that's how you feel—but you cannot expect such a limited and self-restrictive presence—or voice—to maintain a thread of human interest as the book trawls through the news archives. (DeLillo has owned to having some of this "lontananza" himself, intimating that it might have something to do with his having been brought up an Italian Catholic. "I suppose what I felt for much of this period was a sense of unbelonging, of not being part of any official system. Not as a form of protest but as a kind of separateness. It was an alienation, but not a political alienation, predominantly. It was more spiritual." By coincidence, I read this in the *Guardian* in a piece by Hugo Young, also brought up a Catholic. "I also absorbed and relished the sidelong stance, the somewhat distanced obliqueness as regards the established state, which the Catholic inheritance conferred." You feel DeLillo would agree.)

In bringing us voices rather than more traditionally delineated characters, DeLillo is working in an honorable line—*Ulysses* is, after all, a novel of voices. And DeLillo catches and transcribes American voices as no other writer can. You feel that, as with Bill Gray, it makes "his heart shake to hear these things in the street or bus or dime store, the uninventable poetry, inside the pain, of what people say." His ear is, indeed, marvellously attuned to the poetry inside the pain—or, as I sometimes feel, the panic inside the plastic—"of what people say." For some of the exchanges between voices in his book—flat, deadpan, comic, menacing, weird, cryptic, gnomic, enigmatic, absurd, disturbing, moving—you can think of Beckett (or Ionesco, or Pinter) in America. But there is a risk. Speaking specifically of the characters in his *End Zone*, but by implication more generally, DeLillo said they "have a

made-up nature. They are pieces of jargon. They engage in wars of jargon with each other. There is a mechanical element, a kind of fragmented self-consciousness." Tom LeClair, who conducted the interview, comments: "without stable identities as sources of actual communication, the characters often seem, like one character's favorite cliché, 'commissioned, as it were, by language itself.'" *End Zone* was a seventies novel—the time we were hearing a lot about our being "serfs du langage" and "being spoken" rather than "speaking." But DeLillo sometimes takes this very far, and a robotic feeling starts to creep in. And in *Underworld*, the many voices start to seem just part of one, tonally invariant, American Voice. There are hundreds of names in the book, but I would be prepared to bet that—apart from the real figures such as Sinatra, Hoover, Lenny Bruce, Mick Jagger—none will be remembered six months after reading the novel. As I find, for instance, are Pynchon's Stencil and Benny Profane; Oedipa Maas(!); Tyrone Slothrop and Roger Mexico; and—I predict—Mason and Dixon. It is not a question of anything so old-fashioned as "well-rounded characters"; rather I'm thinking of memorably differentiated consciousnesses.

The real protagonist of this novel is "waste." I don't know when garbage moved to center stage in art (as opposed to occasional litter). In a recent exhibition I came across "Household Trashcan" by Arman dated 1960, and it was, indeed, trash in a Plexiglas box. A book called *Rubbish Theory* by Michael Thompson came out in 1979, and I made use of it in a small book on Pynchon I wrote shortly thereafter. For Pynchon is the real lyricist of rubbish. No one can write as poignantly or elegiacally about, for example, a second-hand car lot, or an old mattress. And what other writer, in the course of a long and moving passage about Advent in wartime, would consider embarking on a curiously moving meditation triggered off by the thought of "thousands of old used toothpaste tubes" (in *Gravity's Rainbow*)? Many actual rubbish heaps or tips appear in his work—not as symbolic wastelands (though those are there too), but exactly as "rubbish." One of Tristero's enigmatic acronyms is W.A.S.T.E., and by extension Pynchon's work is populated by many of the categories (or noncategories) of people whom society regards as "rubbish," socially useless junk: bums, hoboes, drifters, transients, itinerants, vagrants; the disaffected, the disinherited, the discarded; derelicts, losers, victims—collectively "the preterite," all those whom, for the Puritans, God in His infinite wisdom has passed over, overlooked. Pynchon forces us to reassess, if not revalue, all those things—and people—we throw away. And DeLillo follows in the master's footsteps.

There is a memorable trash bag in *White Noise*:

An oozing cube of semi-mangled cans, clothes hangers, animal bones and other refuse. The bottles were broken, the cartons flat. Product colors were undiminished in brightness and intensity. Fats, juices and heavy sludges seeped through layers of pressed vegetable matter. I felt like an archaeologist about to sift through a finding of tool fragments and assorted cave trash. . . . I

unfolded the bag cuffs, released the latch and lifted out the bag. The full stench hit me with shocking force. Was this ours? Did it belong to us? Had we created it? I took the bag out to the garage and emptied it. The compressed bulk sat there like an ironic modern sculpture, massive, squat, mocking. . . . I picked through it item by item. . . . why did I feel like a household spy? Is garbage so private? Does it glow at the core with personal heat, with signs of one's deepest nature, clues to secret yearnings, humiliating flaws? What habits, fetishes, addictions, inclinations? What solitary acts, behavioral ruts? I found crayon drawings of a figure with full breasts and male genitals. . . . I found a banana skin with a tampon inside. Was this the dark underside of consumer consciousness?

Terrific! DeLillo absolutely cresting. But in *Underworld* it all gets rather labored and repetitious.

Nick Shay is professionally involved with waste, which, perhaps not very subtly, allows for heaps of the stuff in the novel. "My firm was involved in waste. We were waste handlers, waste traders, cosmologists of waste. . . . Waste is a religious thing." He lives it; he thinks it. He and his wife "saw products as garbage even when they sat gleaming on store shelves, yet unbought." His workmate Brain goes to a landfill site on Staten Island: "He looked at all that soaring garbage and knew for the first time what his job was all about. . . . To understand all this. To penetrate this secret. . . . He saw himself for the first time as a member of an esoteric order." Another workmate, Big Sims, complains that, now, "Everything I see is garbage."

"You see it everywhere because it is everywhere."

"But I didn't see it before."

"You're enlightened now. Be grateful."

Nick's hard-hat humor never lets him down. Perhaps inevitably, there is a former "garbage guerrilla," now "garbage hustler," with his theories:

Detwiler said that cities rose on garbage, inch by inch, gaining elevation through the decades as buried debris increased. Garbage always got layered over or pushed to the edges, in a room or in a landscape. But it had its own momentum. It pushed back. It pushed into every space available, dictating construction patterns and altering systems of ritual. And it produced rats and paranoia.

Everywhere, there are abandoned structures and artifacts—"the kind of human junk that deepens the landscape, makes it sadder and lonelier"; along with any number of Pynchon's "preterite"—"wastelings of the lost world, the lost country that exists right here in America." Perhaps unsurprisingly, there is the contention that "waste is the secret history, the underhistory" of our society. And Nick maintains that "what we excrete comes back to consume us." An unattributed, oracular voice (DeLillo's?) announces at one point: "All waste defers to shit. All waste aspires to the condition of shit." Nick's final appearance in the novel is—of course—at a "waste facility," where he and his

granddaughter have brought "the unsorted slop, the gut squalor of our lives" for recycling. The light streaming into the shed gives the machines "a numinous glow," and the moment prompts a final meditation. "Maybe we feel a reverence for waste, for the redemptive qualities of the things we use and discard. Look how they come back to us, alight with a kind of brave aging." Clearly there is waste and waste, since we hardly think of "shit" as coming back to us "with a kind of brave aging."

What there is is waste turned into art—"We took junk and saved it for art," says one artist in the book. And of course, there are the Watts Towers—"a rambling art that has no category"—visited once by Nick, and once by the artist, Klara. "She didn't know a thing so rucked in the vernacular could have such an epic quality."

She didn't know what this was exactly. It was an amusement park, a temple complex and she didn't know what else. A Delhi bazaar and Italian street feast maybe. A place riddled with epiphanies, that's what it was.

And that is what waste primarily is for DeLillo—epiphanic. That, presumably, is why "waste is a religious thing."

For a Catholic the Epiphany is the manifestation of Christ to the Magi—by extension any manifestation of a god or demigod. Joyce defined an epiphany as "a sudden spiritual manifestation," but without a specifically religious implication. It occurs when a configuration of ordinary things suddenly takes on an extra glow of meaning; when, in Emerson's terms, a "day of facts" suddenly becomes a "day of diamonds," leaving you with, perhaps, a nonarticulable sense of "something understood" (George Herbert). A writer can create secular epiphanic moments—Jack Gladney's exploration of his garbage is an epiphany of a rather dark kind. But simply asserting that something is "riddled with epiphanies" does not, of itself, bring the precious glow. Epiphanies have to be caused rather than insisted on, and *Underworld* suffers somewhat from this failing.

Whether DeLillo still is, or no longer is, a Catholic is none of my business; but he is clearly disinclined to abandon what seems like a proto-religious response to the world. Mystery is a much-cherished word in his fiction. "Mysteries of time and space" is how he begins his essay on the Kennedy assassination, later saying "Establish your right to the mystery; document it; protect it." In his statement of admiration for some of the great modernist works—*Ulysses*, *The Death of Virgil*, *The Sound and the Fury*, *Under the Volcano*—he says: "These books open out onto some larger mystery. I don't know what to call it. Maybe Broch would call it 'the world beyond speech.'" His fiction is eager to sense out moments in which existence begins to turn mysterious. Pynchon also does this of course—economically, but to quite dazzling effect in *The Crying of Lot 49*, for example. No one can better catch that slowly rising sense of the "je ne sais quoi de la sinistre" which can creep into a seemingly ordinary scene. De-



Lillo seems keener on an almost overtly religious dimension. For instance, in *White Noise*, Gladney hears his young daughter murmuring in her sleep—"words that seemed to have a ritual meaning, part of a verbal spell or ecstatic chant."

Toyota Celica.

A long moment passed before I realized this was the name of an automobile. The truth only amazed me more. The utterance was beautiful and mysterious, gold-shot with looming wonder. It was like the name of an ancient power in the sky, tablet-carved in cuneiform. It made me feel that something hovered. But how could this be? A simple brand name, an ordinary car. How could these near-nonsense words, murmured in a child's sleep, make me sense a meaning, a presence? She was only repeating some TV voice. . . . Whatever its source, the utterance struck me with the impact of a moment of splendid transcendence.

That's another word favored by DeLillo: "he liked the voices, loud, crude, funny, often powerfully opinionated, all speechmakers these men, actors, declaimers, masters of insult, reaching for some moment of transcendence." In some ways, DeLillo is, indeed, some kind of latter-day American urban Transcendentalist. The closing pages of *White Noise* touch on matters of religion, or religious-type feelings, in three ways. First: Gladney says to a nun in hospital: "Here you still wear the old uniform. The habit, the veil, the clunky shoes. You must believe in tradition. The old heaven and hell, the Latin mass. The Pope is infallible, God created the world in six days. The great old beliefs." The nun gives him a dusty answer, and explains:

"It is our task in the world to believe things no one else takes seriously. To abandon such beliefs completely, the human race would die. That is why we are here. A tiny minority. To embody old things, old beliefs. The devil, the angels, heaven, hell. If we did not pretend to believe these things, the world would collapse."

"Pretend?"

"Of course pretend. Do you think we are stupid? Get out from here."

She adds that "Hell is when no one believes. There must always be believers." It is an interesting position; and one rather wonders where DeLillo himself stands on this. Shortly after, in the last chapter, there is what may or may not be a miracle when Gladney's young son rides his tricycle mindlessly across a busy highway, and survives unhurt. After this the Gladneys start going to the overpass, joining other people watching the sunsets in seemingly patient expectation.

This waiting is introverted, uneven, almost backward and shy, tending toward silence. What else do we feel? Certainly there is awe, it is all awe, it transcends previous categories of awe, but we don't know whether we are watching in wonder or dread, we don't know what we are watching or what it means, we don't know whether it is

permanent, a level of experience to which we will gradually adjust, into which our uncertainty will eventually be absorbed, or just some atmospheric weirdness.

Immediately after this, the novel concludes in a supermarket, where there is "agitation and panic in the aisles" because all the items have been rearranged. "There is a sense of wandering now, an aimless and haunted mood, sweet-tempered people taken to the edge." There is of course an element of comic exaggeration in all this; but I wonder how comic the very last lines of the book are, as the shoppers approach the cash point.

A slowly moving line, satisfying, giving us time to glance at the tabloids in the racks. Everything we need that is not food or love is here in the tabloid racks. The tales of the supernatural and the extraterrestrial. The miracle vitamins, the cures for obesity. The cults of the famous and the dead.

Ironic? Or perhaps not. One character, Murray Siskind, goes to the supermarket as to a church. "This place recharges us spiritually, it prepares us, it's gateway or pathway. Look how bright. It's full of psychic data." It is here that he seeks to fulfill his ambition—"I want to immerse myself in American magic and dread." Siskind is the most eloquent spokesman for "the American mystery." As a lecturer in popular culture he is an amusing character. He is also a sinister one, as when he persuades Gladney to attempt a murder. Yet, according to LeClair in *In the Loop*: "It's in Siskind's realm, the supermarket, that the tabloids, which DeLillo states are 'closest to the spirit of the book,' are found. These tabloids, DeLillo says, 'ask profoundly important questions about death, the afterlife, God, worlds and space, yet they exist in an almost Pop Art atmosphere,' an atmosphere that Siskind helps decode." DeLillo writes of "the revenge of popular culture on those who take it too seriously," and I wonder what he really thinks of the low lunacies of the tabloids. Has the "religious sense" come to this?

In *Underworld*, the lights from night-flying B-52s give Klara "a sense of awe, a child's sleepy feeling of mystery." The fireball from a missile—"like some nameless faceless whatever"—so impresses a boy that "It made him want to be a Catholic." Matt believes in "the supernatural underside of the arms race. Miracles and visions." Old postbeats are "still alert to signs of marvels astir in the universe." In his Jesuit school, Nick studies "thaumatology, or the study of wonders." No doubt drawing on his Jesuit education, Nick discusses *The Cloud of Unknowing* with an unsuspecting pick-up. "I read this book and began to think of God as a secret, a long unlighted tunnel, on and on. This was my wretched attempt to understand our blankness in the face of God's enormity. . . . I tried to approach God through his secret, his unknowability. . . . We approach God through his unmadness . . . we cherish his negation." (In theology, I believe this approach to God is called apophasis—it feels a little out of place here.) The need or hunger for some kind of "religious" experience

seems ubiquitous. "Sometimes faith needs a sign. There are times when you want to stop working at faith and just be washed in a blowing wind that tells you everything."

But in DeLillo's world there is more than one kind of faith or belief. At the end, when Sister Edgar learns that a young vagrant girl, Esmeralda, has been brutally raped, murdered, and thrown from a roof, she "believes she is falling into crisis, beginning to think it is possible that all creation is a spurt of blank matter that chances to make an emerald planet here, a dead star there, with random waste in between. The serenity of immense design is missing from her life, authorship and moral form. . . . It is not a question of disbelief. There is another kind of belief, a second force, insecure, untrusting, a faith that is springfed by the things we fear in the night, and she thinks she is succumbing." In DeLillo's world, where there is always "some unshaped anxiety" hovering, where things are as often "ominous" as they are "shining," it is this other kind of belief which seems to have the stronger purchase on people. Yet the novel ends—again—with a sort of miracle which both is—and-isn't-but-might-be an epiphany. The beatified face of the dead Esmeralda appears on a billboard whenever a passing commuter train's lights fall on it. Watching crowds gasp and moan—"the holler of unstoppered belief." The skeptical Sister Grace explains it as "a trick of light," but Sister Edgar feels "an angelus of joy." And so the key question is posed—the last of many in a long book:

And what do you remember, finally, when everyone has gone home and the streets are empty of devotion and hope, swept by river wind? Is the memory thin and bitter and does it shame you with its fundamental untruth—all nuance and silhouette? Or does the power of transcendence linger, the sense of an event that violates natural forces, something holy that throbs on the hot horizon, the vision you crave because you need a sign to stand against your doubt?

Sister Edgar dies "peacefully," and we assume happy in her recovered faith. And the book ends there (apart from a short, visionary coda). For me, the novel deliquesces into something close to sentimental piety; and here, perhaps, is the source of my reservations about DeLillo's writing in this book. It can either be very hard—all those "marvelous" flat-eyed looks and that smart, brittle talk; or it goes rather soft, inserting easy intimations of transcendence. In a little essay called "*The Power of History*," which appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*, DeLillo wrote: "The novel is the dream release, the suspension of reality that history needs to escape its own brutal confinements. . . . At its root level, fiction is a kind of religious fanaticism, with elements of obsession, superstition and awe. Such qualities will sooner or later state their adversarial relationship with history." But, having pretty much given up on people and plots (conventional ones, anyway), DeLillo in *Underworld* is totally reliant on history from the opening events of 1951, onwards (he has "turned to the news"). By all means be adversarial to the so-called official versions of the times—as Melville said in *Billy Budd*,

such histories have a way of "considerately" "shading off" any discreditable events into "the historical background." But it seems odd to write of "the brutal confinements of history" per se, particularly when your subject is, manifestly, Cold War America. And I cannot see it as the novelist's task to substitute "religious fanaticism" for the cold prose of the real. There is—God knows—enough of it around already.

#### N.H. Reeve (essay date 1999)

SOURCE: "Oswald Our Contemporary: Don DeLillo's *Libra*" in *An Introduction to Contemporary Fiction*, edited by Rod Mengham, Polity Press, 1999, pp. 135–49.

[In the following essay, Reeve traces the cultural implications in *Libra* of the relationship between the contemporary fictional practices and the "Oswald case," or the immense body of commentary on the events surrounding President Kennedy's assassination.]

To parody a famous question: where were you when you first read a book, or saw a film or TV programme, about the assassination of John F. Kennedy? For those old enough to remember 1963, the famous question itself can evoke both pathos and a certain satisfaction, as if the real motive for asking it were the desire for a shared history, for a collective experience which momentarily eclipsed the fragmented, privatized, consumerist banalities of contemporary existence. Being able to answer would be at some level a token of belonging, an affirmation that the space one occupied once took on the extra significance of interfusion with a whole world turned suddenly the same way. The memory would not only vibrate with the thrill of great events, but would open again its precious glimpse, in the midst of tragedy, of a redemptive social bond. At the same time, as Fredric Jameson has pointed out, what one may really be remembering is not so much the grief or trauma but the impact on consciousness of the global news media, unleashing their full forces for the first time; television in particular taking possession of the events and subjecting them to the repertoire of ubiquity, package, instant replay and reconstruction which now is taken for granted, but which constituted at the time an unbalancing lurch into a new way of receiving images and information.<sup>1</sup>

The parody of the famous question is intended to indicate the degree to which the assassination, in narrative and imagery, has permeated contemporary culture, and the depth of its implication in the arguments and practices of the 'postmodern' condition: indeed, as Art Simon implies in *Dangerous Knowledge: The JFK Assassination in Art and Film*, (1995), the failure of the official investigation by the Warren Commission to provide a convincing and coherent narrative, one which could stabilize the meaning of what had happened, may well have been one of the most powerful accelerators of the aesthetic and epistemological crises of the contemporary West. So many of the

characteristics most frequently assigned to postmodernism are gathered in to the assassination and its aftermath; the resistance to narrative closure, for example, since each attempt to pin the story down merely opens a fresh chapter; the incredulity towards totalizing explanations or 'metanarratives', in Lyotard's term, since the authority and legitimacy of explanation itself is put into question along with the motives of those offering one; a raft of what might really be called 'undecidable' questions (how many gunmen? how many shots? was Kennedy hit from behind or from the front? was there a conspiracy? was there a cover-up?), and the variety of reaction generated by them. There were paranoid theories on the one hand, each claiming to offer the authentic narrative which rival accounts had either failed to produce or had deliberately suppressed; and on the other hand, there was a faith, underpinning each competing theory, in certain fundamental forms of evidence which permit access to a Truth beneath the wearying play of signification. The Zapruder film of the motorcade, or the shape and size of bullet marks on the President's corpse, or the photograph of Oswald holding the alleged murder weapon, have all been appealed to in turn, as if they were unimpeachable guarantees which could protect the world from the chaos of arbitrariness.

As each theory is challenged by a fresh one, with its different interrogations of the same forms of evidence, each of these guarantees turns out to be as open to interpretation as everything else; previously accepted sources of meaning are compromised, 'facts' which are supposed to tell a single story start to release multiple stories, and each injection of doubt sets up its reflex of nostalgic rage for the pure and the uncontaminated—one of the defining features of American ideology from the beginning. It is the same kind of rage which, as is suggested in Don DeLillo's novel *Libra*,<sup>2</sup> motivated the conspirators against Kennedy in the first place, and which now infects those who attempt to trace them. Nicholas Branch, the character in *Libra* who is employed by the CIA to compile a secret history of the assassination complains, as he struggles through the morass of data and testimony that 'he wants a thing to be what it is' (p. 79), while his comment on the famous Zapruder film, that it shows 'the powerful moment of death with 'the surrounding blurs, patches and shadows' (p. 441), is in a way a comment on the whole condition of discourse established by the event, a condition in which death alone seems able to stand out amidst a swirl of contestables.

What kind of contribution does *Libra* make to these debates? DeLillo's previous novel, *White Noise*,<sup>3</sup> had presented a powerfully satirical account of a postmodern America whose inhabitants, uncertain of their identities in a bewildering world of information overload, attempt to gain some illusory sense of empowerment by fitting themselves and their life-histories into pre-formed narratives and scenarios, either of their own design or borrowed from the general culture, narratives of steady progress and clear outcome. The characters in *White Noise* act in so many ways like plotters and conspirators. They change

their appearances, or adapt their behaviour, to suit the images they wish to project and hide behind; or else they try to fend off disaster by anticipating and rehearsing for it, imagining its contours, so that the contingencies of reality can be neutralized or discounted in advance. Meanwhile, chemicals released in an environmental accident nearby start to seep insidiously into the body, producing a toxic reality which evades all efforts to shape and control it, a 'nebulous mass' inside the characters aggravating the paranoia from which they already suffer. *White Noise* examines the postmodern condition without ever presuming that the place from which it is examined is somehow free from its effects; even when the narrator, Jack Gladney, draws back in confused revulsion from his attempt to murder his supposed sexual rival, and tries to act humanely instead, his change of behaviour is open to the doubt that, rather than representing a true moral recovery, it might simply have been borrowed from another, equally thrilling scenario: 'It hadn't occurred to me that a man's attempts to redeem himself might prolong the elation he felt when he committed the crime he now sought to make up for' (*White Noise*, p. 315). *Libra* traces a good deal of this world of evasion, doubt and self-processing back to the figure of Lee Harvey Oswald; a figure who seems half-wittingly to have set postmodernity circulating around him.

The story of America's response to Oswald's presumed involvement in the assassination is essentially the story of a shift, from early efforts to secure him within certain historically specific narratives (as a former defector with a grudge, as a pro-Gastro secret agent, as the fall-guy for a particular plot), to a new set of more generalized psychological narratives, depicting him as a symptom of a deep national malaise; a morbid narcissism, an Oedipal anxiety, a fatherless man who kills the symbolic Father Oswald was frequently constructed as Kennedy's antitype the villainy of the one perversely matching and endorsing the 'virtue' of the other. Oswald sets difficulties both for those who want to read him as exemplary and those who see him as a one-off. He lied and manipulated, he laid false trails about himself; he had unpredictable spurts of decency, affection and viciousness; his delusions of grandeur left him bored and alienated; his impulsiveness seemed calculated and his calculations seemed impulsive; in a somehow touchingly suggestive way he had to empty his rubbish into other people's bins because he could not afford one of his own.

*Libra* not only has things to say about this continuing need on America's part to explain or protect itself from so elusive a phenomenon; it also appeared, whether by accident or design (1), at a special moment in the history of that need, the twenty-fifth anniversary year, just when fresh attention would have been expected, and from a writer who had after long obscurity recently established himself as an authoritative commentator. With such apertenances *Libra* seemed to be intervening almost in the manner of a magisterial summing-up, that which, as one publisher's blurb announced, 'the shaken American psyche



has been awaiting'. But the novel knows that magisterial summing-up remains exactly what the 'postmodernist' aspects of the case resist. Questions moreover inevitably arise as to how and to what extent the summaries offered by the novel to the history it works with could be distinguished from those offered by the paranoia which the novel sets out to confront. To write a novel about so slippery a subject as Oswald is not quite to challenge or subvert an authorized version of history, in the manner of numerous postmodern novels which the critic Linda Hutcheon has called 'historiographic metafiction'.<sup>4</sup> Such novels, her examples of which include Salman Rushdie's *Shame*, Graham Swift's *Waterland*, or J.M. Coetzee's *Foe*, do not use 'history' and 'fiction' to mean 'truth' and 'falsehood', but expose them to be alternative, parallel signifying systems, each with its own set of codes and conventions to produce meaning, and neither privileged over the other. But, as we have seen, the assassination-story not only has never had an authorized version that was not put under such challenge from the beginning, but has itself already done more than any postmodern novel to undermine the supposed authority of historical accounts and objective overviews. What might be called the 'Oswald case' arrives already implicated in contemporary fictional practices: *Libra* tries to distil from it, in the manner of a more traditional humanist novel, certain recurrent patterns and processes—to assist in clarifying things that consciousness finds hard to tolerate in their obscurity; while at the same time, writing from within postmodernism, to suggest how the sheer extent of these recurrences shows the Oswald case successfully reproducing itself, like a rogue cell, and infiltrating everywhere the world of its posterity.

To summarize briefly: there are three interwoven narratives in *Libra*: scenes from Oswald's life; scenes from the lives of those who, like his mother Marguerite, or Nicholas Branch, are trying to understand him afterwards; and scenes from the life of the conspiracy towards which the novel imagines him being drawn. The conspiracy is hatched by a group of former CIA agents nursing grievances about the Bay of Pigs fiasco in Cuba in 1961, when Kennedy pulled back at the last minute from fully supporting a CIA-backed attempt by Cuban exiles to invade the island and overthrow Castro. Win Everett, the leader of this disaffected group, plans to set up a 'failed' assassination attempt on the President which can be traced back to Castro supporters: a deliberate miss which can be made to look like a narrow escape, rousing American public opinion in outrage against Castro and forcing Kennedy to sanction a proper invasion. The brilliant perfection of this plot will have a cleansing effect on a sullied world. But to Everett's dismay and terror everything grows rapidly beyond his control.

Firstly, the most vengeful of the conspirators, T.J. Mackey, semi-secretly takes the plot over in order to kill Kennedy rather than miss him. Secondly, Oswald appears on the scene: Oswald, who seems to be the exact double of the mock-up 'assassin', the traceable fall-guy Everett had been creating on paper—an embittered loner with a gun

and a biography full of incriminating pro-Communist details. Oswald matches the desired profile so precisely as to induce 'a sensation of the eeriest panic' in Everett, 'a glimpse of the fiction he'd been devising . . . living prematurely in the world' (p. 179). A man-made 'Oswald' would have offered everything the conspiracy needed; a real one stirs up all the paranoid sense of impotence in these ageing CIA veterans which the conspiracy was designed to overcome. Have we really stumbled on this man fortuitously, or is he a spy, an informer, a plant from some parallel conspiracy to ours? How could he exist before we imagined him? Can we trust him to do what we require, or will he wander off on his own, or betray us? As the forces Everett has unleashed spiral away from him; and the confusions build to their tragic climax, Oswald, rather like the toxic chemicals in *White Noise*, increasingly seems to infect with a creeping disorder everything he touches; none of the plots can turn out properly once he is involved. Even Mackey, the legendarily ruthless military expert, who had planned to have Oswald silenced immediately after the assassination, is forced to watch him being noisily arrested instead. As Kirilenko, the KGB agent who interrogated Oswald when he defected to Russia, had mused, 'Unknowing, partly knowing, knowing but not saying, the boy had a quality of trailing chaos behind him, causing disasters without seeing them happen, making riddles of his life and possibly fools of us all' (p. 194).

Most of *Libra*'s narrative of Oswald's life stays close to what can be biographically verified, but Kirilenko's reflections occur during an episode which DeLillo has clearly invented, and which precisely for that reason may best gather together his work's concerns with pattern and resemblance: Oswald has been brought secretly to Moscow by the KGB to witness the interrogation of Powers, the pilot of the U-2 spy plane famously shot down over the Urals in 1960. The idea of Oswald's having such clandestine importance in one of the crucial episodes of the Cold War is imaginatively compelling almost because the truth was so different. The evidence assembled in Norman Mailer's biographical study *Oswald's Tale* (1995) suggests that Oswald was in fact terrified at first of the possible repercussions of the U-2 incident on himself, as an American living in Minsk, and secondly both relieved and rather annoyed when nothing ensued—annoyed because it confirmed his *lack* of importance to the world he had expected to create a sensation in by defecting. The Oswald of *Libra* may be fantasizing the whole thing—the text just allows us to think so—as compensation for the Soviets failure to take him seriously. After all, Oswald clearly believed he was destined for greatness; that his experience of both communist and capitalist systems gave him unique political insight; and that the neglect and humiliation he had suffered in his youth resembled those in the classic life-narratives of the future Leader—be it Hitler, Lenin, or Trotsky—on which he modelled himself. Now circumstances arise when the KGB have need of him—and on two counts: that he knows about the U-2 from his time as a Marine radar operator and can cross-check Power's claims about it, and that he is an American, able to read

the 'telltale inflections' (p. 194), the codes of specifically American demeanour in Powers which a Russian interrogator might miss. Oswald is called upon to act as a rather contradictory mixture of lie-detector and semiological critic—contradictory, since for the latter meanings operate only within the local cultural systems that produce them, while the former looks to the nervous system of the body, for example, to yield up universal and final meanings, visible to all and transcending cultural differences. Oswald thus finds himself placed, with comic precision, on a cusp between traditional and postmodernist ways of assessing someone else's discourse—and he cannot perform reliably in either capacity; Kirilenko realizes that Oswald's recollections of the U-2 are untrustworthy, while the comments Oswald makes on Powers's 'American' bearing seem deliberately composed for self referential effect: "'A hardworking, sincere, honest fellow . . . being crushed by the pressure exerted from opposite directions. That makes him typical, I guess.'" (p. 198).

Oswald seems to have chanced upon a figure who replicates in the flesh many of his fantasies of himself. He identifies with Powers on a number of levels. For a brief time the pilot had touched an apex of mastery; all the apparatus of American military might had risen to this point, beyond range of radar tracking, where his plane's spy cameras could penetrate secret places that would never know he had seen them. *Libra* began with the young Oswald riding the New York subway: 'He stood at the front of the first car, hands flat against the glass. The view down the tracks was a form of power. It was a secret and a power. The beams picked out secret things' (p. 13). These systems of power are supportive, protective, embracing; they insulate the self from the outside world, turn others into objects or targets. All the conspirators in the novel experience comparable sensations, whether the insulating power involves CIA euphemism (Everest always refers to Kennedy by his code-name, 'Lancer', in an effort to preempt humane inhibitions), or the superstitious rapture of David Ferrie's belief in destiny, or a film-scenario to imitate (as when the hitman Wayne Elko thinks of himself as one of the Seven Samurai, living by an elite warrior code and volunteering to protect an ignorant and ungrateful public; he fails in fact to shoot Oswald in the cinema when he was supposed to, because he was waiting to synchronize the shot with the swell and tension of the film they were both watching).

At the same time, these secretcies enable someone like Oswald to manipulate the forms that protect him, to work from a private agenda hidden inside the anonymity of his official role; his relish on the dark subway was not just for the metallic shriek of power but for his sense of the other passengers' ignorance of his thoughts and motives among them. He identifies with Powers's loyalty to himself in a crisis, his refusal to take his poison pill on being captured: 'You were right, good for you, disobey' (p. 196). Powers has stepped outside the plot he was cast in, talked when he was supposed to be silent, refused to subordinate himself to anyone else's scheme. Oswald sees nothing abject about

Powers, no sense that his collapse from awesome control into weakness and exposure offers a chastening reminder of human frailty; he sees rather how the whole sequence has given birth to a celebrity, celebrity which is a new and even more powerful hiding place for the self:

It occurred to Oswald that everyone called the prisoner by his full name . . . Once you did something notorious, they tagged you with an extra name, a middle name that was ordinarily never used . . . Francis Gary Powers. In just these few days, the name had taken on a resonance . . . It already sounded historic.

(p. 198)

Kirilenko had designed the juxtaposition of Powers and Oswald in an attempt to establish authenticity, but Oswald comes away with an enhanced sense of how readily the self could seize opportunities to be reconstructed and repositioned (he subsequently adopts Kirilenko's own name, Alek, to use as one of his numerous aliases).

There are other patterns and replications at work in this scene. The narrative contours of the U-2 story anticipate those of the assassination: the dark, glittering, powerful thing is mysteriously shot down, the shattered wreckage is put on display, read and reread into conflicting theories. Had the plane been flying beyond radar range or not? Was it hit by a missile fired at it or caught in the chance explosion of one nearby? Was it not hit at all, but brought down by mechanical failure? Was it sabotaged by the CIA, or a secret group within the CIA, to scupper the upcoming disarmament talks? Everett's conspiracy reproduces the same sequence: it begins in secrecy, in perfection of design, recording and controlling the behaviour of a world unaware of its presence; it frays at the edges, and then collapses altogether, in confusion, accident, sudden weakness. And in each case the same unstable afterlife that Oswald intuited, the glow of celebrity and mystique, blurs the traditional moral messages lodged in the pattern, messages of a tragic or a fortunate, humanizing fall, mankind rescued from its dreams of perfect dominance by the very muddle and uncertainty those dreams sought to eradicate—the moral recovery which *White Noise* questioned without completely abandoning, and which is not all that far away from the closing theme of, say, Rex Warner's *The Aerodrome* (1941), a novel about the attractions of fascism; in which a climactic plane crash, a fall to earth, symbolizes the triumph of the contingent and the ordinary over the inhuman purity of mechanized airborne systems. Powers's fall to earth attracts some of the most softly cadenced writing in a novel inevitably suspicious of imaginative decoration:

He comes floating down out of the endless pale, struck simultaneously by the beauty of the earth and a need to ask forgiveness . . . People come into view, farm hands, children racing toward the spot where the wind will set him down . . . He is near enough to hear them calling, the words bounced and steered and elongated by the contours of the land . . . this privileged vision of the earth is an inducement to truth. He wants to tell the

truth. He wants to live another kind of life, outside secrecy and guilt and the pull of grave events.

(p. 116)

This urge to confess, to break out of the capsule, links Powers with Everett, who as he felt the force of the chaos he had unleashed, began to yearn for the chance to *take* a lie-detector test, to make contact again even at his own expense with something absolute that could confer absolution, the purity that for all paranoiacs lies on the other side of secrecy:

It would be a deliverance in a way to be confronted, polygraphed, forced to tell the truth. He believed in the truth . . . His body would . . . yield up its unprotected data . . . There was something intimate about the polygraph . . . Devices make us pliant. We want to please them. The machine was his only hope of deliverance after what he'd done . . . They would nod and understand. A forgiveness would come to their eyes.

(pp. 361–3)

But Oswald has no such moral yearning, even one like this with the self-serving accents of childhood regression. He is always looking to loop ahead from the crisis of present experience to the future package into which it can be fitted, the new self that will have emerged from it. On the ship back from Russia to the US he prepared and memorized two separate accounts of himself, to be used according to whether he received a hostile or a friendly welcome. Whenever he gives up control for a moment, or seems to abandon himself to fate, there is always a sense of a semi-deliberate collapse into helplessness, half-authentic and half-tactical: even his suicide attempt in Russia seems neither quite real nor quite attention-seeking—“Did you feel, in all seriousness, you were dying?”—“I wanted to let someone else decide. It was out of my hands” (pp. 157–8). Perhaps many suicide attempts have this exploratory air to them, but Oswald also supplies a commentary on his for his diary: *‘somewhere, a violin plays, as I watch my life whirl away’* (p. 152). (Mailer’s study suggests that Oswald’s diary entries deliberately falsified—or misremembered?—the time of day of these events, to give them a more composed, sunset quality.<sup>5</sup>) All the time Oswald is having his life he is also planning a future narrative of it, from which his current insecurities of feeling, and the real presences of the other participants, have been smoothed out: as a boy meeting Ferrie for the first time, ‘he experienced what was happening and at the same moment, although slightly apart, recounted it all . . . relishing his own broad manner of description even as the moment was unfolding in the present’ (p. 45); or, losing his virginity in Japan, ‘he was partly outside the scene. He had sex with her and monitored the scene, waiting for the pleasure to grip him . . . He thought about what was happening rather than saw it although he saw it too’ (pp. 74–5).

Powers’s vision of spring and welcome, as he floats gently down, gives the earth a traditional gender-identity, a maternal lap where rest and emotional relief seem most

natural. Conspiracy, secrecy, control are exclusively male preoccupations in *Libra*, but all the players in the assassination drama feel somewhere behind them a kind of feminized, domestic bedrock a world of pragmatism and acceptance at odds with their ambitions. In conversations like the following, between Jack Ruby, the man who eventually shoots Oswald (probably on Mafia orders), and one of the strippers at his club, the woman’s shorthand prompts are answered by the man’s evasive self-dramatizing:

‘You never married, Jack, but how come.’

‘I’m a sloven in my heart.’

‘Personal-appearance-wise, you dress and groom.’

‘In my heart, Brenda. There’s a chaos that’s enormous.’

(p. 253)

When Brenda says to him, ‘You’re always off somewhere in your mind. Carrying on your own conversation. You don’t listen to people,’ she could be complaining against any of the men in the novel; the humble beginnings, perhaps, of a feminist assault on the paranoid and egocentric mind-set. But the idea of women occupying a separate territory, salutary and life-affirming, in touch with elemental truths that men pass over, could of course as easily derive from that mind-set as undermine it. Win Everett, for example, projects onto his wife the idealized innocent openness he wishes for himself, and by locating innocence in a space he cannot enter, makes his own impurity seem not willed but tragic and inevitable: ‘He said her name and watched her eyes come open to that deep wondering of hers, that trust she placed in the ordinary mysteries. She was in the world as he could never be. She meant the world’ (p. 76).

Everett’s plot emerged in large part from his sense of emasculation from having been shunted sideways by the CIA to a teaching post at an all-female university and a late-arriving family life which he finds at once pleasing and threatening. His co-conspirators are similarly fretting indoors, seeking to revive former male-bonding glories, the days when missions ran like clockwork: Banister, one of the FBI team who shot the ‘public enemy’ John Dillinger; Parmenter, a veteran of the textbook Guatemala invasion. Oswald himself, joining the Marines straight from school because his brother did, feels more than any of them the unmanly force of his dependency on women, not least since an engagement, like his, in permanent self-invention, is in one sense a denial of the mother, a denial that has to be a form of homage. When he married his Russian wife Marina, he told her his mother was dead; when he separates temporarily from his wife he pretends he doesn’t have one: ‘He didn’t explain about Marina and how much he missed her and needed her and how it made him angry, knowing this trying to fight this off, another sneaking awareness he could not fight off’ (p. 271).

‘There is a good deal of old-soldiers’ rage in these various men against the vagueness and imprecision of peacetime emotions and the ‘feminine’ world, a world they need to



imagine as the goal of their activities, but whose values are so different from theirs as to justify their desire to escape it. Everett is aware, as Powers had been, that there could yet be an alternative, domesticated role for him, 'outside secrecy and guilt and the pull of grave events' (p. 116), but his very awareness takes the form of another scenario, impeding the full absorption in the moment which his wife seems able to have: 'He went down the steps to help Mary Frances take the groceries inside. He gripped the heavy bags. A wind sprang from the east, an idea of rain, sudden, pervading the air. He saw himself go inside, a fellow on a quiet street doing ordinary things, unafraid of being watched' (p. 51). Eventually Everett's terrors consume his household, to the point where his daughter starts to use her dolls as fetishes and to suspect that her parents are not really hers; the father destroys the child's trustfulness that might have saved him.

*Libra* seems ambivalent about the sentiments attached to these ideas. There is a trace here of another historically specific, late-1980s, post-stockmarket-slide American sub-text, of the bad father who neglects love and family for the sake of corrosive ambition (although in the Hollywood versions he usually sees his mistake in time); another psychological structure put round the assassination story, the benchmark for all blighted hopes. It is as if the doubt and unease embedded in that story has made it impossible to say whether there really could be any protected spaces which its condition has not reached, spaces where, as is said of Mary Frances Everett, 'happiness lived minute by minute in the things she saw and heard' (p. 135), where one could live at ease with contingency and the unplanned moment: the writing rather remorselessly suggests how much the idea of such spaces is itself a product of the paranoia they are supposed to resist.

There is one graphic illustration of the space of private feeling being violently invaded by the postmodern world: Beryl Parmenter, whose husband, unbeknown to her, was one of the conspirators, watches the TV coverage of Jack Ruby shooting Oswald. She identifies with Ruby's need for vengeance, for 'some measure of recompense' (p. 446) for Kennedy's murder; she, too, had wanted Oswald erased. But as TV repeats and repeats the event, a strange immortality comes to be conferred, upon Oswald, upon the men around him, and upon her own sense of silent complicity in his murder; what should have been final dissolves into endless replication:

Why do they keep running it, over and over? Will it make Oswald go away forever if they, show it a thousand times? . . . This footage only deepened and prolonged the horror . . . After some hours the horror became mechanical . . . a process that drained life from the men in the picture, sealed them in the frame. They began to seem timeless to her, identically dead.

(pp. 446-7)

She had been in the habit of sending newspaper clippings to her friends, carefully prising out with her scissors these orderly, manageable messages which 'all said something

about the way she felt . . . these are the things that tell us how we live' (p. 261). But now TV brings an unmanageable chaos of noise and threat into her room, insisting that she confront it: 'These men were in her house with their hats and guns . . . They'd located her, forced her to look, and it was not at all like the news items she clipped and mailed to friends. She felt this violence spilling in, over and over' (p. 446). Most unmanageable of all is the sense that Oswald has somehow insinuated himself into her consciousness the instant before he dies, that he has jumped across the gap between our space and his, blurring again the spontaneous with the calculated, experience with narration:

Something in Oswald's face, a glance at the camera before he was shot, that put him here in the audience . . . a way of telling us that he knows who we are and how we feel, that he has brought our perceptions and interpretations into his sense of the crime. Something in the look, some sly intelligence . . . tells us that he is outside the moment, watching with the rest of us . . . He is commenting on the documentary footage even as it is being shot. Then he himself is shot, and shot, and shot, and the look becomes another kind of knowledge. But he has made us part of his dying.

(p. 447)

He dies watching himself on TV, an image of Powers running through his head: 'the white nightmare of noon, high in the sky over Russia . . . He is a stranger, in a mask, falling' (p. 440). For Beryl, it is as though Oswald has fulfilled the mission of the spy plane, to reach with 'sly intelligence' into the most intimate and protected corners and to smear them with a ghostly suspicion that nothing thereafter can ever be quite clean: 'She wanted to crawl out of the room. But something held her there. It was probably Oswald' (p. 447).

Beryl is suffering what Jameson suggested we half-remember, the first overpowering of events by television, whose replays and reenactments seem to mock the deep analysis they claim to offer and instead drain meaning out. Her desire for narrative, to give shape to the rush of things, is answered by repetition without progress: the tantalizing sense on the one hand that one more showing might reveal some previously unnoticed, clinching significance, and on the other that the cumulative showings are turning the event more and more into a performance, robotic and self-conscious. The most painful articulations of human distress seem baffled by the forms they cannot avoid adopting; Marguerite, Oswald's mother, testifying before the Warren Commission, offers monologues of shambolic protest against the official versions and packages in which her son's life is being sealed, but can herself only present him through the grid of another, equally reductive package, in which the American government betrays the American ethos, the secret state conspires against the brave, humble, pioneer spirit:

I have struggled to raise my boys on mingy sums of money . . . There are stories inside stories, judge . . . TV gave the cue and Lee was shot . . . I intend to

research this case and present my findings . . . I have lived in many places but never filthy dirty, never without the personal loving touch . . . I am smiling, judge, as the accused mother who must read the falsehoods they are writing about my boy . . . The point is how far back have they been using him? He used to climb the tops of roofs with binoculars, looking at the stars, and they sent him to Russia on a mission. Lee Harvey Oswald is more than meets the eye.

(pp. 450–1)

Her chaotic narratives, with their obsessive pursuit of yet more overlooked detail in which a clear truth might be hiding, can only mimic all the other narratives which they seek to challenge.

If this then-new cultural condition is now dominant, if the individual voice is barely representable in a world of simulacra, if its scattered scraps of feeling cannot be reconnected without a violent and damaging reduction, then in DeLillo's view the outlook for the novel form is bleak. In *Mao II* (1991), the novel after *Libra*, it is resignedly suggested that 'the novel used to feed our search for meaning . . . but [now] we turn to the news, which provides an unrelenting mood of catastrophe. This is where we find emotional experience not available elsewhere'.<sup>6</sup> *White Noise* had dealt with much the same idea, but with a satirical jauntiness which is now completely absent. The central figure in *Mao II* is a novelist, Bill Gray, trying like a Salinger or a Pynchon to hide: from media intrusion, trying to preserve the private voice and resist the celebrity-status which Oswald so desired and ultimately, half-designedly achieved, the conversion of the identity into an image for others to feast on, imitate or speculate about. All Gray finds is that his reclusiveness, his attempt to protest against the permeations of celebrity-culture, has itself been commodified by that culture, turned into a spectacle of 'authenticity' in whose construction he has unwittingly collaborated. Gray's subsequent career is an increasingly exhausted and futile effort to keep one step ahead of 'the language of being noticed, the only language the West understands' (p. 157), the condition in which actions, like so many of Oswald's, seem to include or anticipate the ways they will be looked at, and thus rob each look of its chance to be a real engagement.

*Mao II* is full of idealized nostalgia for the novel as a kind of model democracy, a form that could bring out the humanity stifled everywhere else. To write a novel, Gray argues, is not to reproduce the paranoia of plotting, but to protect oneself from it: 'the experience of my own consciousness tells me how autocracy fails, how total control wrecks the spirit, how my characters deny my efforts to own them completely, how I need internal dissent, self-argument, how the world squashes me the minute I think it's mine' (p. 159). But these flourishes sound rather hollow in their context, of the utter marginalization of the liberal vision; and the appeal they make is uncomfortably close to that addressed in *Libra* to the imaginary, feminized places for the male ego to convalesce in, places offering that ego only an already discounted challenge. For

Nicholas Branch, in *Libra*, there was another kind of 'novel', the text of the Warren Commission Report itself, 'the megaton novel James Joyce would have written if he'd moved to Iowa City and lived to be a hundred' (p. 181). The Report is full of fragments of human story, weird juxtaposings of disparate matter, documents testimonies, miscellaneous data, disjointed pieces of existence which mock their collators' reasons for including them. They cannot provide evidence of anything, or be gathered towards a conclusion, least of all about the assassination to whose story they have been forced to be long. Branch sits in his room full of files as a mirror image of Everett from across the other side of the black hole of the assassination, trying to assemble a cut-and-paste 'Oswald' which will shear off whatever is superfluous and uncontrollable, and experiencing similar panic spurts to those Everett suffered, the fear of being manipulated by those who pass the information on to him, of being caught in something rippling out endlessly. But the Report has things in it which seem to point towards a state beyond the anxiety to connect or to extract meaning. As Branch stares at a photograph captioned '*Curtain rods found on shelf in garage of Ruth Paine*', he feels 'there is a loneliness, a strange desolation trapped here' (p. 182); a sense perhaps like that given off by some of Edward Hopper's paintings, scenes and objects which appear to cry out for a narrative to enfold them and take their solitude away, while simultaneously stopping each narrative dead in its tracks, and maintaining the distance of the viewer from the world, which neither retreats nor comes any closer. Such suspended things, 'arguing nothing, clarifying nothing' (p. 183), are not tokens of an unquenchable human spirit nor fantasy-projections of a desire for refuge. If they intimate

something real, it would be 'real' in the Lacanian use of the word, to mean that which defies representation, that which cannot be contained by the narratives set round it—like death, or, like Oswald, always just beyond the brink of the accessible.

Almost all DeLillo's writing has been in some sense about the assassination, the 'seven seconds that broke the back of the American century' (*Libra*, p. 181): an impulsion that perhaps only became fully clear with *Libra*'s attempt to exorcise it. His ten novels, from *Americana* (1971) onwards, find various ways of exploring what Win Everett calls 'the deathward-tending logic of a plot' (*Libra*, p. 363); they shape themselves towards murder, terrorism, power-fantasy, the distortions induced by media images, some overwhelming catastrophe that eludes definition. They satirize characters who attempt to cross the brink of the 'real', exposing the desperate narcissism of those who, caught in the stupor of late-capitalist culture, try to contrive encounters with something beyond the limit, something that can make them feel alive, whether it be inflicting pain on themselves or others, experiencing some previously unimaginable pornographic thrill, or risking death for the sake of a few seconds of local fame. But the angrier the satire, the more it seems to involve a displacement of the novels' own frustrated nostalgia for unmediated experi-

ence, the nostalgia that works its way through all these contrivings. DeLillo's writing, always gripped and always defeated by the event to which it constantly returns, shares in much of what it scrutinizes: the desire in so many Kennedy stories to return behind the assassination, to an imaginary time that was not broken-backed, to a continuity between self and world that was not fatally disrupted by media interventions. And to sense the pull of that desire is part, perhaps, of what it means to feel, like Beryl Parmenter, that Oswald has turned everyone into one of his accomplices, even those who now search their minds to remember where they were when he did. what he did.

#### Notes

1. Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London, 1991), p. 355.
2. Don DeLillo, *Libra* (New York, 1988).
3. Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (New York, 1984).
4. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (London, 1988), pp. 105–123.
5. Norman Mailer, *Oswald's Tale* (New York, 1995), pp. 51–2.
6. Don DeLillo, *Mao II* (New York, 1991), p. 72.

#### Ruth Helyer (essay date Winter 1999)

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[In the following essay, Helyer analyzes the meaning of the "waste" metaphor in *Underworld* in relation to patriarchal ideals of masculine cultural authority.]

Don DeLillo's *Underworld* explores boundaries, particularly the thin dividing line between what is considered waste product and what is not. Any discussion about what constitutes dirt and abjection leads to questions about concepts of "the body" and consequently gender-specific identity. The narrative's relentless revelation of borders as fluctuating, rather than fixed, demonstrates the problems, not only of disposing of waste, but of identifying waste in the first place. Although this difficulty affects all identities, it is acutely felt by the classic narrative hero, who embodies the patriarchal masculine ideal of cultural authority. Such authority encompasses an inherent potency (even omnipotence), a taste for adventure, bravery, and resourcefulness. Nick Shay, DeLillo's main protagonist, is a professional waste handler and serves as a jarring reminder that the hero contemporary society yearns for does not exist.

As the ideal "male body," the "Hero" should consist of both perfect form and morality, with a certain clean wholeness that precisely differentiates him from the threat of the unclean world. To help us enjoy the book, he should act within clear parameters. These parameters answer to our

socially conditioned urge to create a consummate construction, easily identified by its firm boundaries, that we can believe in. Our hero should always be safely on our side of abjection's border, to appease our "need to structure and classify, to build a system against the terror in our souls" (DeLillo, *Names* 81). The terror is that the undifferentiated mass of waste we dispose of (in a bid to be what it is not, identifying ourselves by our very lack of it) will force its way back into our life, insisting on revealing itself as part of us. Such unwanted baggage sullies our ability to conform to an acceptable prototype, where conforming requires that we display the correct signs, which are, according to Andrew Tolson, "an aura of competence, a way of talking and behaving, [. . .] immediately recognised [. . .and] enshrined in social rituals and customs" (21). Failure to comply results in an undeserving and inauthentic construction, with the potential to create disorder and to lead us into crisis. However, as N.H. Reeve and Richard Kerridge remind us, our yearning for authenticity can never be fulfilled (318). Narrating this constant human search for a tangible self, *Underworld* emphasizes the dichotomy between the modernist faith in origins and logical cognition and the postmodernist lack of cerebral justification, chronology, and causality—lack of respect for the "actual pulsing thing" (DeLillo, *Underworld* 805).

Nick is born and raised amidst the brutality of the Bronx, the son of a poor Italian immigrant. His caustic wit fuses authorial and narrative voices, while his aggressive tendencies confirm that "male behaviour is strongly influenced by the gender role messages men receive from their social environments" (Harris 19). He displays a brute physicality reminiscent of the larger-than-life Hollywood action films of the 1980s, films "that take the male hero to historically unparalleled levels of omnipotence" (Segal 173). Stallone as Rambo in *First Blood* and Schwarzenegger in *The Terminator* offer us male heroes who are darkly attractive yet muscle-bound and monosyllabic, physically developed yet emotionally inept. As Nick reminds us when contemplating hitting Brian, "It's which body crushes the other" (797).<sup>1</sup> However, although Nick is dark, handsome, and uses his admirable physique to heave crates of 7-Up, he contradicts the stereotype by using his time in prison to study, ensuring himself a career with prospects and a bronze tower existence upon release.

The movie heroes display their enviable forms for all to gaze upon, yet Nick, rather than reveal the consummate hero's body, remains elusive and shadowy, never far from the borderlands. His appearance and, indeed, his motivation are only revealed in cryptic hints, inferences, and details mediated through third parties. When he meets Klara again after many years she lets us know how fit he looks by insisting that he must "exercise" (72). He confirms that he does indeed run and is very particular about what he eats and drinks. The perfect body is an image we are afraid to let go of; its beauty, and the control and rigor required to keep it, seem a talisman against the even-lurking object.<sup>2</sup> Our fear ensures that we perpetuate



the obsession with perceived physical perfection by punishing our seeming inadequacy with disciplined exercise and diet. Nick tries to laugh off his insistence on drinking “soy milk” and running (72), but his adherence to his fitness program is exemplary.

Despite, or perhaps because of, the cryptic way in which he is shown to us, Nick becomes something of a heart-throb, a filmic montage of a man created from the perfect “bits.” It would be equally easy to perceive him as a dark, deviant character, but this is not what we are conditioned to do. The vagueness of his description actively encourages the reader to build him from separate pieces into the composite ideal man, our hero. Or seemingly ideal, until he kills George Manza, a drug addict and outsider who is dispensable because he differs from the norm. We should instantly turn against Nick, as he aligns himself with the ultimate horrors of abjection as listed by Julia Kristeva: blood, death, corpses, and bodily fluids. Yet, the circumstances of the murder are left ambiguous enough to encourage us to call it “an accident.” The destruction of another is presented as an act to be envied, rather than condemned: facing death, causing it, watching it, getting as close to the abyss as possible without actually dying. Calling himself “shooter and witness both,” Nick points out, “you can separate these roles” (510). By separating them, Nick maintains some illusion of unbreached boundaries, referring to himself in the third person whenever he remembers the shooting (781).

Before the murder is committed, George smiles knowingly when he hands over the loaded sawn-off shotgun to Nick. Putting himself at stake seems to be the only way that George can attempt to identify himself as a separate entity amongst his sleazy world of dingy back rooms, prostitutes, and hard drugs. For Nick, a murder shared appears to be safe, permitted and recommended; like the infection of the abject, it is irresistible although forbidden, and ultimately condemned. George dies so that Nick can live, much as abjection kills in the name of life (Kristeva 15). The annihilation death offers collapses the borders between oneself and the world, flooding the body with the fluidity of its own insides: blood, sperm, and excrement. The immense destructive potential from the gun’s radical release of energy (like the striking of the baseball and detonation of the nuclear bomb elsewhere in the narrative [621]) results in one figure gaining from another’s loss. The killing of George, like the acceptance of the Mafia, is the making of Nick. “Once you’re a made man,” he asserts, “you don’t need the constant living influence of sources outside yourself. You’re all there. You’re made. You’re handmade. You’re a sturdy Roman wall” (275).

“A deep well of memory that is unapproachable and intimate: the abject.”<sup>3</sup>

*Underworld* confirms human identity as a fragile construct, achieved only by disavowing valid parts of ourselves in the evacuation process defined by Kristeva as abjection. Such cleansing and expulsion are unavoidable after we

acknowledge the impossibility of being perfectly clean, pure, and proper. As children we experience a liberating, oceanic feeling of being unbounded until we realize that we have outer and inner limits, which denote what is and is not the prescribed norm. To avoid being socially ostracized we must adhere to these boundaries. We resort to the safety of naming and labeling in the hope that knowing and being knowable will keep abjection at bay. Nick’s wife Marion illustrates the physical and conscious effort this classification can represent, being “determined to get back to the grind, to the work of hygiened perfection, shaping herself, willing herself into tighter being” (604).

Pinpointing the precise divide, however, between what remains and what is expelled is not straightforward. The abject does not respect the borders, positions, and rules of any given symbolic system. Interfaces exist *between* physical surfaces, forming rims, ambiguous areas that are always both inside and outside of the body, and therefore not definable as subject or object (Kristeva 4). Examples include orifices allowing the passage of abject substances from the body into the world at large. Food, feces, urine, vomit, saliva, and tears are all emitted from the body via a hole, “the edge of everything” (*Underworld* 77) which both attracts and repulses, a gap or lack which seeks an object to both satisfy and identify it, to justify its existence. Nick has a fetishistic interest in mouths, commenting in detail on those of his sexual partners, like Donna: “‘I like your mouth.’ ‘It’s my overbite.’ ‘Sexy’” (292). Marvin Lundy is obsessed by his own bowel movements, charting their progress through continents, linking them to radiation and professing them too chemically powerful for exposure to his revered wife. Such bombarding of borders by unleashing bodily functions destabilizes classification.

Abjection draws us to the place where definition disintegrates. The inherent risk of this edge is illustrated by the vertiginous manner in which the homeless paint sprayers choose to commemorate their dead. While suspended by a rough piece of rope from a “six-story flank of a squatters’ tenement [. . .] graffiti writers spray-paint an angel every time a local child dies of illness or mistreatment” (811). “The Wall,” situated in the South Bronx inner ghetto, is named as such “partly for the graffiti facade and partly [for] the general sense of exclusion—it [is] a tuck of land adrift from the social order” (239), where life and death touch, where the trees and vines grow over and around garbage, which includes limbs and hospital waste (238–39). Sister Edgar, a nun who works in this desperate, borderland area, aptly summarizes the spray paint artists’ cavalier attitude toward risk when pondering the homeless drug users’ propensity for sharing needles. Her sentiments echo George’s attitude when he invites Nick to pull the trigger: she understands “the lure of critical risk, the little love bite of that dragonfly dagger. If you know you’re worth nothing, only a gamble with death can gratify your vanity” (242).

In the struggle between subject and object, abjection represents the underside of that which professes to be clearly figurative. The subject must reject the abject and

attempt to conceal and contain it. *Underworld* attempts to reveal this “underside” and in the process confirms the abject as whatever disturbs socially imposed limits. The subject claims to exclude the abject but must acknowledge its existence; in other words, the subject must acknowledge that “that which threatens to destroy life also helps to define life” (Creed 9). The abject is vital in the subject’s quest for selfhood, as it represents that which the subject professes it is not. It emphasizes the fragility of the law by living on the opposite side of the border, separating the subject from that which endangers its existence (Kristeva 4). Nick as a “hero,” who is also a criminal<sup>4</sup> and murderer (both abject categories due to their involvement with excess and risk), reminds us that the subject can easily “slide back into the impure chaos out of which it was formed” (Gross 89).

Nick and his younger brother, Matty, something of a child prodigy, are presented as opposites who remain inseparably similar. Nick is resolutely physical, while Matty is totally cognitive, spending all of his free time playing chess with Albert Bronzini, a local school-teacher. Matty fails to hold anyone’s attention and tells himself that his lack of dynamism ensures that “Nick [is] always the subject, ultimately” (220). He seems torn between the desire to be like Nick and at the same time be completely different. Their father’s desertion emphasizes this ambivalence by simultaneously dividing and uniting them.

Jimmy Costanza, their father, took a walk one day when the boys were young, supposedly to buy cigarettes, but he never returned. Now he resides in a “lower world,” like the waste his son buries in landfills. Like the waste, Jimmy must be dealt with, Nick will not believe that his father may have left them willingly and imagines him kidnapped and bundled into the back of a fast car to be violently “wasted” (210). Matty, as usual, has faith in mental solutions. After much thought he decides that their father must have slipped “through a crack in the pavement” (808) to lead a parallel life in some other place; he must be living “unknown to [them] in the crawlspaces of the infrastructure, down the tunnels and under the bridge approaches” (323). Both boys struggle to form something like self-image in the absence of a father raising the question, “‘Who are you [. . .] if you’re not them?’” (706). They are ultimately identifiable by comparison to the other’s differences, each brother representing the other’s abject. When Nick seems resigned to becoming a disciplined animal of routine, Matty feels he must ensure that they retain their separate identities by behaving unpredictably, yet both feel that their inheritance is to become what they already are, their father’s sons. Specification comes from difference and sameness, what is kept *and* what is thrown away.

Nick receives therapy while in remand school, and although he recounts the experience in a cynical tone, the therapist can only confirm what he himself already believes: that his father, absent or not, has an influence that is far reaching. “She told me that my father was the

third person in the room the day I shot George Manza,” Nick explains, and that “the two events were connected, [. . .] and this was a link she wanted to probe” (512). Kristeva confirms in her account of abjection that our formation is based on some all-pervasive and influential “other” who precedes us: “Not at all an other with whom I identify and incorporate, but an Other who precedes and possesses me, and through such possession causes me to be. A possession previous to my advent: a being-there of the symbolic that a father might or might not embody” (10). The relationship the community has with baseball is compared to that between fathers and sons, both being similarly steeped in tradition: “You do what they did before you” (*Underworld* 31). The baseball from the famous game of 1951 passes from hand to hand, from father to son and son to father throughout the narrative, the baseball “his dad had given him as a trust, a gift, a peace offering, a form of desperate love and a spiritual hand-me-down” (611). However, like the corpse of a loved one, none of its recipients ever seems to know what to do with it, other than revere it and put it away somewhere safe. The narrative’s constant references to disposing of rubbish by burning or burying it reinforce the quandary of what to keep “on show” in our lives and, ultimately, how to dispose of intrinsic parts of ourselves. The famous game that produces the heirloom ball shows the baseball ground to be a place where men legitimately co-exist within exclusively male company. Masculinity is a construct layered in dogma and tradition which, like any construct, involves rejection of excess. The waste products of their day at the baseball ground emphasize this: “generational tides of beer and shit and cigarettes and peanut shells and disinfectants and pisses in the untold millions” (21).

A large part of this masculine oneness is tied up in working practices. Before shooting George, Nick categorically states that he will not allow the routines of these practices to identify him and subsequently grind him down. He goes out of his way to disobey rules and fail to conform: vandalizing trains and cars, picking fights, and generally running wild in his bid to avoid the monotony of the working day. Nick does not think it “necessary to have one job for life and start a family and live in a house with dinner on the table at six every night” (724). However, he uses his time spent with the ritualistic Jesuits to make a concentrated effort to “fit in,” to re-form himself into “a socially acceptable man” honed by religious indoctrination:

All that winter I shoveled snow and read books. The lines of print, the alphabetic characters, the strokes of the shovel when I cleared a walk, the linear arrangements of words on a page, the shovel strokes, the rote exercises in school texts, the novels I read, the dictionaries I found in the tiny library, the nature and shape of books, the routine of shovel strokes in deep snow—this was how I began to build an individual.

(503)

He tries to adhere to routine, chastened by killing George, yet ironically, he becomes more an automaton and less an individual. It is obvious from his frequent comments that

he is far from satisfied with his “normal” life. He questions and scrutinizes everything that happens, and when he discovers that Marian and Brian are having an affair he is pleased, as it alleviates his feelings of oppression. “[R]elieved of my phony role as husband and father,” he reflects, “I feel free just for a moment, myself again, [. . .] giving it all up, [. . .] the children of both marriages, the grandchild, they could keep the two houses, all the cars, he could have both wives[. . .]. None of it ever belonged to me except in the sense that I filled out the forms” (796). Living his life to a preformatted pattern is not as satisfying as he was led to believe it would be. All aspects become staid, making him yearn for some spontaneity. “[W]hat I long for,” he states, are “the days of disarray, when I didn’t give a damn or a fuck or a farthing (806). [. . .] I long for the days of disorder. I want them back, the days when I was alive on the earth, rippling in the quick of my skin, heedless and real, [. . .] angry and ready all the time, a danger to others and a distant mystery to myself” (810). Nick’s longing to be “heedless” is understandable; it is infinitely easier to act selfishly and willfully than to worry about the consequences or about what “God” will think.

“A thousand times more holy than church.”<sup>5</sup>

DeLillo’s narrative offers differing definitions of the sacred, all of which encourage construction in an authorized format. Identification of self and other is inextricably bound up with the collective myth system of Christianity, which, like science, functions upon dualistic principles. The Christian faith, in the separation of human and divine, spirit and flesh, God and humanity, sacred and profane, parallel the scientific separation of subject and object. Furthermore, Christian teleology (from creation to apocalypse) prefigures scientific linear causality. Albert, normally skeptical about anything spiritual, preferring to trust the scientific paradigm, finds transcendence in his dying mother, in “the drama of a failing body, the way impending death ma[kes] her seem saintly with an icon’s fixedness[. . .].” Albert, “who shunned any form of organized worship and thought God was a mass delusion,” feels that his house is now “suffused with a reverence, [. . .] an otherworldliness, [because] she [i]s here” (683). Religion gives the appearance of bringing the subject away from the abyss by displacing the abject and offering unification. Religious teachings draw upon defilement, taboo, and sin to illustrate the path to a sanctioned construct. Exclusion is often through sacrifice. Albert illustrates how Judaism breaks away from pagan sacrifice by establishing corporeal prohibitions and dietary exclusions, for example, in eating only animals properly matched to their environment. Such exclusion can be traced back to the logic of separation from the maternal. Fear of incestuous binding between the mother and child, by way of the breast milk, is at the root of early separation (Kristeva 105). The female body reminds men of their own mortality. They are simultaneously fascinated by and afraid of its reproductive power. When Nick’s mother dies he feels whole, claiming, “She is part of me now, total and consoling” (804). He overcomes the threat she previously

seemed to make to his boundaries by incorporating her inside of them, into himself, in preference to her incorporation of him.

Kristeva classes food as a polluting abject, a border between two separate entities, for example, edible/inedible, cooked/uncooked, and clean/unclean (75). The manner in which food can be seen to penetrate the self’s “clean and proper” body leads directly to the religious taboos regarding defilement. Klara and Albert are Jewish. Albert is almost obsessive about the oral object, food, and Klara enjoys watching him eat because he does it “so deeply, handling and savoring things, [. . .] chewing food thoroughly, [. . . with] a sense of earth and our connection to it,” and she enjoys “the way he look[s] at food in the plate, breathing it all in before he even touche[s] a fork” (748). Albert seeks refuge in food. In a rapidly changing world, he wants food that remains the same, praising it for being traditional or European (672). Matty, his chess partner of old, grows up to share his values, longing for grapes “that did not have the seeds bred out of them, and peaches with leafy stems” (219). He manages to find such things when he visits his mother, who still lives in the old neighborhood. Rosemary herself notices the traditions of eating going on around her, in “[t]he pleasure [. . .] of familiar food.” DeLillo writes, “the family was an art to these people and the dinner table was the place it found expression. [. . .] This food, this family meal, [. . .] this was their loyalty and bond and well being, and the aroma was in the halls for Rosemary to smell, [. . .] and the savor had an irony that was painful” (698–99). Food is an intrinsic part of identificatory processes, sometimes almost too evocative, with its vivid images and scents, in making us acutely aware of our inadequacies. Nick treats food like everything else—with caution. He seems to live on salads and soy milk, a voyeur of other people’s unchecked consumption of burgers and fries, which he describes in lurid detail. He remains aloof from such indulgence, the measured man, proud of his self-discipline. He sets himself austere limits, determined to retain control and keep abjection at a distance. When he does relax and let his guard down, while out with Sims, they end up drinking too much and fighting in a demeaning roadside brawl.

Nick’s physical restraint reflects the abhorrence of the body in Christian culture. The constructed nature of bodies is depicted in their sexualized, traumatized, and ultimately sacrificed state (as in Holbein’s painting *The Corpse of Christ in the Tomb*).<sup>6</sup> Such images become sacred in their manifest otherness, temporarily appeasing fears of inherent abjection within. Judaism’s rites of defilement set Jews apart as “different.” “The Jew,” as abject, is a concept rooted in religious history, charting the subject’s struggle for validity. The search for spiritual substance and identification has led to the classification of “the Jew” alongside such “soulless” bodies as “the Zombie” and “the Vampire.” They threaten to bring pollution from the other side of the border, as they are rich with suggestions of dirt, darkness, otherness, and the inherent risk of contagion. The feeling of disgust experienced towards “the other”



stems from pre-oedipal experience with such emissions as excrement, blood, and vomit. The scapegoating of minority groups is grounded in the abject, often resulting in a minority figure becoming a sacrificial victim. The victim is viewed as surplus, to be given over to violence in a bid to protect the community at large. This is frequently the logic used by serial killers (such as *Underworld's* Texas Highway Killer), who think they are embodying sacred violence, creating a hierarchy between themselves and their victims in order to take violence into the borderlands of abjection, outside of society at large. Discussing using the toilet, Richard (the serial killer) makes the double entendre: "it makes a certain amount of sense to take your business outside [, w]hen you think about what's involved" (267). Killing is viewed as outside of culture, a violent intrusion into it, to be kept out of society at all costs, hence deflected onto a surrogate victim (qtd. in Hart 137).

Nick and Matty attend a Catholic school staffed by nuns, one of whom, the unyielding Sister Edgar, is repeatedly aligned with death and corpses, the ultimate in abjection. She is "known throughout the school as Sister Skelly Bone for the acute contours of her face," and for "the whiteness of her complexion and the way her lean hands seem[] ever ready to administer some grave touch, a cold and bony tag that makes you *it* forever" (717).<sup>7</sup> Sister Edgar appears to feel little empathy for the impoverished people she works among; indeed, her calling seems to be selfishly motivated. We see her "face the real terror of the streets to cure the linger of destruction inside her" (248). She hopes that by surrounding herself with abject filth she may be rendered immune to it and identified as being as clean as is humanly possible. She will be "protect[ed] from the abject [. . .] by dint of being immersed in it" (Kristeva 28). However, total cleanliness is never attainable due to the threat from outside, and indeed from the borderlands of abjection, areas both inside and outside of the impurity division. This unavoidable filth existing at the borders of individuality threatens the unity of the ego, just as society is threatened by what is outside its parameters and life is threatened by death.<sup>8</sup> We can only appease ourselves with attempts to separate the best from the worst in our own self-fabrication. Sister Edgar's horror of dirt and disease ensures compulsive scrubbing: "if you clean the soap with bleach," she wonders, "what do you clean the bleach bottle with?" (238); and she later laments, "you could never clean a thing so infinitesimally that it didn't need to be cleaned again the instant you were done" (775). The abject cannot be removed, but repeated scrubbing, like religious chanting and purging, is part of the constant vigil to keep it at bay. This fear of contagion prompts her to wear rubber gloves when she goes out ("condomed ten times over" [241]) and obsessively watch for Ismael to produce the first telltale symptoms of AIDS. She "expects him to look wan and drawn, visibly fragile. She thinks he has AIDS. [. . .]She stands at a distance, [. . .and] tries to understand the disappointment she feels, seeing Ismael in good spirits and evidently healthy. Does Sister want him to be deathly ill? Does she think he ought to be punished for being homosexual?" (812–13). Such phobia and loathing are

fundamental forms of abjection. Although she is elderly, she still rises at dawn and kneels on hard floors to pray, relying on the discipline and austerity to identify her, especially during the school vacations when she cannot identify herself by treating the children harshly. "Alone in her room," she reads "'The Raven.'" Poe is "[h]er namesake poet [. . .] and the dark croaking poem [. . .] ma[kes] her feel Edgarish again, contoured, shaped, bevoiced, in the absence of her boys and girls" (775). She wants "to teach them fear [. . .and] make them shake in their back-to-school shoes. [. . .]They would know who she was and so would she" (776). However, when Esmeralda, a twelve-year-old ghetto child whom the nuns had so hoped to save is raped and thrown to her death from a rooftop, Sister Edgar begins to lose her icy grip on the identity she has carved out from "saving" others. She feels herself "falling into crisis[. . .]. The serenity of immense design is missing from her life" (817). It is locally reported that the dead girl is appearing nightly, as a vision, on a poster advertising orange juice. Our identity, indeed our very existence, is validated by such mystical media images, informing us of what we need to retain or cultivate, and what we may safely discard. The wall-painting ghetto dwellers are delighted when they appear on television, appreciating that events are not really happening if they don't justify media coverage. They have the chance to view themselves as others see them, through a transcendental haze: "the things they know so well seen inside out [. . .] smeared in other people's seeing" (817).

Even after death Esmeralda is unable to produce limits to her own being. Instead she becomes "a pure screen, a switching centre for all the networks of influence" (Baudrillard 133). Like Nick upon his release from incarceration, she is open to everything, in spite of herself, with neither distance nor intimacy, just proximity and over-exposure. Her image, visible in the headlights of passing trains, could perhaps be a trick of the light, but it is enough to send the hope-starved public, ever eager for a new icon, into raptures of religious ecstasy. Their reaction typifies "people's collective urge to be part of something larger than themselves, to surrender to a power that would explain the felt alienation of their lives and protect them from a recognition of their own mortality" (Duvall 285).

An "unnameable painful elation" is rekindled in Sister Edgar, the heady tug of pleasure combined with anguish. Desire and terror are closely linked in a cathartic eroticism, offering the hiatus that she needs to feel before she dies; here, "the abject is edged with the sublime" (Kristeva 11).<sup>9</sup> Sister Edgar wants to meet death head on, grasp it, "open herself to the mystery" (245) like an exalted sexual experience seen reflected in "the mirror of death" (Bataille *Eroticism* 239). She wants to let go and lose her "starched" boundaries. She longs for an intermediary, a savior or prophet, and Esmeralda fills that vacancy. The younger nun, Gracie, claims that "[t]he poor need visions" (819), but Sister Edgar serves to remind us that we all search for that "burst of beauty that overwhelms us—and 'that cancels our existence'" (Kristeva 210).

Sister Edgar's afterlife takes place in cyberspace. She is in between computers, rather than in any geographical area: "Here in cyber-space she has shed all that steam-ironed fabric. She is not naked exactly but she is open—exposed to every connection you can make on the world wide web" (824). A free-floating computerized dying is an attempt to compensate for our lack of knowledge about what happens after death, when we must face that plunge over the edge, into the unknown. Albert favors burials in outer space, or alternatively encrypting corpses, reinforcing the need for a different locality somewhere between perception and consciousness. As the subject is defined by its boundaries, infinite space is a confusing concept, simultaneously frightening and attractive; comparable by its very vastness is the desert. "The otherness of the West" (449) fascinates Nick but fills him with apprehension. Matty's wife describes it well, crystallizing why it makes Nick so uncomfortable. For her, the desert is "too big, too empty, [with] the audacity to be real" (449). As part of his attempt to secure a stable classification, Nick now lives in a town where history does not "run loose," a clearly defined geographical area that he acknowledges in spatial terms (86). His memories of "the way the world used to be" (333) are deeply entrenched in places. Kristeva similarly posits how the question "Where am I?" becomes a substitute for the question "Who am I?" Nick does not lend importance to "Back East" as a physical landscape; "Back East" is a vital metaphor, representing strands of his past, a period in his development as a "man" rather than something specific on a map. As a consequence of the landscape of memory, humans can easily become "strays," setting themselves apart, and at risk, like "the Wall" dwellers.<sup>10</sup>

"We are involved in what we would describe."<sup>11</sup>

Nick threatens his staff in the idiom of an Italian hoodlum, relying on a standardized image to *pretend* to be what he actually *is* in a perceived escape from his roots. His staff perpetuates the simulacrum by mimicking him. As a second-generation immigrant, his bicultural incorporation is shown ironically; he speaks English, teaches Latin, and performs Italian impressions. By imitating and copying copies, we embody ourselves in both subject and object and challenge alleged authenticity. Works of art illustrate this; their origins and intrinsic worth are always susceptible to undermining through reproduction, imitation, and appropriation by random mediums. Klara reminds us of this by recycling junk and discarded waste products to produce "new" pieces (102), forming subjectivity through her creations, rather than revering the subject as an unassailable given. As "artist" Klara cannot fulfil the role of stereotypical hero for us; her separation is not (and cannot be) sufficiently defined. The audience/performance classification also dissolves, as boundaries are shown to be dangerously thin. Art is firmly linked to abjection as something ejaculated in an attempt to reinforce a difference, a separation, and to ward off the inherent fear of being engulfed by sameness. As abjection emanates from inside the speaking being, it can be related to both religious

confession and the "outpourings" of artistic inspiration. According to Kristeva, art is "catharsis par excellence[. . .], both on the far and near side of religion [. . .] the artistic experience, which is rooted in the abject [. . .] appears as the essential component of religiosity. That is perhaps why it is destined to survive the collapse of the historical forms of religions" (17). Writers and artists can vicariously void sin on our behalf. Inevitably caught up in what they see, their work cannot help but take on narcissistic overtones. Abjection is a precondition of narcissism as there cannot be a satisfactory self-image without first expelling that which is unacceptable. Like "hands-on" therapy, the work of art can represent what is expunged. Paradoxically, the finished article invariably comes to represent the artist, even though it is much more likely to be the artist's abject expulsions.

In our striving to be "something" we are beset by extremes. There seems to be no safe place between the opposing poles of opting out or conforming to society's stereotyping. Artists fall afoul of these extremes, portrayed as people who can't live with others or uphold responsibility. Nick insinuates that Jimmy could have become an artist, producing "a rambling art that has no category" (276). The alternative is life as "a man who doesn't wash or change his clothes, bummy looking, talks to himself on the street" (276). One homeless artist, Ismael Munoz (also known as "Moonman" 157), spray-paints underground trains, unleashing something that Klara sees as inherently human: "the graffiti instinct—to trespass and declare ourselves, show who we are" (77). He is painting to identify himself, for himself; he does not need the fame or public acclaim. In fact, he is notoriously hard to find, as Klara and Esther, her agent, discover when they attempt to track him down. Ismael prefers to observe anonymously, in *his* underworld, the subway, as the commuters respond to his multicolored outpourings, "the art that can't stand still" (441). The modernist obsession with rigid constructions, fixed and nameable, is being color-washed over by a postmodern fluidity. Ismael goes on to become the leader of "the Wall" sprayers and the Nun's major contact with the street dwellers. Spray paint is presented as part of the abject, expelled and left behind (like animal tracks) by those who are outside of society, "specimens of urban spoor—spray paint, piss, saliva, dapples of dark stuff that [is] probably blood" (211). Although identification by excretion is common to all, someone such as J. Edgar Hoover can use his authority to prevent anyone from becoming acquainted with his intimate waste products. When dissidents threaten to examine his garbage, he wastes no time in having them arrested. He suppresses details of his sexuality with equal alacrity.

"It is necessary to respect what we discard."<sup>12</sup>

Nick agrees with Hoover that waste should not be taken into the open. He feels that it should be carefully secreted and is a model employee visiting landfill sites all over the world. His obsession with waste has a religious fervor underlying the entire narrative; he classes his company as

a sacred entity for burying waste, but he omits to acknowledge that the waste has not gone away, it has simply been hidden. Its innate energy cannot be buried and forgotten about; it has a potent force that must be expended. It has not ceased to exist merely because it has disappeared; it continues in another place, festering and radiating. Our leftovers are offered to the ground in a way reminiscent of offerings made to ancient gods, by way of sacrifice. This treatment of waste echoes Georges Bataille's thoughts about the sacred and profane: "Sacrifice restores to the sacred world that which servile use has degraded, rendered profane" (*Eroticism* 239). We ritualistically bury our moldering garbage, as we would a person or an animal, alive or dead, something worth preserving and offering to larger forces residing beyond the border. Such sacrifices are made to give destruction its due and save the rest from contagion (Bataille, *Accursed* 55). We offer "the accursed share," doomed to be consumed and destroyed, in the hope that we will be spared personally. The seriously malformed people in the medical institution Nick visits demonstrate this. Exposure to radiation has caused them to differ from the approved conformation, and consequently to be associated with abjection. Similar deformities are explored in *Unterwelt*, the faux Eisenstein film that Klara views: it depicts "cripples and mutants, [. . .] hump-lurched with hands dragging," (430) and people with "deformed faces, [. . .] who exist[] outside of nationality and strict historical context, [. . .] people persecuted and altered, [. . .] an inconvenient secret of the society around them" (443). These are deformed bodies, outcast by society and abandoned to attempt survival in the polluted margins, bodies in revolt through the illness that our use of radiation causes.

Nick believes that sex should also be hidden, like the asylum inmates. He argues this point with Donna, a woman he meets in a desert hotel while he is attending his firm's conference, "The Future of Waste," and *she* is seeking sex with strangers. She insists that it is pointless being clandestine because the secret of sex is already out: "'Sex is what you can get. [. . .] It's the most important thing [you] can get without been born rich or smart or stealing. This is what life can give you that's equal to others or better, even, that you don't have to go to college six years to get. And it's not religion and it's not science but you can explore it and learn things about yourself'" (297). Donna reiterates that life's complexities make it impossible to identify yourself using only such grand narratives as science and religion. Sexual identity can never be so straightforward. Sex is expelled, like a waste product, closely aligned to abjection by being neither inside nor outside the body, but permeating both areas. It becomes autonomous and engulfing like the infection and pollution implicit in *Underworld*'s ever-growing heaps of waste. Sexual identity is not the inherent part of our corporeal body that societal norms would have us believe, but is in fact tentative and provisional, with the capacity to change from one experience to the next, if we have an open mind as to "who we are" (319). Despite dating Loretta, Nick feels he must constantly assert his virility with others.

Nick has "had sex with other girls, handjobs, blowjobs, whatever else, putting it in taking it out, putting it in keeping it in, bareback, rubber, whatnot[. . .]" (704). He is fulfilling Georges Bataille's assertion that "men act in order to be" (*Eroticism* 171). His wife imitates his behavior when she has an affair with Brian. The sex seems neither spontaneous nor meaningful, but rather "a matter of close concentration" (258). She labels time with Brian as "her" time, a period when she can be herself, "[l]ess enveloped in someone else's figuration, his [Nick's] self-conscious shaping of a life" (257).

"Everything is connected in the end."<sup>13</sup>

J. Edgar Hoover's possessiveness about his garbage is understandable. Intimate waste, like blood, nail clippings, and hair, render the body indistinct and ambiguous, leaving others to conclude what they will about the identity of the waste shedder. This is why personal debris becomes the subject of ritual acts to ward off defilement, and hence abjection. Our intimate entanglement with our visceral waste and bodily sheddings ensures that such waste is part of the subject and hence can never be completely expelled. "What we excrete," says Nick, "comes back to consume us" (791). We are identified by "otherness," yet what we reject can only be pushed away for a limited time, underlining the inadequacy of binary oppositions. We bury huge heaps of waste and live among the toxic fumes, reduced to the sum of our own waste in a frightening deconstruction that will eventually present waste producer and waste to one another as one and the same, opposites meeting in the middle.

*Underworld* displays the seamless nature of human existence by commenting on the culture that it is part of, in a narrative that has no end or beginning, only multiple connections. We are left in cyberspace, looking through the narrator's computer screen. "Everything is connected" (826), to the extent of enveloping the writer's desk, what he can see, smell, and hear as he writes (827). The author's tangible presence reminds us that "knowing" can only be in relation to self or other things already known; nothing is new or heroic; there is too much of the abject clinging to us all. We are implicated in our own excrement; it remains bound up in our identification, preventing us from standing back and being objective, we cannot escape our involvement, and the threat of being engulfed by a huge, indistinct, overwhelming "one-ness" is frightening. The postmodern thought that perhaps the only boundaries we have are the ones that we create leaves us in an identificatory quandary. It is infinitely more attractive to be "something," embracing the boundaries this brings, rather than be "nothing" and try to deal with the chaos we feel *sure* this would bring. We constantly try to allay our fear, "fear, not so much of disorder as of formlessness: an amorphous vista of murky and uncertain waters and a reshaped landscape which we must learn to navigate without reliable maps" (Weeks 4).

Searching for a pre-ordained identity amid such ambiguity can only be delusive. The toxic wasteland, which constitutes our turn-of-the-millennium world, is not a place of



linear causality nor of discernible separation between subject and object. DeLillo reminds us of the futility of inflicting meaning upon ourselves in such a world. Rigid gender categories and societal norms can only create membranes prone to fracture, which in turn leave us feeling vulnerable and exposed.

## Notes

1. These films are from the 1980s but DeLillo reminds us, through his depiction of fictional characters in *White Noise*, that we have been modeling ourselves on characters from films for much longer. Grappa, for example, states, "I copied Richard Widmark's laugh (in *Kiss of Death*) and used it for ten years. It got me through some tough emotional periods. [. . .] It clarified a number of things in my life. Helped me become a person" (214–15).
2. My use of the term "abjection" is based upon Julia Kristeva's work on this subject, especially *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*.
3. Kristeva, *Powers* 6.
4. The law is an active force in the social construction of masculine heterosexuality; see Collier, 96.
5. DeLillo, *Underworld* 407.
6. *Abjection, Melancholia and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva* vi.
7. Being "it" in children's games is compared to being "outside," abject (*Underworld* 675: 677–78).
8. Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpses, etc.) represent the threat to identity that comes from without (Kristeva 71).
9. Divine intoxication places religion on a par with evil and sex, due to the heady rush of murder and the obliteration of orgasm.
10. See Showalter (91) for a discussion of this metaphoric linking of place with identity.
11. Hayles 20.
12. *Underworld* 88.
13. *Underworld* 826.

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## Jeffrey S. Bull (essay date Spring 1999)

SOURCE: "'What about a problem that doesn't have a solution?': Stone's in A Flag for Sunrise, DeLillo's *Mao II*, and the Politics of Political Fiction," in *Critique*, Vol. 40, No. 3, Spring, 1999, pp. 215–29.

[In the following essay, Bull identifies the conventions of "a literature of impasse" in *Mao II* and Robert Stone's *A Flag for Sunrise*, highlighting the political implications of both narratives.]

The political novel, says Irving Howe, is a work of fiction alive with the "internal tensions" born of abstract ideologies colliding with "representations of human behavior

and feeling" (20)—and since World War II, by his estimation, such fiction has only been produced outside the West (254). In his 1986 epilogue to *Politics and the Novel*, Howe describes authors such as V.S. Naipaul, Nadine Gordimer, and Milan Kundera—among others—as creators of “a literature of blockage, a literature of impasse” (252) that offers “no way out of the political dilemmas with which they end their books.” He praises their ability to document “utterly intractable” circumstances while pointedly refusing to accept the totalist stances propounded by the subject of so many of their novels (253–54).

I argue that Howe's definition underestimates recent attempts by American novelists to create political fictions—that is, that writers such as Robert Stone and Don DeLillo, to name two, also make the themes and discourse of blockage and impasse important parts of their novels. For example, both Stone's *A Flag for Sunrise* (1981) and DeLillo's *Mao II* (1991) explore the seemingly unresolvable conflict between liberal pluralism and revolutionary certitude. Mapping the limitations of both certainty and cynicism in a world where the boundaries between religious faith, political orthodoxy, and “apolitical” evasion meet and cross, Stone and DeLillo are ideal constituents of Howe's literature of impasse, writers who reveal the full effects of political action in an age when clear-cut solutions no longer seem to exist. By documenting the West's increasing uncertainty concerning its own democratic tenets, Stone and DeLillo question how one can find a reason to believe in (let alone act for) as fragile an enterprise as democracy, even as they critique the propensity to spurn dialogue in favor of totalism. Their works expose the limitations of all orthodoxies, while illustrating the sources of their allure. At the same time, both writers resist the temptation to simplify or solve the dynamic (active, potent, energetic) conflict between certitude and pluralism, thereby generating in their novels a perception of politics that reflects the novel's inherent receptivity to differing interpretations and opposing voices.

Uncomfortable separating “observation and participation” (Whalen-Bridge 198), a number of American novelists are now creating political fictions attuned to “the postmodern condition,” the notion that metanarratives (i.e., all-inclusive explanations of human purpose and practice) fail to account for the variety and contingency of human experiences (Lyotard xxiv). Any “faith”—any political ideology, any theocratic design, any dogmatic espousal of “freedom” and the “mission” of the United States—is itself such a metanarrative, and as such is now thought to be worth examining. Stone and DeLillo, drawing on the very complicities and failings of the American sense of mission, reveal the complexities of their homeland's relationship with itself and with the world. Their novels also reveal the complexities of the novelist's own relationship with his or her culture, the “politics of the novel,” and its relationship with democracy.

The last fifteen years have seen numerous compelling declarations of the democratic spirit of the novel. For example, the Czech novelist Milan Kundera praises the

ability of novelists to defend individuality and indeterminacy against those who insist that all bow to an unassailable Law. Believing that religions and ideologies “can cope with the novel only by translating its language of relativity and ambiguity into their own apodictic and dogmatic discourse [. . .]” (Kundera 7), he declares that “the spirit of the novel” is, as a rule, “incompatible with the totalitarian universe,” because totalitarian conceptions of truth reject any vision of “relativity, doubt, questioning” (14), whereas the novel “does not by nature serve ideological certitudes, it contradicts them” (Kundera, quoted in Rorty, *Essays* 73).

Richard Rorty echoes that view when he affirms that, in place of “contemplation, dialectic, and destiny,” novelists offer “adventure, narrative, and chance”—inherently anti-essentialist concepts that subvert the search for some “greater truth” beyond or behind events, something “more important” than suffering or joy (*Essays* 74). Rorty's novelist, unwilling to see suffering as simply “mere appearance” and recognizing that there is no way to completely describe (i.e., subsume) any person, chooses to create “a display of [the] diversity of viewpoints, a plurality of descriptions of the same events” that does not “privilege one of these descriptions” or “take it as an excuse for ignoring all the others” (Rorty, *Essays* 74). That novelist insists upon desacralizing all ideologies and orthodoxies, submitting them to careful analysis and orientation against the specific contexts of a work. The novelist's neologism “postmodernist bourgeois liberalism” (*Objectivity* 197), whatever its flaws, can serve as a name for this pronarrative “politics.” A self-subverting ideology that owes “more to our novelists than to our philosophers or to our poets” (Rorty, *Essays* 81), postmodernist bourgeois liberalism celebrates efforts to undermine dogmatism while making a virtue of the deterioration of certitude.<sup>1</sup> Against totalist appraisals of culture and history, the postmodern bourgeois liberal seeks to create a haven for difference while upholding a central tenet of traditional bourgeois liberalism: the notion that there can be an anti-ethnocentric *ethnos*, a “we (“we liberals”) that is dedicated to enlarging itself, to creating an even larger and more variegated *ethnos*” (Rorty, *Contingency* 198). Salman Rushdie's post-fatwa lecture “Is Nothing Sacred?” makes similar positive claims for inclusiveness, instability, and “unholiness.” Literature, says Rushdie, “tells us that there are no answers; or, rather, it tells us that answers are easier to come by, and less reliable, than questions. If religion is an answer, if political ideology is an answer, then literature is an inquiry” (422). Insisting that distrust of metanarratives must not itself become a metanarrative, that novelists (“we”) “must not become what we oppose,” Rushdie feels that literature must remain “the arena of discourse, the place where the struggle of languages can be acted out” (427).<sup>2</sup>

The politics of the novel, therefore, are founded on the properties of the genre itself. E.L. Doctorow suggests that “the most important political function of the writer is to be a witness” (Whalen-Bridge 198)—and the novel's inherent tendency to measure and question all metanarratives,

upholding the *ethos* of the *ethnos* discussed above, assists in that act of witness. The novel's excellence as a vehicle for "opposition," its capacity for refusing to accept without question any single reading of existence (Howe 23), is a result of its propensity for allowing characters and their ideological stances to interact, to challenge each other, and to be challenged by events.

Although emerging from an entirely different cultural and critical orientation, Mikhail Bakhtin's "prosaics,"<sup>3</sup> his celebration of unfinalizability, variety, and freedom, makes similar claims for fiction. Bakhtin sacralizes the novel to some degree (Seguin 42–43), but the political significance of his ideas is clear: suggesting that metanarratives are of limited value.<sup>4</sup> Bakhtin challenges "theoretisms" (ideological abstractions) of any kind (Morson and Emerson 49–50). He envisages the novel as the place in which contesting discourses state their cases and challenge each other.

According to Bakhtin, Dostoevski's emphasis on creating a "*genuine polyphony of fully valid voices*," and his effort to see that both the form and content of his works support "the struggle against a *reification* of man, of human relations, of all human values[. . .]" (6.62), both help to reveal how human unfinalizability and indeterminacy are central themes of all novelistic discourse. Part of that effort includes creating a new and important role for ideas—including political ideologies—in his works. Whereas ideas in "monologic" (author-centered) texts are placed in character's mouths to be used as "simple artistic characterizing feature[s]," important only so far as they represent or are repudiated by the author's own ideology, ideas in Dostoevski's dialogic (ideologically decentered)<sup>5</sup> texts become "*the subject of artistic representation*," actors in their own right (85).<sup>6</sup> Both characters and ideas confront and test each other as autonomous actors: Dostoevski's polyphonic conception of fiction, the "ideology" of his works, demands that characters' ideas be both known and felt, born of dialogic contact with other consciousness in a world where "*nothing conclusive has yet taken place* [. . .where] *the ultimate word of the world and about the world has not yet been spoken, the world is open and free, everything is still in the future and will always be in the future*" (85–87. 166).

Bakhtin's Dostoevski, as David Lodge points out, "put the adventure plot 'at the service of the idea' [. . .] to make it the vehicle for exploring profound spiritual and metaphysical problems" (62).<sup>7</sup> Therefore, his narratives test both ideas and those who hold them, and feature characters in whom ideas and the idea of self are interdependent, unfinalized, in dialogue. Aspects of Menippean Satire—plot extravagance, the use of low settings such as bars, prisons, and brothels as the site of dialogues concerning ultimate questions, the clash of diametrically opposed viewpoints, and the use of ridiculous, "carnivalized" characters (Bakhtin 109–19)—are turned to charting the sense of spiritual crisis their author detected in modern secular society (typified by political extremism and the decline of

commonly accepted bases for social stability) and to doing justice to the complexity of "the man in man."

Therefore, even though Dostoevski's own antidemocratic opinions are well documented,<sup>8</sup> the artist Bakhtin depicts possesses an aesthetic model that clearly draws on "the wisdom of the novel," that "imaginary paradise of individuals [. . .] where no one possesses the truth [. . .] but where everyone has the right to be understood" (Kundera 159).

In their works, Stone and DeLillo draw on and examine the political implications of such wisdom. *A Flag for Sunrise* and *Mao II*, latter-day examples of the Dostoevskian "philosophical adventure story" (Lodge 62), display all the passions and contradictions that politics and religion engender and set conflicts between characters and ideas in a heterogeneous adventure-story setting. Both novels depict how the differences between religious and political faith blur; guerillas, gun-runners, spies—and novelists—pose "ultimate questions" (What is the use of man? Do we seek freedom to act or freedom from action?) while participating in plots consistent with the contingencies of thrillers. In both books, political ideologies and the characters who hold them come to be tested through contact with each other and are woven into a "great dialogue" that illuminates the complexities of modern culture and character. In so doing, Stone and DeLillo reiterate the particular politics of the novel, the "wisdom" that measures all things before judging them.

Robert Stone, for one, draws on "what there is of the mythic in [the thriller's] kind of popular melodramatic form," both because it works as an "irreverent echo" [that is, conscious parody] of the heroic epic, and because it helps hold readers' attention (Schroeder 159–60). Indeed, *A Flag for Sunrise* "has the pace and suspense of a first-class thriller, [catching] the shifting currents of contemporary Latin American politics," while its author manages to "convert clichés into people, and people into questions" (Wood I). Contingent circumstances and the necessities of ideas control its plot. Characters move from place to place according to the dictates of hidden, often inexplicable motivations, thereby revealing the author's determination to allow his protagonists to struggle freely with antithetical ideas.<sup>9</sup>

Don DeLillo is also known for using popular genres as forums for debating "ultimate questions." Tropes of the conspiracy thriller, for example, vie with explorations of philosophical and political problems in many of his novels (Aaron 308). Frank Lentriccia praises DeLillo's novels for their "irredeemably heterogeneous texture," calling them anatomies, "montages of tones, styles, and voices that have the effect of yoking together terror and wild humor as the essential tone of contemporary America" (239–40). Even though *Libra* (1988) was DeLillo's only best-seller, the preponderance of "popular" genres in his works might lead one to ask, Is DeLillo "a highbrow or a populist writer?" (Johnston 261). In each of DeLillo's novels, "the



subject matter or content normally associated with conventional or popular forms of the novel is crossed or overlaps with at least one other kind of content”—namely, complex philosophical and moral questions (Johnston 262). It is in genre variety of this sort, mixing the contingencies of the thriller with important philosophical and political matters, that DeLillo, like Stone, establishes a dialogue with American mass culture and with the political implications of that culture.

Stone's protagonist, Frank Holliwell, is neither able clearly to articulate why he came to be in Central America, nor why he allows himself to be drawn into the political upheaval there. That which has driven him south resists easy interpretation, as it depends more on longing than logic. Like many Americans before him, he finds himself drawn into events in this "sweet waist of America"—drawn to something sensually thrilling and seductively macabre that inhabits both the landscape and the politics of the fictional nation Tecan. For example, driving toward Tecan with Tom and Marie Zecca, employees of the U.S. Embassy, and Bob Cole, a "leftish" freelance journalist, Holliwell notes to himself that the giant volcanoes for which the country is famous seem to communicate "a troubling sense of the earth as nothing more than itself, of blind force and mortality. As mindlessly refuting of hope as a skull and bones" (*Flag* 157–58). Stone sets that observation against Cole's belief (as intuited by Holliwell) that there is something moral and just in history, something worthy of respect. Holliwell finds such optimism both touching and dangerous. For him, the truth of the land exists beyond hope, beyond politics; here "primary process" rules. That same feeling radiates from the menacing blankness he later encounters while scuba-diving below "Twixt," and from Pablo Tabor, the American drifter with whom Holliwell makes his escape from Tecan at the end of the book: all give off intimations of a darker power no justice can answer.

Already seductive, the macabre allure is only augmented by the chance to encounter the Catholic missionaries his "friends" in the C.I.A. have asked him to check up on—people in whom faith and hope might still abide. "It would be strange to see such Catholics," he thinks. "It would be strange to see people who believed in things, and acted in the world according to their beliefs" (101). With his own sense of hope "badly seared" by what he encountered in Vietnam (165), he has grown comfortable with the voyeurism allowed by his profession (anthropologist) and the cynicism born of his past and present experiences with American history in action. As a result, he feels within himself a simultaneous longing for and loathing of hope, a sort of false martyrdom of caustic despair that drives him forward.

That inchoate compulsion is the plot-device that allows Stone to place Holliwell in extreme situations, such as his conversation with the antiterrorist operative Heath or his ride in the open boat with Pablo Tabor. Such situations test Holliwell's personal "ideology" of political indifference

(an attempt to forget that silence is consent), his own mix of personality and philosophy. He believes himself to be a liberal, a free agent; he thinks he owes nothing to anyone. Nevertheless, the dictates of history and fear eventually beset his faith. In the polarized political world of Tecan, his "curiosity" seems to both the Left (the missionary Sister Justin) and the Right (Mr. Heath) little more than "a moral adventure [he] can dine out on in the States" (395). "I don't know quite why I came[. . .]," he angrily tells Heath. "People do such things, you know. You may live in a world of absolute calculation but I don't" (394). "[H]e had vainly imagined that truth was on his side—but of course there was no truth. There were only circumstances" (394). Amidst that ineluctable polarization of Left and Right, the needs of Holliwell's "dry spirit" and his abiding discomfort with such needs (apparent in his despairing skepticism and political uncertainty) combine to put him in peril. Curiosity and desire lead him deeper and deeper into the politics of the region—and closer and closer to the confrontation with himself and his own values that ends with his murder of Tabor, an act of calculated violence he had hoped to avoid, yet knew he could not escape. He had hoped to evade politics, evade involvement, leave the world to the sharks. In the end, of necessity, he is obliged to become one of them. He betrays Justin to the *Guardia*, and kills Tabor, hallucinating after the murder, he "hears" sharks "talk" to him, joke with him, as they swim past the boat back toward Tabor's body. They tell him that now he has his proof, that there is no justice—"just us." Cole was entirely wrong. In the final scene the sun rises on a world, as Holliwell sees it, permanently lost, one in which history cannot be challenged or changed. He styles himself the man who "understands history" because his encounter with Tabor's brutality and his own has confirmed what the volcanoes and Twixt called forth: that sense that "blind force and mortality" are the only earthly powers.

In *Mao II* the central characters are also at the mercy of contingencies. They act out a plot less dependent on cause and effect than on the need to intertwine certain issues and circumstances to test idea against idea, person against person. The culmination of the novel comes when Brita Nilsson, a photographer who gave up her original project of photographing authors—because "it stopped making sense"—chooses instead to cover "the interesting things, barely watched wars, children running in the dust[. . .]" (229), meets Abu Rashid—the Maoist leader whose kidnapping of a Swiss relief worker and poet in Beirut provides much of the surface impetus of the plot. Rashid, recreating himself (like his idol, Mao Zedong) as a symbol of the "immortal truth" of his "total politics," epitomizes "the Terrorist," that figure the novelist Bill Gray (the central figure in the novel) believes has taken control of mankind's narrative (41). By making Rashid a Maoist in Beirut, DeLillo is able to play with the implications of both those proper nouns, thereby commingling political and theocratic absolutisms and complicating all definitions of belief. Although not typical of those who battled over Beirut and Lebanon during the 1970s and 1980s—the

Christian and Muslim militias, the Islamic Jihad, the South Lebanon Army—but entirely believable within the parameters of that disaster or of the text itself.<sup>10</sup> Rashid works as both a contrivance (“the Terrorist” incarnate) designed to allow DeLillo to pose “ultimate questions” and as an example of those “men dazed by power” (DeLillo, “Art” 296) who turn to violence in the hope of fulfilling their political programs. Therefore, his encounter with Brita, erstwhile iconographer of old-style “authors” (those using words, not bombs, to create the world’s narrative) allows DeLillo the chance to pose terrorism against “novelism” without unduly favoring either stance.

Brita is a paradoxical choice as a challenger to Rashid. Photographs, as Martin Jay suggests, have an uncanny ability to “stop time” violently, thereby “introducing a memento mori into visual experience.” As Roland Barthes put it, photographs are “*clear evidence* of what was there” that ineluctably speak of “flat death” (quoted in Jay 135, 451–55). Brita calls her author photographs “[b]eautiful and a little sacred” (*Mao II* 36): they are both moving and unworldly. Depending on the context, they can become “the death of the author” made literal, if you will, monologizing depictions that type writers as saints, grant them existence simply as objects. Therefore, while her “‘species count’” may be “‘a form of knowledge and mystery’” (26, 25), it also participates in the emptying out of the image prevalent in postmodern culture, the depletion of meaning as (to paraphrase Bill Gray, the novelist-protagonist of the novel) Nature gives way to aura (44). On first arriving in New York, years before, she concentrated on photographing street people: “‘But after years of this I began to think it was somehow, strangely—not valid. No matter what I shot, how much horror, reality, misery, ruined bodies, bloody faces, it was all so fucking pretty in the end. Do you know?’” (24–25). She moved on to making authors beautiful—creating the images of “celebrity” that, as Bill Gray suggests, do not “‘begin to mean anything until the subject is dead’” (42). That Brita turns her attention to terrorists at the end of the novel seems to suggest that the *ethos* of novelists has been over-whelmed by the culture of terror and image, that “novelism” is static now, dead: and her lens needs to turn to a new theme.

Yet the author, and the character, simultaneously challenge that pat conclusion. The ambiguous effect of photographs does not allow for it. Brita’s camera can both undermine the absolutism of Rashid and help promote his message. Although it can subvert his totalist design by catching scenes that contradict his rule, it also fixes things, limits how they can be known. Unlike the novel (Rushdie’s “arena of discourse”), photographs offer only scant shelter to debate. DeLillo implies as much by enabling us to imagine, side by side, the identical photographs of Rashid that his hooded disciples wear pinned to their uniforms in place of their own faces (233) and the set of newsphotos of the man that Brita compiles. Nevertheless, her roll of film also includes an “unauthorized” exposure of one of Rashid’s boys unmasked, himself. By ending the novel with such an ambiguous challenge to Rashid’s “total

thought.” DeLillo brings to the fore the unresolvable debate over images and ideas that make up the real “plot” of the novel.

Brita, for her part, wary of the price of “moral adventures,” attempts to take her pictures without commenting on their content (i.e., on Rashid). She believes she can stay clear of “politics”: “‘I know that everybody who comes to Lebanon wants to get in on the fun,’” she tells him, “‘but they all end up confused and disgraced and maimed, so I would just like to take a few pictures and leave, thank you very much’” (232). However, despite the fact that her actions and speech seem to indicate that terrorists have taken control of the West’s narrative (as Bill predicted), she still challenges Rashid’s demand that all surrender to “something powerful and great” (234). Impulsively unmasking one of Rashid’s followers allows her to thwart, for an instant, anyway, the “longing for Mao” (236) Rashid promotes, the disintegration of self into “all man one man” (235). In that frame she saves an image of violence, contempt—and individuality—that subverts totalitarianism. At the same time, DeLillo, lending complexity to his depiction of her act of witness, insists that the reader note how Brita’s act is not founded in any inflexible idealism but bears all the imperfections of a “democratic shout” (159): “She does this because it seems important” (236).

Her almost accidental act of subversion, for which she has no clear explanation, remains unresolvably paradoxical. Although our culture suffers under a camera-borne barrage of increasingly substanceless images, those images can also challenge and subvert “monologic” political cures such as Rashid’s. Brita’s rash act of witness, set in the ruins of the dead city, is a central episode in the unresolved combat of ideologies in DeLillo’s text and reflects the necessities of his self-consciously self-undermining narrative—a narrative in which the ideas Brita and Rashid embody are as important as their personalities. Here, characters are ideologists; ideas themselves become subject to scrupulous testing. No metanarrative is allowed to pass by unexamined.

Stone also manages to investigate, and thereby unsettle, both ideological certitude and the politics of the novel. Holliwell’s use of language and his meeting with Sister Justin are two examples of how Stone examines the limitations of both unquestioning belief and corrosive doubt. For example, Holliwell’s political voyeurism, his attempt to watch American foreign policy in action in Tecan while trying to avoid becoming committed to either side, arises from his unwillingness to believe that change is now (or ever) possible, that history and hope might be related. By his estimation, the United States has put an end to that. Asked by an old friend (now a C.I.A. stooge) to present a lecture at the Autonomous University of Compostela, Tecan’s neighbor (asked, he later finds out, so he will be “in the neighbourhood” of the missionaries). Holliwell decides to let his audience in on a crucial secret: not only has the United States buried the world under pop culture—to borrow his phrase, “‘Mickey Mouse will see [us]

dead” (*Flag* 108)—but it has also committed cultural suicide by destroying its own secret, nonexportable culture: the United States no longer believes that it is “more” (109).<sup>12</sup> The peculiarly American brand of idealism, that problematic bonding of self to nation, born of the merger of secular and spiritual hope, is, as he understands it, a dying thing, “Its going sour and we’re going to die of it” (109–10). Recent history has toppled American certainty and brought down with it Holliwell’s faith in that nonexportable virtue.

As evidence of that decline, Holliwell’s own speech, in several spots in the text, re-creates tropes adopted during the Vietnam War, phrases haunted by self-betrayal and futility (Wood 1). That “doubly-voiced discourse” (to borrow Bakhtin’s term) lets Stone create a dialogized conception of history within Holliwell’s own consciousness. Vietnam merges with Tecan: Driving into the capital Holliwell imagines that “the markets would be behind the bus station, where they always were, in Tecan as in Danang or Hue (163). “He had no business down there,” he tells himself (245)—not down under the reef, where he had sensed some greater darkness in the depths, not down in Tecan, “far from God, a few hours from Miami” (71), and not “under that perfumed sky” (245) (a turn of phrase as appropriate to Saigon and the Perfume River as to Puerto Alvarado). Memories of the idioms and events of Vietnam return repeatedly to his thoughts, drawn out by the echoes and similarities with that former circumstance he recognizes in his new surroundings. The Zeccas, he is only half-surprised to learn, also served in Vietnam. His conversation with them is centered around a comparison of then and now, Vietnam and Tecan, which increasingly paints Tecan as “Vietnam” about to be reborn. Tom Zecca, an astute student of history, hopes that when the place goes up he will be long gone: “[m]y tour is almost up. Then they can send in the types who like the Guardia’s style. The headhunters, the Cubans, the counter-insurgency LURPS’s” (169). Spooks and assassins; the names move back and forth through time, make incursions into a new continent, bleed 1961 into 1981. Such overt and implicit comparisons engage the present (early 1980s) in a dialogue with the American past and work as reminders of both the danger of American confidence and the price of its loss. The death of the sense of mission is handled in its full complexity by that use of language: language containing both a memory of the price Americans exacted from others in order to pursue imperial dreams and a sense that the last and the finest of all human dreams—democracy for all—has been murdered by such pursuits.

The void left by the end of hope is filled. Holliwell believes, by a loss of affect. “Whirl” supplants the dying sense of purpose. Powerful ideals have given way to empty yet deadly simulations. “In suburban shopping centers [he thinks] the first chordates walk the pavement, marvels of mimesis. Their exoskeletons exactly duplicate the dominant species. Behind their soft octopus eyes—rudimentary swim bladders and stiletto teeth” (246).

Having lost the secret culture of democratic hope. Holliwell’s United States has become no more than its commodities, “for sale to anyone who can raise the cash and the requisite number of semi-literate consumers” (108). Unable to believe in belief and possessed by nostalgia for a world in which people acted on their beliefs. Holliwell slides into a lasting cynicism. Reflecting on Sister Justin and her fragile sense that she can act in history—that is, act for others, fulfill her religious and political “mission”—Holliwell feels “admiration, contempt, and jealousy” (243). Drawn to her hope yet repelled by it, he lacks the courage to be sincere, “Positive thinkers” frighten him. Such people’s beliefs, he feels, are turned by the brute force of existence into a species of moral blindness leading to murder. “The world paid in blood for their articulate delusions, but it was all right because for a while they felt better. And presently they could put their consciousnesses on automatic. They were beyond good and evil in five easy steps[. . .]” (245). He recognizes that his absolute doubt is a sign of despair, that last and greatest challenge to believer and political actor alike. “There was no reason to get angry,” he thinks. “At his age one took things as they were. Despair was also a foolish indulgence, less lethal than vain faith but demeaning” (246). However, by the end of the book, despair becomes master of his speech and thought. He reifies that “ideology of despair,” this sense that all is whirl and *only* whirl and insists that it governs every circumstance. When he tries to get Sister Justin to come away from the mission with him by arguing that the revolution is futile, she recognizes that for him “despair and giving up are like liquor[. . .]” (388). He believes he must warn her that “God doesn’t work through history”—and even after she tells him that that’s “too metaphysical” for her, he persists: ““The things people do don’t add up to an edifying story. There aren’t any morals to this confusion we’re living in. I mean, you can make yourself believe any sort of fable about it. They’re all bullshit”” (387).

What he fails to understand is that Justin is no longer interested in doubting or affirming any abstract ideology. Paradoxically, she moves away from metaphysics toward belief; she accepts the notion that “justice” might only be a word, yet she continues to see the revolution as a chance to end some suffering in one place, now. The paradoxes of religious and political belief settle in her as a desire for practical action, and she discovers a moment when a choice must be made and kept. Her conception of political practicalities alters the dynamic between Holliwell and herself so that the reader witnesses Holliwell becoming the “believer”—believing in the meaninglessness of belief—whereas Justin finds her use in a suffering world. “I don’t have your faith in despair,” she tells him, “I can’t take comfort in it like you can” (388). Her faith in action and her attention to the necessities of her particular situation allow her to go on: his controlling sense that action is futile, therefore worthless, binds him to the escapism of despair. Holliwell’s internal conflict, the collision between his desire to “drink and drink and drink” of her goodness and his belief that all political action is foredoomed, allows Stone to play out “ultimate questions” arising from



the American sense of self-doubt and thereby to establish and explore the longing and self-loathing within its politics.

In creating Bill Gray's series of discussions with the terrorists' spokesperson, George Haddad, DeLillo also brings together implacable and antithetical visions of the world and uses their contact to illustrate the limitations of faith and despair. Paralleling the meeting of Brita and Rashid (their successors, in a sense). Gray and Haddad's dialogue tests both the "longing for Mao" and "the democratic shout" of the "novelistic" world-view. Authors and terrorists, Bill believes, "are playing a zero-sum game" (156): "What terrorists gain, novelists lose. The degree to which they influence mass consciousness is the extent of our decline as shapers of sensibility and thought. The danger they represent equals our own failure to be dangerous" (157). Whereas Haddad believes that the terrorist, by default, has become the new hero of history. Bill refuses to concede the game. To his mind, absolutism is the terrorists' great failure, proof that both their means and ends are corrupt. They abolish choice, accident, and all faiths save one, universal and absolute. At that point, however, the text makes plain the ambiguities inherent in Bill's novelistic politics, his celebration of openness. Are there no ideals worth dying for? Worth killing for? "I think you have to take sides," Haddad declares. "Don't comfort yourself with safe arguments. Take up the case of the downtrodden, the spat-upon. Do these people feel a yearning for order? Who will give it to them?" (158). The novel's attention to that debate in itself supports Bill's "novelism," but his politics of inclusion and individuality, events in the book, such as Karen Janney's uncanny spiritual encounters with mass man (as a participant in a Unification Church mass wedding in Yankee Stadium, as a lay worker amongst the victims of modern culture living in Tompkins Square, even while watching Khomeini's funeral on TV) suggest that the longing of many humans for the "symbolic immortality" offered by totalist rulers and their "immortal"—that is, impregnable monologic—words certainly cannot be ignored.<sup>13</sup> The text contains a recognition of that dilemma and allows a place of absolute privilege to neither Bill's strident dismissal of absolutes nor Haddad's paean to "total politics, total authority, total being" (158).

DeLillo's own depiction of Karen's mission amongst the sufferers in Tompkins Square forces readers to pay attention to "the down-trodden, the spat-upon" that Haddad believes only total order can save. Nevertheless, the author also ensures that we note how Bill Gray, spokesperson for the novel, cannot present his case without resorting to the kind of tropes of certitude his work is supposed to resist. His dependence on those tropes increases alongside his sense of doubt concerning both himself and his art. Yet, unlike Rashid's Maoism, Bill's novelism puts its faith in failure and ambiguity. That antithesis is the basis for the success and the failings of his argument. "Even if I could see the need for absolute authority," he tells Haddad, "my work would draw me away. The experience of my

own consciousness tells me how autocracy fails, how total control wrecks the spirit, how my characters deny my efforts to own them completely, how I need internal dissent, self-argument, how the world squashes me the minute I think it's mine" (159). Novels are a "spray of ideas. One thing unlike the next. Ambiguities, contradictions, whispers, hints." That is what Rashid's absolutism would destroy. However, the receptivity offers no sense of security, or certainty; only words. Bill's own dissolution into despair under the "shitpile" of his own "hopeless prose" offers little of promise to those Karen finds living in New York's streets, learning the "language of soot." Bill's discourse appears to be little match for the tropes of whirling terror—for bombs, kidnappings, "enormous and commanding [. . .] figure of absolute being" (158). Paradoxically, DeLillo's "great dialogue" reflects that ineffectualness even as its very existence declaims the validity of Bill's ideal. In the interplay of political circumstances and ideologies within the text, the possibilities inherent in the ideology of the novel are renewed even as that text describes hope's end. As a result, the book may be read as both a homage to the New Postmodernist vision of the novel as a democratic space and as a critique of the optimism of that vision.

Bill Gray, like Frank Holliwell, eventually finds himself adumbrating an ideology of despair and political ineffectuality. In the "great dialogue" of the novel he repeatedly prophesies barrenness and negation. Telling Brita of the decay of the word, Bill relates consumerism with terrorism and ties them together as proof of the extinction of meaning. Describing how the Terrorist has seized our time's narrative from the Novelist, Bill does not forget to include the commercialization of art as a factor in art's defeat: "[. . .] I used to think it was possible for a novelist to alter the inner life of the culture. Now bomb-makers and gunmen have taken that territory. They make raids on human consciousness. What writers used to do before we were all incorporated" (41). In his view, the acceleration of consumerism exemplified by literary celebrity has had as much a part in the terrorists' victory as any other factor. All is commodity<sup>14</sup>: "There's the life and there's the consumer event," quoting Bill. "Nothing happens until it's consumed. Or put it this way. Nature has given way to aura" (42). He predicts that Brita's photographs of him, another commodity, will gain power after his death—and he is correct. In his absence, his assistant and hagiographer, Scott Martineau, creates the myth of "Bill Gray the Writer" by leaving Bill's uncompletable "botch" of a book unpublished, silent, "gathering aura and force," and using the pictures Brita has taken to deepen "Old Bill's legend, undyingly" (224).

Although events in the text almost completely validate Bill's affirmation of despair and the dissipation he suffers as he moves toward a confrontation with Rashid and his own death, ironic points of light appear to contradict the mood of destruction. That silence of the author-protagonist, his loss of faith in his power to draw out the "moral force" of a well-made sentence (48) (a decline evinced by his

fading attempts to write some sense of the life of the hostage, to see dialogically, see another as himself) compels one toward accepting the text's suggestion that "our only language is Beirut" (239). However, as the book also reveals, that language still retains phrases capable of communicating the ineffable: the moment Brita pulls away the hood; the wedding party moving across the rubble, "transcendent, free of limits[. . .]" (240). Positioned at the end of the work, in ironic contrast with the mass wedding at the beginning, that last event subverts Bill's assumption that the full and final defeat of man has been prefigured by the emptying out of "facts" and the empty violence that calls forth. Like Holliwell, Bill comes to depend too much on despair; he grows perversely fond of ineffectiveness and affectlessness. DeLillo (as Stone did with Holliwell) engages Bill's overarching despair in dialogue with circumstances of immediate personal and political importance, moments of reprieve that offer some hope, some sense that human agency is not futile at all times. That commingling of ideology and the tangible concerns of human behavior and suffering allows DeLillo and Stone to illustrate the complexities of political faith and political action in an age that knows too well the dangers of blind certainty.

According to Stone, "There's a shared Marxist and American attitude that where there's a problem there must be a solution. What about a problem that doesn't have a solution?" (Plimpton 371). Stone and DeLillo's "answer" to that question is to enhance the tensions between idea, character, setting, and content that are the sources of the novel's effectiveness as an art form. Actual political crises (ghosts of Vietnam stirred up in Central America, censorship, and the rise of theocratic states<sup>15</sup>) become important figures in both texts, taking their places in the "arena of discourse." In playing out these historical events (drawing on fiction's ability to clarify and order experience, lend it scope) both writers are able to draw the conflict of ideologies down to the personal level, thereby establishing "the connection between political forces and individual lives" important to all successful political fiction (Stone, "Reason" 75–76). Their novels support Bill Gray's contention that the novel has its own bit of moral force (*Mao* 48), which abides in the novel's ability to represent the complex and changing relationships between the private desires and the political ideals of the characters.

#### Notes

1. Mark Edmundson calls Rushdie, Rorty, and (to a lesser extent) Kundera positive-minded "new postmodernists" who both "disenchant the world" (standard operating procedure for the original "negative postmodernists") and affirm the merits of diversity and uncertainty (62–66).
2. As Howe put it in *Politics and the Novel*, ideologies become "active characters in the political novel" (21); they are brought to life and brought into live, set against each other.
3. A neologism coined by Gary Saul Morson (Morson and Emerson 15ff).

4. Bakhtin resists "*semiotic totalitarianism*, the assumption that everything has a meaning relating to the seamless whole [. . .] one could discover if only one had the code. This kind of thinking is totalitarian in its assumption that one can, in principle, explain the totality of things" (Morson and Emerson 28). "Semiotic totalitarians typically assume that it is disorder that requires an explanation. Prosaics begin by placing the burden of proof the other way. [. . .] In the self, in culture, and in language, it is not [. . .] disorder or fragmentation that requires explanation: it is integrity" (31).
5. Bakhtin himself calls his ideas inadequate summaries, monologic representations of Dostoevski's dialogic creations (see Morson and Emerson 61). As Linda Hutcheon points out, he favored an ideology of anti-ideologism, whereas postmodern novelists recognize that paradox and use parodic re-enactments of traditional "centering" (which they promptly throw into doubt) to contest both centering and decentering. By the rules of Bakhtin's own analysis, "decentered" texts also have a "center," self-conscious though it may be (180).
6. Bakhtin's thoughts here match Howe's own interpretation of Dostoevski in *Politics and the Novel*. "Dostoevsky shows how ideology can [. . .] blind men to simple facts, make them monsters by tempting them into that fatal habit which anthropologists call 'reifying' ideas. No other novelist has dramatized so powerfully the values and dangers, the uses and corruptions of systematized thought" (71). He is the "*great artist of the idea*" because he does not "finish" ideas and characters who hold them: he keeps his distance, "neither confirming the idea nor merging it with his own expressed ideology" (Bakhtin 85).
7. See Bakhtin 106–66, where he discusses how the *spirit* of Dostoevski's works reflects the subversive power of carnival and compare with Kundera 20, on the wisdom of "the depreciated legacy of Cervantes."
8. One can only imagine what he'd say of "postmodernist bourgeois liberals!"
9. Compare Bakhtin 104: "The adventure plot relies not on what the hero is [or] the place he occupies in life, but more often on what he is not, on what [. . .] is unexpected and not predetermined."
10. DeLillo prefigures Rashid by having the words "Sendero Luminoso" (Shining Path, the Peruvian Maoist revolutionaries) and "Beirut" meet and mix beforehand. Written in spraypaint on "half-demolished walls," the former word is an uncanny caption for an apocalyptic New York (in which gas mains rupture and fireballs form "outside famous restaurants"), which has the locals muttering "Beirut, Beirut, it's just like Beirut" (173–75).
11. Compare Hutcheon 178–87.
12. That nonexportable element is "Idealism. A tradition of rectitude that genuinely does exist in American

society and that sometimes has been translated into government, [ . . . ] so much that is best in America is a state of mind you can't export" (Stone quoted in Plimpton 370).

13. Compare Lifton 7–8. Lifton describes how "the Thought of Mao Tse-tung," particularly during the Cultural Revolution, came to take on quasi-religious significance for the Chinese people: "Over the course of Mao's later career the word becomes not only flesh but *his* flesh. The man-word corpus is increasingly represented as *absolutely* identical with China's destiny" (91). Unlike Bakhtin's version of the author, just one voice amongst many in his text (Bakhtin 63), the writer Mao, inspiration for Haddad and Rashid, supplants all other voices, is every voice.
14. See Hutcheon 223. Postmodern texts, by "problematizing" our conceptions of reality itself, undermine any lament concerning emptiness by generating an elusive sense of possibility, an unresolvable tension between opposing conceptions. DeLillo's play with the powers of the camera, its ability to liberate and finalize at once, is an example of such a postmodern strategy.
15. Compare Stone quoted in Plimpton 371 and DeLillo quoted in Passaro 77.

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#### John Loughery (review date Summer 1999)

SOURCE: "The Hard Subjects," in *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 52, No. 2, Summer, 1999, pp. 285–8.

[In the following excerpt, Loughery pans Valparaiso.]

Don DeLillo's *Valparaiso* concerns a man who buys a plane ticket to Valparaiso, Indiana, and ends up in Valparaiso, Chile. This mildly amusing idea might have yielded a good light comedy. It is certainly plausible; I recall some years ago a couple intending to go to Panama City, Panama, ending up in Panama City, Florida, just as a



hurricane hit, stranding them there for days. This became a running joke in Florida, where the northern Gulf Coast is referred to as "the redneck Riviera."

*Valparaiso* however, is no comedy, but a hyperserious social problem play, focussing on how the hero's misadventure is treated in the press and on television. Brustein, in a program note, maintains that the play "exposes the media's ravenous invasion of privacy," but this is false. The hero, Michael Majeski, *wants* to be interviewed. He gives up his job, signs autographs, even has a Web site. The reporters and interviewers in the play are often bored with him (as are we) and his silly escapade, and if anything are reluctant to pry. Everything is seen from Majeski's point of view, with nothing much about the inner workings of the media.

Nevertheless, by focussing on his hero's obsession with achieving instant fame, DeLillo might still have written a good play. Unfortunately, this obsession goes nowhere. Everything is presented through exposition rather than action, including the original trip. Majeski tells the story over and over, until you want to scream. A parody of the Oprah Winfrey shows drags on forever, without evoking a single laugh. There is a lot of pseudopoetic dialog, as in, "Her nipples are sensitive to messages from orbiting satellites." Halfway through the second act, something finally happens; Majeski's wife becomes pregnant by another man. But even this event (presented again through exposition) goes nowhere. The conclusion shows Majeski re-enacting the flight while the Oprah figure and her sidekick chant more poetry. Majeski apparently tried to commit suicide by asphyxiating himself in a restroom on the plane. I still am not sure what to make of this, since it has nothing to do with fame or the media. Perhaps it is meant to suggest that his original going astray was intentional, and that a desire for fame has something to do with a death wish.

David Wheeler directed this maladroitness piece, with good contemporary settings by Karl Eigsti and costumes by Catherine Zuber. The cast was quite competent; Will Patton as the hero had a nice, bland, Midwestern look, and was quite well spoken, while the rest of the cast were all better than their counterparts in Ibsen's *Master Builder*. The failure of this production relates back to the playwright alone.

An academic friend of mine who teaches at a university in the Boston area said he never goes to the A.R.T. anymore, because "there are easier ways to get angry." It would be unfair to judge this company by his wisecrack, or by two productions alone. Nevertheless, as a standard, they were well below what you would see at other major American theatre companies.

## FURTHER READING

### Criticism

Begley, Adam. "Don DeLillo: *Americana*, *Mao II*, and *Underworld*." *Southwest Review* 82, No. 4 (1997): 478-505.

Extensively reviews *Americana*, *Mao II*, and *Underworld*, detailing significant thematic and stylistic developments in DeLillo's career.

Dee, Johnathan: "The Reanimators: On the Art of Literary Graverobbing." *Harper's Magazine* 298, No. 1789 (June 1999): 76-84.

Assesses *Libra* as a form of "anti-history."

Engles, Tim. "'Who Are You, Literally?': Fantasies of the White Self in *White Noise*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 45, No. 3 (Fall 1993): 755-87.

Explicates the "subtextual portrait of white American modes of racialized perception" in *White Noise*, focusing on the characterization of Jack Gladney.

Hagen, W. M. Review of *Underworld*, by Don DeLillo. *World Literature Today* 73, No. 1 (Winter 1999): 145-46.

Unfavorably criticizes the plot and characterization of *Underworld*.

Knight, Peter. "Everything Is Connected: *Underworld*." *Secret History of Paranoia*. *Modern Fiction Studies* 45, No. 3, Fall, 1999, pp. 811-36.

Accounts for the ebb and flow of mass paranoia in twentieth-century American culture as represented in *Underworld*.

Neclotti, Maria. "An Interview with Don DeLillo," translated by Peggy Boyers. *Salmagundi* 100 (Fall 1993): 86-97.

Originally published in the Italian magazine, *Linea d'Ombra*. Discusses crowd psychology, autobiographical influences, gender relations, and the contemporary status of American authorship.

Osteen, Mark. "Becoming Incorporated: Spectacular Authorship and DeLillo's *Mao II*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 45, No. 3 (Fall 1999): 643-674.

Discusses the characterization of Bill Gray in *Mao II* as the representative writer of postmodern culture, showing how the Romantic model of authorship has passed.

———. "Children of Godard and Coca-Cola: Cinema and Consumerism in Don DeLillo's Early Fiction." *Contemporary Literature* XXXVII, No. 3 (Fall 1996): 439-70.

Demonstrates the influence of cinematic techniques on DeLillo's early fiction, particularly on the plot, narrative structures, and themes of *Americana*.

William, Skip. "Traversing the Fantasies of the JFK Assassination: Conspiracy and Contingency in Don DeLillo's *Libra*." *Contemporary Literature* XXXIX, No. 3 (Fall 1998): 405-33.

Analyzes the narrative structure of *Libra* in terms of the dialectical tension between conspiracy and contingency, examining the ways each undermines the other.

**Additional coverage of DeLillo's life and career is contained in the following sources published by the Gale Group:**

# Penelope Fitzgerald

## 1916-2000

English novelist and biographer.

The following entry presents an overview of Fitzgerald's career. For further information on her life and works, see *CLC*, Volumes 19, 51, and 61.

### INTRODUCTION

Penelope Fitzgerald is a traditional English novelist of manners with an understated style. She wrote carefully plotted novels in spare, witty prose, delineating interactions and subtle tensions among groups of characters who work together or reside in a small community. She utilized varied settings of time and place, vividly evoking period detail and peculiar issues and customs. Her diverse, often eccentric characters cope with sudden conflicts in their lives and relationships. Although her career began late in life, Fitzgerald's style garnered her critical praise, awards, and a loyal readership.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Fitzgerald was born in 1916 in Lincoln, England. She was raised in a notable family: one uncle was a cryptographer and two were eminent Roman Catholic priests. Her father moved the family to London when he became the editor of *Punch*. Fitzgerald received a scholarship to Oxford where she studied literature with such notables as J. R. R. Tolkien. She graduated in 1938 and took a wartime job with the Ministry of Food. Then in 1939 she began working at the British Broadcasting Corporation, a time which she recounted in her novel *Human Voices* (1980). More of Fitzgerald's experiences made their way into her literature, such as her time as a clerk in a bookshop (*The Bookshop* [1978]) and the time she, her husband, and three children could only afford to live on a barge docked on the Thames (*Offshore* [1979]). Fitzgerald's writing career started late in her life. She published her first book when she was fifty-nine and her first novel when she was sixty-one. When Fitzgerald's husband became ill with cancer in the 1970s, she made her first foray into fiction with a mystery novel she wrote to entertain him during his illness. Her husband died in the early 1970s. Fitzgerald was short-listed three times for the Booker Prize with *The Bookshop*, *The Beginning of Spring* (1988), and *The Gate of Angels* (1990) and won the Booker prize for fiction with *Offshore* in 1979 and *The Blue Flower* (1995) in 1995. She also received the National Book Critics' Circle Award for *The Blue Flower* in 1997. Fitzgerald died on April 28, 2000.

### MAJOR WORKS

Early in her career, Fitzgerald wrote several biographies, including *The Knox Brothers* (1977) about her famous uncles and her father. Fitzgerald's first novel, *The Golden Child* (1977), is a mystery set in an art museum where a prized exhibit is discovered to be a forgery and a well-known explorer is murdered. She exposed human foibles and deception resulting from struggles for power and authority among museum staff members. In *Offshore*, Fitzgerald drew upon personal experience to detail camaraderie and conflicts among members of a community of houseboat dwellers on the Thames River. Fitzgerald also wrote about personal experience in *Human Voices*, which revolves around activities at the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) during the 1940 Nazi air offensive against England. The novel examines the importance of truth in public communications and private relationships as it depicts BBC staff members who must provide moral uplift to their beleaguered listeners. Fitzgerald's concern for sense of place and its effect on character are important elements in her next two novels, *Innocence* (1986) and *The Beginning of Spring*. *Innocence*, which is set in Florence, Italy, chronicles the lives of the Ridolfis, a decaying aristocratic family, and the Rossis, a working-class family. Through the courtship and marriage of Chiari Ridolfi and Salvatore Rossi, Fitzgerald examines various themes relating to innocence and the influence of family history as she develops allegorical implications through allusions to fables and legends. *The Beginning of Spring* is set in an English community in Moscow during the early twentieth century. While describing customs and period detail to recreate the social atmosphere prior to the Russian Revolution, Fitzgerald focused upon the confusion and unhappiness experienced by an Englishman abruptly abandoned by his wife. Typical of Fitzgerald's fiction, *The Beginning of Spring* is a comedy of manners with an ambiguous conclusion, as a small group of well-developed characters experience conflict, tensions, and change while reacting to unexpected and perplexing events. In *The Gate of Angels* Fitzgerald tackled the insular world of the university and intersects the lives of a bachelor professor and an independent working-class woman who raised herself out of poverty to become a nurse. In *The Blue Flower*, Fitzgerald combined imagination and biography in her fictionalization of the life of Fritz von Hardenberg. Fitzgerald recreates the world of eighteenth-century Germany and the love affair Fritz had with the twelve-year-old Sophie von Kuhn.



## CRITICAL RECEPTION

Fitzgerald slowly developed a fine reputation in her native England, being compared to such writers as Martin Amis and Evelyn Waugh. While not well known in America, Fitzgerald developed a small but loyal following among readers and notable critics alike. Her work is often described as "spare," and reviewers note her ability to pack rich detail into concise novels. Julian Gitzen argued, "Fitzgerald's gift for pinpointing or encapsulating character or situation in a few apt and incisive phrases constitutes one of her most engaging methods of achieving both intensity and compression." Critics also appreciate her ability to evoke the essence of a time and place with what appears to be first-hand memory, rather than a recitation of historical research. Reviewers often cite her use of precise and convincing detail as one of the author's unique gifts. Many reviewers have praised Fitzgerald's light comic touch, and Richard Eder asserted, "Far from being bland, [Fitzgerald] is almost sentence by sentence, thrilling and funny and, I have come to believe, the finest British writer alive." Some critics complained of Fitzgerald's use of characterization, often arguing that she presented too many characters to fully develop them. Others found her style too understated for American audiences. Philip Hensher sums up Fitzgerald's gifts stating, "Fitzgerald has been widely and justifiably praised for the excellence, discretion and solidity of her historical imagination, which brings unlikely periods of history to life with unarguable, strange rightness."

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## PRINCIPAL WORKS

*Edward Burne-Jones: A Biography* (biography) 1975  
*The Golden Child* (novel) 1977  
*The Knox Brothers* (biography) 1977  
*The Bookshop* (novel) 1978  
*Offshore* (novel) 1979  
*Human Voices* (novel) 1980  
*At Freddie's* (novel) 1982  
*Innocence* (novel) 1986  
*The Beginning of Spring* (novel) 1988  
*The Gate of Angels* (novel) 1990  
*The Blue Flower* (novel) 1995

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## CRITICISM

**Richard Eder (12 January 1992)**

SOURCE: "Two Bicycles, One Spirit," in *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, January 12, 1992, p. 3.

[In the following review, Eder praises Fitzgerald's deft use of details to evoke a sense of possibilities in her *The Gate of Angels*.]

High wind and drenching rain lash the flat fenlands, in Penelope Fitzgerald's *The Gate of Angels*. Branches blow down; leaves tangle in the horns of grazing cows; partly blinded, they stumble. "Two or three of them were wallowing on their backs, idiotically, exhibiting vast pale bellies intended by nature to be always hidden. They were still munching."

Along the road, a covey of Cambridge University dons on heavy iron bicycles—it is 1912—struggles against the wind, black gowns flapping. Nature may be in an uproar, but each academic teeters forward in his own abstraction and at his own rate of speed. When one pedals ahead or drops behind, it is not his legs but a burst of speculation or a mental impasse that is responsible.

Fred Fairly overtakes a Lecturer in the Physiology of the Senses who lags because he is trying to recall whether it is cows that can't get up once they fall over. A moment later, the Lecturer surges past. It's sheep, he whoops. "The relief of it!" Fred whoops back.

Fred, who lectures in physics, is the hero of Penelope Fitzgerald's powerfully bewitching new novel. He is also the hinge, as that obliging but faintly disenchanted whoop may hint. The novel itself is a series of hinges, gleaming and disconcerting ones that keep opening out unexpectedly.

*The Gate of Angels* encompasses Fred's liberation by passion from a careful, kindly bachelorhood. It touches on the breaching of the manners and assumptions of the stuffy Edwardian world—in this case, the university world. It suggests the windstorm of scientific thought that was upsetting the tenets of the Newtonian era as if they were so many cows.

It does these things with a lightness whipped up in unequal parts of comedy, irony and the fantastic. It attaches the lightness to the stoical gravity of time's wheel. The mix is uniquely Fitzgerald, though it has a connection in one sense to Evelyn Waugh; in another to Iris Murdoch.

*The Gate of Angels* is about the crossing of two lives: that of Fred, the Cambridge scholar, and that of Daisy, a nurse who has struggled from a background of poverty and social oppression to become a woman who is not only independent but a sunburst as well. It is a prodigious encounter, like atomic bombardment with its terrific release of energy. In this case, the release takes the form of a miracle that come at the end and puts a tangled story right. To reveal nothing, it consists of the opening of the gate in the title.

"Angels" is the nickname for St. Angelicus, the fictional Cambridge college in which Fred is lodged. It is the tiniest of the colleges, and the purest exemplar of 600 years of

eccentric institutional inbreeding. Like Oxford's All Souls, it has no resident students; its tradition is even more sublimely dreamy, and it is smaller. Its wine cellars, in fact, are larger than its buildings.

It consists of a Master who is blind and dispatches a perpetual stream of notes; the purpose of each is to refine even more precisely the nuances of the previous one. It consists of six Fellows. And it consists of Fred. As Junior Fellow, he is also Assistant Bursar, Assistant Steward, Assistant Organist and custodian of the Medieval instruments which the Fellows play in excruciating dissonance after their lavishly irrigated evening meal.

Planted in this dream world, Fred carries out its rituals. He lectures, attends the meetings of the Disobligers Society—where you argue against whatever position you believe in, and interrupt continually—and makes gingerly visits to his clergyman father and suffragette mother. The visits are gingerly because he has lost his faith.

He is, in fact, torn, and ripe for change. He thinks of working under Ernest Rutherford and other physics pioneers; instead, he chooses Flowerdew, a redoubtable mystic who believes the new age of quanta and subatomics is a delusion and will collapse. Fitzgerald is lucid about science, but her heart, ultimately, seems to be with the mystics. Flowerdew's witty and melancholy warning about the revolution in physics is one of the book's most arresting and engaging passages.

Fred's collision with Daisy is literal. Both are cycling at night, both are hit by a drunken carter. They come to, undressed and in the same bed. The accident takes place in front of the house of Wrayburn, another Cambridge don; thinking deductively, he assumes that since they seem to be together, they must be married; hence the joint bedding.

Daisy is unembarrassed; she gets up and goes back to London. Fred is horribly embarrassed and totally smitten, and devotes himself to finding her. It doesn't take long; she was in Cambridge to apply for a job at a local clinic. Not only does she get the job, she also takes up lodging with the Wrayburns. Mrs. Wrayburn has intellectual aspirations; she is crushed by the demands of an Edwardian household and an Edwardian husband—Fitzgerald takes us wonderfully into these demands by listing all the items of tableware a husband of the time requires for his lunch. Daisy can give her a hand.

If the book's first part brings out Fred and his world, its second part brings out Daisy and hers. As a child, she and her mother regularly had to move at night to avoid paying rent. She grows up to take business courses, and to have her employers regularly offer her a choice between sex and discharge. She is too alive to give in; instead, she convinces the matron of Blackfriars Hospital to train her as a student nurse. An act of irregular charity toward a patient gets her fired; hence her presence in Cambridge.

Daisy is utterly determined and utterly open. Her courage, her independence, her absolute readiness to be delighted makes a shining and complex portrait. The matron warns

her—again, the author reminds us of the abusive conditions for women at the time—that “A grown woman must expect to spend one-quarter of her life in actual pain”—and cautions her against “a weekly habit of constant complaint.” Daisy, whose health and beauty grow out of her resistant spirit, “felt her physical self-respect extend and stretch itself like a cat in the sun.”

The book's ending has its complications but no true surprises. Even the miracle is no true surprise; it is as much a matter of course as everything else. Fitzgerald is both the most down-to-earth and magical of writers, as well as one of the funniest. She is an animist; there are ghosts of possibility in each concrete fact: in the upside-down cows; the crowded arrangement of bicycles at St. Angelicus; the horse that once, but no longer, pulled the cart that ferried passengers from the village railroad station, and that still backs away in its paddock every time a train comes in.

The story of Fred and Daisy in a time of revolutions is told largely in particular details and with a deceptive matter-of-factness. It can take us a moment to realize how oddly and suggestively the details are wielded. They do not fill a picture in; they open up windows through which we see a world of possibilities. They are not always easy possibilities; many are very sad and one or two, terrifying. But having these windows is so beguiling, so like flying, that while we are not deluded, neither are we oppressed. We are freed.

#### Nina King (23 February 1992)

SOURCE: “The Heart Has Its Reasons,” in *Washington Post Book World*, Vol. 22, No. 8, February 23, 1992, p. 1.

[In the following review, King praises Fitzgerald for her ability to infuse so many ideas in such a brief novel while maintaining the novel's leisurely pace in *The Gate of Angels*.]

Penelope Fitzgerald's astonishing novel *The Gate of Angels*, begins with a wind surpassing in power and portent the one that brought us Mary Poppins:

“How could the wind be so strong, so far inland, that cyclists coming into the town in the late afternoon looked more like sailors in peril? . . . The willow-trees had been blown, driven and cracked until their branches gave way and lay about the drenched grass, jerking convulsively and trailing cataracts of twigs. The cows had gone mad, tossing up the silvery weeping leaves which were suddenly, quite contrary to all their experience, everywhere within reach. Their horns were festooned with willow boughs. Not being able to see properly, they tripped and fell. Two or three of them were wallowing on their backs, idiotically, exhibiting vast pale bellies intended by nature to be always hidden. They were still munching. A scene of disorder, tree-tops on the earth, legs in the air, in a university city devoted to logic and reason.”

The university is Cambridge, the year 1912. One of the cyclists is Fred Fairly, 25, experimental physicist and junior fellow of tiny St. Angelicus College (known as "Angels"). Fred's mild, scholarly existence has recently been turned as topsy-turvy as the silly cows. Three weeks earlier, during another bike ride, he was knocked unconscious by a farm cart and came to in a strange bed, lying next to an enchanting young stranger named Daisy Saunders.

"My God, what luck," was Fred's first thought.

But Fred is a scientist, a rationalist who believes in neither God nor luck. There is a logical explanation. Daisy was also struck by the cart and their rescuer concluded from her gold ring that the two accident victims, "together in a heap on the road," were married and belonged in the same bed.

Daisy is *not* married; Fred falls instantly in love. While he is recuperating in a nursing home, however, she disappears. When he finds her again, there are complications. Fred's anachronistic college forbids its fellows to marry. And there is the matter of class: Fred is the son of a country rector, Daisy the product of working-class south London.

For three-quarters of the book it is possible to read *The Gate of Angels* as a charming, quirky romance of lovers from different worlds. Fitzgerald sketches Fred's first: Cambridge in its glory days, a world of advanced ideas, antiquated heating systems and eccentricity raised to a fine art. This is, explicitly, the university of J. J. Thomson and Ernest Rutherford and C. T. R. "Cloud" Wilson, pioneers of atomic physics. Those who know the period will also recognize the university of philosophers Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein, economist John Maynard Keynes, mathematicians G. H. Hardy and the Indian genius Ramanujan—an extraordinary concentration of brain power soon to be dispersed by the winds of a brutal war. In a glancing reference to what is to come, Fitzgerald notes that Fred's fellowship became available "through a lecturer in Propellant Explosives being unexpectedly recalled to Germany."

Fred is a nice young man whose most daring undertaking to date has been to inform his clergyman father that he has lost his faith in God. (The impact of this revelation is severely diminished by his father's preoccupation with other matters: His wife and two daughters have become suffragettes, and there are only leftovers for supper.)

Though as an undergraduate Fred studied under the (real-life) C. T. R. Wilson, constructor of cloud chambers, he is now assistant to the (fictional) Prof. Flowerdew. Flowerdew is a melancholy maverick, who finds the atom as intellectually unacceptable as God, because equally "unobservable." In a lovely bit of hindsight, Fitzgerald has Flowerdew predict the history of 20th-century theoretical physics—from neat models of that "unobservable" atom,

through the hypothesizing of "elementary particles which are too strange to have anything but curious names," to the scientists' admission, at century's end, that "the laws they are supposed to have discovered seem to act in a profoundly disorderly way." Chaos, in a word.

There has been little time for theorizing in Daisy Saunders's life. Her mother works in a brewery; her father has long since vanished. For mother and daughter, making ends meet means moving in the night when the rent is due. But Daisy has character, courage, "recklessly curling hair" and a kind heart. She quits several clerical jobs to evade lecherous bosses. After her mother dies, she finds her vocation as a nurse, but her generosity results in her losing that job shortly before she encounters Fred and he discovers he cannot live without her.

"There is no God, no spiritual authority, no design . . .," Fred thinks, "there is no purpose in the universe, but if there were, it could be shown that there was an intention, throughout recorded and unrecorded time, to give me Daisy."

In Cambridge at large as well as within Fred, logic and empiricism are challenged by more elemental forces. There is a mystery surrounding the accident that brought Fred and Daisy together: A third bicyclist and the cart-driver have never been found. Just when it seems that Fred and Daisy may have a future together, Dr. Matthews, provost of St. James College, medievalist, palaeographer and teller of ghost stories, recalls—or invents?—a story of terror and the supernatural on a long-ago archeological dig at the very spot where Fred's accident occurred. His unsettling tale, which involves a medieval convent of crazed nuns and their gruesome revenge on the male sent to evict them, is reminiscent of M. R. James, author of such classic tales of malignant haunting as "Casting the Runes" and "Oh, Whistle and I'll Come to You, My Lad." (Not coincidentally, M. R. James was the real-life provost of King's College, Cambridge, in 1912.)

The immediate popularity of Matthew's story forces the police to investigate more actively the disappearances of bicyclist and carter and leads to a revelation about Daisy that throws her future with Fred in doubt. Matthews's tale, with its undercurrents of twisted sexuality and madness, also forces the reader to see the world of the novel in an eerie new light. The parallel between the sinister convent of mad women and the quaintly misogynist St. Angelicus is inescapable. Yet when the long-sealed south-west gate of Angels finally opens, it is to let in a breath of fresh air.

This funny, touching, wise novel manages, despite its brevity, to seem leisurely. It is vibrant with wonderful minor characters, ablaze with ideas. Fitzgerald juggles traditional dichotomies—mind/body, male/female, faith/reason, chance/necessity, science/religion—and lets them fall where they will. The old logic of empiricism is affronted by the new science of invisible particles; the Rutherford-Thomson debate over the structure of the atom recalls



scholastics counting the dancing angels on a pinhead. But its: "When the heart is breaking." Fred muses to his students, "it is nothing but an absurd illusion to think you can taste the blood. Still I repeat, your efficiency may be impaired."

Though not well known in this country, Penelope Fitzgerald's novels have won prizes and critical acclaim in Britain. Her nonfiction books include an enchanting biography of the Knox brothers, of which the most famous was her Uncle Ronald, Roman Catholic apologist and Oxford wit. Her father, Edmund, was editor of *Punch*. Her Uncle Dillwyn, a cryptographer who played a key role in the breaking of the German Enigma code, was a Cambridge character of this very period and a close friend of Maynard Keynes.

There are seven other Fitzgerald novels, among them the Booker-Prize winning *Offshore*. My God, what luck.

#### Bruce Bawer (essay date March 1992)

SOURCE: "A Still, Small Voice: The Novels of Penelope Fitzgerald," in *New Criterion*, Vol. 10, No. 7, March, 1992, pp. 33–42.

[In the following essay, Bawer traces the distinctive characteristics of Fitzgerald's fiction and asserts that these features are most prominent in *The Gate of Angels*.]

Among the many symptoms of the American literary scene's current infirmity is that stateside publishers have been slow to take on, and readers on these shores slow to discover, the English novelist of manners Penelope Fitzgerald. Though British critics have justly compared her to such writers as Evelyn Waugh, Kingsley Amis, Barbara Pym, and Anita Brookner—all of whom have long enjoyed sizable readerships here—and though back home she has received one Booker Prize and been nominated for three others, two of her eight novels have yet to appear in U.S. editions and her name is nowhere near as well-known hereabouts as that of Pym or Brookner.<sup>1</sup> Why is this so? The answer is not simply that Fitzgerald, now in her seventy-fifth year, is decidedly English in setting and sensibility (so, after all, are Pym and Brookner); nor is it merely a matter of her novels' temperate tone and modesty of scale. (To read through the reviews of her books is to find, time and again, such words and phrases as "slight," "delicate," "unpretentious," "economy and understatement," "an impression of sharpness and shortness," "in no sense a 'big' book"; more than one critic has compared her novels to watercolors.) Nor is it that, like Pym and Brookner, she is a writer of unsensational stories. For Fitzgerald's novels are not only unsensational: they are elliptical, elusive, episodic, at times exasperating in their deliberate slenderness of plot and lack of resolution; their most essential relationships, pivotal incidents, and intense confrontations tend to happen offstage or to be rendered very concisely.

Instead of action, what Fitzgerald often gives us are apparent digressions, among them conversations in which trivial matters may receive as much attention as important ones—but in which her characters, in one way or another, tellingly reveal themselves. She is less interested in storytelling, per se, than in the qualities that draw people together and the differences that estrange them, in the abiding and numinous mystery that the world is to human beings and that human beings are to one another, and in the disjunction between what they are and what they pretend to be (or imagine or hope themselves to be). She celebrates those who defy mean self-interest in the name of some higher cause—art, truth, love, or even a vague longing for something better—even as she is acutely aware of the hurtful ways that people can treat their nearest and dearest in the name of such causes, and of their often less praiseworthy underlying motives: a fear of losing independence, a need to control, a craving for power. She is fascinated by the dynamic of romantic love and family devotion, but never yields to anything that might be taken as a sentimental impulse; in book after book she reminds us that good and bad can coexist in one heart, and that otherwise unimpressive—and even somewhat ridiculous—people can display remarkable qualities of character. At their best, her *dramatis personae* exhibit those most English of virtues: decency, honesty, quiet fortitude, a sense of duty, an uncomplaining acceptance of one's role and responsibilities in life.

Penelope Fitzgerald's first novel appeared a mere fifteen years ago, when she was nearly sixty. (It was preceded by two biographies, one of Edward Burne-Jones and the other of Fitzgerald's father, an editor of *Punch*, and her uncles, the cryptographer Dillwyn Knox and the priests Wilfred and Ronald Knox; she has since published a third biography, of the English poet Charlotte Mew.) Though now chiefly notable as the fictional debut of a writer whose artistry has since grown in leaps and bounds, *The Golden Child* is a competent whodunit, the sort of mystery that is set mostly in a single institution and whose success depends largely on the author's ability to make that setting interesting. In this case the institution is an unnamed London museum, obviously modeled on the British Museum; and the characters—many of whom might have been plucked out of an Evelyn Waugh novel—are mainly museum officials who, almost to a man, care less about art than about their own careers. During a mega-exhibition of the Golden Treasure of Garamantia, an ancient African civilization, there takes place a series of odd and troubling incidents, chief among them the murder of the distinguished resident archeologist, Sir William Simpkin. Whodunit? Why? The solution turns out to be hidden in a message composed in Garamantian pictographs and carved on a clay tablet in an exhibition display case.

If *The Golden Child* falls short of being a first-rate mystery, it is because Fitzgerald's artistic priorities clash head-on with those of the genre in which she has chosen to work. A murder mystery should be tidy and schematic; the characters may be shot through with ambiguities, and

the mystery richly nuanced, but in the end there should be a firm sense of order restored, of pieces falling neatly into place. But to Fitzgerald one of the important points about life is that the pieces never fall neatly into place; she is less interested in devising jigsaw-like plots than in exploring the perplexities of the human condition. To be sure, in an apparent attempt to fit her characters neatly into their assigned roles in the mystery, Fitzgerald tries to reduce most of them to familiar comic-novel types; yet the very resistance to contrivance that makes her later novels feel so credible prevents her, in *The Golden Child*, from tailoring these characters as dexterously as a top-notch mystery writer would to the needs of her plot. Especially unsatisfactory is Waring Smith, the protagonist (and the first of Fitzgerald's many innocents). He is a surprisingly sketchy creation; his motives are never clear, so one has less sympathy for him than one might otherwise—a state of affairs that is hardly unusual in Fitzgerald (who was once told by Ronald Knox that one should write biographies about people one loves and novels about people one dislikes) but is less than desirable in a mystery. What's more, Waring is so terribly passive that it's not even he who solves the case; again, such passivity might work in a literary novel, but not in this genre.

To be sure, Fitzgerald's ironies of circumstance and temperament are far sharper than her plotting. Already in this book she is a forthright critic of manners and morals. The Garamantia exhibition is plainly an allusion to the King Tut extravaganza that helped usher in the age of the museum mega-show; and Fitzgerald captures perfectly the inanity of an era in which armies of people who wouldn't cross the street to look at a Matisse can be persuaded by relentless publicity and media hype to line up in the freezing cold for hours to view a historically inconsequential exhibition of little artistic merit. In good English fashion, moreover, she gets in a few digs at Continental art and scholarship. We learn, for example, that Waring and his wife frequently "go out . . . to see films by leading French and Italian directors about the difficulties of making a film." Fitzgerald skewers both the oppressive seriousness of Germans—a Heidelberg Garamantologist's book is entitled *Garamantischengeheimschrift-endeckchiffrierkunst*—and Gallic silliness: a pretentious impromptu oration by Rochegrosse-Bergson, a French scholar, includes a trendy nihilistic flourish to the effect that "[o]ur art—for every man, let us admit it, is an artist—is to achieve absolutely nothing!" The audience for this "arrant nonsense" consists of a pair of British journalists, of whom Fitzgerald offers a sardonic description: "exquisites for whom life could hold no further surprises, and removed by their foreign educations from crass British prejudices, [the journalists] sat in their Italian silk shirts and deerskin jackets, waiting, in a kind of energetic idleness. . . . Trained in French lycées, they were unable to resist [Rochegrosse-Bergson's] rounded sentences which now dropped a couple of tones to announce the coming peroration." These few words provide the reader with a veritable beginner's catalogue of qualities (all of them somewhat connected to Continental ways and means) that

Fitzgerald holds in disesteem: pretension, foppishness, "energetic idleness," overassurance, a snobbish attitude toward middle-class bigots, a fashionably nihilistic or grotesquely scholarly approach to art. Though *The Golden Child* is far from a masterwork, then (alongside her later novels it looks decidedly primitive), it has wit and personality, and one comes away from it with a clear sense of Fitzgerald's impatience with shabby contemporary values and with the wretched prospects for Western civilization in an age of hype, self-seeking, phoniness, and philistinism, high and low.

*The Golden Child* is the first of several Fitzgerald novels to focus on a cultural institution and on a cast of characters who are, shall we say, not all devoted in equal measure to the good, the true, and the beautiful. In her second novel, *The Bookshop* (1978), set in 1959, a widow named Florence Green buys the Old House, a centuries-old building in her sleepy East Suffolk village, and turns it into a bookshop. Like Waring Smith, she is something of an innocent—a well-meaning, quietly plucky, but rather naïve adult with commendable moral and artistic instincts but an insufficient awareness of the degree to which other people are driven by selfishness, jealousy, and power-hunger. In place of the self-seeking museum officials in *The Golden Child*, *The Bookshop* gives us Mrs. Gamart, a society matron who, seeing her role as the local doyenne of culture threatened by Florence's shop, resurrects a plan to turn the site into an arts center and proceeds to use all her influence to have the building confiscated by the government. How does Florence react? If one expects her to be yet another mild-mannered, virtuous underdog who triumphs over the villainous powers-that-be, one will be disappointed. Nor should one expect her motives to be overly clear: as it is not entirely obvious why Waring Smith works in a museum and not, say, in some civil-service job, neither can one understand why Florence Green, of all people, has decided to go into the book-selling business. Confronted with the newly published *Lolita*, after all, she can't even decide whether to stock it—"I haven't been trained to understand the arts," she explains, "and I don't know whether a book is a masterpiece or not"—and has to turn to the well-read village recluse for an opinion. How, one cannot but wonder, did such a woman fasten upon the idea of opening a bookshop?

Here, as in *The Golden Child*, Fitzgerald contemplates with a jaundiced eye the rampant popularization of culture. An entire wall of Florence's shop is covered by paperbacks: "cheerfully coloured, brightly democratic, they crowded the shelves in well-disciplined ranks. They would have a rapid turnover and she had to approve of them; yet she could remember a world where only foreigners had been content to have their books bound in paper. The Everymans, in their shabby dignity, seemed to confront them with a look of reproach." A whole cultural outlook—the sort that some might call elitist and xenophobic—is conveyed in this brief passage. Nor is this the only time that Fitzgerald weighs in on such issues. When Mrs. Gamart tells Florence that she and others in the village

have long wanted to turn the Old House into an arts center, Florence at first thinks it possible to have both a bookshop and an arts center in the building and innocently decides that, in order to run the latter efficiently, “she herself would have to take some sort of course in art history and music appreciation—music was always appreciated, whereas art had a history.” The aged village recluse, meanwhile, is unimpressed by Mrs. Gamart’s plans: “How can the arts have a centre?”

*The Bookshop* was followed by the Booker Prize-winning *Offshore* (1979), which has less in common with Fitzgerald’s other early efforts than with her later works, and which I shall discuss in connection with them. It was succeeded by *Human Voices* (1980), a novel about wartime London—or, to be specific, about the BBC in 1940, a place where, as in the museum of *The Golden Child*, some officials are identified not by name but by title (a device which nicely underscores the importance to Fitzgerald of roles and responsibilities). A temperate, lightly plotted book, *Human Voices* covers a few months in the lives of two programming directors, the Director of Programme Planning (DPP) and the Director of Recorded Programming (RPD), and of several young men and women who serve as assistants. Most important of these assistants is Annie Asra, a Birmingham piano tuner’s sensible daughter, who falls senselessly in love with the eccentric, middle-aged RPD. Given the promising situation—inside BBC headquarters during the Blitz!—a reader may well find himself frustrated at the lack of high drama in these pages. But the frustrations he will experience are those of life itself: Fitzgerald reminds us that heroism is not necessarily glamorous and is often, indeed, a matter of quiet dedication to monotonous tasks. She reminds us, too, that heroes, like saints, can be selfish and stupid, maddeningly quirky and abundantly flawed: though the Beeb’s employees “bitterly complain[ed] about the shortsightedness of their colleagues, the vanity of the newsreaders, the remoteness of the Controllers and the restrictive nature of the canteen’s one teaspoon,” the Corporation’s loyalty to the truth (despite temptations to conceal unpleasant facts for purposes of national morale) filled them with “a certain pride which they had no way to express, either then or since.” In the end, the book is a tribute to the unsung and quintessentially English heroism of imperfect people.

*At Freddie’s* (1982) is something of a tribute as well. Like *Human Voices*, it is an account of several months in the lives of several people; this time around, though, we’re at the Temple School, a.k.a. Freddie’s, an ever-destitute but widely revered London academy for child actors whose elderly founder and leader, Frieda Wentworth, a.k.a. Freddie, is a legendary figure in the theater world. Among the principal characters are two young teachers, one of whom falls in love with the other, and a pair of students, a brilliantly gifted nine-year-old named Jonathan and a vain, showoffy type (and future movie star) named Mattie. As Florence’s bookshop is threatened by Mrs. Gamart, so Freddie’s is endangered by a vulgar entrepreneur who wants to change it into a school for television-commercial

actors; but, surprisingly, the real joker in the deck turns out to be Freddie herself, who, in her heart of hearts, proves to be devoted not to the theater but to the perpetuation, at any cost, of her own power. (Meanwhile, the school’s talentless, lovestruck young teacher—whom Freddie hired only because he would accept low pay—proves to have great strength of character.) As if to emphasize that what ultimately matters is not fame or power but art, the novel concludes with a memorable glimpse of the one true artist in the place, Jonathan, who, interested not in celebrity but in the perfection of his craft, remains past dusk in the schoolyard, repeatedly practicing a leap from a wall for his role in *King John*.

Jonathan, we are told, “was born to be one of those actors who work from the outside inwards. To them, the surface is not superficial.” The surface has never been superficial to Fitzgerald either, though there are times in *The Golden Child*, *The Bookshop*, *Human Voices*, and *At Freddie’s* when her meticulous portraits don’t communicate quite as much as she presumably wants them to. This is far less true of her other four novels, in which Fitzgerald, though no more than ever inclined to engage in extensive mind-reading, manages with far greater success to convey, for all her concision, a phenomenally rich sense of place and character and moral tone. These later novels (though they are not all strictly “later,” since I include among them the third, *Offshore*) are more ambitious and ambiguous than those already discussed; Fitzgerald’s vision seems larger, subtler, more complex. She focuses less on institutional than on family relations, and even reaches beyond England for her main settings; while infatuations figure in *Human Voices* and *At Freddie’s*, moreover, such later books as *Innocence* and *The Gate of Angels* examine full-fledged romances and marriages.

Fitzgerald is also more explicit, in these later novels, about her interest in matters of the spirit. The niece of two eminent priests, she takes what might be described, to an extent, as a Christian view of her creations: she notes their transgressions and names them bluntly, even biting, but if she scorns the sin she has compassion for the sinner. Such words as “soul” and “saint” crop up frequently in her pages, though one might miss them because of the casual, colloquial way in which they are generally introduced. (In *Innocence*, for example, she describes the perturbed young hero as rushing out of a room “like a lost soul.”) Fitzgerald is preoccupied, moreover, with the nature of innocence—its assets and liabilities, moral and practical, and the myriad forms it takes, whether in small children or in supposedly sophisticated adults—and emphasizes that innocence and righteousness do not necessarily go hand in hand. Sometimes her innocents are people who lack sufficient knowledge of the world; sometimes they are very worldly folk indeed—scientists, physicians, and journalists—who possess an overweening confidence in the ability of rational investigation to determine objective truth, and about whose smug, unquestioning reverence for such things as behaviorism and the scientific method Fitzgerald can be trenchantly sardonic. Surely one reason why she



shrinks from directly rendering her novels' climactic events is that she is intensely aware of the difficulty of pinning down the precise truth of a human situation.

This is not to suggest, of course, that Fitzgerald's position is that of many a contemporary academic theorist who claims that nothing is knowable. On the contrary, she patently believes in truth, and believes, too, that fundamental human truths are worth pursuing. Yet she is hesitant to delve too deeply into the human soul. So heavily, indeed, does she rely on dialogue and physical action to convey character that at times one almost gets the impression that there is, to her, something unseemly about rummaging around too much inside a protagonist's head. In any event, her emphasis is invariably not on exploring her characters' souls but on examining their conduct in the company of others. When she makes general statements, accordingly—some of which are attributed to the narrator, others to various characters—they tend to be commentaries not on psychological but on social verities: "Morality is seldom a safe guide for human conduct." "Total approval is never convincing." "Honourable men are rare, but not necessarily interesting." "Politics and business can be settled by influence, cooks and doctors can only be promoted on their skill." Manifestly, these aphoristic remarks are the work of someone who is clear-eyed but funny about human failings, someone who has firm and unromantic convictions about art, life, and civilization. Yet her best novels are characterized by a reflectiveness, a probing curiosity, an acute awareness of the contingency of the human condition that separates her dramatically from the callow certitude of many a glib, solipsistic contemporary novelist.

Such is the case, certainly, with *Offshore*. Set in a community of Thames barges on London's Battersea Reach during the early 1960s, the book focuses on thirty-two-year-old Nenna James, a former music student who lives with her daughters, Martha and Tilda, on a barge named *Grace*. Nenna bought the barge, we learn, while her engineer husband, Edward, was in Central America on a construction job; Edward, now back in London and unwilling to join them in their unorthodox new residence, has instead taken a room in a drab-sounding neighborhood that Nenna can't even bring herself to visit: "In Christ's name, who ever heard of such a place?" Fitzgerald doesn't offer a simple thumbs-up or thumbs-down verdict on all this. Nor does she tell us, in so many words, precisely why Nenna decided to move onto a barge and why she now obstinately refuses to give it up. (There are, significantly, no flashbacks to the marriage, of which we are offered the skimpiest, most objective record.) Doubtless the explanation is not a simple one, for Nenna is not a case study out of a textbook but a character who feels at every moment perversely, perplexingly, and poignantly real. By way of dialogue and gesture, however, and the occasional brief flashlight glimpse beneath Nenna's edgy, stubborn, and confused surface, Fitzgerald delicately plants in one's mind the notion that marriage has been for Nenna a string of failures and disappointments, including the frustration

of her musical ambitions, and that the approach of middle age and the absence of Edward have combined to bring to a head her long-suppressed fears and resentments and to propel her into extreme, perhaps even reckless, action. In moving offshore, Nenna has moved away from the mainstream of middle-class existence, to experiment with a life on the margins that may, in her mind, provide a gratifying tie to her musical ambitions of yore and to her passing youth.

In addition to bringing Nenna and her daughters to vibrant life in very little space, Fitzgerald affords us engaging glimpses of the other lives on the Reach—those of Willis, an old man whose leaky boat finally sinks; Maurice, a sad, aimless gay man; and Richard, a married business executive with whom Nenna has a brief fling. Though the sometimes protracted episodes involving these other characters cannot be defended on strict grounds of dramatic structure, they don't feel superfluous: on the contrary, they all help to fill in the picture of life on the Reach, to illuminate the odd little corner of the world into which Nenna has chosen to withdraw. It should be noted that the Thames functions here in several ways: not only as a symbol of sexuality (especially female sexuality) and of the unrelenting flow of time, but also as an image, paradoxically, both of life (it is, note well, a river of life on which the heroine and her children are kept afloat by a boat named *Grace*) and (as in *Huckleberry Finn*) of escape from life and its responsibilities. A number of events here might be interpreted symbolically: for instance, when a priest comes to ask why the girls haven't been attending school, he slips on *Grace's* deck. But Fitzgerald isn't insistent about such symbolic implications, and the novel's details are presented so realistically that a reader might well overlook their possible figurative significance.

Much the same might be said about *Innocence* (1986), which chronicles the romance and marriage of two bullheaded young Italians in 1955. Salvatore Rossi is a peasant boy from a rural village who has grown up to be a brilliant and successful "nerve doctor" in Florence. Excitable, antireligious, and devoted to science, he is the son of two parents with their own strong attachments: his mother (who named him for the Savior) was a devout Christian, his father an equally devout Communist. Indeed, it was a traumatic boyhood visit to his father's hero, Antonio Gramsci—who, by that time, was a hideous, broken-down old jailbird—that made Salvatore resolve never to risk his life, health, or freedom for his principles or to be emotionally dependent on anyone. His beloved is Chiara, a beautiful student at an English convent school who is the daughter of an ancient and noble Florentine family, the Ridolfi.

In the novel's opening pages, we are vouchsafed an anecdote from Ridolfi history. In the sixteenth century, the Ridolfi were midgets; a beloved daughter, kept within the walls of the family estate so that she would be protected from the knowledge of her difference from others, had a mute midget playmate who unexpectedly began to grow to normal size; whereupon the Ridolfi child, to protect her

friend from the knowledge of her apparent differentness from others, had the girl's eyes put out and her legs amputated at the knees. Neither Fitzgerald nor any of her characters ever spells out a moral to this anecdote, or explains the implied thematic link between it and the story of Salvatore and Chiara; but over the course of the novel the anecdote resonates frequently, the pitch changing ever so slightly every time. Part of the point, certainly, is that innocence, far from being a guarantee of virtue, can be a wellspring of cruelty and horror; that people are capable of doing foolish and even wicked things to those they love in an attempt to improve them, to make them conform to some vision of normality or rightness; that the innate differences between people, whether of stature or sensibility, can form insuperable barriers between them; and that, in some way or another, the attributes of one's parents remain ineradicable, perhaps even disfiguring, elements of one's own identity. Family is character; family is fate.

The lovers' first encounter in *Innocence* might well be an episode from a romance novel. Introduced during an intermission at the Teatro della Pergola after a crude performance of Brahms's Third Violin Sonata, Salvatore asks Chiara politely whether she enjoyed the music; she replies: "Of course not." He falls for her immediately, and she is so taken with him that she lets him lead her out into the rain before returning to the auditorium. (Like Forster's *A Room with a View*, this novel is about a capable, experienced young man of humble origins who, amid picturesque Italian settings, introduces a sheltered, well-to-do girl to sensuality in Italy.) But nothing else here is remotely reminiscent of a romance novel. Obsessed with Chiara, Salvatore makes no effort to see her. Months pass; finally she appears at his office, only to be upbraided by him for coming. She flees; he writes her a letter, then tears it up. Perplexed by his behavior, Chiara invites Barney, a no-nonsense English schoolmate, to Italy and asks her advice. At Barney's suggestion, she arranges for herself and Salvatore to be invited to lunch by mutual acquaintances, but they both hesitate to go; the vacillations that precede their meeting are recounted in elaborate detail.

Not so, however, the ensuing affair, which begins offstage and is recounted very succinctly. Ditto the first months of Salvatore and Chiara's marriage: instead of seeing them together, we hear about their relationship in conversations between Chiara and Barney (who tells her: "You're just an innocent who hopped into bed with the first man you saw when you got out of the convent") and between Salvatore and his friends. The narrator sums up the marriage in businesslike fashion: "Chiara and Salvatore quarrelled, but not so successfully as they made love. Chiara had no gift for quarrelling at all and could scarcely understand how it was done, nor, really, had Salvatore, since his argument was with himself, and he was therefore bound to lose. . . . They loved each other to the point of pain and could hardly bear to separate each morning." The main problem with the marriage, as this quotation suggests, lies with Salvatore, who is unable to enjoy the blessing of his and Chiara's love; insecure, irrational, and suspicious, he

comes to feel that he was unwise to tell Chiara everything about himself, and is sure that she doesn't need him, that she must be unhappy, that she's a dilettante when it comes to romance, and that she's secretly arranging to regain the family property that he sold in order to afford to marry her.

A friend opines that Salvatore has "a sickness and craziness about him because he has cut himself off from the place where he was born." (Note the words *cut off*—a reminder of the story of the leg amputation.) Salvatore, for his part, feels "that both Marta [his ex-mistress] and Chiara took advantage of him by attacking him with their ignorance, or call it innocence. A serious thinking adult had no defence against innocence because he was obliged to respect it, whereas the innocent scarcely knows what respect is, or seriousness either." But who's the innocent here? At one point Salvatore says that the only thing he hopes to be spared is "to know exactly what kind of man I am": what is he hoping for here, after all, except to retain a kind of innocence? One of the things that this novel is about, ultimately, is the ways in which people deprive themselves and others out of innocence—an innocence that, paradoxically, may generate guilt, and that may take the form of deficient self-knowledge or a lack of worldly experience. Chaucer's "Franklin's Tale" poses the question: "Which was the mooste fre?" Perhaps one question that *Innocence* seeks to pose is: which is the more innocent, Salvatore or Chiara? "What's to become of us?" Salvatore asks a cousin of Chiara's in the novel's closing pages. "We can't go on like this." "Yes, we can go on like this," comes the reply. "We can go on exactly like this for the rest of our lives." And that's part of the point in this novel, which concludes on a note of hope but intimates that, people being the troubled and troublemaking creatures that they are, the very notion of a happily-ever-after ending—or, for that matter, of an innocence without unsavory repercussions—is a patent absurdity.

What with its sumptuous settings, its colorful cast of aristocrats, politicians, and Vatican priests, its Latin outbursts of temper and its torrid passions (which run several degrees hotter than the passions in any previous Fitzgerald novel), *Innocence* differs significantly from its predecessors. Some reviewers seem to have thought it odd for so English a writer as Fitzgerald to set a story in Italy, but it makes a certain kind of sense: there's something in a pure English temperament that just naturally assumes a tempestuous, irrational romance of this sort should be set in hotter climes. (Think of *Romeo and Juliet*.)

Fitzgerald's Italian novel was followed by her Russian novel. *The Beginning of Spring* (1988) is set in Moscow on the eve of revolution. It is 1913, and Frank Reid, the Russian-born English owner of a printing firm, has been abandoned by his wife, Nellie, for reasons that are apparently a mystery to him. Hiring a taciturn young woman named Lisa to take care of their three children, he asks her to cut her hair, presumably because he finds her attractive and wants her to look less tempting (shades of the Ridolfi

mutilation!). More than ever in Fitzgerald, there are abundant references here to God and the soul: if Fitzgerald seems, at least in part, to have set *Innocence* in Italy so that she could write about extravagant passions, she seems to have set *The Beginning of Spring* in Russia so that she could allow certain of her characters to converse at length, and with relative unrestraint, about spiritual matters. Frank, who does “everything quickly and neatly, without making a business of it,” considers himself a rational being, but isn’t sure: “Perhaps, Frank thought, I have faith, even if I have no beliefs.” More openly meta-physical-minded than Frank is his accountant, Selwyn Crane, a religious poet and Tolstoy disciple who is described by Frank’s servant as “a good man, . . . always on his way from one place to another, searching out want and despair.” “If you have a fault,” Selwyn tells Frank, “it is that you don’t grasp the importance of what is beyond sense or reason.” Yet, as the beloved Freddie turns out to be the resident demon of *At Freddie’s*, so it is the seemingly righteous Selwyn who proves to have been the reason for Nellie’s disappearance: as he confesses remorsefully, they were having an affair and arranged to run off together—a plan that he did not repudiate until after Nellie had already deserted Frank.

*The Beginning of Spring* is set in the year before the outbreak of World War I; Fitzgerald’s most recent novel, *The Gate of Angels*—which, though published in England in 1990, did not appear in America until this winter—takes place a year earlier. (One can well understand why Fitzgerald would want to set two novels in that period, which marks the boundary between the British Empire-dominated world of the Victorians and Edwardians and the modern era.) Like *Innocence*, it follows two strong-willed young people down their separate paths to each other and through a romance marked by disagreement, misunderstanding, and estrangement; as in both *Innocence* and *The Beginning of Spring*, it is not until the very last sentence that Fitzgerald, in the most matter-of-fact way, introduces the possibility of reconciliation.

Fitzgerald gives us straightforward accounts of both these young people’s lives. Fred Fairly, a former choirboy and the son of a provincial rector, has been appointed a Junior Fellow at the fictitious Saint Angelicus, the smallest college at Cambridge; known colloquially as Angels, the college is a sort of secular monastery whose charter forbids its fellows, all mathematicians and scientists, to marry. Like Salvatore, Fred is basically a good sort, a well-educated man of science with a callow reverence for rationality. “These are wonderful years in Cambridge,” says Fred; science is in its glory days, and he has decided to clear his mind “of any idea that could not be tested through physical experience.” Since this includes, to his way of thinking, the idea of God, he has decided that he is no longer a Christian. Informed of this decision, his father is not surprised: “When you told me that you wanted to study Natural Sciences at university, which led, fortunately I suppose, to your present appointment, I took it for granted that you would sooner or later come to the conclusion that you had no further use for the soul.” To be sure,

like any good scientist, Fred is willing to keep an open mind about these things: “He had no acceptable evidence that Christianity was true, but he didn’t think it impossible that at some point he might be given a satisfactory reason to believe in it.”

The young lady for whom Fred falls is also something of a rationalist. A lower-class girl from the south of London, Daisy has studied to be a nurse because she wants to know how the body works. She is at once hard-nosed and sympathetic: “Hating to see anyone in want, she would part without a thought with money or possessions, but she could accept only with the caution of a half-tamed animal.” Dismissed from a London hospital for violating professional bounds to help a patient, she travels to Cambridge in search of a job and is followed by a sleazy middle-aged newspaper reporter, Kelly, who seeks to take advantage of her helplessness. The two of them are bicycling to the hotel where he plans to rob her chastity when they—and Fred, who happens to be directly behind them on his Royal Sunbeam—are knocked unconscious in a road accident caused by a carter named Saul (which, if one choose to notice it, may be taken as an allusion to Saint Paul, *né* Saul of Tarsus, the transfiguring event of whose life also took place on a road). Awakening next to Daisy in a strange bed, Fred is smitten as quickly as Salvatore is with Chiara.

Several of the signal characteristics of Fitzgerald’s fiction are more pronounced in this novel than in any of its predecessors. For one thing, if her books have always tended toward brevity and directness—their chapters short, their style plain, crisp, and unadorned—the tendency is even more manifest in *The Gate of Angels*. Also, though her protagonists have often been quite calculatedly ordinary, Fred and Daisy, with their humble backgrounds and almost parodically down-to-earth names, could hardly seem less exotic—to an English reader, anyway. (They may seem especially so to readers who come to the new novel with vivid memories of the foreign settings and characters of *Innocence* and *The Beginning of Spring*.) Moreover, Fitzgerald’s powers of selectivity and compression are at their zenith here. Finally, if Fitzgerald’s preoccupation with spiritual matters has been increasingly evident in her last few novels, such matters figure even more prominently in *The Gate of Angels*, and her apprehension of that which lies beyond sense and reason is communicated with greater force and beauty than ever before in her oeuvre. Partly because her description of each homely particular is well-nigh allegorical in its simplicity—and partly because the place names that she chooses to include (e.g., Jesus Lane, Christ’s Pieces, Bishop’s Leaze) serve to remind us, in an unaggressive way, that everything around us is a part of the divine creation—the reader of *The Gate of Angels* begins to feel, before too long, as if the novel’s very landscape is gently but unmistakably aglow with its own miraculousness. And what is the significance of the wind that stirs up in the first line of the novel, and then again at the very end, when, after having resolved to part forever, Fred and Daisy meet



once more by what may or may not be purest chance? This is, let it be said, the rarest of novels in which an eleventh-hour coincidence, because it is in perfect figurative harmony with all that has gone before, feels not at all like an authorial contrivance but like a genuine moment of grace, a gentle brush with the hand of providence—a still, small voice in the madding crowd.

One of the things that figure importantly here is a historical anecdote. Early on, Fitzgerald tells us that Saint Angelicus “had no real existence at all, because its foundation had been confirmed by a pope, Benedict XIII, who after many years of ferocious argument had been declared not to be the Pope at all.” Obstinate, Benedict refused to accept the verdict and spent the rest of his very long life holding papal audiences. Fred, we are told, is also obstinate: “Like Benedict XIII himself, he might be asked to admit defeat, but would never recognise it as legitimate, or even respectable.” This story of Saint Angelicus’s founding, like that of the Ridolfi ancestors at the beginning of *Innocence*, resonates throughout the book. By suggesting that the college has “no real existence,” Fitzgerald is playing something of an ontological game with the reader: for the college *doesn’t* exist, of course, outside the world of the novel; but it *does* exist within the novel, Pope or no Pope. But what does it mean to say that it exists when the narrator says that it doesn’t? Fitzgerald’s game forces the reader to attend throughout the book to questions of reality and unreality, and, in particular, to the delicate intimations of another reality—one of spirit—with which Fitzgerald permeates her narrative. This is all very effectively done, and indeed it points to what may be this author’s most distinctive achievement: namely, her ability to combine, in one novel, a convincingly detailed realistic surface with a sublime sense of the transcendent. In none of her novels has this been quite as elegantly and affectingly accomplished as in *The Gate of Angels*.

#### Notes

1. Only four of Penelope Fitzgerald’s novels are currently in print in America: *Offshore* (141 pages, \$7.95), *Innocence* (224 pages, \$7.95), and *The Beginning of Spring* (187 pages, \$8.95) are in paper from Carroll & Graf; *The Gate of Angels* (167 pages, \$19) is newly out in cloth from Nan A. Talese/Doubleday.

#### William H. Pritchard (review date Autumn 1992)

SOURCE: “Tradition and Some Individual Talents,” in *Hudson Review*, Vol. 45, No. 3, Autumn, 1992, pp. 488–89.

[In the following excerpt, Pritchard lauds Fitzgerald’s *The Gate of Angels* as a “delightful entertainment.”]

. . . For some reason I’ve failed to read Penelope Fitzgerald, thus know her only by the latest *The Gate of Angels*.<sup>1</sup> It is a delightful entertainment, set in 1912 in a mythical

Cambridge college, St. Angelicus, where Fred Fairly is a junior fellow, and in London, where Daisy Saunders is a nurse at Blackfriars Hospital. The novel charts their meeting, separation, and coming together again; but its real interest is the offbeat sensibility of Penelope Fitzgerald who ranks right up there with the eccentric English fictionists of this century. The time period is perfect Ivy Compton-Burnett; the dialogue sometimes sounds straight out of Evelyn Waugh, as when Fred visits his family at the Rectory (by train to Blow Halt with a stop at Bishop’s Leaze), is greeted by two dogs named Sandford and Merton, and embraced by his little sister Julia:

“Is there anything to eat?” Fred asked.

“There’s some rook pie and sago pudding left over for tonight. They’re very nasty, but you remember that we’re poor and have to eat nasty things.”

One recalls William Boot’s ancestral home at Boot Magna (nearest rail stop, Boot Magna Halt) and its collection of lovable antiquities in Waugh’s *Scoop*. Fitzgerald is a performer: when Daisy tries to convince the wife of a Cambridge scholar named Wrayburn to take her on as hired help, Mrs. Wrayburn (who spent four action-packed years at Newnham) looks down at the sink, “loaded down with all that was necessary when a husband had his daily meals at the house”:

Like most of her friends, she had prayed not to marry a clergyman, a general practitioner, or a university lecturer without a fellowship. All these (unlike the Army or the Bar) were professions that meant luncheon at home, so that every day (in addition to cups, plates and dishes) demanded toast-racks, egg-cups, egg-cosies, hot water jugs, hot milk strainers, tea-strainers, coffee-strainers, bone egg-spoons, sugar-tongs, mustard pots manufactured of blue glass inside. . .

It continues for thirty-five or more items without which luncheon is inconceivable, concluding with “compotiers, ramekins, pipkins, cruets, pots,” most of which items we assume are “in the sink at the moment, waiting, in mute reproach, to be washed and dried.” You get the picture: an essential English wit.

#### Notes

1. THE GATE OF ANGELS, by Penelope Fitzgerald. Doubleday. \$19.00.

#### Gabriele Annan (15 September 1995)

SOURCE: “Death and the Maiden,” in *Times Literary Supplement*, No. 4824, September 15, 1995, p. 20.

[In the following review, Annan discusses the amount of detail Fitzgerald manages to put in *The Blue Flower*.]

The German Romantics were drunk with ideas, and Novallis was the drunkest. He is the hero or anti-hero of this biographical novel. He died in 1801, aged twenty-eight,

leaving a few beautiful religious poems which many Germans know by heart because they read like hymns and are sung in church. His mystical poems can be as bizarre and embarrassing as anything written in the seventeenth century; one of them imagines a kind of Eucharist in which the sea turns into heavenly blood and the rocks into delicate palpitating flesh and the universe embraces and eats itself up in a voracious orgy of love. Those who partake of the feast, the poem concludes, appreciate the food. Novalis's love lyrics and occasional poems are conventional, but his mystical-philosophical essays and fragments made a great impression on his own and later generations. His unreadable novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* is about a medieval knight who dreams of a blue flower and sets out to seek it. He doesn't find it, for one thing because the novel is unfinished. But that in itself is symbolic, and the blue flower became and remains the symbol of the Romantic movement.

Novalis's real name was Friedrich von Hardenberg. Penelope Fitzgerald calls him Fritz. He was born in 1772, the second of eleven children. All of them died before their father, an impoverished Saxon country gentleman who tried to make ends meet by running the Prince's salt mines in the little town of Weissenfels. He was a convert to the Herrenhut Brotherhood, a mystically oriented Puritan sect. Fritz was sent to the Brethren's boarding school when he was nine and expelled when he was ten, because "he insists that the body is not flesh, but the same stuff as the soul". That is what Fitzgerald tells us. *The Blue Flower* is closely based on the German edition of Novalis by Samuel, Mähl and Schulz, which includes not only all his correspondence, but also every contemporary reference to him that they have been able to trace. Fitzgerald uses this material with cunning, mixing verbatim chunks with invented descriptions and conversations.

It was customary for young men to attend several universities. Fritz went to Jena, Leipzig and Wittenberg, and studied history, philosophy, natural science and law—pretty well everything on offer. Jena was where it was all happening in the 1790s. Fritz heard Schiller and Fichte lecture. Everyone admired his intellect and particularly the speed with which he absorbed knowledge. The scientist Johann Ritter spotted that he was a mystic: "For him there is no barrier between the seen and the unseen. The whole of existence dissolves itself into a myth." His fellow student Friedrich Schlegel, soon to become the chief theoretician of the Romantic movement, was bowled over by him: "a young man from whom everything may be expected. He is thin and well made, with a beautiful expression when he gets carried away. He talks three times as much, and as fast, as the rest of us." A portrait in the museum at Weissenfels shows that beautiful expression, "the brilliant, half-wild gaze". The sitter looks like a fawn, not startled so much as prepared to be, probably by some new intellectual insight or spiritual revelation. It's a shame the publisher didn't use it on the dustjacket, instead of the portrait of a Symbolist lady.

Fritz needed to earn his living, and after Wittenberg his father sent him to learn business administration with an acquaintance of his. Coelestin Just was a magistrate and inspector of taxes in Tennstedt, another small Saxon town. Fritz was industrious and just as quick to pick up practical procedures as philosophical concepts. He boarded with the Justs, and made a confidante of their niece Karoline, who kept house for them. She was five years older than he was, and when he fell in love he told her all about it.

It was love at first sight, and the object of it was twelve-year-old Sophie von Kuhn. Fritz met her when Just took him to see the Rockenthien's, another huge family like his own, but richer, jollier and less aristocratic. Sophie and several sisters were the children of Frau von Rockenthien's first marriage. Punning on her name, Fritz called Sophie "my Philosophy", and he seems to have looked on her as a cross between a Platonic other half and a spirit guide. He also confessed to erotic thoughts about her in his diary. Fitzgerald does not mention them. Sophie was not particularly enthusiastic about getting engaged; she wanted to go on romping with her friends. Eventually she accepted his ring, and wore it round her neck because the engagement had to be kept secret from old Hardenberg, who thought the Rockenthien's inferior socially.

Sophie was lively but not very bright. She could barely write a letter. What she liked were presents and fun. "She had", as Fitzgerald beautifully puts it, "the remorseless perseverance of the truly pleasure-loving." She wasn't even particularly pretty. Two miniatures of her show a double chin, and Fitzgerald has Fritz's favourite brother Erasmus point it out to him. In her account, Fritz's love for Sophie horrifies Erasmus and breaks Karoline Just's heart. But Sophie developed tuberculosis. After several operations without an anaesthetic, she died two days after her fifteenth birthday. That was in March 1797; in April, Erasmus died of the same disease, and Novalis followed four years later. By that time, he was engaged to a professor's daughter. The deaths are listed with the deaths of three more Hardenberg siblings in an Afterword. The novel itself ends in 1797 with Sophie's death.

It is fastidious, funny, sad, clever, and very engaging. The tragic tale is told with a dryness that has humour built into it, as though Jane Austen instead of Mrs Gaskell were writing about the Brontës. The tension between Fitzgerald's cool and the alien turbulence of most of her characters adds piquancy. And yet she draws one right into the milieux she describes: at first, they seem uncouth, gothic and grotesque; but gradually, like a receptive *au pair*, one accepts the strange scene and customs, and comes to care very much for the weird foreign families among whom one finds oneself at Weissenfels, Tennstedt and the Rockenthien's estate at Grüningen. *The Blue Flower* is like *Anna Karenina* (though only in this respect) in being a novel of households.

Fitzgerald never lets the sense of foreignness go. She puts in a lot of German words, even when there are adequate English equivalents. For instance, because the Harden-

bergs are poor, Fritz rides a sorry old nag. The German for nag is *Gaul*. Fitzgerald makes everybody call Fritz's horse "the Gaul", as though it were Asterix's mount. She uses the opposite technique for the same purpose, translating German usage literally into English. So Fritz's maverick little brother becomes "the Bernhard", and Sophie's married elder sister "the Mandelsloh". These devices are amusing, but she could manage perfectly well without them. Her details are brilliantly chosen: the fees at the Herrenhut school, for instance, are eight *Talers* for a girl and ten for a boy, because boys eat more and need Latin and Hebrew grammars. Her descriptions, almost adjective-free except for a few colours, pull one into the scene: "By September carts were beginning to make their way into Jena from the pinewoods with logs for the coming winter. Branches from the tops of their loads scraped against the windows in the side-streets, which were littered with twigs like a rookery."

As for the characters, each one, however briefly he or she appears (and the whole book is a miracle of concision, cramming three teeming households and a great deal of research into 224 pages), is as visible and audible as the twigs scraping the windows. Fitzgerald tells you what they eat (goose, eel, cabbage, plums), what they read (if they read), and what they think about the French Revolution. She is sympathetic towards all of them, even difficult old Hardenberg. As for Novalis himself, she acknowledges his gifts and his charm, and goes along with his mystic experiences: the apparition in the Weissenfels graveyard, and the luminous transfiguration of the Justs' parlour. She lets him speak his manifesto a few days before Sophie's death: "As things are, we are the enemies of the world, and foreigners to this earth. Our grasp of it is a process of estrangement. . . . I love Sophie more because she is ill. Illness, helplessness is in itself a claim on love. We could not feel love for God Himself if he did not need our help."

But I don't think Fitzgerald loves Fritz. When Sophie lies dying, he decides he can't bear it and leaves her to her practical, dull, staunch sister. The Mandelsloh has courage; she is the real hero along with the equally *terre-à-terre* and stoical Karoline, who finds Goethe's Mignon "very irritating". "She is only a child", says Fritz, "a spirit or a spirit-seer, more than a child. She dies because the world is not holy enough to contain her." "She dies because Goethe couldn't think what to do with her next", says Karoline. I wonder what Fitzgerald will do next. Her eclectic choice of subjects for fiction and for biography is always a welcome surprise.

#### Michael Ratcliffe (review date 17 September 1995)

SOURCE: "Seen and Unseen," in *Observer*, September 17, 1995, p. 15.

[In the following review, Ratcliffe complains that while Fitzgerald has provided a well-drawn setting and several memorable characters, she has not given all of her heart to *The Blue Flower*.]

Penelope Fitzgerald has long mastered the high comedy of optimistic free spirits being forced to fight the unscrupulous to prove they are really free. In her earlier novels, battle was joined on native institutional soil—the British Museum, the BBC, a children's acting school. More recently, the campaign switched to Tuscany and Russia and, most rewarding of all, to the early twentieth century which continues to inform our lives: Moscow (*The Beginning of Spring*, 1988) and Cambridge (*The Gate of Angels*, 1991) on the eve of the First World War. These are probably her best books: they are positive and inspiring.

*The Blue Flower*—no less ambitious but rather more detached—takes place 200 years ago at another moment when the world was picking up speed. In the so-called Golden Hollow of Saxony and Thuringia, as the French Revolution and Napoleon thunder distantly, poets sniff the air of the woods and fields for the enriching presence of coal, copper, silver or lignite. Heartland of the German classical and Romantic movements—Goethe, Herder and Jean-Paul are in Weimar; Schiller, Fichte, Novalis and the Schlegel brothers in Jena—the Saxon principalities are honeycombed with mineral wealth, and Fitzgerald's hero Fritz is training to be an Assistant Inspector of Salt Mines.

Eldest of seven children, with a patrician father who runs the house on a Moravian regime of prayer, and a mother who rarely goes out of doors, Fritz is Friedrich von Hardenberg (1772–1801), alias the mystic mining engineer and visionary poet Novalis, pupil of Schiller, contemporary of Wordsworth and Blake. Fitzgerald tells us that the name 'Novalis', which he chose for himself, means 'newly cleared land'; and indeed her gentle Fritz is dismayed to find himself trapped in conventional perceptions of the world even as he stakes out his own new transcendental patch:

*I say this is animate, but that is inanimate. I am a Salt Inspector, that is rock salt. I go further than this, much further, and say this is waking, that is a dream, this belongs to the body, that to the spirit, this belongs to space and distance, that to time and duration. But . . . I want to exert myself to find a different kind of measurement.*

'For him,' adds a colleague in Jena, 'there is no real barrier between the seen and unseen'. He can, therefore, fall inappropriately but forever in love with the 12-year-old Sophie von Kühn, and persist until he receives permission to marry her when she is 16. Long before then, however, Sophie has been winged by the dark angel of Romanticism, and is dying of TB.

*The Blue Flower*, fewer than 200 pages long, comprises 55 chapters, whose brevity sometimes unsettles the rhythm of the tale. Period and household are wonderfully well set up with a Brueghelesque laundry scene, and pretty soon we know how contemporaries could tell the Hardenbergs were skint, that members of the upper classes were not supposed to run in public (send a servant), and that in eighteenth-century Saxony you could take a glass of



schnapps at the grocer's but not at an inn. The magical onset of snow, the ceremonies of Christmas Eve, the mundane beauty of dawn after a morning duel: the novel is full of such sensuous occasions, precisely felt and seen.

There is an excess of characters, and the most memorable are not the lovers but those who mind and watch and stand on the side: among them a bookseller, a precocious child, Sophie's fearless sister Mandelsloh, wiser than any man at 22, and Fritz's mother, behind whose timidity lie strong feelings and a suppressed urge to speak out. The result is a meticulous, clever and often witty fiction of German cultural history, to which the novelist gives all her curiosity and intelligence but not, quite, all her heart.

### Jane Gardam (review date 23 September 1995)

SOURCE: "The Professor and the Flower," in *Spectator*, Vol. 275, No. 8724, September 23, 1995, p. 38.

[In the following review, Gardam praises Fitzgerald's ability to draw a convincing setting and set of characters in *The Blue Flower*.]

'Novels arise out of the shortcomings of history' is the epigraph by Fritz von Hardenberg of this biographical tale about his love affair with his muse and passion, 12-year-old Sophie von Kuhn. Whether by history he means 'History' or 'Biography', or simply 'life', *The Blue Flower* is not only a beautiful book but a beautiful example to use in debate about whether biography is fiction or fiction biography run wild.

Von Hardenberg was born in 1772 and died at 29. He was contemporary with Goethe and Schiller, who make brief appearances in the story, but his distinction came after the book ends in the last burning years of his life when he began to call himself 'Novalis'. Novalis became 'a great romantic poet and philosopher' who nevertheless 'wished that he was dead'. This book is based on papers, diaries, letters and public and private documents that were finally published only in 1988. 'The Blue Flower' is the name Hardenberg gave to one of his early folk-tales written as a student about a chosen spirit who was sent out upon a quest he did not understand but yearned to fulfil. It still haunted him on his deathbed.

Von Hardenberg sounds a delightful fledgling. He had huge hands and feet. He entered a room like a thunderbolt. He rode excitedly about on a broken-down horse. He electrified his university teachers by his brilliance. He was compulsive and affectionate, innocent and guileless, comically insensitive to omen. After three universities his terrible old father sent him off to learn about being an inspector of saltmines which he seems to have enjoyed.

The family were devout, old-fashioned Moravians, 'people of standing' who made good sardonic jokes. They owned vast decaying properties here and there but were not rich

except in bed-linen, of which they had so much they need wash but once a year. The book opens with a great cleansing, sheets 'dropping in dingy snowfalls' from high windows.

Fritz left this comfortable if peculiar set-up in search of 'the meaning of the world', which he thought redeemable, and of the 'universal language'. There was a time, he believed, when plants and stones and sunlight communed with one another on equal terms with animals and man. He found instead, in a moment of timeless revelation, the child Sophie standing at the window, and within a quarter of an hour told her they would marry. Sophie was not interested in the meaning of the world or the conversation of stones. She wasn't interested much in anything. She was very dull. Fritz's family found her bourgeoisie, plain, double-chinned, vacuous, with a dreadful laugh. A disaster of a wife for a burgeoning philosopher. She was also inarticulate about love.

But they need not have worried. Life in the soggy plains round Weissenfels was short. Children died like frosted buds. Sophie sickened. And as she faded her bravery astonished. The very account of her operations without anaesthetic is hard to bear, but Sophie bore them and survived. She endured for a spell in the heart of her rowdy loving family, laughing still although it hurt and listening for the sound of the broken-down horse's hooves, which never came. The philosopher was not so brave as the flower.

How much of this short but widehorizoned book is true? The chapters, often only a page or two long, are sometimes straight extracts from the Hardenberg papers. One is the transcript of an hilarious reading-list for the student of the management of salt-mines. There are pathetic little scraps of Sophie's diary ('Today it was hot . . . Nothing happened. Hardenburch [she could never get his name right] did not come') which must be quotations. There is An Incident of Student Life about Fritz the philosopher-to-be acting as referee in a duel and having to carry home in his mouth two severed fingers of one of the contestants to keep them warm enough to be stitched on again. This, one feels, could not have been made up.

But other things are tantalising. Was the love of Karoline for Fritz imagined? Was the terrifying escapade on the river true or put there because there is evidence—see appendix—that the child did in the end drown himself in the Saale? Were the von Kuhn family as described 'born to be happy'? And the lovers' two younger brothers, Fritz's a demon angel who discussed the nature of death and Sophie's who sat listening to him with a hard stare, munching pigeon pie?

I am prepared to believe a lot, and anything else Penelope Fitzgerald tells me about any of these people. She has total confidence in her characters, sees their ridiculousness as well as their pathos, sees them from within. Her sense of time and place is marvellously deft, done in a few

words. She knows how they all walked, eased their old joints, watched each other. She knows the damp smell of decay of the ancient schlosses, I suppose all gone by now. Did she go and look? What happened to wonderful Schloben-die-Jena in its thick woods, its great clock set in its walls and all the workings ticking like hammers and defying sleep? She describes all classes from threadbare aristocrats to the middle-classes in their garden bowers smoking pipes and the peasants gathered for Christmas almsgiving, 'vagrants, old soldiers, travelling theatrical companies, pedlars', all 'silting up like floating rubbish on the rivers' banks.' In a bare little book she reveals a country and an age as lost as Tolstoy's Russia and which we seem somehow always to have known.

### Frank Kermode (review date 5 October 1995)

SOURCE: "Dark Fates," in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 17, No. 19, October 5, 1995, p. 7.

[In the following review, Kermode asserts that Fitzgerald's skillful use of detail in *The Blue Flower* convincingly renders the historical moment.]

Penelope Fitzgerald's *The Blue Flower* is a historical novel based on the life of the poet, aphorist, novelist, Friedrich von Hardenberg, a Saxon nobleman who wrote under the name of Novalis and lived from 1772 to 1801. He figures largely in all accounts of the German literature of the time, and Georg Lukács is not much more extravagant than other critics in calling him the *only* Romantic poet. He spoke of the need to romanticise the world by the action of intellect and imagination; in this novel he parodies his teacher Fichte, crying: 'Have you thought the washbasket? Now then, gentlemen, let your thought be on *that* that thought the washbasket!' He also dwelt on self-annihilation, and in his last years made a cult of death.

In this country his reception has been less than tumultuous. Carlyle, liking the idea of self-annihilation, and also finding in him a sympathetic tendency to worship heroes, thought it his duty as a Germanist to introduce Novalis to British readers, and wrote an essay about him in 1829, treating him as a mystic and comparing him with Coleridge. This is held to have been a mistake, to be explained by Carlyle's erroneous view of Coleridge as a mystic, and by Coleridge's obsession with obscure German Idealist philosophy. Carlyle was right to describe Novalis as talented, poetical and philosophical, wild and deep, and right to compare his thought with 'what little we understand of Fichte's', but again wrong, as Rosemary Ashton explains in her admirable book *The German Idea*, in failing to understand that Fichte and Fichteans differed fundamentally from Kant in rejecting the Thing in Itself. You were to think the Thing only as a preparation for thinking that that thought of the Thing.

In Fitzgerald's book the student Novalis and his friends gather in order to *fichtieren* among themselves after the great man's lectures, but Fichte wasn't the only influence;

there were others, possibly deeper. The Hardenbergs were a noble but not a rich family (the poet, though formally addressed as 'Freiherr', was short of cash, rode a nag and sometimes had to walk). They had a 16th-century reformer among their ancestors, and they were Moravians, interested in prayer, hymn-singing and simplicity of life. Although he was to find the disciplines of the sect too limiting, the poet retained a powerful strain of pietism, unaffected by his professional interest in the latest chemistry and geology. Familiar with modern philosophical idealism and the Romantic 'organicist' aesthetic, resistant to the rationalism of Enlightenment, Novalis can presumably be thought of as participating in what Isaiah Berlin named the 'counter-enlightenment'.

As Berlin remarks, irrationalists such as J. G. Hamann could turn Enlightenment thought to their own purposes, and it is here slyly hinted that Novalis could have reconciled his interest in Jakob Boehme and Spinozan pantheism with an interest in Hume (for example: it is belief in miracles that is the miracle). Other leading ideas were that matter and spirit were continuous, and that all knowledge, from mathematics to poetry, was of the same basic stuff.

Like Goethe, though probably with more practical success, Novalis had a job in mining, and seems to have found a place in his philosophy for mineral deposits. And as Goethe wanted to find an *Urpflanz* in Sicily, Novalis had a vision of a unique blue flower as the goal of a quest. He admired Goethe, of course, though he found *Wilhelm Meister* artificial, a work of the understanding rather than of the imagination, and wrote his unfinished, posthumously published novel about the blue flower (*Heinrich von Ofterdingen*) to counteract what he regarded as the coldness of that work.

The above ragged and perfunctory account of Novalis is in sad contrast with Penelope Fitzgerald's. She has the gift of knowing, or seeming to know, everything necessary, and as it were knowing it from the inside, conveying it by gleams and fractions, leaving those who feel so disposed to make it explicit. Her first novel was a detective story set in a museum rather like the BM, and it was at once clear, though unobtrusively so, that she knew all about museum administration and its crises. *Bookshop* implied knowledge not only of bookshops but of book-keeping; *Offshore* not only of life on a houseboat in Battersea Reach but of William de Morgan. *Human Voices* unmistakably suggests an inwardness with life at the BBC, and *Innocence* a close familiarity with post-war Italy, Gramsci and various human deformities. Other novels hint at omniscience concerning Cambridge, and Russia in 1913.

All this is inside information, which never seems to be got up or stuck in for the occasion, as sometimes happens with historical blockbusters: and of this rare skill *The Blue Flower* is a remarkable further instance. 'Novels arise out of the shortcomings of history,' runs one of Novalis's fragments, used here as an epigraph. It is a wise

remark and explains why familiar ways of writing history acquire something like the narrative qualities of fiction. Fitzgerald, a superbly tactful novelist, has avoided a form of fiction that might be thought to resemble that kind of history. The method used here is episodic, discontinuous: the effect is rather *tachiste*, which enhances one's sense that the book's design or designs are for the reader to make or discern.

The visionary blue flower dominates his imagination, but in the waking life of Fritz von Hardenberg the part of the flower was played by Sophie von Kühn. She is 12 years old when he meets her and at once designates her his future bride and his incarnation of Wisdom. Reluctant parental permission is obtained for their betrothal, but Sophie (as well as not being noble) is tubercular. Much of the story concerns this painful and destructive illness, which kills her when she is 15. Novalis himself, though he lived long enough to get engaged to somebody else, thereafter confessed a wish for death, and did not long survive Sophie, dying at 29 of the same disease. Their relationship, and Fritz's dealings with his own family and Sophie's, are the main business of the novel.

Sophie was, it seems, a perfectly commonplace young girl, neither intelligent nor particularly beautiful, but on Novalis's view of the world nothing is commonplace because all when rightly seen is symbolic. There is no barrier between the seen and the unseen. He claims to love Sophie all the more because she is sick: 'Illness, helplessness, is in itself a claim on love. We could not feel love for God if he did not need our help.' His friends can understand neither his blue flower nor his passion for Sophie, though one of his brothers also falls in love with her, unlike Fritz, he is repelled to discover that because of her illness she has become bald. Only another brother, 17 years younger than Fritz, has an intuitive glimmering as to what the flower is all about; he doesn't say, but probably guessed it had to do with death. This boy is the latest version of a type that Fitzgerald has used before, a sort of wise child figure, with a gift for shrewd, pert dialogue, rather like some children in Ivy Compton-Burnett. The Bernhard, as he is called, is sketched with great delicacy and humour, in spite of his dark fate; he died—before Fritz—by drowning, a fate he probably sought. His end is prefigured in the novel though outside its time scheme.

The main narrative is fragmentary and rather distanced. What is so impressive is the sureness and economy with which the setting is established. Great men—Goethe, the Schlegels, Fichte—walk on without seeming in the least intrusive. Allusions to contemporary university life (students could still ask Fichte questions only because he was not yet a professor), to contemporary philosophy, medicine, agriculture, have the same unobtrusive certainty, which also characterises more humdrum matters. If a piano is bought to replace a harpsichord the qualities of this newfangled instrument and the merits of rival makers are touched in with the same assurance as the domestic duties of daughters, the pious habits of a Moravian father, or the privileges and duties of the minor nobility.

The book opens with the confusions of washday in Fritz's noble Saxon household, and we learn as it were by the way that washday was an annual event in establishments possessing enough linen to last out that time—a friend of Fritz's, deriving from less exalted stock, feels ashamed that he has only 89 shirts, so that at his house there has to be a washday every four months. Fitzgerald, who delights in knowing this kind of thing, also knows how winter supplies of wood were delivered, how coaches were sprung, why the wrist-watch was invented and how Christmas was celebrated in pious homes (all confess the sins of the year to father; there is a Saxon variant of Father Christmas called Knecht Rupert). The cuisine of Saxony (rose-hip and onion soup, goose with treacle sauce, *Kesselfleisch*—the ears, nose and neck fat of the pig boiled with peppermint) seems too *recherché* to have been made up for the purpose, and is unlikely to have been included in the collected works of Novalis; but this curious and retentive writer has not confined her researches to them. She has always had a taste for detail.

Detail, expertly dabbed in, provides in the end a substantial background for the story of a poet which, it is subtly suggested, is also the story of a remarkable moment in the history of civilisation. There are echoes of the great disturbances in France; a brother joins the Army; the universities, notably, Jena, and the cities, Leipzig and Dresden, are just out of view, but the formation of the poet is largely domestic. He is naive and provincial, but innocently intelligent, which enables him to entertain with uncorrupted enthusiasm ideas of all sorts—about nature, its purity and its symbolism, about God and mineral deposits, about the epiphanies vouchsafed to the elect, about the new and the old ideas combining at the great moment when it was possible to proclaim that the world must be romanticised. It is hard to see how the hopes and defeats of Romanticism, or the relation between inspiration and common life, between genius and mere worthiness, could be more deftly rendered than they are in this admirable novel.

#### Richard Eder (review date 13 April 1997)

SOURCE: A review of *The Blue Flower*, in *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, April 13, 1997, p. 5.

[In the following review, Eder describes the mosaic quality of Fitzgerald's writing in *The Blue Flower*.]

It is not certain that God makes a distinction between Beethoven's writing the Waldstein sonata and a parent's folding the baby's diapers. Not because there is no difference but because God, if I can interpret, may reason that a certain equipment (genius) went to Beethoven and that a certain equipment (a washing machine) went to the parent and that each made full and perfect use of each.

Further, it is always possible that the clean diapers will wrap some infant Beethoven of the future, who otherwise would perish from an infected rash, or that the parent was lifted out of suicidal tedium by hearing the Waldstein on FM radio.



This may sound pious and bland, but it is an attempt to get at the elusive quality of Penelope Fitzgerald, an author who is in no way pious, though in some sense religious. Far from being bland, she is, almost sentence by sentence, thrilling and funny and, I have come to believe, the finest British writer alive.

Deceptively small in size, *The Blue Flower* is a fictional evocation of the Romantic movement that revolutionized Europe's sensibility at the beginning of the 19th century and of the contrast between the intellectual passions of any such large movement and the humbler, more permanent truths of human nature.

Big subjects—and Fitzgerald does, in fact, start them in the laundry. A young man travels from Jena with his former fellow-student the Freiherr Friedrich von Hardenberg, later famous as the German Romantic poet Novalis. They arrive at the decrepit Hardenberg townhouse only to find themselves under a snowstorm of sheets, pillowcases, chemises and drawers pitched from the upper stories into the courtyard.

"The Freiherr is trampling on the unsorted garments," shouts the housekeeper from a second-story window. Knee-deep in underthings, the two young men below discuss whether there can be said to be such a thing as a thing in itself. In *The Blue Flower*, laundry is philosophical, and philosophy and poetry exist as materially as the fact that the family wash is done three times a year and that a young man will therefore own 89 shirts, allowing for an occasional two-day stretch.

Novalis, a mystical poet, was the son of a strict and devout father, a minor noble and director of the state salt works in Brunswick. Taking part in the intellectual ferment at the university in Jena, with such figures as Fichte and Schlegel, he died in 1801 at the age of 29, a few years after the death of his teen-age fiancée.

Within the facts, Fitzgerald has woven a shimmering fictional garment. Instead of a running narrative, her brief chapters are a series of sudden illuminations, sharply juxtaposed. They range from family scenes, to a glimpse of the Jena circle, to a duel, to Fritz (as Novalis is familiarly called) riding through the countryside. They present Sophie Kuhn, whom Fritz meets when she is 12 and promptly dubs "my philosophy," and a terrible glimpse of a surgical operation without anesthetic.

Fitzgerald is the most cosmopolitan of English writers. Her three best books—*Innocence*, *The Beginning of Spring* and *The Gate of Angels*—are set, respectively, in Italy, pre-revolutionary Russia and Oxford before World War I. Like any excellent writer she creates a world, but like only a very few—Milan Kundera and Italo Calvino come to mind—she creates a metaphysics as well.

There is a magical immanence in her world, but it has no hierarchy. It is found in the grand Romantic ferment but also in a family routine, a young woman concealing a sudden start of love, a child running down to the river after the mildest of scoldings.

Take that last one. Fritz's angelic little brother, "the Bernhard" (Fitzgerald imparts the faintest of German locution with just "the"), hides on a river barge.

Fritz, no longer the dreamy poet but a panicked brother, runs to find him. "The Bernhard" is briefly defiant and then allows himself to be hoisted on his brother's shoulders.

"How heavy a child is when it gives up responsibility," Fitzgerald writes. It is the finest of natural observations, but there is something more. Novalis' poetry about the affinity between life and death has planted itself in the mischievous 8-year-old—years later he will drown in the same river.

Or take any of several scenes with Fritz's autocratic, penny-pinching father. (The family's penurious piety is such that Sidonie, the incandescent daughter who manages things, has to argue that providing a slop-pail for a visitor in no way breaches "a plain and God-fearing life.")

The old Freiherr conducts an annual Christmas examination in which he proclaims a spiritual balance for each member of the family. One Christmas, looking shrunk, he cancels the ceremony. His Moravian Brethren preacher has told him he is too old to act as judge; his Christmas duty now is to be childlike and joyful.

"Anything less childlike than the leathery, seamed, broad, bald face of the Freiherr and his eyes, perplexed to the point of anguish under his strong eyebrows, could hardly be imagined." The author adds that "the Brethren were experienced in joy, and perhaps sometimes forgot what a difficult emotion it is. . . ."

For the old man, it is conversion: a lofty event and also terribly funny. Fitzgerald's writing is exquisite but not graceful: a choppy stream not a smooth one, a sublime current broken up by rocky absurdities. The episodes, some barely a page long, roughly converge around the motifs of love. Fritz is candid, awkward and sweet-natured, but he and his poetry are propelled by the abstract Romantic passion that is just beginning its historic reign. When it touches two particular women, it injures.

One is Sophie, whose childhood in a large and boisterous family, wonderfully evoked, is flooded out by Fritz's prophetic tidal wave. She is unformed—her diary is a series of entries: "Nothing happened today"—but she responds as best she can. She keeps a poem of his with her list of dogs' names.

Fitzgerald does not judge between art and life. But after Sophie dies, following an operation that in a few lines is the book's most frightening scene—the author fulminates by withholding—we sense the emotional depth under the intellectual shallows.

Even more moving is Katherine, memorably human. She is the poet's intimate confidant and too real for him to love. Her love for him is expressed through brilliant evasive strategies that are both comical and sad.

Fitzgerald has always been easier for British critics to admire than define (she has won the Booker Prize once and been a finalist twice), though the failures have produced some splendidly perceptive prose. I can do no better. It occurs to me, though, that closer than any literary comparison are the films of Eric Rohmer, their powerful emotional charge achieved, mosaic-like, by playful indirection and digression.

Like Rohmer, she has never quite caught fire in the United States—*The Blue Flower* appears only in paperback, which seems absurd—but it is hard to believe that a conflagration will never come.

### Michael Dirda (review date June 1997)

SOURCE: "Petals on the Wind," in *Washington Post Book World*, Vol. 27, No. 14, June, 1997, pp. 3, 13.

[In the following review, Dirda recounts the virtues of Fitzgerald's *The Blue Flower*.]

Penelope Fitzgerald brought out her first novel in 1977, when she was past 60; in the two decades since then her books have appeared regularly every other year or so; three titles—*The Bookshop* (1978), *The Beginning of Spring* (1988) and *The Gate of Angels* (1990)—made the shortlist for Britain's distinguished Booker Prize, and *Offshore* (1979) took home the award. Many readers felt that at least one of her other books, *Innocence* (1986), was as good as or even better than these four. When *The Blue Flower* came out in England in 1995 it was chosen as "the book of the year" more often than any other by a score of distinguished writers and reviewers. In fact, Fitzgerald's public admirers range from novelist A. S. Byatt ("How does she do it?") to the eminent scholar Frank Kermode. On these shores Richard Eder, book critic of the Los Angeles Times, has called her "the best English writer who is at present at the prime of her power." That phrase may be a little awkward, but there's no mistaking the enthusiasm.

So why, one cannot help but wonder, is *The Blue Flower* appearing here as a paperback?

Doubtless our American publishers prefer to distribute only the truly timeless in hardcover, and a perfect work of art such as this one must naturally bow before the obvious superiority of the latest "Star Trek" tie-in. Perhaps, though, Mariner Books—a new division of Houghton Mifflin—hopes that a paperback edition may encourage readers, especially younger readers, to give Fitzgerald a whirl. Whatever the case, *The Blue Flower* is a bargain, a book to buy and salt away for vacation or to turn to gratefully at the end of a soul-destroying Washington workday.

*Die blaue Blume*, the blue flower—first imagined by the great German poet Friedrich von Hardenberg, better known as Novalis—has long been a symbol of Romantic yearn-

ing, whether for easeful death or for some ineffable and transcendental ecstasy. In her novel Fitzgerald follows the general course of Hardenberg's early life, providing cameos of his family, teachers, friends and employers. Even though there are 55 chapters (for a mere 225 pages) and nearly as many characters, the book never feels busy or hurried. Each character springs to life in a few sentences or a crisp turn of phrase. "Large though the house was, she always found guests a difficulty. The bell rang, you heard the servants crossing the hall, everything was on top of you before you could pray for guidance." And so you have Fritz's timid, always slightly bewildered mother, the Freifrau.

At the book's heart lies the poet's mystical, seemingly irrational love for the very young and rather plain Sophie von Kuhn—who will eventually die at 15. Although the novel touches on several aspects of German romanticism (the mystical, philosophical, folkloristic), the real pleasure of this text derives from its shrewd understanding of personal relations and from the elegant beauty of the writing.

Consider how deftly Fitzgerald suggests the Germanness of the setting with her very opening words: "Jacob Dietmahler was not such a fool that he could not see that they had arrived at his friend's home on the washday." Note, first, the double use of "not" to convey a formality and exactness verging on pedantry. Yet the real feather touch of genius lies, of course, in the insertion of "the" before "washday": Immediately, the whole sentence takes on a purse-lipped Teutonic accent. Such nuances recur periodically, just often enough to evoke another time, a vanished world.

Where some writers like to build their effects slowly, Fitzgerald prefers a quicksilver economy that may sound a little bare outside her pages. One picks up the rhythm of the sentences, though, and comes to value minute, telling details. When Fritz returns from visiting a sophisticated city uncle, his brother Erasmus asks what was talked about at the dinner table: "Nature-philosophy, galvanism, animal magnetism, and freemasonry"—precisely the right late 18th-century topics for fashionable intellectual discussion. After a friend's two fingers are cut off in an early morning duel, young Dr. Dietmahler tells Fritz to put them in his mouth. "If they are kept warm I can perhaps sew them back on our return." More than a few Washingtonians will ruefully recognize their own experience in this observation about a soiree for blue-stockings and their admirers:

"The musical evenings and *conversazione* at Jena were crowded, but not everyone said brilliant things, or indeed, anything at all. Some of the guests stood uneasily, certain that they had been invited, but not, now that they had arrived, that their names had been remembered."

Fitzgerald brings to vivid, flashing life servants and salt mine bureaucrats, both the august Goethe and a precocious little brother named Bernhard. The bookseller Severin, we

learn, “had been poor and unsuccessful, had kept himself going by working very hard, at low wages, for the proprietor of the bookshop, and then, when the proprietor had died, had married his widow and come into the whole property. Of course the whole of Weissenfels knew this and approved it. It was their idea of wisdom exactly.” That last sentence encapsulates an entire bourgeois mentality. By contrast, could anyone be more romantic than the serious young painter, hired to create a portrait of Sophie? “He had determined to paint Fraulein Sophie standing in the sunshine, just at the end of childhood and on the verge of a woman’s joy and fulfillment, and to include in his portrait the Mandelsloh, her sister, the soldier’s wife, likely to be widowed, sitting in shadow, the victim of woman’s lot.”

Ah yes, the Mandelsloh! What a woman! At one point she enters a room carrying a bucket and pauses to talk high-mindedly with Fritz for a while. “Sophie reappeared . . . It seemed that she had been playing with some new kittens in the housemaids’ pantry. ‘So that is where they are,’ said the Mandelsloh. She was reminded now that she had brought the bucket of water to drown these kittens. The servants were fainthearted about their duty in this respect.” It is yet another sign of Fitzgerald’s mastery that this seemingly coldhearted Valkyrie turns out to be the most admirable character in the book—at once competent, selfless and commonsensical. Following Sophie’s three barbaric operations, she alone cares for her sister with complete devotion, even when she knows it is all in vain. Near the end, she brusquely tells the annoyingly optimistic Fritz about the facts of death: “If you stayed here, you would not be wanted as a nurse . . . You would be wanted as a liar.”

Throughout *The Blue Flower* there are occasional longer chapters, carefully lit scenes of heartbreak and comedy: Karoline Justen’s aching realization that Fritz has fallen in love with an insignificant little girl; a Christmas feast at the Hardenbergs; Sophie’s engagement party; her first surgery without anesthesia. One watches with particular delight as Erasmus, who described Sophie as plain and empty-headed, slowly falls in love with his brother’s intended, eventually finding himself compelled to spend more and more time in her company because of one of the strongest motives “known to humanity, the need to torment himself.”

There is no waste in this apparently meandering, almost leisurely short novel. When young Dr. Dietmahler arrives on that memorable washday, he finds himself attracted to Fritz’s younger sister Sidonie. Two hundred pages later, the rising young surgeon again encounters Fraulein von Hardenberg, who smiles and claims to recall his visit. The doctor politely hands Sidonie his professional card. “That would bring his name to her mind, no doubt of it. But the few moments during which she had not been able to remember it confirmed Dietmahler in what, after all, he already knew, that he was nothing. What means something to us, that we can name. Sink, he told his hopes, with a

kind of satisfaction, sink like a corpse dropped into the river. I am rejected, not for being unwelcome, not even for being ridiculous, but for being nothing.”

It is quite astonishing how much Penelope Fitzgerald packs into a little more than 200 pages. It is even more astonishing to realize that she is, past 80, writing better than ever. Perhaps such masterpieces as this, serene with wry wisdom, can only be achieved in later life. So seek *The Blue Flower*, and when you find it, rejoice. After a while, you’ll want to go out and look for *The Beginning of Spring*, *Innocence*, and *The Gate of Angels*.

Richard Holmes (17 July 1997)

SOURCE: “Paradise in a Dream,” in *New York Review of Books*, Vol. 44, No. 12, July 17, 1997, p. 4.

[In the following review, Holmes traces the course of Fitzgerald’s career that eventually led her to write *The Blue Flower*.]

The sensibility of early German Romanticism seems infinitely distant to us now. The very name Novalis, the pseudonym of the poet Friedrich von Hardenberg (1772–1801), sounds like an astronomical explosion on the edge of some remote galaxy. The symbol of the Blue Flower, which he created in his unfinished novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, was never successfully transplanted into the English-speaking world. As the epitome of German Romantic longing, it was naturalized most convincingly in a delphic entry in one of Coleridge’s Notebooks.

If a man could pass through Paradise in a Dream, & have a Flower presented to him as a pledge that his Soul had really been there, & found that Flower in his hand when he awoke—Aye! and what then?

Novalis’s whole life seems something like that dream. A member of the minor German aristocracy in Thuringia, he fell in love with a twelve-year-old girl (like Dante falling for Beatrice or Petrarch for Laura) who died shortly after their engagement, and having written a mass of philosophic and poetic fragments partly inspired by her (notably the “Hymns to the Night,” 1800), he himself died from consumption at the age of twenty-nine. The five volumes of his Letters and Works (edited by Richard Samuel and Paul Kluckhohn, 1988) have never been fully translated,<sup>1</sup> and it is characteristic that perhaps the most beautiful version of the “Hymns to the Night,” by the 1890s poet James Thomson, was only issued in a limited edition in 1995.<sup>2</sup> His Fragments, some of them collected in *Pollen*, give a glimpse into a visionary world, strongly influenced by the extreme idealism of Fichte, and the poetic science or *Naturphilosophie* of Schelling. “Philosophy is really Homesickness; the wish to be everywhere at home.” “The Sciences must all be made Poetic.” “Man is metaphor.” “Poetry heals the wounds given by Reason.” “Space spills



over into Time, like the Body into the Soul." "Death is the Romantic principle in our lives." "The World must be romanticized, only thus will we discover its original meaning."

When Thomas Carlyle first introduced Novalis to English readers in a famous essay of 1829, he excused him as a "Mystic," and remarked that though his writings showed wonderful depth and originality, Novalis's mind was "of a nature or habit so abstruse, and altogether different from anything we ourselves have notice or experience of, that to penetrate fairly into its essential character, much more to picture it forth in visual distinctness, would be an extremely difficult task. . . ."

The attempt to bring back Novalis—or rather young "Fritz" von Hardenberg—into a world of recognizable human feelings and "visual distinctness," across that great gap of historical time and sensibility, is the subject of a truly remarkable novel, *The Blue Flower* by the British writer Penelope Fitzgerald. She puts as her epigraph another of Novalis's aphorisms: "Novels arise out of the shortcomings of history." And she steps back into that lost, transcendental, German world with a scene so striking and utterly surprising that one is enthralled from the outset.

A young friend from the University of Jena has arrived at Weissenfels to visit Fritz and his extensive and rather alarmingly clever family. He plunges headlong into laundry (rather than poetry), having fallen by mistake upon the aristocratic annual Washday.

. . . Here, at the Hardenberg house in Kloster Gasse, he could tell from the great dingy snowfalls of sheets, pillow-cases, bolster-cases, vests, bodices, drawers, from the upper windows of the courtyard, where grave-looking servants, both men and women, were receiving them into giant baskets, that they washed only once a year. This might mean wealth, in fact he knew that in this case it didn't, but it was certainly an indication of long standing. A numerous family, also. The underwear of children and young persons, as well as the larger sizes, fluttered through the blue air, as though the children themselves had taken to flight.

The description in its wit and confidence, its knowledge of eighteenth-century domestic customs, its slight hint of Germanic diction and accent, its evocation of a whole bustling household, and its final suggestion of visionary destinies about to "take flight," shows a master hand immediately at work. The novel that follows, in fifty-five short chapters, structured almost like some Schubertian song cycle, bears out this promise to an extraordinary degree, in a work of exquisite, crystalline intelligence and angular polish.

How did Penelope Fitzgerald come to this ambitious subject with such formidable confidence? Her career is intriguing. Having taken a First Class Degree at Somerville College, Oxford, she did not begin writing until her sixties. She worked in journalism, the BBC, the Ministry

of Food, a bookstore, and a theatrical school. At one point she lived with her husband and family on a Thames barge at Battersea, "which sank."

All these experiences gave her the material for her early novels, which are short, affectionate, lyrical satires on human folly. Her characters are small, eccentric people within large, conventional institutions, who are marked out by a moral vision of the world often hopelessly at odds with its ordinary, material values. Their stories are told with a dry, elliptical wit and a highly compressed prose style, often running to less than two hundred pages, and having the intensity of moral fables. The bookselling episode emerged as *The Bookshop*, set on the bleak East Anglian coast, peopled with quirky, hostile customers and a comparatively friendly poltergeist. It is really a study in courage. The Thames barge experience produced *Offshore*, which in turn is really about generosity, and which won the Booker Prize in 1979. Since then her work has won exceptional praise from many of her peers, including Doris Lessing, A.S. Byatt, and Professor Frank Kermode, and in 1996 she was awarded the Heywood Hill Prize for a lifetime's contribution to literature. In interviews she is unfailingly modest, calling herself "a depressive humorist" and revealing the sadness that belies her lightness of touch. "I have remained true to my deepest convictions, I mean to the courage of those who are born to be defeated, the weaknesses of the strong, and the tragedy of misunderstandings and missed opportunities which I have done my best to treat as comedy, for otherwise how can we manage to bear it?"

Something of the source of this vision can be found in a wonderful, anecdotal biography she wrote of her father, Edmund Knox (the celebrated editor of *Punch*), and his three brothers, including Ronald Knox, the Roman Catholic translator of the Bible. "They were a vicarage family and the vicarages were the intellectual powerhouses of nineteenth century England." Their taste for literature, for strenuous intellectual endeavor, and for the Edwardian wit of understatement, has evidently remained with her. They had "an inborn melancholy, and natural relish for disaster." Her father thought that real humor was found "not in ingenuity but incongruity, particularly in relation to the dignified place which man has assigned to himself in the scheme of things." Much of their genius, she says, "lay in their fondness for quiet understatement. 'One gets so little practice at this,' said my father gently when in 1971 he lay dying. I too feel drawn to whatever is spare, subtle and economical."

One story she tells of uncle Dillwyn Knox, a brilliant scholar of ancient Greek texts in the Housman tradition, and also one of the eccentric band of cryptographers who broke the Enigma code at Bletchley during the Second World War, shows her fictional style in the making. Referring to herself in the third person as "the niece," she recalls how, as "the kindest of visiting uncles," Dillwyn would faithfully take her out for weekends from her detested boarding school, and as frequently bring her back late

after roll call. "Agitated at having brought her back late in the baby Austin, which seemed to spring and bounce along the roads like a fawn, he bravely entered the precincts, blinking in the bright light, confronting the outraged housemistress, who said 'Rules are made to be kept' with the answer: 'But they are only defined by being broken.'" Many of her themes—love, loyalty, defiance, unconventional intelligence—are caught in that oddly touching snapshot.

Perhaps responding to changes in her own life, the domestic English focus of Penelope Fitzgerald's work suddenly began to alter and expand, to breathe more exotic air, in 1986 with the novel *Innocence*, a slightly baroque and deliciously bizarre picture of postwar Italy. Two years later, she was even deeper into Europe, with *The Beginning of Spring* (1988), a startlingly effective re-creation of Moscow in 1913. This is a story of the emotional rebirth of a middle-aged Englishman, Frank Reid, who has come to work in Russia. Though brilliantly detailed in historical setting (the snow, the samovars, the Tsarist chaos), it has strong metaphysical undertones, partly drawn from Tolstoy's *Resurrection*. It contains a mysterious heroine, the peasant girl Lisa, who in a wonderful passage is identified with the myth of the Russian birch forest carrying the cycles of seasonal regeneration.

As soon as the shining leaf-buds split open the young leaves breathed out an aromatic scent, not so thick as the poplar but wilder and more memorable, the true scent of wild and lonely places. . . . The leaves, turning from bright olive to a darker green, were agitated and astir even when the wind dropped. They were never strong enough to block out the light completely. The birch forest, unlike the pine forest, always gives a chance of life to whatever grows beneath it.

This is already closer to the European dream of Novalis and his child bride, and it singles out a powerful but hitherto latent Fitzgerald idea about the moral necessity of imagination. One of Frank's friends, an eccentric poet and accountant called Selwyn (who is a suitably crazed Tolstoyan, and printing a volume entitled "Birch Tree Thoughts"), upbraids him with his failures of imagination, "I mean of picturing the sufferings of others." The scene hovers characteristically between the lyrical and the tenderly absurd. If the kindly Frank has a fault, "it's that you don't grasp the importance of what is beyond sense or reason. And yet that is a world in itself. 'Where is the stream,' we cry with tears. But look up, and lo! there is the blue stream flowing gently over our heads." One might suppose that Selwyn's strangely haunting quotation, about the blue stream inverted overhead like the flood of distant stars, comes from Tolstoy. It is never identified. But in fact it comes from Novalis's *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*.

*The Blue Flower* is so powerful, it seems to me, because it draws on a long and deep accumulation of Penelope Fitzgerald's most distinctive concerns. What appears so distant is in fact—by a wonderful process of assimilation—already a familiar universe. The ability to recreate

the family life of the Hardenbergs (with its strict Moravian religious background) is already foreshadowed in the lost Edwardian world of the young Knoxes in their vicarage. The steady expansion of moral and metaphysical themes—the great questions of love, loyalty, imagination, suffering—arise naturally from the earlier novels. When young Fritz falls in love with the twelve-year-old Sophie von Kühn, the beauty and absurdity of it strikes a perfectly recognizable Fitzgerald note. All great historical fiction, one might suggest, is a form of homesickness.

The picture of Sophie is a marvelous, tender, ironic creation. To Fritz she looks like this: "Sophie was pale, her mouth was pale rose. There was the gentlest possible gradation between the color of the face and the slightly open, soft, fresh, full, pale mouth. It was as if nothing had reached, as yet, its proper color or its full strength—always excepting her dark hair." But to Fritz's friend, the painter Hoffmann, she is merely "a decent, good-hearted Saxon girl, potato-fed, with the bloom of thirteen summers, and the coarse glow of thirteen winters." To Fritz's beloved younger brother, Erasmus, she is as "empty as a new jug," and moreover has a slight double chin. When Fritz reads her the opening of his novel, and asks her about the meaning of the Blue Flower, her response is naive. "Why should he care about a flower? He is not a woman, and he is not a gardener." He concludes, "she doesn't want to be embarrassed by my love. . . . She cares more about other people and their feelings than about her own. But she is cold through and through." Yet in their conversations, Fitzgerald captures again and again what enchants him and makes him love her. When he talks of Schlegel's theories of the transmigration of souls, she agrees that she would like to be born again—"if I could have fair hair."

Sophie's figure is offset by several more mature women who love Fritz, but to whom he remains almost cruelly indifferent. Notable among these is Karoline Just, the niece of his first employer at Tennstedt. (Fitzgerald makes brilliant use of the surprising circumstance that the poet is training as a mining engineer, and is fascinated by science and mathematics.) Fritz writes a poem to Karoline's eyebrow, but does not return her love. Yet he and Karoline can discuss Romantic philosophy together, and these debates show wonderfully well the formation of that "abstruse" imagination which will transform Fritz into the poet Novalis. (The name, incidentally, was taken from an ancestral estate—like the French poet Gérard de Nerval's—and refers not to stars, but to something more earthly—"the clearer of new land.")

Karoline, like the feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, regards mining as a violation of Mother Nature, and cannot see how a Romantic poet could condone it. Using passages from Novalis's letters and his novel (as she does throughout, with extraordinary skill and delicacy), Fitzgerald constructs a wonderful and weirdly poetic reply to Karoline, which catches all the heady, metaphoric alchemy of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie*.

Fritz cried—"No, Justen, you have not understood. The mining industry is not a violation of Nature's secrets,

but a release. You must imagine that in the mines you reach the primal sons of Mother Earth, the age-old life, trapped in the ground beneath your feet. I have seen this process as a meeting with the King of Metals, who waits underground, listening in hope for the first sounds of the pick, while the miner struggles through the hardships to bring him up to the light of day. Release, Justen! What must the King of Metals feel when he turns his face to the sunlight for the first time?"

All this is anchored, or earthed, within a superbly realized picture of social life in late eighteenth-century Thuringia, among the proud but penniless aristocracy, the intellectuals of Jena University, and the greedy bucolic peasantry of the rural communes. Goethe and Schlegel have walk-on parts. There are many striking set pieces—a provincial fair, Fritz's engagement party, a student duel, a Christmas party with its pagan candle-lit fir tree. "Inside the library the myriad fiery shining points of light threw vast shadows of the fir branches onto the high walls and even across the ceiling. In the warmth the room breathed even more deeply, more resinously, more greenly."

The descriptions of Germanic feasting are rendered with particular gothic virtuosity, as if to counterbalance the delicate idealism of Fritz's poetic dreaming. "The servants had already brought in the soups, one made of beer, sugar and eggs, one of rose-hips and onions, one of bread and cabbagewater, one of cows' udders flavored with nutmeg. There was dough mixed with beech nut oil, pickled herrings and goose with treacle sauce. . . ."

In one scene, which prefigures Sophie's tragic death, Fritz enters a country churchyard at dusk, and sees the mysterious vision of a youth standing above an open grave. This moment of mystic contemplation is rendered with extraordinary assurance and simplicity, as if bringing a Caspar David Friedrich landscape to external life, and then dissolving it back into a wholly interior world, in exact accordance with Romantic doctrines. (The source here is the famous sixteenth Fragment from Novalis's *Pollen*.)

It was by now the very late afternoon, pale blue above clear yellow, with the burning clarity of the northern skies, growing more and more transparent, as though to end in revelation. . . .

The creak and thump of the pastor's cows could still be heard far into the burial ground where the graves and the still empty spaces, cut off from each other now by the mist, had become dark green islands, dark green chambers of mediation. . . .

He said aloud, "The external world is the world of shadows. It throws its shadows into the kingdom of light. How different they will appear when this darkness is gone and the shadow-body has passed away. The universe, after all, is within us. The way leads inwards, always inwards."

But in a perfect Fitzgerald peripetacia, the full tragic irony of this calm pantheistic vision only becomes clear when Sophie's "shadow-body" is subject to an appallingly physi-

cal operation at the hands of the surgeons of Jena, from which she dies an agonizing and lingering death. (Some of the medical details are taken from Fanny d'Arblay's horrifying and unforgettable account to her sister Esther Burney of her mastectomy operation undertaken in 1811 without anaesthetic.)

This swift and constant play of extremities and "incongruities," of light and dark, love and misunderstanding, imagination and foolishness, idealism and gross physically, gives *The Blue Flower* its distinctive power and narrative conviction. At times it reads like a satire, at others like a folk tale, at others like a pure Romantic lyric. The pungent shifts of tone, and compressions of style, are amazingly assured. As an act of historical re-creation it achieves what Carlyle had thought nearly impossible, and makes Novalis and the world that produced him recognizable, memorable, and indeed movingly intimate.

For all its research, it is still of course a fiction. We would not guess, for example, that Fritz's brother Erasmus would die of consumption just three weeks after Sophie. Nor can we take account of the fact (which so exercised Carlyle) that Friedrich von Hardenberg soon after became engaged to another woman, Julie von Charpentier, the daughter of the Professor of Mathematics at the Mining Academy of Freiberg. (Fitzgerald places this, mischievously perhaps, in a postscript.)

But these are the shortcomings of history, and *The Blue Flower* leaves us free to mediate on them, and perhaps to try Novalis for ourselves. As it stands, this seems to me the book that Penelope Fitzgerald (now in her eighties) was born to write, and I can think of no better introduction to the rest of her wonderfully accomplished and original work. As Fritz says to Sophie, "If a story begins with finding, it must end with searching."

#### Notes

1. But see *Henry von Ofterdingen*, newly translated by Palmer Hilty (Waveland, 1990).
1. *Novalis and the Poets of Pessimism*, edited by Simon Reynolds (Norwich: Micheal Russell, 1995).
1. First published in England in 1978, to be published in the US in September by Houghton Mifflin.

#### Julian Gitzen (essay date October 1997)

SOURCE: "Elements of Compression in the Novels of Penelope Fitzgerald," in *Essays in Arts and Sciences*, Vol. XXVI, October, 1997, pp. 1–14.

[In the following essay, Gitzen studies Fitzgerald's use of compression in her novels, tracing common features, including a short time span, a restriction of plot, and a minimum number of prominent characters.]

Despite more than a decade of lavish critical praise, the fiction of Penelope Fitzgerald has as yet been the subject of little if any sustained commentary or analysis. This



neglect is all the more difficult to understand in light of the award to one of her novels, *Offshore* (1979) of the Booker Prize and the shortlisting for the same prize of three others, *The Bookshop* (1978), *The Beginning of Spring* (1988), and *The Gate of Angels* (1990). As a useful beginning, critical attention might focus upon the methods adopted by Fitzgerald to achieve that remarkable compression which constitutes the most distinctive feature of her narratives. *The Blue Flower* (1995), her longest novel to date, occupies 226 pages, while the average length of her volumes is 160 pages. The author wittily describes herself as a writer of "microchip novels," and the critic Valentine Cunningham has adopted the term *nouvelle* in acknowledgement of both the intensity and the brevity of Fitzgerald's best work.<sup>1</sup>

Fitzgerald's milieu is social comedy, within which she invariably focuses upon the activities of a small group of characters and prefers to feature comedy's traditional subject of romantic love. She understands that successful compression in fiction requires above all restriction in both plot or narrative incident and passage of time, and that, as in short stories, the number of prominent characters must be kept to a minimum. The time span of her narratives typically is a year or less. The events in *Innocence*, arguably her most ambitious and complex work, transpire in little more than twelve months and involve only five or six major characters. As suggested by its title, *The Beginning of Spring* covers a time span of only a few weeks and centers upon the activities of three characters. These narratives revolve around one or two events: a middle-aged woman's unsuccessful attempt to operate a bookstore; a father's search for a suitable governess for his children; the meeting, brief courtship, and marriage of a young doctor and a Florentine noblewoman; the career conflict caused by the love affair between a fledgling academic and a would-be nurse.

In the interest of rapid pace, Fitzgerald occasionally accelerates events by introducing to each other two characters who, with an alacrity worthy of Shakespearean comedy, instantly fall in love. More typically, one immediately falls in love, while the other remains cool or is attracted to a third person. Impulsive acts also contribute to the brevity of the narratives. *The Beginning of Spring* is set in train by the impulsive departure of Frank Reid's wife and closes abruptly (but symmetrically) with her equally sudden and unexpected return. Coincidence also plays its part in shortening the narratives. *The Gate of Angels* opens with the collision of two bicycles on a Cambridge byway, an accident which serves to introduce to one another the bicyclists, Daisy Saunders and Fred Fairly. It ends with a second fortuitous collision of sorts when Daisy unexpectedly encounters Fred while hurrying to the train station with the intention of leaving him. In *Innocence* an opportune phone call from his wife prevents a distracted neurologist from committing suicide. In *Offshore* a storm arrives on cue to signal both the end of a marriage and the conclusion of the novel.

Fitzgerald obviously recognizes that restriction of setting or locale is also suited to compressed narratives. Her strict rationing of backgrounds is particularly noteworthy in the three novels to date located in London, in each of which the action proceeds with a stage-like economy requiring no more than four major settings. The chief characters of *Offshore* dwell on a barge and a converted minesweeper, both of which are moored in the Thames at Battersea Reach. The majority of the novel's scenes occur on these two vessels. *Human Voices* centers upon BBC personnel in the early days of World War II and accordingly takes place largely in Broadcasting House, with occasional excursions to a French restaurant or to the Hammersmith home of one of the young female characters. The central locale of *At Freddie's* is the Temple School, an academy for child actors situated in Covent Garden. Additional scenes occur in the Nonesuch Theatre, "just off the Strand," and in the bed-sitter rented by one of the school's teachers. While these three novels are among Fitzgerald's shortest, even in the longer and considerably more complex *Innocence* the majority of the action transpires in three settings, all of them family properties in or near Florence.

Complementing these neatly restricted locales is a judiciously focused character-portrayal. Fitzgerald is perhaps unique among current English novelists in identifying and delineating her characters primarily according to single, dominant virtues. In most of her novels one or more of the major characters exemplifies one or two traditional virtues. Among the most appealing of such figures is Daisy Saunders of *The Gate of Angels*. Daisy has been born in London into a life of poverty and hard work. At the age of eighteen she is accepted as a nurse-in-training at Blackfriars Hospital. Her choice of the nursing profession is itself indicative of the generosity of spirit which moves her and which is underlined when the author describes her as "generous . . . the kind of girl who'd give you the teeth out of her head, if she could get them loose." Though admirable in itself, generosity is linked with vulnerability. Daisy remains blessedly unaware of "how dangerous generosity is to the giver," but as if to drive home the lesson, her kindhearted attempt to assist one of her patients requires her to break a hospital rule and leads to her dismissal.

Fitzgerald has no time to waste upon protracted romances. Even the shyest of her suitors, such as Fred Fairly, act with sturdy impetuosity. On their first excursion into the country, Fred asks Daisy to marry him. Although fond of Fred and touched by his proposal, Daisy hesitates. Her unwillingness to accept on the spot arises in part, as the author explains, from her habitual generosity of spirit: "All her life she had been at a great disadvantage in finding it so much more easy to give than to take. Hating to see anyone in want, she would part without a thought with money or possessions, but she could accept only with the caution of a half-tamed animal."<sup>2</sup> As the narrative develops, it assumes the dimensions of old-fashioned melodrama, with Daisy's virtue being threatened by an unscrupulous journalist, who eventually (and quite improbably) is

knocked unconscious by the jealous Fred. This encounter fails to clear the way entirely for the marriage, and a distraught Daisy is hurrying to the train station, intending to return to London, when she passes an open door in the wall of one of the Cambridge colleges. Unknowingly, she is gazing into the inner courtyard of Fred's college, St. Angelicus. In other words, an angelic figure stands before "the Gate of Angels." From within she hears "a very faint . . . human cry of distress," and, as is her wont, "without thinking twice about it, she walk[s] straight in" to find in the inner courtyard "an elderly man," the blind Master of the college, in a mild state of shock. Daisy comforts him but fails to understand either the reason for his shock (the inexplicably opened door in question) or the general excitement occasioned by her innocent arrival within the walls of a college where no women are permitted. The door through which she has entered has opened mysteriously on only two other occasions in the college's 500-year history. Though currently renowned as a center for scientific study, the college was founded as an institution of Christian learning, and the rare appearance at its door of Christian charity has been recognized and welcomed. In this instance, too, charity is rewarded, since the brief delay of her detour into the college grounds causes Daisy shortly thereafter to meet Fred unexpectedly as he returns to his quarters at the college.

Daisy's generosity is spontaneous and unwilling, though no less estimable on that account than duty, the learned and deliberately practiced virtue which is exemplified in Richard Blake of *Offshore*. Richard is the chief male character of this novel, the counterpart to and briefly the lover of Nenna James, its female protagonist. Nenna and her two children inhabit one of a cluster of barges moored at Battersea Reach. Nearby lies Richard's converted minesweeper, *Lord Jim*. One circumstance common to these two is an aversion on the part of their spouses to living aboard a vessel. Nenna's husband, Edward, refuses to join her on the barge, while Richard's wife, Laura, is intensely uncomfortable aboard ship and eventually deserts her husband to dwell ashore. Nenna has long admired Richard, having found him a model of the dutiful gentleman, a part which he plays in the novel's opening scene. A meeting of the water-dwellers has convened to consider the wish of one of them to sell his vessel, despite its being unseaworthy. Richard has taken the chair and is conducting the meeting, recognizing it as his duty: "Duty is what no-one else will do at the moment. Fortunately, he did not have to define duty. War service in the RNVR, and his whole temperament before and since, had done that for him."<sup>3</sup> It is explained also that "politeness, observation and helpfulness" have been instilled in Richard from early boyhood. Though uneasy about the proposed sale of the leaking barge, he considers it his duty to offer assistance. Just as Daisy Saunders' generosity takes its toll of her, so Richard's sense of duty also exacts a high price from him, when one evening aboard one of the barges he unhesitatingly confronts a stranger who is in fact a thief. The intruder strikes him with a heavy wrench, seriously injuring him. Though his wife returns to his hospital bedside,

she also takes steps to dispose of *Lord Jim* immediately and to purchase a house for herself and Richard in the country where she has long wished to live.

Among the virtues which most appeals to Fitzgerald, perhaps because of its rarity, is absolute honesty, an attribute exemplified on occasion by Fred Fairly of *The Gate of Angels*. It is in the figure of another male suitor, however, that Fitzgerald has enshrined a comically conspicuous honesty. This individual is Pierce Carroll, an instructor at the child actors' academy in *At Freddie's*. When the proprietress hires him and reveals that, owing to her poverty, Pierce's salary, both at present and in the future, must remain "quite low", he replies bluntly, "It's very low, I should describe it as exploitation, but it's as much as I can expect with my qualifications."<sup>4</sup> Evidently, he is incapable of diplomacy, for after remarking to his employer that the surroundings in her school suggest that money is indeed in short supply, he reassures her that strict economy is estimable, "particularly in anyone who's well advanced into old age." Whatever may be her private reaction to this tactless observation, it combines with Pierce's other remarks to arouse her interest, for she has heard in them "the weak, but pure, voice of complete honesty." In his utter truthfulness and straightforwardness, Pierce is incongruously situated teaching would-be actors, whose art requires them to impersonate others. Indeed, he is perplexed by the aspiration of his students to earn a living by transforming themselves into a series of different characters. In his opinion it is "a sufficient achievement to be an individual at all, what you might call a real person." Pierce's manner of wooing is as direct and disconcerting as his conduct of daily affairs. He proposes that his colleague, Hannah Graves, should marry him and join him on his family's farm in County Londonderry, where they might establish a business building and selling houses. He is willing to abandon his teaching career, in which he foresees little prospect of success: "I think we should admit that most teachers are a good deal more competent than I am. Promotion would pass me by."<sup>5</sup>

Once more the issue of vulnerability arises, for Hannah fails to return Pierce's affection, being instead attracted to an actor who treats her casually. Although she permits Pierce to spend one night with her, it is a gesture more of pity than of mutual feeling. In a futile effort to ease the pain of rejection, Hannah politely lies that Pierce's original proposal was so business-like in character that she was unable to take it seriously. She reminds him that on that occasion, when she did not give him her immediate assent, he merely folded his papers, replaced them in his briefcase "and never blinked an eyelid." He replies, "I might have done, perhaps, if I'd been acting."<sup>6</sup> Clearly he has learned nothing from his students, who act or play roles, including the role of student actor, both on and off the stage. Whatever the occasion, he can summon only a true and honest response, thereby causing Hannah to recognize in him the potentially humiliating combination of practical incompetence or lack of ambition and emotional innocence.

Though he is outspokenly honest to a fault, Pierce is not above censure on other counts. When he discovers Hannah's fondness for the middle-aged actor, Boney Lewis, his very honesty compels him to manifest a tiresome jealousy. Embarrassed by his churlishness, he can only protest that, given a choice of sins, he "wouldn't have chosen jealousy." In admitting to one sin Carroll calls attention to Fitzgerald's distinctive methods of character-portrayal. Just as she prefers to focus upon one or two dominant virtues which govern a character's behavior, so conversely she deliberately limits and thereby highlights the faults (if any) attributed to each.

While Fitzgerald's personae as a whole are much more notable for their virtues than for their vices, their estimable behavior does not assure wellbeing. Florence Green, the aspiring bookseller, whose distinctive virtue is kindness, eventually is reduced to poverty and homelessness. The dutiful Richard Blake suffers a punctured lung, loses his beloved *Lord Jim*, and is forced to retire to the country. Honest Pierce Carroll not only relinquishes his claims to Hannah Graves but, despite having no future prospects, resigns his teaching post to spare both Hannah and himself needless distress.

If their virtue has contributed to the misfortunes of the above characters, it has caused no serious injuries to others. In contrast, *Innocence* illustrates the potential of an unadulterated virtue to cause widespread comic disorder and distress. Set in Florence in the year 1955, the novel centers upon the affairs of the remnants of the ancient and noble Ridolfi family. It opens by recounting a bizarre family legend: in 1568 the Ridolfi villa was inhabited by midgets—the Count, the Countess, and their only daughter. Desiring that their daughter should always consider herself normal in stature, the parents never permitted her to leave the villa and surrounded her with midget attendants, among them a playmate of her own age who, to general consternation, subsequently "began to grow at a very noticeable rate" and soon towered over her companion. Assuming her playmate's height to be abnormal, and wishing to spare her a lifetime of humiliation, the Ridolfi daughter innocently proposed that her friend should be blinded and her legs amputated at the knee. This fable's implicit moral that innocence may be cruel anticipates well-intentioned calamities to come, most of which are precipitated either by the innocent honesty of the present daughter of the Ridolfis or by that of the young doctor who eventually becomes her husband.

Chiara Ridolfi is only eighteen and still attending the aptly named Holy Innocents school in England when, during the interval of a concert, she is introduced to the young neurologist, Dr. Salvatore Rossi. They have been listening to a histrionic performance of a Brahms sonata by a gypsy violinist. Dr. Rossi inquires politely, "You enjoyed the Brahms?" To his delight, Chiara replies simply, "Of course not." The doctor esteems his new acquaintance as utterly truthful and trustworthy. A typical Fitzgerald suitor, he immediately becomes obsessed with Chiara, who in return is

smitten with him, so much so that, upon returning from her final school term in England, she promptly calls at his office. This unexpected visit both excites and angers him. Indeed, the very presence of his beloved seems to exasperate him, but despite this paradoxical circumstance, at only their third meeting the couple make love in a bedroom of the Ridolfi villa. Chiara's father learns enough of this episode to suspect what has transpired but determines "to avoid asking Chiara about it, because she would tell him the truth." The author's emphasis upon Chiara's spontaneous honesty underlines the inseparability of her constitutional innocence from her honesty, itself perhaps Fitzgerald's favorite virtue. Protagonists governed by honesty may well be dramatic but are unsubtle, more easily and rapidly portrayed and known than those impelled by multiple and shadowy motives. The attraction of such figures for a novelist bent upon compression is obvious.

In preparation for his marriage, Dr. Rossi pays a final visit to his mistress, Marta, to explain that the two of them must part. Although he is himself an emotional innocent (or at least appears utterly incapable of controlling his emotions), on this occasion he reflects that the innocence of both his mistress and his bride-to-be gives them the power to exploit vulnerability in the more sophisticated: "A serious thinking adult [has] no defense against innocence because he [is] obliged to respect it, whereas the innocent scarcely knows what respect is, or seriousness either."<sup>8</sup> To exemplify the potential of innocence to create discord, the newlyweds' first public quarrel occurs in the midst of a dinner party when Chiara spontaneously offers to provide temporary lodging for a young English art historian. Instant jealousy prompts her husband to exclaim that they can accept no lodgers. Chiara is temperamentally unfitted to understand the reasons for this outburst since, in the wryly ironic words of the author, "The Ridolfi family were so constituted as not to feel jealousy and as a result they never suspected it. This was a serious fault in them, as it would be in anyone."<sup>9</sup>

The novel's climax arises because of an act of misplaced benevolence typical of the ingenuousness of the Ridolfis. Chiara's aunt Maddalena repurchases in Salvatore's name a parcel of land which he has recently sold to acquire the necessary funds for a house. He erroneously concludes that this gift is the work of his wife, who, he believes, is bent upon placating him. As though mindful of the proposal of Chiara's distant ancestor that her playmate's legs should be amputated, he grimly acknowledges the unexpected ability of his nineteen-year-old wife "to cut down a grown man." He deems himself to be an "unnecessary person," of whom Chiara has "no need whatever." Amusingly, he repeatedly describes his wife as "not rational," while with his usual impulsiveness he resolves upon immediate suicide. Fortunately, a timely phone call from Chiara (and one during which she manifests a brilliant rationality) brings him to his senses. While the innocent forthrightness of these lovers causes considerable pain to them both as well as discomfort or inconvenience to their friends and family, it also affords joy to the pair of



them while lending a refreshing sharpness and directness to their conduct.

Fitzgerald's gift for pinpointing or encapsulating character or situation in a few apt and incisive phrases constitutes one of her most engaging methods of achieving both intensity and compression. It has prompted Penelope Lively to assert, "There are few who can match her when it comes to nailing a character in a few words."<sup>10</sup> Victoria Glendinning likewise has praised as "extraordinary" Fitzgerald's "compression of . . . characterization" and her ability to "sum people up in a single sentence that begs as many questions as it answers but is worth pages of analysis."<sup>11</sup> This talent is evident when Fitzgerald characterizes the frequent quarrels between Chiara and Salvatore as unsatisfactory for the simple reason that "Chiara had no gift for quarrelling at all and could scarcely understand how it was done, nor, really, had Salvatore, since his argument was with himself, and he was therefore bound to lose."<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, Salvatore is quarrelsome, and his disputatious stance discomfits the priggish English art historian, Burton, who, while exchanging sharp words with him, registers "the unfairness of being confronted by a man who was apparently even more ready to take offence than he was himself."

Even in the cases of characters who have received sympathetic portrayals, these pithy observations, replete with aphoristic succinctness and shrewdness, frequently are unflattering. Of honest Pierce Carroll we are informed, "He had no ability to make himself seem better or other than he was. He could only be himself, and that not very successfully."<sup>13</sup> Characters far less estimable than Carroll are subjected to proportionately withering scrutiny, as for instance Milo North, the selfish and dilatory young TV executive of *The Bookshop*, whose "fluid personality tested and stole into the weak places of others until it found it could settle down to its own advantage." Not only the adults, but also the children who frequent Fitzgerald's narratives are the subjects of these capsule pronouncements. One such concerns twelve-year-old Martha, daughter of Nenna James, who differs from her parents in being a model of self-reliance and purposeful capability and who has acquired the maturity of judgment to recognize, as children may, "that their parents are younger than they are." Martha has a spiritual sister in Christine Gipping, the assistant in Florence Green's bookshop. Brisk, businesslike, and precocious, she readily and capably performs a variety of complex tasks. Though sympathetically portrayed, Christine is also accorded a comically ironic self-assurance: "Christine liked to do the locking up. At the age of ten and a half she knew, for perhaps the last time in her life, exactly how everything should be done."<sup>14</sup>

Pronouncements such as these are the province of the omniscient author, and Fitzgerald's fondness for them helps to explain why all of her novels to date consist of third-person narratives. Her implied presence in the text permits the freedom for occasional comments which sud-

denly sharpen the outlines of one or another of her characters. It also facilitates occasional statements, directed less to individual characters than to humanity in general, which reflect this writer's charitable but penetrating appraisal of human nature. Thus, when Fred Fairly reacts favorably to the diffidence of a fellow character, the author explains that Fred himself is unassuming, "and only the humble can value humility." Somewhat more astringently, the ambivalent kindness shown to Daisy Saunders by her fellow probationers when she is dismissed from Blackfriars Hospital is accounted for on the grounds that "Disgrace contaminates, even though it makes everyone else feel a little safer."<sup>15</sup>

In keeping with the strict economy of Fitzgerald's methods, certain features of her settings may be accorded such prominence as to acquire symbolic dimensions, permitting them to intensify and heighten situations or themes. Thus, *The Gate of Angels* focuses attention upon St. Angelicus College itself, emphasizing its comparatively small size and exclusiveness, as well as its defensive appearance. The point is made that the building resembles not a monastery but a fortress, toylike in size, "but a toy of enormous strength, with walls 3 1/2 feet thick." This fortress is a male preserve, not even admitting female domestic staff, and, in striking contrast to its Christian and spiritual origins, it has become a bastion of empirical science. Although in the year 1912 atomic physics is under study within St. Angelicus, at least one resident scientist, Professor Flowerdew, skeptically warns of "the folly of basing any kind of scientific research on unobservables." Together with the atom, Professor Flowerdew ranks God and the soul as additional "unobservables," and dismisses the reliance upon such intangibles as "nothing more than a comforting weakness."

Although Fred Fairly attends gravely to Professor Flowerdew's pronouncements, the essay topic which he assigns to his physics class, asking them to "devise a rational system of measuring human happiness," indicates a willingness on his part to ponder intangibles and a desire that his fellow scientists should do likewise. He reminds his students that "scientists are not dispassionate," and that anyone's emotional state may seriously affect his ability to carry out research. At this moment his own emotions are running high, as he assumes that he and Daisy have parted, but fortunately Daisy too is subject to ready emotions, and her impulsively charitable entry of the college as an "angel of mercy" not only breaches the citadel of empiricism but indirectly presents the two lovers with a felicitous opportunity for reconciliation.

Once again in *The Beginning of Spring* a tangible image serves to highlight and exemplify both visible and invisible phenomena. Rather, two images, a young peasant woman and a birch forest, when combined, signal and symbolize the rebirth associated with spring. The novel's chief setting is Moscow at the end of winter, where an English businessman named Frank Reid has been inexplicably deserted by his wife. His immediate need is to locate

a suitable governess for his three children. Lisa Ivanovna, the beautiful and extremely young woman hired for the job, radiates a haunting serenity which not only calms the restive children but irresistibly draws Frank into her arms. While she accepts and returns his embraces, she maintains an eerie, inner self-possession and reserve, "as though . . . she was listening to something else a little beyond his range."

Lisa's symbolic significance in the narrative increases at the approach of Easter, the season of rebirth and spiritual renewal, when she spends a week with the children at the family dacha deep in a birch forest. Fitzgerald emphasizes how the year's cycle is mirrored in the annual changes experienced by the birch trees. The trees are portrayed as ceaselessly alive and in motion, each having "five or six different movements." The birch trees' vital presence permeates the dacha. The scent of their leaves perfumes the air, and in July when the "mealy" seed-bracts fall, they drift indoors and pile up in corners. At night in their beds residents of the dacha hear no human sounds, "only the voice of the birch trees." It is the merger between Lisa and these trees one moonlit night which signifies the onset of the Russian spring. Dolly, the eldest of the Reid children, has followed Lisa into the birch forest, whose leaves already have begun to form, generating a pervasive scent. When the pair reach a clearing, Dolly is startled to discover that "by every birch tree, close against the trunk, [stands] a man or a woman. They [stand] separately pressing themselves each to their own tree."<sup>16</sup> So indistinguishable from the birch trees are these people that their faces, turned toward the new arrivals, appear as "patches of white against the whiteish bark." Lisa, then, is a leader of a secret organization, probably a revolutionary. The year is 1913, and massive change is soon to sweep across Russia. The posture of those who are pressed against the trees as though sharing in their existence, however, invests the scene with a quasi-allegorical atmosphere, marking it as a rite of spring. When Dolly returns to her dacha bedroom, the odor of "the potent leaf-sap of the birch trees" remains "as strong inside the house as out." Coincidentally, Frank Reid's sanctimonious accountant Selwyn Crane is the author of a volume of poems entitled *Birch Tree Thoughts*. When asked facetiously, "What do birch trees think?" Crane soberly replies that the thoughts of birch trees are as spontaneous as those of women: "Just as a woman's body . . . moves at her heart's promptings, so the birch tree moves in the winds of spring."<sup>17</sup> His words prove prophetic, for immediately after the forest meeting Lisa mysteriously disappears. Meanwhile the storm windows are ceremoniously removed from the Reids's Moscow home, and the outer windows are thrown open for the first time in months, admitting the sounds of "bells and noises" and also the fresh "spring wind." Here as in the birch-forest dacha natural fertility merges with uniquely human space. At this pregnant moment a cab pulls up outside, bringing Frank's wife, Nellie, back to her family.

Of the numerous central or dominant images developed by Fitzgerald, none is more pervasive nor more instrumental in enhancing character, situation, or motif than the Thames

which is a constant presence throughout *Offshore*. The vessels inhabited by the barge-dwellers are homes of both land and water, since at low tide they rest on the mud of the riverbed. Ever conscious of the turning tide, the barge-dwellers regulate their daily affairs by its movements. Even Tilda James, a child of six, has memorized the schedule of tides and can chant, "High water Gravesend 3 a.m., London Bridge 4, Battersea Bridge 4.30."<sup>18</sup> Situated between land and water, these people regard themselves as amphibians. Like most "tideline creatures," they are "not easily dislodged" but they fear being displaced and forced to move permanently to land, an environment in which others of their type have failed to adapt.

The Thames with its powerful tides is, of course, an appropriate setting for love-scenes, a fact recognized by poets from Spenser to Eliot and intuitively understood by Nenna James, who longs to persuade her husband, Edward, to join her on the barge. On one of the rare occasions when they do make love aboard the vessel, Nenna experiences a joy "which flowed like the current, with its separate eddies, of the strong river beneath them." The novel's central love-scene centers upon a night dinghy-ride, during which Richard Blake and Nenna make their way upriver to Wandsworth Bridge and then "switch off and drift down with the tide" to tie up at Richard's vessel, *Lord Jim*.

Even the novel's comically chaotic final scene owes its power to the behavior of the Thames during a storm. Having learned of Nenna's eminent departure for Canada, an intoxicated Edward James, in search of his wife, has blundered aboard the barge of her equally inebriated neighbor, Maurice. He is clinging to the barge's ladder at the moment when high wind and waves combine to tear away the vessel's anchor and mooring-ropes, setting it and its two passengers adrift on the tide. The image of Maurice's barge lurching toward the open sea fittingly symbolizes the character and situation of its two hapless and fugitive occupants. It also imposes poetic justice upon Edward, whose stubborn aversion to boats has contributed much to his wife's distress.

With compression as a guiding principle, Fitzgerald has seized upon and exploited a valuable fact—namely that naked honesty is so uncommon a quality as to create a dramatic effect, particularly when it features prominently in emotional exchanges between characters. Not for her protagonists are the laborious and circuitous ways of Henry James's characters, who seek a wealth of information about one another, yet who dodge and feint and conceal their motives and eventually, if they are to prevail, either must prove able to read one another's minds or to interpret actions rather than words. In contrast, Fitzgerald's characters are seldom long in doubt about the true state of their mutual affairs, and their knowledge often produces dramatic effects. In *Human Voices* a young woman employed in the BBC complains to her boss that he is selfish and thereby awakens his love for her. Similarly, Chiara's truthfulness instantly wins Salvatore's heart.

While this diligent focus upon honesty or upon some other virtue such as kindness expedites her narratives, furnishes her characters with an appealing and amusing intimacy, and at length becomes a trademark of Fitzgerald's fiction, it also limits the variety and dimension of her characterization and produces a degree of single-minded predictability in the behavior of the figures in question. Furthermore, it restricts enlargement of character in the course of a narrative. That it succeeds as frequently as it does is a tribute to her inventiveness in shaping individual and distinctive circumstances for her personae, in placing them in a multitude of fresh and imaginative settings, the vast majority of which are accurately observed and furnished with authentic detail, and to her skill in centering her narratives upon dominant or controlling images which lend a poetic unity and intensity to her fiction.

#### Notes

1. "Suffocating Suffolk," *The Times Literary Supplement* 17 November 1978: 1333.
2. *The Gate of Angels* (London: Harper/Collins, 1990) 118.
3. *Offshore* (London: Collins, 1988) 9.
4. *At Freddie's* (London: Collins, 1989) 21.
5. *At Freddie's* 105.
6. *At Freddie's* 147.
7. *Innocence* (London: Collins, 1987) 31.
8. *Innocence* 136.
9. *Innocence* 176.
10. "Backwards and Forwards," *Encounter* June/July 1982: 86–91.
11. "Between Land and Water," *The Times Literary Supplement* 23 November 1979: 10.
12. *Innocence* 165–166.
13. *At Freddie's* 21.
14. *The Bookshop* (London: Harper/Collins, 1989) 64.
15. *The Gate of Angels* 97.
16. *The Beginning of Spring* (London: Harper/Collins, 1989), 174.
17. *The Beginning of Spring* 114.
18. *Offshore* 64.

#### Dagmar Herzog (review date October 1997)

SOURCE: "Love in the Time of Tuberculosis," in *Women's Review of Books*, Vol. 15, No. 1, October, 1997, p. 6.

[In the following review, Herzog asserts that the spareness of Fitzgerald's style and her ability to capture setting in *The Blue Flower* creates a powerful effect on the reader.]

The late eighteenth century is fascinating not least because it was the era of the American and French Revolutions as well as the birth of modern notions of democracy. It was also the age when the modern ideas about heterosexual romance that still move, suffocate, inspire and torment women and men to this day were first fully elaborated and worked out. As Penelope Fitzgerald's absorbing novel *The Blue Flower* makes clear, there were then—as now—winners in the game of hetero-love, people whose lives seemed effortlessly to fit the cultural ideal. There were also casualties.

Based on the early life of Friedrich "Fritz" von Hardenberg, who later became prominent as the Romantic poet Novalis, *The Blue Flower* is about a few of those casualties. Its organizing mystery centers on why Fritz would suddenly plunge into head-over-heels infatuation with a young girl of twelve, Sophie von Kühn, whom he has only met for fifteen minutes, but has already asked to marry him.

Fritz, in his early twenties, son of an aristocratic (but not wealthy), pious Protestant family in the German region of Thuringia, is a promising—indeed perhaps brilliant—student of philosophy. And yet he has, at least according to his brother Erasmus' angry accusations, allowed himself to be taken in by a girl who is "stupid!" and "not even pretty . . . at twelve years old she has a double chin." Fritz, however, is completely serene, secure that his transcendent feelings for Sophie are not figments of an inebriated imagination:

"I know that I am receiving moral grace. How can that be intoxication?" Fritz wrote.

*Am I to be kept apart from her for ever?  
Is the hope of being united  
With what we recognised as our own  
But could not quite possess completely  
Is that too to be called intoxication?  
All humanity will be, in time, what  
Sophie  
Is now for me: human perfection—  
moral grace—  
Life's highest meaning will then no  
longer  
Be mistaken for drunken dreams.*

(p. 91)

For Fritz, Sophie is "my heart's heart" and his devotion to her is unwavering.

*The Blue Flower* never fully resolves the mystery of what makes Sophie so enthralling to Fritz, but it gives plenty of clues to help us make up our own minds. The novel chronicles the evolution of their courtship, as well as the other relationships in which they are enmeshed. It ends with a haunting account of Sophie's battle with tuberculosis—that most characteristic disease of the era—and, finally, with her death just two days after her fifteenth birthday.



For those readers familiar with German literature, the fact of Novalis' seemingly irrational obsession with Sophie, and its impact on his work, may be standard textbook fare. But it scarcely matters what one might know of this story beforehand. Fitzgerald's talent as a storyteller is to turn even the seemingly incidental moments of her tale about lovesickness in the 1790s into something wholly fresh.

One thing that particularly struck me was how much Fitzgerald tells us about the hard realities of life in the late eighteenth century. We learn along the way about the pigs' snouts boiled in peppermint schnapps—a special treat for lovers at country fairs—the pigeon pies, pickled herrings, and soups made of beer, sugar and eggs, or of cows' udders flavored with nutmeg. We hear that university students were perpetually drunk, and that when an admired professor was ill, students nursed him and emptied his bedpans. We discover that this faraway world too had its fair share of abortions, adulteries and divorces.

Fitzgerald subtly addresses the power imbalance between the genders. There is Fritz' burdened mother Auguste, who "seemed always to be looking for someone to whom to apologise," a woman terrified of unannounced visitors because then suddenly "everything was on top of you before you could pray for guidance." Already totally intimidated by her own life, Auguste cannot really manage her household (she leaves that to her eldest unmarried daughter). Even going out into the garden alone in the evening is a daunting challenge. And yet, although the mother of seven and in her forties, she nonetheless gives birth to two more children—or, as Fitzgerald tartly puts it, "in the warmth of the great curtained patriarchal goose-featherbed . . . Nature's provisions continued, so that last year Amelie had been conceived and born, and this year, Christoph."

There is Karoline Just, five years Fritz' elder, the unmarried niece and housekeeper of the man who is training Fritz in business management as he prepares for the solid and respectable career of salt mine inspector for the Prince of Saxony—work thought appropriate for the nobility. At the very least, Karoline is his intellectual equal, and Fritz confides everything in her. While she chops sausages and mends clothes, he enthuses about his latest deep thoughts.

Fritz makes clear that he wants only a friendship with Karoline, but he also, with unthinking narcissistic cruelty, flatters and flirts with her. Sharing drafts of his writing, he impatiently waits for her to help him interpret his own work.

"What is the meaning of the blue flower?"

Karoline saw that he was not going to answer this himself. She said, "The young man has to go away from his home to find it. He only wants to see it, he does not want to possess it. It cannot be poetry, he knows what that is already. It can't be happiness, he wouldn't need a stranger to tell him what that is, and as far as I can see he is already happy in his home."

The unlooked-for privilege of the reading was fading and Karoline, still outwardly as calm as she was pale, felt chilled with anxiety. She would rather cut off one of her hands than disappoint him, as he sat looking at her, trusting and intent, with his large light-brown eyes, impatient for a sign of comprehension.

What distressed her most was that after waiting a little, he showed not a hint of resentment or even surprise, but gently shut the notebook. "*Liebe Justen*, it doesn't matter."

(p.63)

Soon afterwards Fritz tells Karoline that "we are like two watches set to the same time, and when we see one another again there has been no interval—we still strike together," and then blithely informs her that he has fallen in love with Sophie. For her part, Karoline masks her feelings for Fritz—and her heart keeps on breaking.

As Novalis, Fritz is perhaps best remembered for the slogan, "The world must be romanticized!" His poetry and prose, reacting against the classicism of Goethe, advanced a mystical spiritualism in which body and soul are united, there exists no barrier between life and death, and all things commune with each other. To some extent we see him already heading in this direction in the course of the novel, particularly when he rhapsodizes about the spiritual meaning and beauty of the most mundane objects. *The Blue Flower* also suggests that taking opium, in the form of laudanum, was routine. In a time more like our own the talk of Hardenberg and his friends might well be dismissed as only pseudo-deep—the ramblings of stoned sophomores, not the musings of the canonized philosophers and literati of German culture.

Simultaneously, however, Fitzgerald makes clear, without mockery, what it was about this era, its extreme provinciality and its yearnings and enthusiasms, that made these ideas so appealing. There was, for instance, the fierce authoritarianism of Fritz' father, against which he rebels, as well as the constraining austerity of his childhood home. Fitzgerald does a deft job of capturing the anxiety about worldliness and sin that structured the Hardenberg family's daily existence, without in any way allowing the reader to smirk at their worldview.

Penelope Fitzgerald's spare and compressed style gradually grew on me. I especially found the later portions of this novel, about people who spent so much time reflecting on themselves and each other, thoroughly engrossing. Drawn extensively from the actual letters and diary entries of Hardenberg and his family and friends, a significant part of *The Blue Flower's* luminous eloquence is in fact *their* eloquence. But it is difficult not to be awed by Fitzgerald's gift for distilling the essence from mountains of evidence, moving pieces around into unexpected combinations, imaginatively filling in gaps in the historical record, making these odd and occasionally unappealing historical figures speak at cross purposes and past one another, even while the juxtapositions of their casual remarks manage to convey worlds of meaning. The cumulative effect is heart-wrenching.

**Dean Flower (review date Spring 1998)**

SOURCE: "Looking Backward," in *Hudson Review*, Vol. 51, No. 1, Spring, 1998, pp. 245–46.

[In the following excerpt, Flower states that *The Bookshop* is "clearly one of [Fitzgerald's] best."]

Another backward glance must be made at the amazing career of Penelope Fitzgerald, who has published nine superb novels in England since 1977, when she was sixty-one. Although *Offshore* won the Booker Prize in 1979 and three other works of hers were short-listed for it, Fitzgerald's novels are hard to find in this country, except for *The Blue Flower* (1996) and *The Bookshop* (1978),<sup>1</sup> both recently reissued in paperback. *The Bookshop* is Fitzgerald's second novel, and clearly one of her best. Its protagonist, kindhearted Florence Green, attempts to run a bookshop in her soggy little East-Anglian village. But Hardborough discovers, in its provincial wisdom, that it does not want a bookshop, neither one that sells new fiction like *Lolita* (the date is 1959) or one that sells *Every Man His Own Mechanic*. Florence has spent ten years in this place, after her husband's death, trying to survive, "wanting to make it clear to herself, and possibly to others, that she existed in her own right." But everyone in the community cooperates, most of them without guile or intention, to defeat her purposes. Her clear intelligence, practicality, and generosity do her, in the long run, no good at all. The whole story seems wonderfully amusing, from stern little Christine who comes in to help after school to the eccentric hermit Mr. Brundish who so awkwardly and honestly appreciates Florence's worth. There is even an inconvenient ghost and an old horse with the bumbreezes. But the genial, winning details only make the end more agonizing. No wonder critics are saying reckless things, like "the finest British writer alive," about Fitzgerald.

## Notes

1. *THE BOOKSHOP*, by Penelope Fitzgerald. Mariner Books/Houghton Mifflin. \$10.00p.

**Mona Knapp (review date Spring 1998)**

SOURCE: A review of *The Blue Flower*, in *World Literature Today*, Vol. 72, No. 2, Spring, 1998, p. 371.

[In the following review, Knapp delineates the positive and negative features of Fitzgerald's *The Blue Flower*.]

Penelope Fitzgerald's ninth novel *The Blue Flower*, sets out to retell the tale of Friedrich von Hardenberg and Sophie von Kuhn, one of literary history's most poignant love stories. The effort is timely, since the book was published on the two-hundredth anniversary of the couple's first meeting.

Hardenberg, who assumed the pen name "Novalis" after Sophie's death, was a member of an aristocratic family in Saxony. He studied philosophy with Fichte in Jena and left behind, in his brief creative years before an untimely death at age twenty-nine, a work that defines the philosophical and literary heights of German romanticism. In his novel Heinrich von Ofterdingen he created the symbolic "blue flower," the essence of romantic longing that goes beyond all limits of time and space: "I have no craving to be rich, but I long to see the Blue Flower. It lies incessantly at my heart, and I can imagine and think about nothing else."

Fitzgerald's depiction of Hardenberg is historically accurate. His love for Sophie, who is all of twelve years old when they meet, is instantaneous and unshakable. He gradually persuades her, then the various family members involved, to accept their engagement. This feat soon appears small, however, in contrast to the battle for Sophie's health. She has a tumor infected by tuberculosis, and even Hardenberg's devotion cannot save her waning strength. Sophie von Kuhn died in 1979, barely fifteen years old; Hardenberg would survive her only by four years, as the entire young generation of his family also fell to tuberculosis in the early years of the nineteenth century.

Given the richness of the material, Fitzgerald's presentation is often understated. Most frustrating is the depiction of Sophie as dull and unimaginative; she can barely read and write and never does learn to spell Hardenberg's name. This character fails to come alive and is less interesting than even the least of the secondary characters. Of these there are many, and taken as a whole they give an interesting glimpse into the life of late-eighteenth-century Saxony, including the struggles between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, the influence of philosophers such as Fichte and the Schlegels, and the horrifying status quo of medical treatment before anesthetics. One of the book's most notable features is its use of language to mirror the expressions and syntactical nuances of the German—in places it reads like a very loyal translation that lets the original shine through. (Readers without some previous background may find it rough going, however.)

Fitzgerald's achievement is to have gently rekindled the theme of the romantic search for the blue flower for modern readers. Perhaps Sophie's vacuous nature should highlight the fact that the romantic yearning itself, not its object, becomes the true source of life and creativity, for "the external world is the world of shadows. The universe, after all, is within us. The way leads inwards, always inwards."

**Philip Hensher (review date 11 April 1998)**

SOURCE: "The Sweet Smell of Success," in *Spectator* April 11, 1998, pp. 33–4.

[In the following review, Hensher argues that Fitzgerald's *The Blue Flower* finally solidifies the author's reputation.]

A little national pride has been restored, in the aftermath of the much-lamented failure of any Briton to win anything much at the Oscars, by the triumph of a short English novel in gaining the most prestigious of American literary prizes. Penelope Fitzgerald's ninth novel, *The Blue Flower*, beat the widely fancied chances of three enormous and ambitious American novels to walk off with the National Book Critics' Circle Award. Well, the captains and the kings depart; prizes are more quickly forgotten even than the members of the Critics' Circle; and what, in the end, will be left will be this great novel, a masterpiece.

Fitzgerald has been widely and justifiably praised for the excellence, discretion and solidity of her historical imagination, which brings unlikely periods of history to life with unarguable, strange rightness. We know exactly from *The Beginning of Spring* the wattage of lightbulbs permitted in Moscow in 1911 (25 watts); we learn from *The Blue Flower* that livestock were forbidden to cross the bridge at Weissenfels in the 1790s. Perhaps even more impressively, she has a marvellous sense of what was regarded in a particular time and place as commonplace, and what was held eccentric; Matryona Osipovna in *The Beginning of Spring*, recommending that young girls should have their eyes washed with their own urine, for instance, or, in *The Gate of Angels*, a 1912 Cambridge don's wife's food faddism:

'Now, as to main dishes, this is a tin which I bought at the new Eustace Miles Emporium in King's Parade. You can read about it on the label, it's all printed there and it's worth knowing for its own sake, particularly if—well, as you can see, this tin contains Health Plasmone, which may be combined with a variety of substances to make nourishing dishes without the necessity of cooking them.'

'It looks like cornflower to me,' said Daisy.

But mere research would never have produced this degree of solidity. Fitzgerald is a writer rooted in the physical world, who, whether she is writing about a familiar or a strange world, always bases her abstract truths, her observations of character and morality on a concrete fact. At another moment in *The Gate of Angels*,

Fred looked at his watch. It was a silver watch, belonging to his father, given to him when he took up his appointment, and yet not quite given to him either, since when he went back on vacations his father tended to borrow it back.

She is, of course, not quite talking about the watch here, but about Fred; her observations ground a single truth much more deeply than a simple statement about his character would have done.

And the novels are full of such strongly physical moments, making a large point through a small observed detail; Florence's embarrassing and regretted red party dress in *The Bookshop*, or the cheese straws which the lackadaisical Maurice, short of fuel, burns to keep warm

on his decrepit barge in *Offshore*. She is a writer who wants to understand how things work, and wants to make the workings—particularly the financial workings—clear. Accountants play a crucial role in *The Beginning of Spring*, *At Freddie's*, and *The Bookshop*; we know an almost embarrassing amount about the finances of the Hardenberg household in *The Blue Flower*. Sylvia Townsend Warner said of her great mediaeval novel, *The Corner that Held Them*, that she wrote it 'on the purest Marxian principles, because I was convinced that if you were going to give an accurate picture of the monastic life, you'd have to put in all their finances'. Fitzgerald has the same urge; her novels are constructed from the ground up.

Occasionally, in some of her moral observations, she may strike the casual reader as fulfilling the famous definition of a cynic. 'It was not a fair blow, but justice is sometimes what you can afford.' (*The Gate of Angels*), '[Willis's] moral standards were much the same as Richard's, only he did not feel he was well enough off to apply them as often, and in such a wide range of conditions, as the Skipper.' (*Offshore*). But if her more impoverished characters sometimes seem to have a clearer view of truth, it is because they are closer to what the world acts by, and can less afford romantic illusions. From *The Gate of Angels*: 'Don't you know what you are to me?' Fred asked. Daisy considered. 'I suppose I do know, Fred. To tell you the truth, a child of six would notice it.'

There is an extraordinary swiftness about all Fitzgerald's writing; she gives the impression of having finished the paper while the other candidates are still sharpening their pencils. Only two of her novels are longer than 200 pages, or need to be. And, though she is not a Dickensian writer, she has the Dickensian trick of fixing a character through a single sharp observation:

The Director of Programme Planning ordered a second double in his dry, quiet, disconcerting voice. Probably in the whole of his life he had never had to ask for anything twice.

The swiftness is at its most marked in the last page or two of each of the novels. At the end, Fitzgerald characteristically brings about a resolution which seems, in retrospect, always to have been foreseen, but which, in the process of reading, catches the reader on the hop. At her most wonderful, there is a sense of spiritual release, expressed in half a dozen final lines: in *The Beginning of Spring* the outer windows of the Moscow house are flung open to the northern wind; at the conclusion of *The Gate of Angels*, an ancient door, magically, opens for only the third time in history, and a woman, entering, changes everything, as men 'cry out in dismay and one of them in what sounded like animal terror'.

'We can't go on like this,' Salvatore says at the end of *Innocence*, just before his life changes for good. 'Yes, we can go on like this,' said Cesare. 'We can go on exactly like this for the rest of our lives.' That is the superficial



claim of these great novels; to be documenting unremarkable lives, without drama, with only small events. But fundamentally, they are fictions of transformation in which those small events—a man folds a map for a woman, a lonely New Zealand farmer turns up, uninvited, for dinner—somehow change everything.

They are often incredibly funny novels, but are never satisfied merely to make the reader laugh. Even a delicious romp like her first, *The Golden Child*, finds time and space to breathe and make a few serious points about the responsibilities of culture; and even her most hilarious are apt to end in death, disaster or a glimpse of the sublime. *At Freddie's*, for instance, has a brilliantly funny line in child actors, culminating in the monstrous Joybelle Morgan. It concludes, however, with a cool, distressing look at the indignities to which genius subjects itself in search of perfection, with the boy Jonathan leaping off a pile of crates, 'climbing and jumping, again and again and again into the darkness'.

A dazzling scene in *Human Voices* shows just how far Fitzgerald is prepared to push her comic invention. The novel is set at the BBC, during the last war. A general of the Free French, General Pinard, arrives to give a live broadcast to the nation. Welcomed by half a dozen dignitaries, he embarks on what seems a bland, effective speech. After a couple of minutes, however, he sets off on an unforeseen tack:

When the Germans arrive, and at best it will be in a few weeks, don't think of resistance, don't think of history . . . all governments are bad, and Hitler's perhaps not worse than any other. Give in when the Boche comes in. Give in.

The disaster proves to have been averted when an administrator admits to having pulled the plug in advance; Fitzgerald's acute sense of balance between the hilarious and the appalling is underlined by a brief conversation between the administrator and his superior, reprimanding him for acting without authority:

Heads will roll. He was a privileged speaker.

Do you intend to do this sort of thing often?

'I hope we shan't often be within measurable distance of invasion.'

'I don't like that, Haggard.'

'I don't mind withdrawing "measurable".'

Some writers would have omitted this exchange, not wishing to puncture the brilliant farce with a grim truth; most would not have thought of making a serious point with the devices of farce. The interest in farce is constant; one of her best short stories, 'The Means of Escape', is revealed, only at the very end, to be a farce, as well as, as the reader had always suspected, a crime story, a miniature psychological thriller.

Remarkable as all her novels are, it is with *The Blue Flower* that her greatness finally becomes unarguable. It is the story of the German romantic poet Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg) and his passion for a 12-year-old girl, Sophie von Kuhn. Novalis's writings, such as his unfinished novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, remain partly cryptic, and, to his biographers, his life is still more opaque. How he fell in love with a girl about whom nothing remarkable is known and how, after her death, he could so swiftly propose marriage to one Julie von Charpentier are questions which no one has managed to explain. *The Blue Flower* takes on a strange and difficult subject; it is at once a realistic historical novel of incomparable solidity and accuracy, and a richly suggestive fable about the fascination which mediocrity holds for genius. Blake's proverb, 'Eternity is in love with the productions of Time,' might stand as an epigraph.

The novel's extraordinary richness and depth come with its perfect balance between the quotidian and the sublime. This is something which Fitzgerald has often exploited for comic effect, and, in the exchanges between the artists of the novel and the members of rural Saxon society, goes on enjoying here:

All I am doing is glancing round the table and assessing the presence, or absence, of true soul in the countenance of everyone here.'

'Ach Gott, I should not think you are often asked out to dinner twice,' said the Mandelsloh.

But here things can be simultaneously ordinary and numinous; it is all a matter of perception. Sophie von Kuhn is, to most of the cast, an ordinary little girl; she has a double chin at 12; she is 'a decent, good-hearted Saxon girl, potato-fed, with the bloom of 13 summers, and the coarser glow of 13 winters.' But we are not asked to doubt Hardenberg's rapturous view, when he looks at her and sees that

Sophie was pale, her mouth was pale rose. There was the gentlest possible gradation between the colour of her face and the slightly open, soft, fresh, full, pale mouth.

The temptation is always to assume that the high-falutin is punctured by the commonsensical, to agree with Karoline Just when she says that

Mignon dies because Goethe couldn't think what to do with her next. If he had made her marry Wilhelm Meister, that would have served them both right.

But *The Blue Flower* sets out a world in which both poetry and housekeeping have their place, where, indeed, they depend on each other. The double view of Sophie allows a stunning coup near the end. Friedrich's brother, Erasmus, interrupts Goethe, who has been pontificating about Friedrich's chances of happiness, and cries, 'About hers, about Sophie's, about hers!' And we realise that Erasmus, too, has been given a glimpse of the sublime.

Like her previous novels, *The Blue Flower* ends with an epiphany, an afterword whose shattering force seems out of all proportion to the modest means employed. But the whole novel is rather like that; a work in which the major weight of expression seems to fall between the words, where the silences so beautifully created by Fitzgerald's sense of rhythm and her evocation of the unsayable allow the reader time for his own thought, his own feelings. It is precise and unambiguous, and one cannot see how it is done. It never shouts its own seriousness, or seems to be leading the reader to any premature conclusion, but its quality, like the quality of the rest of Fitzgerald's work, is beyond question. *The Blue Flower* deserves every prize in the world, but, by now, it no more needs them to make its way than *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*.

#### Mallay Charters (review date 17 May 1999)

SOURCE: "Penelope Fitzgerald: A Voice Amidst the Blitz," in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 246, No. 20, May 17, 1999, p. 51.

[In the following review, *Charters* provides a brief overview of Fitzgerald's life and career and how the author's experience working at the BBC during World War II provided the basis for *Human Voices*.]

On June 14, 1940, four days after the fall of Paris to Hitler, the British public learned of the successful escape to London of General Georges Pinard, writes Penelope Fitzgerald in *Human Voices*, a novel about her job as an assistant at the wartime BBC. Pinard, "a romantic, a Dreyfusard, and a devotee of the airplane," was famous as the commander of the last counterattack against the German advance. When he offered to give a radio address, the BBC quickly accepted. Once behind the microphone, however, Pinard urged the British to surrender, thundering, "ne vous faites pas aucune illusion, you have lost your war." But even as the show's producer frantically rang the Prime Minister for advice, he learned that the station was not broadcasting. Acting on a hunch, the Director of Programme Planning had quietly censored the speech before it even began.

Such close scrapes (Pinard is a fictitious character, but the anecdote is based on a real event) were routine in those turbulent years at the BBC, an employer Fitzgerald describes as "a cross between a civil service, a powerful moral force, and an amateur theatrical company that wasn't too sure where next week's money was coming from." First published in Britain in 1980, *Human Voices* is being released in the United States for the first time this month by Mariner Books. Curiously, the 82-year-old novelist, who resides in London, is not optimistic about its reception. "I was surprised they brought that one out," she says. "It must be strange for American readers."

Delightful is more like it. The publication of the novel finally makes available stateside the fourth volume of Fitzgerald's unofficial quartet of memoirs, whose other

installments are *Offshore* and *The Bookshop*, both recently reissued by Mariner, and *At Freddie's*, forthcoming in September. While the other three novels chronicle episodes from Fitzgerald's middle age, *Human Voices* offers American readers a glimpse of what the writer may have been like as a very young woman, new to work and love, enamored of one of her BBC superiors even as the London blitzkrieg raged outside.

In person, that young woman lingers mainly in Fitzgerald's mischievous half-smile. Otherwise, the two-time recipient of the Booker Prize (most recently for 1995's *The Blue Flower*, which received the NBCC fiction prize when it was published in the U.S. in 1997) looks very much the grandmother of nine that she is. With wavy gray hair and ruddy cheeks, wearing a crimson skirt and loose wool sweater patterned in rows of marching pheasants, Fitzgerald serenely fields questions from a red sofa midway between her writing desk and neatly made-up bed. The bags of pink knitting yarn tucked under the coffee table at her feet, and the fact that her two-room apartment is annexed to the Victorian home of her younger daughter, neurobiology professor Maria Lake, enhance the matronly air. Only her watchful, slightly guarded eyes hint that she possesses the strong-minded critical sensibility so evident in her writing.

In Fitzgerald's three biographies, one mystery and eight novels, she marries satiric wit with trenchant prose in a style reminiscent of George Eliot—and, indeed, Fitzgerald's current writing project is an introduction to a forthcoming edition of *Middlemarch*. Unlike Eliot, however, her deepest allegiance is not to any elevating moral philosophy but to the quixotic and the quirkily human. Her characters are always the most strongly drawn element of her books, tending to be individual to the point of eccentricity and as vulnerable as they are independent-minded.

With the same perversity that allows her to blithely predict failure for a new publication, she claims that the hero of *Human Voices* is one Dr. Vogel, a peripheral figure, also based on a real person, who plays no role in the plot. A BBC acoustical expert and German refugee, Dr. Vogel is obsessed with capturing the perfect recording. "He's so devoted, he doesn't even notice the war," explains Fitzgerald of Vogel. "He doesn't notice anything that is at an advantage to himself—he is only devoted to sound itself."

#### GIVEN TO UNDERSTATEMENT

Fitzgerald's intellectually accomplished and highly individual family background explains much of her idiosyncratic outlook. Both of her grandfathers were Anglican bishops. Her father, E.V. Knox, a journalist who became the editor of *Punch*, was the eldest, member of a quartet of remarkable brothers. There was Dillwyn, a cryptographer and Oxford classics professor who helped crack German code in both world wars; Wilfred, an Anglican priest and writer; and Ronald, a Roman Catholic

apologist. "It was a very brilliant family, and they were given to understatement, which is where I got it from" says Fitzgerald by way of explaining her elliptical prose. "They felt that people ought to understand them without them saying anything. They did write a lot, though."

Fitzgerald was born in 1916, in Lincoln, though the family moved to London when her father took the helm of *Punch*. Her only sibling was her older brother, Rawle, who later became a distinguished war correspondent. Fitzgerald is nonchalant about her earliest forays into literature: "I think all children write, up to a certain age—I certainly did. And perhaps we wrote more because there was less media." At one point, she collaborated with Rawle on a magazine, noting that "you weren't really entertained so much as children, just put in the playroom and asked to get on with it."

Fitzgerald won a scholarship to Oxford, where she studied literature with J. R. R. Tolkien. She graduated with honors in 1938, but her ambitions for a graduate degree were postponed in view of the country's wartime needs. Instead, she moved to London, where she worked at the Ministry of Food, "a kind of hastily got-together administration to administer rationing." In 1939 she took a job at Broadcasting House, the London quarters of wartime BBC, as a recorded program assistant.

At 25 she was married, to an Irish soldier she had met at a party ("Wartime's a great time for parties"). In the late 1950s, with three young children, the couple lived in a converted oyster warehouse in Southwold, on the east coast of England, where Fitzgerald took a job in a bookshop. Later, in the 1960s, the family moved to London, where the only lodgings they could afford were a barge anchored on the Thames that twice sank under them. There, Fitzgerald worked full-time as a teacher: "We were only allowed to use the lavatory on a falling tide. It was terribly difficult to get respectable enough to go into work." After two years on the houseboat, the family rented a flat. "It seemed rather odd to come back to dry land," she recalls. In the early 1970s, her husband, who worked in the travel business, died of cancer.

Fitzgerald is notoriously reticent about her married life, noting only that "while we had our difficulties, we never actually separated." Nonetheless, it was her husband who inspired her first attempt at fiction, 1977's *The Golden Child*, a mystery novel that was written to entertain her husband during his final illness. "My impression is that men—husbands—only read mysteries, and nonfiction, biographies. They don't read novels, not really—and it did amuse him," she says.

Her search for a publisher followed an equally unorthodox route: "I looked through the *Writer's Yearbook* and I found somebody who didn't take crime [Duckworth publisher Colin Haycraft]—and sent it to him, because I thought he wouldn't have seen very much of it. I had heard horror stories of people going to publishing houses where there

were tables groaning with manuscripts. But I was lucky, and he took it." Perhaps tongue in cheek, Fitzgerald blames her penchant for brevity (most of her books are less than 200 pages long) on an early Duckworth editor, who truncated her manuscripts to fit within the company's page specifications.

Fitzgerald's first foray into the mystery genre proved to be her last. "The publisher told me I'd have to write six, with the same detective—so they could make a row on the bookshelf—and I was appalled," she remembers. "I had found it rather hard to make it all come together with all the clues. So I wrote about my own experience—I think that's what most people do." The result was *The Bookshop*, her 1978 novel about a small bookshop on England's east coast that is forced to close after arousing the antagonism of the local arts patron.

Fitzgerald won her first Booker Prize for 1979's *Offshore*, a love story set amidst the motley but warm-hearted community of a group of barge-dwellers on the Thames. (Regarding the strongly autobiographical setting, Fitzgerald notes dryly, "I didn't say as much as I really could have said about the rats.")

For *Offshore*, Fitzgerald had switched to Collins as her publisher, "because I had a friend [Richard Ollard] who was an editor there." With Ollard she published *Human Voices* and 1982's *At Freddie's*, an account of teaching at a theatrical school. Stuart Proffitt, whom Fitzgerald praises as "wonderfully energetic," succeeded Ollard, and edited her through *The Blue Flower*, her Booker Prize-winning account of the love affair between the 18th-century German Romantic poet Novalis and a 12-year-old burgher's daughter.

In the United States, Fitzgerald has been published previously by Scribner, Holt and David Godine to what she describes as little fanfare. She notes that the Mariner reissues, edited by Chris Carduff and Janet Silver, have been received "as if they had come out for the first time," and pronounces herself "thrilled" at the NBCC prize. Mariner will reprint *Offshore*, *The Bookshop* and *The Blue Flower* as a boxed set in September. Fitzgerald has never been represented by an agent, saying that "They're obviously very good to have, but I feel they just make an added complication." While she has yet to embark on a promotional tour in the States, she says that letters from American readers help her feel connected to her audience here.

#### LONDON CALLING

American fans drawn to *Human Voices* for its autobiographical element will also find it compelling as a historical document. While the story sketches out the complex dynamic between its female protagonist and her two superiors, the novel is really a valentine to the wartime BBC, the only source of information to England—and most of free Europe—for almost six years.



Fitzgerald is profoundly respectful of the radio station's accomplishments during the war. Even as bombs were blitzing London nightly, the station continued its 24-hour broadcasts. She would later find out that her brother, a POW captured in Singapore, listened to the BBC throughout the war on a homemade radio. When street conditions got too perilous, the staff bivouacked in an auditorium. "The BBC rightly felt that they had to keep people's spirits up, and tell the truth as far as they could, and it was a lot to do—and meanwhile you have these very human, fallible people actually doing it," she says.

The fragility of the BBC that Fitzgerald describes is suggestive of the fragility of the creative endeavor generally, perhaps particularly for women of a certain generation. Fitzgerald reports having no regular work "routine" to speak of. "I don't think women ever do—they call us kitchen-table writers," she says. "Women always have to let the cat in, or something."

Not that she's complaining: "I hate writing, actually—I think a lot of people do. You just welcome any interruption that comes." Despite the tartness of her statement, her eyes are twinkling, and she has a half-serious, half-amused air. As usual with Fitzgerald, she is finding the comic in the difficult—and inviting her audience to share in the laugh.

#### Jonathan Raban (review date 2 August 1999)

SOURCE: "The Fact Artist," in *New Republic*, Vol. 221, No. 4,411, August 2, 1999, pp. 39–42.

[In the following review, Raban lauds Fitzgerald's ability to write as if from first-hand memory instead of historical research, especially in her *Human Voices*.]

If Penelope Fitzgerald has ever fossicked in the stacks of the London Library in order to research the background for her novels, there is no trace of her labors in the books themselves. She always writes as if from first-hand memory. She cannot actually have lived in Germany in 1792, in Cambridge in 1912, in Moscow in 1913. Born in 1916, Fitzgerald still appears too young to have acquired the abundant, cosmopolitan knowledge of the world that irradiates her best work. She may well have been in Florence in 1955, and she probably worked for the BBC in 1940; but whether she is treating the recent past or the distant past, in England or elsewhere, she seems able to recollect it, effortlessly, with all the random, off-center details that memory alone can usually supply.

It is instructive to see what she admires in other writers. In the current issue of the new British quarterly *Books and Company*, Fitzgerald is to be found singing the praises of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* by Sarah Orne Jewett:

In a few pages Jewett establishes forever the substantial reality of Dunnett's landing. We know it, we have been there, we have walked up the steep streets, we know

the sea air. . . . Jewett knew all about fishing and small-holding and cooking haddock chowder, about birds, weather, tides and clouds. She had a wonderful ear for the Maine voice, breaking the immense silences. She quotes, more than once, what her father said to her: "Don't write about things and people. Tell them just as they are," and she understood the natural history of small communities.

These are all Fitzgeraldian virtues, especially the last one. Her own understanding of "the natural history of small communities" as if the communities were tide-pools, to be investigated with shrimp-net and magnifying glass—lies at the heart of her fiction.

She conducts her novels like scientific experiments involving a precise historical moment, a lavishly remembered physical habitat, and an ill-assorted bunch of human beings—accidental inhabitants of their place and their time. Though the outcome of each experiment is complex and often contradictory, the initial question that sets it in motion is simple. In *The Bookshop* it is: can the widowed Florence Green make a success of running a bookstore in the sour townlet of Hardborough on the East Anglian coast in 1959? In *Offshore*, it is: will the tatterdemalion community of Londoners, living aboard their Thames barges on Battersea Reach in the early 1960s, sink or float? In *The Blue Flower*, the question seems to have been resolved before the book starts: Fritz von Hardenberg will become the poet Novalis. But one of the great pleasures of the novel is one's discovery of how very easy it would have been for Fritz not to have become Novalis.

In Fitzgerald's bracingly stoic view of the world, things could always have been otherwise. Contingency rules. The last two sentences of *The Gate of Angels* make the point:

She must have spent five minutes in there, not much more. The slight delay, however, meant that she met Fred Fairly walking slowly back to St. Angelicus.

Those five minutes may or may not reverse the apparent outcome of the novel, which finds chaos theory in its infancy in the Cavendish Laboratory.

The tone of the novels is of a piece with their cool, experimental structure. More than any novelist I can think of, Fitzgerald aspires to a scrupulous disinterestedness as she observes the goings-on inside her books. She cherishes hard data, in the form of dialogue and facts about weather, architecture, domestic routines, professional expertise, clothing, voices. Figurative language is a rare and highly significant luxury for her. She carries sparseness of description to an extreme. A paragraph by her often reads as if every other sentence had been omitted: the reader hops, oddly, from recorded fact to recorded fact, and has to work quite hard to intuit the connections between them. It is like being at a dinner party full of strangers, all of whom know each other well; you find your way by hunch and guesswork. The effect is disquietingly lifelike.

At a time when nearly all contemporary fiction assumes a comfortable solipsism as a natural condition of existence, with every novelist busy creating his or her "own" world,

Fitzgerald insists, unfashionably, that *the* world is the place to write about, and that the lives of her characters continue independently of the novelist's capacity to observe or create them. This is not a modest philosophical position to occupy. It turns Fitzgerald into a radical dissenter from the literary mainstream.

In her watchful detachment from the events in her books, she is a classic ironist, in H.W. Fowler's happy definition of irony as "a form of utterance that postulates a double audience, consisting of one party that hearing shall hear and shall not understand, and another party that, when more is meant than meets the ear, is aware both of that more and of the outsiders' incomprehension." She is always requiring her readers to be that second audience; and, for those who make the exacting grade, Fitzgerald is the funniest writer in English now alive.

Her first book, published when she was fifty-nine, was a biography of the painter and designer Sir Edward Burne-Jones. Her second book, *The Knox Brothers* (1977), was in effect the natural history of Penelope Fitzgerald, an engrossing study of the family tide-pool in which she grew up. Her father E.V. Knox, and his brothers Dillwyn, Wilfred, and Ronald, were a daunting quartet, and (one would guess) a hard act to follow. Both of Penelope Fitzgerald's grandfathers were Anglican bishops—solid pillars of the educated English upper middle class. Her father, who wrote under the name "Evoe," was a famous humorist who became editor of *Punch* at a time when the magazine was still a British institution, the Church of England in mirthful mood. Her uncle Ronald caused a family scandal by converting to Romanism ("Popping," as it was called), and metamorphosing himself into the gorgeous figure of Monsignor Knox, who, like his close friend Evelyn Waugh, sang wittily for his supper at the great Catholic houses of the land. Her uncle Wilfred remained within the C. of E. as an Anglo-Catholic "Socialist Christian," taking vows of poverty and celibacy, and trying to reform "the church of the rich." Her uncle Dillwyn, a classicist and mathematician, became a cipher expert, a key figure in the Enigma project at Bletchley during World War II.

Between them, the brothers wrote theological books, detective stories, translations of Greek poetry and the Bible, autobiographies, mathematical papers, pamphlets, feuilletons, satires, newspaper columns, comic sketches, and manuals of devotion. It was four years after the death of her father in 1971 that Penelope Fitzgerald published her Burne-Jones biography—a very late and tentative beginning to what has become a spectacular literary career.

Being born a Knox must have been a complex fate, at once deterrent and liberating. Fitzgerald's childhood and youth brought her into contact with a huge cast of English notables. Through the pages of *The Knox Brothers* passes almost everyone who was anyone: Waugh, of course, along with such disparate figures as Alan Turing and William Temple the Archbishop of Canterbury, Maynard Keynes and Ivor Novello, Lytton Strachey. Hilaire Belloc, Harold Macmillan.

She is a novelist for whom a broad knowledge of the world and its workings is as essential as it was to Thackeray or George Eliot. Her own native habitat—the London haute-bourgeoisie of the 1920s and '30s (a period, interestingly, in which she has so far not set a novel)—must have afforded extraordinary opportunities for the apprentice observer. More than that, it helps to explain the sturdy intellectual framework of her books, with their easygoing grasp of the language of philosophy and science.

Fitzgerald is the least academic of writers—far less so than, say, Iris Murdoch, whose novels can sometimes read like diverting illustrations to a knotty article in *Mind*. Fitzgerald's work is alive with the play of ideas, wielded with confident lightness, as if they were the stuff of ordinary civilized conversation. She has written engagingly of how the young Ronald and Wilfred Knox used to wrangle with their friends and brothers over cocoa in the smoking room of the bishop's palace in Manchester, "snapping at the gaiters in a cloud of dust," as Ronald later put it. In her novels, one is always in the smoking-room, never in the lecture hall.

It has taken nineteen years for *Human Voices* her fourth novel, and one of her best and funniest—to get published in the United States. The habitat is Broadcasting House on Great Portland Street, headquarters of the BBC, a temple of the arts and sciences, personally dedicated by Sir John Reith to Almighty God. (I am translating from memory Reith's grandiose Latin inscription, which runs in a frieze around the cathedral-high lobby.) The historical moment is 1940—in Britain, the darkest year of the war, when the German invasion was hourly expected. The central characters are a job-lot of PAs—program assistants, mostly young women in their teens and early twenties, drawn from all over England to work as dogsbodies for their distracted male bosses.

The animating question of the book is drawn from Fitzgerald's version of the BBC's own wartime mission statement:

Broadcasting House was . . . dedicated to the strangest project of the war, or of any war, that is, telling the truth. Without prompting, the BBC had decided that truth was more important than consolation, and, in the long run, would be more effective. And yet there was no guarantee of this. Truth ensures trust, but not victory, or even happiness.

Can an organization such as the BBC, described here as "a cross between a civil service, a powerful moral force, and an amateur theatrical company that wasn't too sure where next week's money was coming from," tell the truth? Can its individual members tell the truth to themselves or to each other? And with what consequences? So Fitzgerald sets her experiment in motion.

For the natural historian of small communities, the Byzantine corporate structure of the BBC proves a glorious field of study. Somewhere on an upper floor of the

building lives God Himself, the Director General, or DG, a figure so remote that he is never seen in person by the characters in the book, though one of his lieutenants, ADDG, does make a fleeting appearance BH (Broadcasting House), a drab honeycomb of offices and studios, is divided into a multitude of independent fiefdoms, under the command of jealous departmental heads like DPP and RPD. Truth, as conceived in one chamber of the honeycomb, emerges as brazen falsehood when expounded in another chamber.

For Sam Brooks, the Recorded Programmes Director, truth resides in perfect aural fidelity. His master project, which goes under the provisional title of *Lest We Forget Our Englishry*, is to record the authentic noises of life in England before the anticipated invasion. In the company of Dr. Vogel, a German refugee and “the greatest expert in Europe on recorded atmosphere.” RPD roams the countryside in the department’s official black Wolseley, capturing for posterity such sounds as wheezing English lungs in the first chill of autumn, on aluminum discs, “all 78s . . . coated on one side with acetate whose pungent rankness was the true smell of the BBC’s war.” One particular national treasure is the creaking of an ancient church door:

“What we have been listening to—patiently, always in the hope of something else coming up—amounts to more than six hundred bands of creaking. To be accurate, some are a mixture of squeaking and creaking.”

“They’re all from the parish church of Hither Lickington,” Sam explained eagerly. “It was recommended to us by Religious Broadcasting as the top place in the Home Counties. What you’re hearing is the hinges of the door and the door itself opening and shutting as the old women come in one by one with the stuff for the Harvest Festival. The quality’s superb particularly on the last fifty-three hands or so. Some of them have got more to carry, so the door has to open wider. That’s when you get the squeak.”

“Hark, the vegetable marrow comes!” cried Dr. Vogel, his head on one side, well contented.

An American reader might suspect that Fitzgerald has gone over the top here. Having spent a good portion of the 1970s in the company of sound-fetishists from BH’s radio-phonetic workshop, I declare the passage to be a nugget of masterly realism. Sam Brooks—childish and fanatical in his pursuit of true sound, insulated from the larger world by his “seraglio” of Junior Temporary Assistants—was and is a form of life that flourishes extravagantly in the many-chambered labyrinth of the Corporation.

His whole existence, though, is threatened by a directive that drifts down through the building from a higher authority, to the effect that truth is Live and not Recorded. The news is broken to him by DPP:

“The object of the meeting was to cut down the number of recordings in news transmissions—in the interests of truth, as they said. The direct human voice must be used whenever we can manage it—if not, the public

must be clearly told what they’ve been listening to—the programme must be announced as recorded, that is, Not Quite Fresh.”

The conflict between live and recorded truth comes to the boiling-point when General Pinard visits BH to speak to England after the fall of France. Pinard, an Anglophile, and a familiar figure in horseracing circles at Newmarket, Ascot, and Epsom, is the government’s preferred alternative to the spiky and egotistical Charles de Gaulle. Talking without notes, on air not on disc, Pinard delivers a speech that is one of the triumphs of the novel—a paragon of comic pace and timing, beautifully judged in its effect on the reader as Pinard moves rapidly from warm patriotic sorrow to the demand that England surrender forthwith to the Germans:

“When the Germans arrive, and at best it will be in a few weeks, don’t think of resistance, don’t think of history. Nothing is so ungrateful as history. Think of your selves, your homes and gardens which you tend so carefully, the sums of money you have saved, the children who will live to see all this pass and who will know that all governments are bad, and Hitler’s perhaps not worse than any other. I tell you out of affection what France has learnt at the cost of terrible sacrifice. Give in. When you hear the tanks rolling up the streets of your quarter, be ready to give in, no matter how hard the terms. Give in when the Boche comes. Give in.”

A terrible fit of coughing overwhelmed the microphone.

“He’s overloading,” said the programme engineer, in agony.

It is typical of Fitzgerald’s sureness of touch that one recognizes with pleasure the small, unflagged details of the general’s French-inflected English, like “quarter” for “town” or “neighborhood.”

But the wireless sets of England have been silent for the duration of Pinard’s broadcast, because Jeff Haggard, DPP, has pulled the plug on him, warned in advance of the drift of the speech by two words, spoken by the general on his arrival at the studio: “*Soyons réalistes*.” The truth, DPP judges, will not be served by the general’s brand of realism: in 1940, England’s only hope lies in the grandiose unrealism of Churchill—“the courageous drunkard whom you have made your Prime Minister,” as Pinard dubs him. Silence, Fitzgerald more than once reminds us, is often truer than human voices.

The corporate debate (or, rather, the collision of prejudices) about truth-telling is conducted far over the heads of the young women in RPD’s seraglio whose lives occupy the foreground of the novel. It is part of Fitzgerald’s experimental bent that she has always been interested in adolescents, in personalities not fully formed, such as the students in *The Blue Flower*, the young actors in *At Freddie’s*, the girls Chiara and Barney in *Innocence*. Observing teenagers harden, uncertainly, into the shapes that they will assume as adults is one of the driving preoc-



cupations of her work. So here Fitzgerald holds her magnifying glass to Lise, Vi, Della, and Annie, the pliant Junior Temporary Assistants, whose characters are in the process of being permanently molded by the BBC's peculiar war.

One girl in the seraglio, Annie Asra, the daughter of a widowed Birmingham piano-tuner, emerges as the single most important voice in this novel of voices. She is a born truth-teller. She has perfect pitch—a gift both useful and dangerous, in an institution dedicated to sound-broadcasting—and speaks in the flat adenoidal accent of Selly Oak, a Birmingham suburb. To the dialect of self-protective irony, worn like a camouflage uniform by the middle-aged men of the BBC, Annie brings a puncturing literalism. On her first assignment to a producer, she remarks amiably to him that “you talk so daft.” But daft talk is the lifeblood of Fitzgerald's BBC. The whole crankish, high-minded, admirable, and absurd enterprise is kept going by a language as rich in euphemisms and evasions as Mandarin Chinese. Broadcasting House is almost next door to Looking-Glass House, and Annie Asra is a close cousin to Lewis Carroll's Alice.

She turns out to be an adroit philosopher. When Eddie Waterlow, the daft-talking producer, complains that he is undervalued and underused by the corporation, she tries to cheer him up.

“Surely the BBC can find something for you?” she asked gently. He looked forlorn.

“The BBC is doing gits bit [he is mimicking her accent]. We put out the truth, but only the contingent truth. Annie! The opposite could also be true! We are told that German pilots have been brought down in Croydon and turned out to know the way to the post-office, that Hitler has declared that he only needs three fine days to defeat Great Britain, and that there is an excellent blackberry crop and therefore it is our patriotic duty to make jam. But all this need not have been true, Annie! If the summer had not been fine, there might have been no blackberries.”

“Of course there mightn't,” said Annie. “You're just making worries for yourself, Mr. Waterlow. There isn't anything at all that mightn't be otherwise. After all, I mightn't have . . . what I mean is, how can they find anything to broadcast that's got to be true, and couldn't be anything else?”

He gestured towards the piano.

“We couldn't put out music all day!”

“Music and silence.”

Annie's precocious grasp of the contingent nature of things, and her willingness to live in the world on the world's terms, mark her out as an alien in the BBC, where the idea of the necessary, and of everyone's personal necessity within the organization, are articles of superstitious faith.

When RPD throws a dinner party for his assistants at Prunier's. Annie falls suddenly and unexpectedly in love with him, for the excellent Fitzgeraldian reason that she is

wearing a white dress, and so is seated by the waiter on Sam Brooks's right. Nothing is more contingent than love. Like Fritz von Hardenberg's passion for Sophie in *The Blue Flower*, Annie's ungovernable hunger for RPD is, as one might say, supremely unnecessary. Yet even in her bewitchment, Annie remains an unillusioned realist

Vi wanted to be of help, but it was difficult to find facts which Annie had not already faced.

“He's old, Annie,” she ventured at last

“He is,” Annie replied calmly, “he's forty-six: I looked him up in the BBC Handbook, and it's my opinion that he's putting on weight. I daresay he wouldn't look much in bed.”

“But what do you expect to come of it?”

“Nothing.”

But Sam Brooks—self-engrossed, absent-minded, capable of tender feeling only for aluminum discs—is too weak to offer any real resistance to the force majeure of Annie's love for him. She sweeps him away. His most nearly positive response to her is to resign, with feeble gentlemanliness, from the BBC, because “I've always prided myself on this one thing, I mean that I've got a proper attitude towards my staff.”

The immediate consequence of Annie's compulsive telling of the truth is the death of DPP, Jeff Haggard, the cleverest, most ironically detached character in the book. Leaving BH to rescue Sam Brooks from the avalanche of Annie Asra's passion, he is killed, contingently of course, by an unexploded parachute-bomb that he mistakes for his taxi.

There is no boiling-down of a Fitzgerald novel to its driving theme or themes. She makes life hard for critics because she works every inch of her canvas. Her minor characters are as fully realized as her major ones. She is a writer who watches over the fall of each sparrow, and she bestows on all her sparrows the gift of free will, to exercise as waywardly as they may choose. She is always reminding the reader of the ability of her characters to pursue independent lives behind the scenes, and their offstage activities are as important as the activities that are performed in public view. This gives her books an extraordinary three-dimensionality: they are virtual realities, brought into being by a novelist who combines a rational skepticism about human affairs with a view of the world more commonly held by theologians than philosophers.

In *Human Voices*, Fitzgerald has built a perfect replica of the genteel labyrinthine bureaucracy of the BBC, but this inspired freehand realist is impatient with realism for its own sake. Like Eden, her BBC is a testing ground for individual volition and its chaotic consequences. Sharing her wonder, her pity, and her high humor at the goings-on in her created world, one finds oneself adopting the point of view of an amused, highly intelligent, and supremely

charitable god. Man's first disobedience, and the fruit of that forbidden tree, are Fitzgerald's true subjects, but she handles them so deftly, and with such dry wit, that the Miltonic grandeur of the enterprise is kept artfully hidden beneath the eventful, talky surface of her fiction. The experienced reader of Fitzgerald grows used to being taken suddenly aback by her underlying depth and seriousness. No wonder that a fast-growing cult is forming around her writing.

**Edward T. Wheeler (review date 10 September 1999)**

SOURCE: "A Listener's Guide," in *Commonweal*, September 10, 1999, p. 32.

[In the following review, Wheeler states that the central paradox of Fitzgerald's *Human Voices* is between human truth and the lies of war.]

The trouble with memory "is that it develops its own defenses, against truth telling and in consequence against history"—so writes the eighty-three-year-old Penelope Fitzgerald, an adult witness to the Battle of Britain, in reviewing a recent book on London during the Blitz. Fitzgerald faced these problems, truth telling and memory's defenses, as a novelist in *Human Voices*, published almost twenty years ago in Britain and issued in the United States this spring for the first time. The novel, set in the BBC's Broadcasting House, attempts to record the truth of human voices against the lies of war, those "consolations" by which government radio hides or distorts what is happening. In the process, the book cannot but also raise the paradoxical relationship between fact and fiction: how can fiction be true? So heavy a philosophic weight might seem too much for so brief a work to bear, but its extraordinary style turns the tension in the paradox into a genuine aesthetic pleasure—even if the paradox itself goes unresolved.

But first, who is Penelope Fitzgerald and why is her twenty-year-old novel being reprinted? Much honored in Britain (Booker Prize winner in 1979, and shortlisted three times), Fitzgerald received acclaim here only recently for *The Blue Flower*, a historical novel on the life of Novalis, the German Romantic poet. She took a first-class degree in English from Oxford, married in 1941, and published her first work of fiction (still unavailable in the United States) when she was sixty-one. Before turning to novels she had written biographies of the painter Edward Coley Burne-Jones and of her illustrious uncles, the brothers Knox, including the Scripture scholar and Catholic convert, Ronald. Her father was, for a time, editor of *Punch*. In raising her three children, she resided in England and abroad, in circumstances sufficiently unusual to give her subjects for her work.

Fitzgerald is an uncanny, if understated, stylist. Her style is so distinctive that the novels give pleasure by making us ask how she achieves her effects. Those works of hers set

outside England or beyond the immediate past (late eighteenth-century Germany, prerevolutionary Moscow, postwar Italy, Cambridge ca. 1912) abound with a detail, domestic and social, that makes fiction read like fact. *Commonweal* readers might particularly enjoy the sections of *Innocence* (1986) that take a wry look at Vatican politics through the aspirations of one Monsignor Gondi.

"I try to get the movement and counter-movement of the novel and its background to go together," Fitzgerald writes. "*Human Voices* was set in Broadcasting House in the old days of wartime radio, and the narration as far as possible is through voices and music." Memory and its defenses, truth telling, the honest sound of the human voice—these dilemmas and textures circulate thematically through the book, which is a love story, an ironically detailed recollection of Fitzgerald's own time at the BBC, a quirky and puzzling study of characters who are somehow beyond our comprehension and all the more human for this. It is also a tribute to Broadcasting House, which is conceived metaphorically as a kind of great ocean liner navigating the turbulent seas of war in the early forties. (Edward R. Murrow, in the form of the character Mac McVitie, rushes on and off as the bombs fall.)

Episodic is not the right term for Fitzgerald's style, nor is collage a correct way to describe the accumulation of scenes and bits of dialogue that characterize the work. Perhaps her own ocean liner metaphor is apt: the plot steams along taking characters to their ends; the occasional shock of emotional waves reminds us that we are under-way. The novelist moves from deck to deck, cabin to cabin, recording, commenting sparingly, and letting the enigmatic quality of the dialogue provide the truth telling.

"Annie! If the summer had not been fine, there might have been no blackberries."

"Of course there mightn't," said Annie. "You're just making worries for yourself, Mr. Waterlow. There isn't anything at all that mightn't be otherwise. After all, I mightn't . . . what I mean is, how can they find anything else to broadcast that's got to be true, and couldn't be anything else?"

As this quotation suggests, Annie, the heroine of the love story, has an impenetrable resourcefulness; she shows as much faith in the workings of the BBC as she does courage in her own apparently fruitless devotion to her boss, Sam Brooks. We are not given much more sense of what motivates her—or for that matter what happens after her confession of her love to Sam, the RPD. (The BBC's notorious alphabet abbreviation is another aspect of the novel's truthfulness; it takes a few rereadings of the first twenty pages to distinguish the RPD [Recorded Program Director], from the DPP [Director of Program Planning], from the RPAs [Recorded Program Assistants] at BH [Broadcasting House].) There is interior monologue or approximate omniscient narration, but the effect of the style is one of distance rather than intimacy. We have dotty inconsequentiality, hilarity shared but somehow private, a

point of view which is skewed to the eccentric, and a style which has the abruptness of bombs exploding and changing the contour of a neighborhood—but the noise and the explosions have happened the night before. We were not there and witness the aftereffects in the riddling dialogue and the abrupt changes of scene.

On occasion, the novelist as captain, does let us know what is happening:

“As an institution they could not tell a lie, they were unique in the contrivances of gods and men since the Oracle at Delphi . . . they were broadcasting in the strictest sense of the word, scattering human voices into the darkness of Europe, in the certainty that more than half must be lost. . . . And every one who worked there, bitterly complaining . . . felt a certain pride which they had no way to express, either then or since.”

*Human Voices* is, we must believe, the expression of that pride in the scattering of seeds of truth.

Praises Fitzgerald's comic voice in her *Human Voices*.

Dee, Jonathon. "The Reanimators." *Harper's* 298, No. 1789 (June 1999): 76.

Lauds Fitzgerald's light touch in *The Blue Flower*.

Duguid, Lindsay. "In Faery Lands Forlorn." *Times Literary Supplement*, No. 4988 (6 November 1998): 10.

Discusses a resurgence of interest in the work of Edward Burne-Jones, including Penelope Fitzgerald's biography of the artist.

Leivick, Laura. "Love and the Poet." *Wall Street Journal* 99, No. 68 (8 April 1997): A20.

Discusses Fitzgerald's recreation of eighteenth-century Germany and the birth of the Romantic movement in *The Blue Flower*.

## FURTHER READING

### Criticism

Annan, Gabriele. "Letting Go." *New York Review of Books* 46, No. 10 (10 June 1999): 28.

**Additional coverage of Fitzgerald's life and career is contained in the following sources published by Gale Group: *Contemporary Authors*, Vol. 85-88; *Contemporary Authors Autobiography Series*, Vol. 10; *Contemporary Authors New Revision Series*, Vol. 56; *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vols. 14, 194; and *Major Twentieth-Century Writers*, Vol. 2.**



# Ellen Gilchrist

## 1935-

American short story writer, novelist, and poet.

The following entry presents an overview of Gilchrist's career. For further information on her life and works, see *CLC*, Volumes 34 and 48.

### INTRODUCTION

Ellen Gilchrist is best known for her short stories that chronicle the decline of the Southern aristocracy. Much of her fiction is set in New Orleans, a city she describes in detail to contrast the idealistic hopes of her upper-class female protagonists with the harsh reality of their lives. Gilchrist's characters often reappear in different works, allowing her to examine various stages of their personal development. Gilchrist is consistently praised for her use of vivid language and dialogue, and critics have particularly noted her ability to capture the dreams and frustrations typically experienced during adolescence.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Gilchrist was born in Vicksburg, Mississippi, in 1935. She spent her childhood on Hopewell Plantation, the home of her maternal grandfather. Gilchrist left the family home at nineteen when she eloped. She subsequently divorced and married three more times before the age of thirty-two. She received her B.A. in Philosophy from Milsaps College in 1967. In the 1970s, Gilchrist tried her hand at poetry and joined poet and novelist Jim Whitehead's writing class at the University of Arkansas. Gilchrist wrote poems and stories for various periodicals before publishing her first collection of short fiction, *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams* (1981) with a small university press. The book caught the attention of the reading public and the literary world alike and earned her a contract with Little, Brown for another collection of short stories and a novel. She won the American Book Award for fiction for *Victory over Japan* (1984) and has written several other short story collections and novels, as well as a collection of essays.

### MAJOR WORKS

The stories in *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams* center on wealthy Southern women who escape the restrictions of their upper-class lives through unorthodox, sometimes destructive, behavior. "Revenge" focuses on the memory of Rhoda Manning, who as a young girl is stifled by the constraints placed on women in southern society. She is

not allowed to use the pole-vaulting pit built by her brother and her male cousins because it is considered unbecoming for a girl to develop muscles. Instead she is lured to the more feminine pursuit of playing a role in her cousin's wedding. At the end of the story she rebels, triumphantly ripping off her formal dress after the wedding and vaulting across the pit. Gilchrist's first novel, *The Annunciation* (1983), follows the life of Amanda McCamey from her childhood on the Mississippi Delta to her married life in the familiar milieu of aristocratic New Orleans, and eventually to an artists' commune in the Ozarks. Some of the characters from *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams* reappear in the collection *Victory over Japan*, which traces the lives of several eccentric women. In this collection, Gilchrist the character of Rhoda Manning returns in "The Lower Garden District Free Gravity Mule Blight or Rhoda, a Fable." In this story, Rhoda is middle-aged, recently divorced, and struggling with poverty and loneliness. She attempts to solve her problems by defrauding her insurance company and seducing her insurance representative. Other previously used characters also reappear in the stories of *Drunk with Love* (1986). In addition to exploring the lives of her female protagonists as they rebel against Southern social mores, this volume deals with greater social issues, such as interracial love affairs in "Memphis" and "The Emancipator." Another story, "The Blue-Eyed Buddhist," concludes in a manner atypical of the standard Gilchrist heroine—as the protagonist ends her life in a grand, self-sacrificing gesture. The novel *The Anna Papers* (1988) relates the experiences of Anna Hand, a dying author who wants to write her family's story in order to leave a legacy for the future. Although Anna is childless, motherhood and family are central to the narrative in this book. *Net of Jewels* (1992) involves Rhoda Manning once again, this time focusing on her during adolescence and young adulthood. The book examines Rhoda's rebellious relationship with her parents and the Southern belle ideal. *Starcarbon* (1994) returns to the chronicles of the Hand family who appeared in *The Anna Papers*; this time Olivia de Haviland Hand, Anna's niece, becomes the protagonist. Olivia is living in Oklahoma and struggling to reconcile her Cherokee roots with the Southern aristocracy of the Hand family.

### CRITICAL RECEPTION

Gilchrist is more often praised for her style than for the substance of her work. Victoria Jenkins remarks "Ellen Gilchrist's writing tumbles and spills off the page, seemingly without effort, like a voluble cousin breathlessly bringing you up to date on the liaisons and adventures of

various members of a sprawling family. . . .” Many critics are enamored of Gilchrist’s rebellious female heroines since they break the fictional mold of the typical Southern belle. Jeannie Thompson and Anita Miller Garner state, “Gilchrist captures the flavor and essence of her region without drowning in its idiom. She does not diminish her work by parroting already established Southern voices or depending upon stereotypes of landscapes and character.” Some reviewers desire more from Gilchrist’s protagonists, and argue that they are in no way heroic. Such commentators complain that barring a few exceptions, Gilchrist’s characters do nothing to change the wretchedness of their lives. Dorie Larue laments, “[Gilchrist’s] characters are more thought about than thought through.” Generally Gilchrist’s short fiction is more favorably received than her novels and her work is increasingly becoming a subject for critical study.

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## PRINCIPAL WORKS

*The Land Surveyor’s Daughter* (poetry) 1979  
*In the Land of Dreamy Dreams* (short stories) 1981  
*The Annunciation* (novel) 1983  
*Victory Over Japan* (short stories) 1984  
*Drunk with Love* (short stories) 1986  
*Falling through Space: The Journals of Ellen Gilchrist* (essays) 1987  
*The Anna Papers* (novel) 1988  
*Light Can Be Both Wave and Particle* (short stories) 1989  
*I Cannot Get You Close Enough* (short stories) 1990  
*Net of Jewels* (novel) 1992  
*Starcarbon: A Meditation on Love* (novel) 1994  
*The Age of Miracles* (short stories) 1995  
*Nora Jane and Company* (novel) 1997  
*Flight of Angels* (short stories) 1998

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## CRITICISM

Few writers can achieve with a first collection of short stories published by a university press the kind of instant popular success and critical acclaim Ellen Gilchrist won with *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*: Not only did it immediately sell out its first printing, the collection was literally the talk of New Orleans, selling many copies by word of mouth and winning for its author a substantial contract with a notable publisher for a novel and another collection of stories. Gilchrist’s regional success has been explained in much the same way the regional success of writers like Walker Percy, Eudora Welty and, more recently, John Kennedy Toole has been explained: that is, readers in the South cannot resist the descriptions of settings, landscapes, dialects and societies which, love them or not, are easily recognizable as home. Yet, like these writers, Gilchrist

writes fiction that is more than regional. Indeed, if it is regional, it is so in the sense that the works of Dostoyevsky and Flaubert are regional, which is to say that it represents not regionalism so much as the successful capturing of a social milieu. Gilchrist captures the flavor and essence of her region without drowning in its idiom. She does not diminish her work by parroting already established Southern voices or depending upon stereotypes of landscapes and character. The view that Gilchrist gives us of the world is a very straight and narrow path of realism, traditional fiction peopled with characters whom life doesn’t pass by, characters who lust and kill and manipulate, and most importantly, dream.

The focus of Gilchrist’s realism in *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, as well as in her novel, *The Annunciation* is the female psyche, for Gilchrist puts us deeply inside a female point of view in eleven of the fourteen stories as well as in much of the novel. Even in “*Rich*,” “*The President of the Louisiana Live Oak Society*,” and “*Suicides*,” stories in which she employs a more nearly omniscient point of view, her narrators still manage to sound as if they are characters in her stories. (Gilchrist similarly manipulates the point of view in *The Annunciation*, making us privy to the minds of various characters as well as the protagonist, Amanda McCamey.) In “*The President of the Louisiana Live Oak Society*,” the narrator’s eye and voice are those of a woman confiding to her friend in a beauty salon, much like Flannery O’Connor’s omniscient narrators who often sound like the “Georgia crackers” who people her stories. The result of an intense focus on the female point of view and a shortage of three-dimensional male characters will undoubtedly result in charges by some of Gilchrist’s lack of range. Fortunately, the placement of “*Rich*” as the first story in the collection presents Tom Wilson, perhaps the only fully rounded male character in the book. The glimpses we are given of his coming to terms with a hatred of his difficult daughter Helen, are some of the most poignant and human scenes in the collection. Yet, when we put all the stories together, add up all the views the reader gets of the female mind, the composite suggests that Gilchrist’s treatment of women is very traditional and in several areas resembles that of her predecessors.

Like at least two Grandes Dames of Southern fiction, Eudora Welty and Flannery O’Connor, Gilchrist evidences a type of Romantic Calvinism in her view of women. On one hand, she seems delighted with the idea of innate depravity, while on the other she seems convinced that a woman’s life is often like an extended downhill sled ride, starting out with much promise for excitement and speed, but troubled by ill-placed obstacles, icy spots, and a fizzle at the end. For example, Gilchrist likes to show her young protagonists as simultaneously wonderful and horrible. In “*Traveler*,” LeLe prefers telling lies to telling the truth, concocting wild tales to tell her summer companions about her social success back in Indiana, when in fact she has just lost a bid for cheerleader. When her cousin Baby Gwen Barksdale greets LeLe at the train station, LeLe

tells her that “practically the whole football team” saw her off at the station back home, and then she creates a melodramatic tale about a college boy she supposedly dates who is dying of cancer. LeLe’s sloth is shown through her failure to face up to the real cause of her obesity. She does not feel guilty for all of the lies she tells. In fact, the only emotion akin to guilt she feels is the remorse she experiences for eating vanilla ice cream directly out of the carton while the freezer door stands open, something she is sure Sirena the maid knows about and holds against her. Yet for all of LeLe’s exaggerations and lies, the reader cannot fail to be charmed by her sheer spunk when she swims the five miles across the lake with Fielding, her summer crush, and exuberantly realizes that she has created an identity for herself. “I was dazzling. I was LeLe Arnold, the wildest girl in the Mississippi Delta, the girl who swam Lake Jefferson without a boat or a life vest. I was LeLe, the girl who would do anything” (151). LeLe’s exaggerations sound as if she has listened too often to Scarlett O’Hara’s lines in *Gone With the Wind*, but her gutsy actions are more reminiscent of Katherine Anne Porter’s Miranda stories, stories in which the female characters gain more than petty desires and whims by their actions. What LeLe gains by swimming the lake has much in common with what Miranda’s idol, Aunt Amy, gains by riding off to Mexico astride a horse in “*Old Mortality*.” Just as Miranda’s dull life is reshaped by this socially rebellious event, LeLe cannot forget when she returns to hum-drum Indiana how “the water turned into diamonds in [her] hands” that day (153).

In “*Revenge*,” Gilchrist uses the same pattern with success. Rhoda is only ten years old when she is sent with all of her brothers and male cousins, five in all, to spend the summer with their grandmother during World War II. Rhoda’s language is spicy and her thoughts are full of how sweet it would be to get even with the hateful boys who constantly ignore and diminish her abilities. Rhoda is particularly angry about the fact that the boys will not allow her to participate in the building of the Broad Jump Pit, and she calls vicious remarks to them from the distance at which they keep her. Secretly she begins to pray that the Japanese will win the war so that they will come and torture her tormentors. She puts herself to sleep at night imagining their five tiny wheelchairs lined up in a row while she rides around by her father’s side in his Packard. In short, Rhoda’s spirit is eaten alive with envy and bitterness, hate and anger. Yet she gets her revenge and a miraculous boost for her self-image when she sneaks away from her cousin Lauralee’s wedding festivities to strip off her plaid formal and vault over the barrier pole at the Broad Jump Pit. Rhoda imagines “half the wedding” is calling her name and climbing over the fence to get her when she runs down the path in the light of the moon to sail victoriously over the barrier. The Romantic vision of this early success is amplified by Rhoda’s last thought: “Sometimes I think whatever has happened since has been of no real interest to me” (124). This line does a great deal to separate Rhoda from other depraved and naughty young female protagonists such as Carson McCullers’s Frankie

Addams in *A Member of the Wedding* or Flannery O’Connor’s child protagonist in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost.”

Indeed, in story after story Gilchrist’s grown-up female protagonists are living life after the Fall. She in fact reworks the pattern in *The Annunciation*, though with a different result. In “*There’s a Garden of Eden*,” Alisha Terrebone decides that although she has always been a renowned beauty, her preeminence is drawing to a close. Alisha perceives herself to be “soft and brave and sad, like an old actress” (43). Like many of Gilchrist’s characters, she becomes to others what she perceives herself to be. She is painfully aware of the folly of her life, nonetheless, knowing that inevitably her present lover will leave her. She thinks, “*And that is what I get for devoting my life to love instead of wisdom*” (47).

In their downhill journey through life, the protagonists of these stories run into obstacle after obstacle to mar their gorgeous, effortless journeys. In “*1957, a Romance*,” Rhoda fears another pregnancy and cannot face what she perceives as the ugliness of her body. In the title story, LaGrande McGruder finds her obstacle in the form of “That goddamn little new-rich Yankee bitch,” a crippled, social-climbing Jewish woman who forces LaGrande to cheat if she wants to win in a game of tennis, the only thing important in LaGrande’s life other than her integrity and pride at being at least a third-generation member of the New Orleans Lawn Tennis Club. In “*The President of the Louisiana Live Oak Society*,” Lelia McLaurin’s life tumbles into chaos as the trappings of the social revolution of the sixties—blacklights, marijuana, and pushers—trickle down into her adolescent son Robert’s life and then into her own carefully ordered home. Lelia’s buffer from such madness and social unrest is to visit her hairdresser, who shares Lelia’s psychiatrist and who creates for Lelia a hairdo that resembles a helmet.

Thus in gathering for the reader a whole cast of female characters in various stages of life, with the character Rhoda appearing by name in four of the stories, Gilchrist achieves a kind of coherence of style and voice that is absent from many first collections of short fiction. She invites us to compare these women with each other and determine whether or not the sum of their experiences adds up to more than just their individual lives. The result is a type of social commentary that pervades the work, full of sadness and futility. By dividing the collection into sections, Gilchrist emphasizes how “place” has affected these females’ lives, and how what has been true in the past may exist nowhere other than in dreams in the future. The rural and genteel Mississippi in which Matille and the very young Rhoda summer seems to offer little preparation for the life in which Rhoda finds herself in 1957, in North Carolina with a husband and two small sons and the fear of a third child on the way. Clearly nothing in LaGrande McGruder’s life has prepared her for the disruption of a society she has always known, nor for the encroachment of dissolution upon her territory. Similarly, Lelia



McLaurin's only plan for escape is a weekend spent with her husband on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, just as they used to do in the old days, driving to Biloxi with a shaker full of martinis.

With the creation of Amanda McCamey, the female protagonist in her new novel, *The Annunciation*, Gilchrist may be reversing the trend set by Rhoda, LeLe, Matille, even LaGrande McGruder and Lelia McLaurin. Amanda is possibly Gilchrist's first female protagonist who may be elevated to the class of *hero*. Although Amanda has in common with her "sisters" a penchant for the downhill slide, a heavy cargo of guilt, and a similar Mississippi Delta/New Orleans background, she redeems herself with an honest attempt to flee "the world of guilt and sorrow," to borrow a phrase from Flannery O'Connor, by literally asserting her will against the forces that would slow her down in her bid for a self-directed, meaningful life.

Amanda is the central focus of the novel, most of which is narrated in a close third person through her perceptions, though occasionally Gilchrist, like O'Connor, dips into the consciousnesses of other characters for a balancing effect. Still, it is Amanda's story, her quest to know who she is and how to live her life that is the main theme of the novel.

*The Annunciation* is divided into three sections: "Cargo," "Exile," and "The Annunciation," the latter being about four times as long as the second, which is twice as long as the first. This structure invites questions: What is Amanda's "cargo"? From what or whom and to where is she exiled? Is "the annunciation" intended as a scriptural parallel? If not, is it used ironically?

Amanda's "cargo" we learn is in part her guilt over a child born out of wedlock and given up for adoption when Amanda is just fourteen. In the second section of the novel, it is revealed that her daughter, adopted by a wealthy New Orleans family, the Allains, has married and is living on State Street only blocks from Amanda. Eventually their paths cross: Amanda and Barrett Allain Clare pass each other on the way to the ladies room at Antoine's one evening, and later when Amanda sees Barrett fighting with her husband Charles she almost intervenes. Still later, they are even introduced to one another by a mutual friend. Though their relationship is profound, mother and daughter can't and don't recognize one another.

Growing up in the same small Mississippi county, Issaquena, which figured prominently in at least three of the short stories, Amanda is drawn from an early age to her athletic, darkly handsome first cousin Guy. They seem to be the pride of the stock on Esperanza plantation, and as children they develop an intense loyalty that later blossoms into sexual attraction when they are adolescents.<sup>1</sup> When Guy is eighteen and a football sensation in Rolling Fork, Mississippi, and Amanda a precocious fourteen year old, she seduces Guy. Though she desires him physically, she also feels a spiritual need to keep him near. As they

make love for the first time she thinks, "Guy is ours. . . . Guy belongs to us" (14). She dreads the thought of him leaving for college because it will mark the end of their childhood together and the relationship they have had. It also heralds, ultimately, the close of their direct ties with the place they were reared, the Mississippi Delta. Unfortunately, Amanda becomes pregnant and is sent to a Catholic home for unwed mothers in New Orleans. This is the beginning of "what she must carry with her always. Her cargo" (15). From then on she is irretrievably split from Guy, and, for a good part of her life, from herself. The fact that the baby girl she delivers by Caesarian section is taken from her, remembered as a slick, slippery thing with eyes squeezed shut, haunts her throughout the novel.

"Now you can be a girl again," Sister Celestine tells Amanda as she prepares to leave New Orleans for Virginia Seminary (20). But, of course, Amanda has been initiated into the adult world, though she only dimly perceives it through her obsessions with pleasures of the body and her own vanity; there is to be no return to girlhood. Although later Guy drives to meet her at school, it is clear that a continued relationship with him is out of the question. Amanda's cargo, then, also is loss—loss of her home place, her closest friend and lover, Guy, and her first child.

Amanda's period of "exile" takes place in New Orleans, the land of dreamy dreams, where she enters Uptown society by marrying Malcolm Ashe, a wealthy Jewish management lawyer. Their childless marriage is further marred by Amanda's alcoholism—a state that existed prior to their union. In the "Exile" chapters, Gilchrist covers some of the same territory traversed in the New Orleans society exposé stories of *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*: the Junior League women, the politically corrupt men, materialism of the rankest sort, "good" schools, worried children, class consciousness, racism, and sterility. Amanda eventually sobers up, awakening to realize that these people either hate each other or themselves. "What am I doing here?" (69), she wonders but, until she stops drinking, she can't find her way out of the maze.

Amanda's ticket out of town is the interest that she develops in language translation while pursuing a degree at Tulane University. Chiefly with the support of her black maid, her friend and "ally" Lavertis, Amanda is able to stop drinking and find the encouragement to go to school. Also at this time, Amanda and Guy have a brief reunion at their grandmother's funeral at Esperanza, which they will jointly inherit. They are drawn together again through grief and "the old desire"; they even leave the post-funeral gathering in Guy's car and end up making love in the rain. But when they discuss the daughter that neither of them knows, it is obvious that Guy is obsessed with locating the girl and is no happier than Amanda.

Amanda's exile is both literal and metaphorical. Exiled from her home territory, the family plantation, Esperanza, in Mississippi, she has not yet found her second home,

Fayetteville, Arkansas. On a figurative level, she is exiled from herself through her drinking and also in her lack of knowledge as to who she is and what she should do with her life. Childless, without a career, the wife of a rich man, living with guilt over her daughter, Amanda is in despair most of the time. Yet one of the main themes of *The Annunciation* is Amanda's bid for freedom through self-knowledge. During their time alone at their grandmother's funeral, Guy offers to leave his wife and take Amanda some place where they can be happy. Amanda, who is waking up from a dream of happy-endings, refuses his offer, saying, "all I'm really trying to do is find out what I'm good at. So I can be a useful person, so I can have some purpose" (60). When Guy says he can give her anything "that goddamn ingratiating Jew" can give her, she replies that she's not interested in money. "I want something else," she tells Guy. "Something I don't know the name of yet" (59).

Eventually, Amanda gets a chance to name her desire. She becomes involved in translating a manuscript smuggled out of the Vatican and put into the hands of Marshall Jordan, a seventy plus year old translation scholar from the writing program at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. Ironically, Amanda will translate a manuscript of poems in middle French by a poet named Helene Renoir, who also had an illegitimate child, was sent away to live with nuns, and who chose to hang herself at age twenty-one. It is Amanda's involvement with this project, her separation and eventual divorce from Malcolm, and her move to Fayetteville to start a new life as a single, working woman that constitute her deliverance from exile. Thus the stage is set for her "annunciation."

Arriving in Fayetteville with all the best intentions of living alone, Amanda starts out well, and her new ally, Katie Dunbar, an extremely strong, positive female counter-psyche for Amanda, stands by her throughout her emergence into wholeness. The theme of freedom is highlighted when on the first night alone in her new home, after the guests have gone, Amanda must bravely face exactly what it was she wanted: solitude. A poignant moment occurs in which we see Amanda summoning her power for courage:

This is it, she thought. This is what I dreamed of. The old sugar maples outside the window moved in the wind, sending shadows onto the wall behind her. That doesn't scare me, she thought. Nothing scares me. That's only the wind I'm watching. That wind has traveled around the world a million times to be with me. That wind was alive when Helene Renoir walked the earth.

(147)

But Amanda is still Amanda, and soon she is restless, bored and lonely. Though she has learned that freedom is necessary for her work, the isolation of freedom is hard to take. Before long she becomes involved with Will Lyons, a twenty-five year old local guitar player who gives her pure joy and lets her believe she wants to love again. The night after she first goes to bed with him, she menstruates

for the first time in months, and believes Will has "touched the part of [her] that wants to live" (164). Once again Amanda's nameless desire seems close to articulation.

The tug between real, joyous, even stormy love and the need to accomplish her work is a fierce struggle for Amanda, and it is further complicated by money: her abundance of it and Will's complete lack of it. Not surprisingly, her translations play second fiddle when her young lover comes "breezing in and put[s] his hands on her hair" (191). Later, when they are swimming in a local river, she is unafraid to show off her older woman's body. She strips and swims alone in the water. Will, impatient, young, is soon ready to leave, but Amanda dives far and deep, as if away from him and all the world, perhaps even herself. Their relationship is fraught with paradoxes.

On a spring white water canoe trip down the Buffalo in Arkansas, Amanda and Will make love on a rocky beach in the middle of the night. Earlier in the day, Amanda had felt a "sharp pain low on her left side"—"the old quirky pain of ovulation." On their way home after their night on the beach, Amanda and Will wait out a thunder storm and later, when Amanda grows "bored with the river" and fails to pay attention, she accidentally turns over the canoe. She and Will are spilled out into treacherous white water. In a bluntly brutal yet lyric passage, Amanda encounters Death. Her own mortality seems about to sweep her away, and she appears willing to surrender to it—presumably just as she has conceived for the first time in thirty years! The passages of conception and the nearness of death are surprisingly similar and bear comparison, foreshadowing as they do the nearly simultaneous birth of the child and the death of Will in the last pages of the novel. In each, lyricism heightens the narrative:

Amanda woke in the night. There was mist all over the water and the little rock peninsula. She stirred in Will's arms, moving her body against his until she woke him. Then, half asleep on the hard bed of the earth they made love as softly as ever they could in the world. Love me, Amanda's body sang. Dance with me, his body answered. Dance with me, dance with me, dance with me.

Now, the darkness demanded. And Amanda surrendered herself to the darkness and the river and the stars.

(243)

A very similar demand darkly presents itself to Amanda when the canoe overturns less than twenty-four hours later:

Everything in the world was cold green water, so cold, so very cold. The whole world was singing in a higher key. She could not breathe, the pressure of the water against her chest was so deep, so hard and dark and cold and full. I am here forever, she thought. This is what it is to die, this pressure, this powerlessness. Then Amanda let go of fear, surrendered, gave in to the water, gave in to her death.

(246)

Amanda does not give in, however; something impells her to save herself. One can perhaps conclude that the life inside her has done this; at any rate, Amanda is destined to survive, unlike Helene Renoir, her role model from another life.

Soon after their bittersweet canoe trip, Will strikes out to solve his money troubles by working on an off-shore oil rig. Some time later, Amanda learns that she is pregnant and writes to Will, telling him of her pregnancy, and also that she has learned her daughter's name and whereabouts from Guy. On his way back to Fayetteville to see his child, Will (who dreams of literally giving children to Amanda) stops in New Orleans to tell Barrett Clare that her mother is alive and well and loves her. Though Will never makes it home, this gift, given impulsively as befits his youthfulness, surely immortalizes him for Amanda.

Gilchrist's choice of *The Annunciation* as a title for her novel about a woman who, after giving up one child at age fourteen, gives birth to a son thirty years later on Christmas Eve leads one to question how closely the novelist intends to parallel the biblical annunciation. Perhaps the author is playing with this motif, suggesting a modern version of "miracle." If one goes to what is considered by many to be the loveliest of the four gospels, St. Luke, and reads the disciple's account of Mary's annunciation, some parallels can be seen to Gilchrist's novel. However, a word of warning is in order at the outset: while this approach sheds interesting light on Gilchrist's structure and helps clarify certain details in *The Annunciation*, the main character's hardline stand against organized Christianity, and the Roman Catholic church in particular, makes the possibility of the author's intention to render a strict biblical reference or allegory highly unlikely. Neither is Gilchrist satirizing Christianity; rather, she takes what she needs to shape her narrative. Still, what she appears to need of the New Testament is quite revealing.

To begin with, Amanda is told of her pregnancy by a masseuse who has looked into her eye and seen "a little configuration." This "unwashed hippie doctor of the hills with his gorgeous tan," is, coincidentally, named Luke. After learning her amazing news, Amanda plays briefly with the idea that Luke is "the angel of the Annunciation." Somewhat comically, she imagines that he has almost struck a classical pose of the annunciation angel: "His hands were folded at his chest. He might have dropped to one knee" (279). In addition, she notices that she is wearing the Virgin's colors, "blue shorts, white T-shirt," and calls herself "Maria Amanda Luisa, the gray-blue virgin of the middleweights." Luke's words, "*a special case. A very special child*," ring for her, and she wonders whether her young lover Will is her "Joseph leading the donkey." But Amanda puts her feet back on the earth when she admits that "he is not here. . . . I have not even heard from him and there is no donkey" (279). Amanda, the High Blasphemer, decides that "it's time to think straight," and so for the moment she ends her flirtation with outright scriptural comparisons.<sup>2</sup>

A fiction writer might be understandably attracted to the gospel of Luke, the "storyteller," who is interested above all in people and especially women. It is in Luke's gospel that human beings speak most eloquently and dramatically, often breaking into songs. As Mary Ellen Chase points out in *The Bible and the Common Reader*, Luke alone includes in his Gospel the Magnificat of Mary. In addition, Luke is known to biblical scholars and readers as a setter of scenes and a chronicler of homely details.<sup>3</sup>

Like the Virgin Mary, Amanda has a close relationship with a female companion, Katie Dunbar. For Mary it is the mother of John, Elisabeth (who also experienced a miracle), and it is in her presence that Mary sings of the angel's visitation and her joy. Though there isn't a strict parallel to this in *The Annunciation*, Amanda is comforted repeatedly by the "experienced" and wise Katie at the potter's home. Finally, one notes that St. Luke refers to Judea as "hill country" and Gilchrist sets her final portion of the book, "The Annunciation," in the hills of northwest Arkansas.

Perhaps a more productive comparison to make, however, is the fact that Mary's news comes to her as a disturbing revelation, and Amanda is likewise extremely troubled by her unexpected pregnancy. She is unmarried, forty-four years old, presumably has experienced an early menopause, and is about to embark upon a possibly auspicious career as a translator of middle French and as a writer. The prospect of having a baby and the ensuing duties of motherhood appear to stand directly in her path toward self-determination. Gilchrist deals with a sharply realistic situation: a woman who perhaps must choose between a career and motherhood, options which until this point have both been closed to Amanda. She struggles with the conflict, and even goes to Tulsa for an abortion, but then she changes her mind, gets drunk to celebrate and has to be taken care of by the Good Samaritan Katie. At this point Amanda seems to have reached a low point, but like Mary, she comes to believe that nothing is impossible and so decides to have the child.

As if sensing that this birth will help ease the guilt with which she has lived for thirty years, Amanda joyfully prepares for labor in her go-for-broke style, "training like she was going out for the Olympics," Katie observes (344).<sup>4</sup> Finally, although the word "obey" seems an odd one for Amanda McCamey, she does in some sense obey a law of nature by not having the abortion. Like Mary, she acquiesces to motherhood. Though what Amanda does may not be said to have strictly to do with grace in the Christian sense, she does redeem herself by being able to give life, through her son, and therefore forgive herself of her sins. Here, then, is the novel's central theme: Amanda's life-long search for love and acceptance and peace.

Amanda achieves a form of heroism by overcoming her alcoholism and to a certain extent, her materialism, and by giving of herself through her late-life motherhood. The favor that she seeks through learning how to live her life



is won through hard circumstances, and will be won anew through even harder days to come as she learns of Will's death and as she seeks her daughter, an event that will surely take place given Will's visit to State Street and Amanda's nearly simultaneous resolve to meet the young woman, Barrett Clare.

As parents of Barrett Clare, Amanda and Guy must face what proves "desperately hard": their act of incest (they were first cousins) and their ultimate responsibility to identify and subsequently love their child, a responsibility from which they can no longer run or hide.<sup>5</sup> The question remains whether Guy and Amanda ever achieve true, lasting heroism. For Guy, it is not so clear cut. With a great deal of money and power within his reach, the first step toward facing his daughter is easily taken when he asks a rich New Orleans politico to find out about the girl's fate. When handed the information, however, Guy asks to have it summarized for him; he can't bear to read it. Later, he visits the New Orleans Lawn Tennis Club and watches his daughter play a match "as if she were a tennis-playing machine." He sees his grandson, a "wild fat little red-headed boy" and feels deeply the need to know this child also. Yet Guy can't approach Barrett alone; he needs Amanda. By the novel's end, Guy hasn't yet contacted his daughter.

Amanda, on the other hand, vows to find her daughter after her son is born, though she had earlier refused to go with Guy to see their child. In the final pages, the possibility for her heroism is strongly hinted; we can believe that, buoyed by the strength which she has already gained from loving her baby son, she will have the courage to seek and acknowledge her first born.

As the novel closes, Amanda drifts to sleep shortly after delivering her son, "dreaming of herself in a white silk suit holding her beautiful daughter in her arms." She at last has the courage to imagine the reunion a happy one, though formerly she had always dreamt of the meeting in nightmare. Perhaps at this point Amanda goes beyond courage to hubris, as she continues: "My life leading to my lands forever and ever and ever, hallowed be my name, goddammit, my kingdom come, my will be done, amen, so be it, Amanda" (353). In her blasphemy of the Lord's Prayer, Amanda McCamey gropes toward self-respect, forgiveness and love. There is nothing irreverent in Amanda's creation of her own liturgy as she accepts motherhood and acknowledges a degree of selflessness shortly before she goes into labor:

This is my body which is not broken by you. This is my flesh and blood. This is myself. I am going to stop being alone in the world. Already I am not alone. Already a miracle is inside of me. Already a miracle has occurred. My child, my ally, are you listening. I love you so much. I can not tell you how I love you. Be well, be whole, stay well.

(325)

Later, when the child lies peacefully in his mother's arms, in Gilchrist's contemporary nativity, Amanda speaks to

him in words that are surely holy for the love and forgiveness they embody:

"Flesh of my flesh," she whispered. "Bone of my bone, blood of my blood. You are kin to me," she whispered, touching his soft hair. Kin to me, kin to me, kin to me. And the memory of the other child was there with them, but it was softer now, paler.

(347–48)

Guided often in her life by lust, hunger, greed, and curiosity, Amanda finally, at age forty-four, begins to direct her own life with loving intelligence: "My life on my terms, my daughter, my son" (353). The lyricism of the ending of *The Annunciation* is a hymn to self-determination, from which we can only wonder at the reserves of Amanda McCamey's imagination and strength.

In her two works of fiction to date, Ellen Gilchrist portrays the workings of a complex female psyche through a variety of women of all ages. Rhoda, Matille, Alisha Terrebone, and Amanda McCamey, to name a few, are all mined from the lode of a larger consciousness which Gilchrist is working with amazing confidence. It is encouraging to see that with *The Annunciation* a possibility for redemption appears on the horizon for Gilchrist's anguished but tenacious women. The writer has struck one element that may lead to a greater wealth for her characters: courage to face the truth about themselves. With this discovery, Gilchrist's women may go further in future works to develop a realism that not only entertains but ennobles.

#### Notes

1. This treatment of children's sexual awakenings is similar to the children's sex games in "Summer, an Elegy," in which Matille and Shelby discover sex while in bed recovering from typhoid vaccinations. Later, when Shelby dies while under anesthesia, Matille feels she has been freed from guilt and the fear that he will tell of their game, though clearly a part of her has also died, as he was her first lover.
2. Gilchrist also toys with the notion of immaculate conception. Shortly before the birth scene, Katie Dunbar's boyfriend Clinton asks, "What about the father?" Katie replies that "she willed it into being, all by herself out of light and air" (315). Though this is meant lightheartedly, Amanda uses the word "miracle" to describe her child only pages later.
3. See Chase's comments (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 284–89, on Mary in Luke's gospel.
4. Amanda is essentially a life-affirmer and is powered by the will to live. One should note here that her lover's name "Will" invites a supposition that when he dies, practically at the moment she is giving birth to their son, a transference of "will" takes place.
5. That their daughter Barrett Clare has suffered from feelings of neglect, isolation, abandonment, and despair—despite, or perhaps because of, her adoption by a wealthy New Orleans family—is made pain-

fully apparent: she has a terrible relationship with her husband (he represents the “heartless” New Orleans society that threatened to consume Amanda) and is out of touch with herself and trying desperately to gain self-respect by playing ferocious tennis and writing anemic confessional poetry. Her links to humanity are through her psychiatrist, Gustave (an obviously one-sided infatuation based on narcissism: she believes he loves her but his job is to be interested in her) and through her love for her hyperactive son.

**Margaret Jones Bolsterli ELLEN GILCHRIST'S  
CHARACTERS AND THE SOUTHERN WOMAN'S  
EXPERIENCE: RHODA MANNING'S DOUBLE  
BIND AND ANNA HAND'S CREATIVITY**

Since the experiences of any powerless class are considered less interesting than those of the powerful, one of the differences between the writing done by men and women has been the tendency for women to ignore the basic facts of their existence because it was not considered significant enough to read about. On the other hand, because of their superior status, men's every thought, feeling or movement has been considered valid subject for literature, easy access for a writer to a vast area of material. However, the current phase of the women's movement has brought a gradual realization that women are not powerless in their own sphere, that as Adrienne Rich's line goes in “From an Old House in America,” “my power is brief and local, but I know my power”—and that the key to transcendence for a writer lies in validating that experience rather than in repudiating it. Because the roles of women and men have traditionally been more clearly defined in the South than in any other region of America, the experience of Southern women, so different from that of its men, is a relatively unmined goldfield. Ellen Gilchrist goes a step further than the canonical Southern women writers, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor and Carson McCullers, in validating that experience because she is willing to go deeper into personality, to shine a light into the dark corners of women's souls to expose the preoccupations that get in the way of their achieving wholeness and coherence. Moreover, she writes about the problems of the female sphere without denying the pleasures in it. Food obsessions may get in the way of happiness, but Gilchrist's characters who have addictions also enjoy the chocolate they cannot resist.

One significant issue she examines is the difficulty of breaking out of the cocoon of the female experience into creativity. For instance, Rhoda Manning's dilemma in “*Revenge*,” or “the Summer of the Broad Jump Pit,” illustrates the double bind that tied up bright little southern girls in the nineteen-forties and gave them some of the problems that are so painful to meet in many of the adolescent and adult women in her stories.<sup>1</sup> Anna Hand, in “*Anna, Part I*,” shows that a woman can transcend the limitations of her experience by using it as material for

art.<sup>2</sup> Not only is that experience, after all, her capital as a writer, but she can understand what has happened to her only by making order of it in fiction, so what might, under other circumstances, be considered her limitation, becomes her passage to freedom.

“*Revenge*,” told in retrospect by the adult Rhoda, begins with the memory of herself as a child, sitting on top of the chicken house watching through binoculars her five male cousins running down a cinder track to pole-vault into a pit of sand and sawdust, an activity from which she is exiled because she is a girl. “I was ten years old, the only girl in a house full of cousins. There were six of us, shipped to the Delta for the summer, dumped on my grandmother right in the middle of a world war.” The societal expectations that put her at this distance from what looks to her like the most fun in the world were reiterated by her own father who, in his letter telling the boys how to construct the track on which they are to train for the Olympics, ended by instructing Rhoda's older brother Dudley “to take good care of me as I was my father's own sweet dear girl.” The boys follow these instructions with relish and refuse to let her help with building the track or run on it once it is finished. She is not allowed to touch the vaulting pole. As Dudley tells her, “this is only for boys, Rhoda. This isn't a game.” Rhoda is supposed to be satisfied with playing with other little girls. In a pattern she is expected to follow for the rest of her life, *she* is to watch from the swing, or the roof of the chicken house, and sometimes from the fence itself, while *they* run and play and learn the discipline of trained athletes. As her grandmother and great-aunt point out to her, if the boys did let her train with them, all she would get for it would be big muscles that would make her so unattractive no boys would ever ask her out and she would never get a husband. Since she is bored to death by the little girl she is supposed to play with on the neighboring plantation, the only diversion she can find besides watching the boys on the track is learning to dance from the black maid.

So Rhoda's first bind is being kept from doing what she wants most to do because she is a girl; it is the old “biology is destiny” argument dramatized on a Mississippi plantation. Little boys are encouraged to pursue activities that will prepare them for running the world while little girls are restricted to the domestic arena where they are expected to spend the rest of their lives.

The second bind, and perhaps the most pernicious one, is the fascination that this woman's sphere comes to hold for little girls. It is so seductive that they can find themselves up to their necks in quicksand before they have felt the ground quiver underfoot. In Rhoda's case, the seductress is her Cousin Lauralee who comes along and asks her to serve as maid of honor in her second wedding. It is more than a touch of irony that Rhoda's mother had been matron of honor in her first excursion down the aisle. The implication is unavoidable that Rhoda is following exactly in her mother's footsteps. She idolizes and imitates Cousin Lau-

ralee and becomes engrossed in preparations for the wedding, trying on every dress in Nell's and Blum's Department Store in Greenville before the right one can be found. It is significant that Rhoda refuses to look at dresses from the girls' department, she feels herself to be so much a part of the "ladies" world in this matter. And she is adamant in her insistence on the "right" dress.

The dress I wanted was a secret. The dress I wanted was dark and tall and thin as a reed. There was a word for what I wanted, a word I had seen in magazines. But what was that word? I could not remember.

"I want something dark," I said at last. "Something dark and silky."

"Wait right there," the saleslady said. "Wait just a minute." Then, from out of a prewar storage closet she brought a blackwatch plaid recital dress with spaghetti straps and a white piqué jacket. It was made of taffeta and rustled when I touched it. There was a label sewn into the collar of the jacket. *Little Miss Sophisticate*, it said. Sophisticate, that was the word I was seeking. I put on the dress and stood triumphant in the sea of ladies and dresses and hangers.

(121)

And so Rhoda, although maintaining all the while that *she* never will marry but will have a career instead, is caught up in preparation for the wedding, which she sees as a means of drawing the envy and admiration of the boys who have cut her out of the pole vaulting. If she cannot get their attention as an equal in their games, she will get it this way. As she later recalls the drive back from Greenville with her new dress, "All the way home I held the box on my lap thinking about how I would look in the dress. 'Wait till they see me like this,' I was thinking. 'Wait till they see what I really look like.'"

The wedding itself is a disappointment. Held at the grandmother's house, there is much less drama than Rhoda would have liked. But afterwards, at the reception, she does something that lets the real Rhoda out of the prison of the women's trappings she has assumed for the wedding. Under the influence of a strong drink of her own concoction, she goes down to the track, takes off her formal, teaches herself to pole vault, and just as everybody from the wedding comes searching for her, she makes a perfect vault over the barrier into the pit.

In retrospect, she is not sure that anything she has done since has been of any real interest to her.

The girl is mother to the woman. This story with such two strong forces pulling at Rhoda, the male sphere with its activity and power on one hand, and the traditional woman's sphere on the other, shows in a nutshell the difficulties that bright little girls of that generation faced. Gilchrist never implies that the experiences in the woman's sphere are not fun. Rhoda *enjoys* choosing that dress and being a big shot in her cousin's wedding, but she also wants to participate in the male world of activity and

power. The dreadful part is that each area apparently excludes the other. Her choices seem to be as final as the choice of figs in Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar*. To choose one means to give up the others.

This is the "vale of soul-making" of the Southern woman writer; but as Gilchrist shows in the later stories about Rhoda and Anna Hand and in her novel *The Annunciation*, some women do indeed finally make it through to creativity. And they do it by accepting the validity of their experience and transforming it into art.

A good example of this is Anna Hand's realization in "*Anna, Part I*" that the context in which she must understand herself is not the male world of power but an adult version of the domestic sphere to which the child Rhoda was confined, and that to order it in fiction is a way to control it. Creativity emerges from the trick of combining the two pulls: one becomes material for the other. Writing is the key to transcendence.

The exclusive nature of the traditional choices for a woman can be seen in the devastating effect of love on Anna, a successful writer whose creativity has been immobilized for ten months by an affair with a married doctor. She has fallen into the pitfalls of such a relationship with her eyes wide open; at the beginning she reflects that she has, after all, already wasted five years of her life on a married man and swears she will never do it again. But she is helpless in the face of love. She is getting old, and this may be her last chance at passion. The doctor, of course, never misses a beat in his career nor in his marriage; it is only Anna's life that is disrupted.

Ellen Gilchrist's opinions about the relative value of the choices Anna has made are implicit in the terms she uses to describe Anna's coming to her senses. The story begins with Anna, having realized the folly of what she has been doing, calling her editor in New York to announce that she is ready to get back to work: "It was a big day for Anna Hand. It was the day she decided to give up being a fool and go back to being a writer" (20). ". . . I've wasted ten months of my life. Ten goddam months in the jaws of love. Well, I had to do it. It's like a cold. If you leave the house sooner or later it happens" (221). What she goes to work on is a story about the affair, "How to ring the truth out of the story, absolve sadness, transmute it, turn it into art" (223). Then Gilchrist's technique is to follow Anna's prescription for writing this story; she begins at the beginning of the affair, noticing everything. It is obvious that the whole thing was hopeless from the start. Not only was the doctor solidly married with no intention of leaving his wife, but Anna knew all along that there were serious, probably irreconcilable differences between them. Yet during the time of the affair she did what women are supposed to do. She ignored the fact that his sentimentality embarrassed her, for example, and let her obsession with him completely dominate her life. Her love blinded her to everything else and induced her to give up her writing, which she acknowledges as the most important thing in



her life. She even entertained the impossible dream that one day they would be married and live happily ever after. The incident that breaks the spell, in fact, is that one day, when they have not been together in a while, he comes over and they have such a good time she forgets he is married, thus breaking her one ironclad rule, never to forget where she is and what she is doing. Realizing that she has fallen to this level of consciousness wakes her up; within three weeks she is home again in South Carolina putting her life back together. In other words, she goes home to return to writing, to validate her experience in art and therefore to achieve transcendence. Significantly, Anna knows that this is what she is doing.

There is a way to organize this knowledge, Anna decided. To understand what happened. This love affair, this very last love affair. In a minute I will get out of this bed and begin to understand what happened. I will pick up the telephone and call Arthur [her editor] and then I will begin to write the stories and they will tell me what is going on.

I will create characters and they will tell me my secrets. They will stand across the room from me with their own voices and dreams and disappointments. I will set them going like a fat gold watch, as Sylvia said. . . . I will gather my tribe around me and celebrate my birthday. There will be champagne and a doberge cake from the bakery that Cajun runs on the highway. Yes, all that for later. For now, the work before me, waiting to be served and believed in and done. My work. How I define myself in the madness of the world.

(238)

At this point, she takes control of her life by climbing out of bed, sitting down at her typewriter and beginning to write. Her subject, of course, is what she knows best: the women's world, the love affair and her survival.

#### Notes

1. Ellen Gilchrist, "Revenge," *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams* (Fayetteville: Univ. of Arkansas Press, 1981) 111–24.
2. Ellen Gilchrist, "Anna, Part I," *Drunk with Love* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1986) 220–39.

Every family, it is sometimes said, has a member to whom secrets are told. These secrets are passed on with a clear injunction against retelling but with the hidden hope that, someday, somehow, they will be revealed. So begins *The Woman Warrior*,<sup>1</sup> with Maxine Hong Kingston's mother telling her: "You must not tell anyone . . . what I am about to tell you." And this story, the story of Kingston's dead aunt, "No Name Woman," becomes the first chapter of that book.

Often the person to whom secrets are told is a writer, or a would-be writer. Anna Hand, the main character of Ellen Gilchrist's *The Anna Papers*,<sup>2</sup> is just this kind of family member. A "black sheep"<sup>3</sup> herself, as well as a repository of family secrets and disreputable stories, Anna is a writer

and a dying childless woman who wants to affect her family in some irreparable way before she ends her life. She remembers and resurrects a past her family wants to forget, and she leaves a legacy (both material and emotional) that is to affect her family in important ways after her death.

*The Anna Papers* thus raises many issues concerning writing, fiction-making, fictionalizing, memory, storytelling, and gossip. Anna Hand wants to remember and recover the past, and she reflects (as "writer" and as "gossip") on that process of recovery. As writer as well as central character of the text she controls even after her death, Anna advances and rejects various interpretations of her life history and that of her family, and she comments self-consciously on her own narrative identity. Thus, by appearing as both writer/creator/narrator and as central character, Anna Hand breaks down the usual distinctions between "reality" and "fiction" and exposes the arbitrary nature of the boundaries between them. And like that other Anna in *The Golden Notebook*, this Anna talks about narrative *within* her own narrative and thus creates a "metafiction" that draws attention to the conventionality of its own narrative codes.

Within this complex of issues, perhaps it comes as no surprise that the main character should be named Anna and that motherhood (biological and adoptive, literal and figurative) should be a central concern of the narrative. Like St. Anne, the mother of the mother of the "Word Made Incarnate," who was so often depicted in medieval iconography holding a book, this Anna is also associated with language and culture, and she also appears as a kind of "Ur-mother," an original mother, a spiritual mother to others. But the linking of motherhood and creativity, of procreation and representation, is no simple issue in *The Anna Papers*. Anna Hand, unlike St. Anne, is a sexually active unmarried woman, and more important, she is herself a writer, a creator of culture, and an independent, self-determining woman. St. Anne, we remember, was *only* the mother of the mother of the "Word" and was thus at several removes from the authority of the incarnated word itself. The original St. Anne was an image, like Mary herself, of purity and spirituality, of selfless love and care of others, not an image of the creation of culture. The figures of Anne (and Mary) have most frequently been seen, by feminists especially, as writing women *out* of culture, or into culture only as mothers, never as independent, self-determining selves and never as writers, creators, artists.<sup>4</sup>

There are three central events in Gilchrist's novel that link writing and fictionmaking with motherhood. One concerns Anna's effort to find and recover a lost "spiritual" daughter, her niece, and in the process to write Olivia de Haviland Hand back into the story of the Hand family. The second concerns Anna's efforts to write another competing mother *out* of the Hand family history, to create a novel that will effectively dismiss the story and the claims of the mother of another niece. (This mother is rather pointedly named Sheila McNiece.) The first of these events concerns Anna

primarily as family member, the second primarily as writer. One event shows her (as “mother”) recovering a lost part of the Hand family history; the other shows her (as writer) destroying a part of their history. But ultimately the two events come together: They both express Anna as writer and as competing “mother,” and they both involve the complex interrelation of gossip, fiction-making, fiction writing, creativity, and sheer meddlesomeness.

But there is a third event that is centrally concerned with writing and motherhood, with competing “fictions” and with issues of narrative control or manipulation. The third event takes place after Anna’s death and concerns the “Anna Papers” that have been left to Anna’s sister Helen as executor of her literary estate. Anna entrusts these papers (many of which are gossipy accounts of real or imagined affairs) to the one truly conventional member and the only living mother of teenaged children in the Hand family. Her intention, seemingly, is to control her “bourgeois” little sister Helen and to replicate herself in this sister after her death.

All of these events (finding and claiming the niece, dismissing the sister-in-law as an “unworthy” mother, managing and controlling the sister after Anna’s own death) are acts of cultural appropriation—cultural imperialism, if you will. Each silences the voices of others in the text, and in particular they silence the voices of other mothers. As such, they undermine the fantasy of the strong and self-determining writing woman as “mother” and as authority. And they do this, finally, within the structure of the gothic romance.

At the very beginning of *The Anna Papers*, we learn that Anna Hand is a childless writer and a dying woman, someone who has been wounded by cancer in her reproductive organs. Also at the beginning of the narrative, we see Anna coming home to her family in North Carolina; for reasons that even she cannot identify, she needs to be close to them, to gather her family about her, this family that has been broken up and dispersed through death, divorce, geography, and feuding. One week before Anna finds the first lump, which will signal the cancer that threatens her life, she lies awake at night, brooding over the symptoms she is trying so hard to deny:

It’s getting worse. . . . I almost fainted the other day and my hair is getting thin . . . I’m not imagining things. I am imagining every bit of this. . . . Go to sleep. I’m my mother’s child. She is right around the corner, loving me. And Daniel and Jessie and Olivia and James and Niall and Louise the runaway and Helen, God bless her little bourgeois heart, and so many.

(141–42)

We can see from this passage that Anna senses subconsciously that she is facing her death, but we can also see that she attempts to “manage” this troubling information received from her body and to distance it, to explain it away. And so Anna proceeds through all the rest of her narrative: acknowledging, reflecting, remembering, avoiding, explaining away, fictionalizing.

Anna also faces another kind of loss, which she is concerned to remember and to forget, to acknowledge and to deny, and that is the many miscarriages she suffered earlier during her marriages. She considers that a child is “the thing itself, the whole entire meaning of the tribe, nation, species, the branching out, the seed.” A child is the “one thing that was denied to me that I can never forgive or understand” (44). But she works hard to cover up this loss in numerous affairs and then in her refusal to consult a doctor once again, this time about her troubling symptoms of cancer. And these two anxieties—the loss of children, the approach of death—inform all the rest of the narrative, driving Anna to a kind of nostalgia based on denial and appropriation of the lives of others.

When her niece, Olivia de Haviland Hand, the lost child of her brother’s first marriage, reads Anna’s books and contacts her through her publisher, Anna feels compelled to visit her, even though she is acting against the strong wishes of her brother. Olivia’s own mother, Summer Deer, died giving birth to her, and Olivia lives with her American Indian aunt and grandparents in Oklahoma, significantly enough at the end of the “Trail of Tears.” Anna goes to Oklahoma to meet Olivia; then she arranges to bring her back to North Carolina where she engineers her absorption into the Hand family. Still grieving for all the children miscarried from her own womb, Anna says she “needs” this 16-year-old girl who makes straight A’s, this “gene carrier par excellence” (45). “Dear Daniel,” she writes her brother, “I wish I would stop STICKING MY NOSE IN YOUR BUSINESS. Replicating DNA, that’s what’s causing all this trouble . . . my empty, troubled womb” (110).

Interestingly, Anna has another niece, a second daughter of her brother, and this niece has a living mother, a professional woman herself, who might have appeared as a competing story to Anna’s own fiction-making about herself as real “spiritual” mother to her nieces. Instead, Sheila McNiece is written *out* of the family in the last novel to be written by Anna Hand. Jessie’s mother is dismissed in a line or two: She is a drug addict, she lives in London, and she is an image of pure “evil.” Her story is contained in a text that will “explore evil” because “Sheila McNiece *is* evil” (139, emphasis added), as Anna tells us:

By August Anna was feeling better. . . . She went to New York and got drunk with her editor and told him about the book. “It better not really be her mother,” he said. “Is it really her mother, Anna?”

“No, only my perceptions. Do you know the line from *The Tempest*, ‘Come, Spirit, it is time to deal with Caliban’? That’s the theme of it. I want to explore evil and Sheila McNiece is evil.”

(138–39)

This mention of Caliban points the way to a deeper reading of *The Anna Papers*. For the reader in a postcolonialist context, Caliban is now frequently read as an image of colonial appropriation.<sup>5</sup> Enslaved, deformed, landless, and largely without speech, he is the “native” evil that is cast

out in Prospero's colonization of the island. But Anna invites us to understand Caliban as pure "evil," not as an oppressed native. And whereas Sheila is dismissed as nothing but a symbol of pure evil, Olivia, as the "native" or half-native child, is appropriated. Olivia is the recaptured native child, brought back into the context of her European family, her father's family. Anna herself is driven by a nostalgia for lost origins, and Olivia, the "lost" native American, functions in this book as partial fulfillment of her dreams.

Anna gives Olivia's aunt and grandparents money, but the deeper issues of family loyalty and cultural identity are left unresolved, even unstated. Her own claims as Olivia's new mother and as the wealthy professional woman who can lift her niece out of poverty are simply more important to her, and they blind her (and the text) to other considerations.

*The Anna Papers* is concerned with absent and silenced mothers (Summer Deer and Sheila McNiece), and it is concerned with the fiction-making of Anna Hand who works hard to recover and reconstitute the stories of these other mothers and their daughters as versions of her own story. But interestingly, Anna herself is silenced halfway through the chronology of her narrative when she commits suicide by cyanide and drowning. Dressed in a fur-lined Valentino jacket and expensive leather boots, Anna leaves her lover ("the red-haired married baby doctor"), drives to the pier, sticks the pill into her mouth, and walks into the Atlantic Ocean.

Anna's death, however, does not cause her disappearance from the text. By dying abruptly and without explanation, she is able to control the "script" for the rest of the book. Her family and friends are left to try to solve the mystery of her death, then to sort through her papers, find her legacy (a fortune in South African Krugerrands left in the family graveyard), and resolve the issues left unresolved by her sudden disappearance from the text. In doing these things, they are transformed and they come together, in the way that Anna has scripted for them before her own death.

After Anna's death, Helen must work, as Anna's literary executor, to reconstitute Anna's life through the papers she has left behind. Initially, Helen resists this work: "I have never been this chatty and I have never gossiped in my life. That's what writers do and why I wouldn't stoop to be one" (207–8). Helen discovers a set of "embarrassing" papers and discovers, furthermore, that these papers were written not in Anna's own voice but in the one that "Momma says Anna borrowed from listening to me" (208), a voice that Helen denies.

Helen denies the voice that Anna has assigned to her, but she begins to take on the voice of Anna herself as found in her papers. And in reading tales of Anna's seductions, Helen herself begins to enter a tale of seduction designed by Anna for her little "bourgeois" sister. Helen begins to meditate on her own loss of freedom as a mother, and

then—becoming like Anna herself—she goes to bed with the coexecutor of Anna's estate. In the end, Helen starts to write some papers of her own and discovers "I'm beginning to sound just like her" (218).

Silence and speech. Motherhood and creativity. Reproduction and representation. *The Anna Papers* evokes all of these cultural dualities, but it plays them out within a text that is more "popular" than "elitist." Gilchrist's book is, in many ways, a contemporary "gothic romance." The beautiful heroine dying of an undiagnosed disease, hopelessly in love with wonderful, unattainable men (especially Anna's favorite lover, "the red-haired married baby doctor"), is of course a stock-in-trade of modern mass-market romance. And other motifs found more commonly in nineteenth-century romances are here also: the young mother dead in childbirth (Olivia's mother, Summer Deer); Anna's wake without her body; and finally, the treasure map she leaves directing her mourners to a buried treasure in South African Krugerrands waiting to be dug up in the family cemetery. Finally, the brilliant and beautiful lost niece (Olivia) who is found and claimed by the family, and who will receive the fortune at the end, is familiar to all readers of that paradigmatic Victorian romance *Jane Eyre*.

Leslie Rabine, in *Reading the Romantic Heroine: Text, History, Ideology*,<sup>6</sup> points out that romantic love narratives, including twelfth-century romances, nineteenth-century novels, and contemporary mass-market romances, are most popular in historical periods when the family or other smaller social groups are breaking down. The romance tends to be written when "forms of community based on direct personal relations, like the medieval clan, the nineteenth-century peasant village, or in our own day the nuclear family" are in the process of disintegrating and being replaced by "institutions of the state which mediate, rationalize, and alienate these direct human relations" (RRH 186). In other words, romantic fictions are driven by nostalgia. And this nostalgia can be seen as a response to threats to the family or as a response to anxiety or loss—all of which inform *The Anna Papers*.

But Rabine also points out the contradictions embodied within these romantic fictions. Frequently, romances "work to recuperate women's subversive fantasies into structures of patriarchal power" (RRH 188), as in Harlequin romances, which place the heroine at the center of a genre that nevertheless itself remains marginalized. But a different sort of contradiction appears in *The Anna Papers*. Anna's subversive fantasies of the strong and self-determining *writing* woman are incorporated within the gothic romance, as we have seen, and also within the corrupted and now discredited formula of (white) American popular culture concerning American Indians.

As Anna comes to get Olivia and to take her away from the town of Tahlequah, where the Trail of Tears ended for the Cherokee, we witness both a familial and a literary-cultural appropriation. For, as Anna says, "she is one of us": one of the Hands by virtue of blood relation, and one



of the Hands by virtue of education, culture, language, text, and inscription. In other words, Olivia is written out of the text of American Indian culture (the only thing she retains from them is her love of horses—itsself a European importation) and into the culture of a white, southern family.

Thus, in reading *The Anna Papers*, it is hard to escape the suspicion that the “best Indians” in this book are “dead” ones (Summer Deer, who died giving birth to Olivia) or living half-Indians like Olivia, who has all the “approved” qualities—height, slimness, and red hair—of her white father and is recognized and accepted by him at the end. The narrative thus moves to incorporate Olivia into her father’s white southern family in the kind of cultural imperialism that recognizes the “native” as exotic and desirable as long as she can be contained or appropriated.

*The Anna Papers* thus practices an unexamined form of cultural imperialism, one where each “self” in the book is appropriated, renamed as a part of Anna, the Ur-character, the “devouring mother,” if you will. Olivia, Jessie, Helen, and others all mirror parts of Anna herself, and their separate identities are never allowed to emerge in the book. The metafiction of the book, the self-conscious reflections by Anna and Helen on the narrative process itself, as well as the determined doublings and repetitions of plot lines, serve in the end only to silence a potential dialogue with others—other mothers, children of other races or ethnic backgrounds. Furthermore, the novel seems to continue and reaffirm the cultural myth that mothers do not write and that writers are not mothers. As in nineteenth-century texts, representation and reproduction are here largely incompatible. The biological mothers in *The Anna Papers* are either absent, dead, or ineffectual, and the fiction-making of Anna (as writer and also as manipulator of the life “scripts” of others) is dependent on their absence or death.

*The Anna Papers* thus draws on many of the myths, metaphors, and tropes of more distinguished literature and of a Christian and classical cultural heritage. Like Anne the mother of Mary, the mother of Christ, this Anna is presented as an “original” mother, the true spiritual source of others. But more important, Anna Hand is like that other Anna, the Roman Anna Perenna, who stands “at the change of years,” looking both backwards and forwards. A “two-headed goddess of time,” Anna Hand is the caretaker of family stories from the past and also the ghost that haunts the future after her own death. Both black sheep and historian, outcast and center, this Anna has great exuberance and cleverness. But Anna Hand appears, finally, to be largely meddlesome and self-deceiving, and the book as a whole comes across as a series of competing stories or representations of this one narcissistic self.

#### Notes

1. Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (New York: Random House, 1976), 3.

2. Ellen Gilchrist, *The Anna Papers* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1988). Subsequent quotations are noted in parentheses in the text by page numbers.
3. See Elizabeth Stone, *Black Sheep and Kissing Cousins: How Our Family Stories Shape Us* (New York: Penguin, 1988), for a provocative discussion of how family narratives shape us.
4. For example, see Susan Rubin Suleiman, “Writing and Motherhood,” in *The (M)other Tongue*, ed. Shirley Nelson Garner, Claire Kahane, and Madelon Sprengnether (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).
5. For example, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,” in *The Feminist Reader: Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*, ed. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989).
6. Leslie Rabine, *Reading the Romantic Heroine: Text, History, Ideology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985). Subsequent quotations are noted in parentheses in the text by (RRH) and page numbers.

Experiences, reminiscences, episodes, picked up as only women know how to pick them up from other women’s lives,—or other women’s destinies, as they prefer to call them,—and told as only women know how to relate them; . . . that is what interests the women who sit of summer nights on balconies. For in those long-moon countries life is open and accessible, and romances seem to be furnished real and gratis, in order to save, in a languor-breeding climate, the ennui of reading and writing books.

—Grace King, *Balcony Stories*

Although an established literary tradition associated with a particular place, region, or city can be of enormous value to a writer, offering inspiration and teaching by example, it can also become an obstacle to success and a threat to the writer’s creativity. The danger is especially severe when the materials of the tradition gain such popular approval that publishers, critics, and other readers demand more of the same. Flannery O’Connor spoke to this difficulty when she described the predicament of the southern writer after Faulkner this way: “Nobody wants his mule and wagon stalled on the same track the Dixie Limited is roaring down.”<sup>1</sup> The writer who takes New Orleans as a setting faces a similar dilemma, although we might substitute Tennessee Williams’ streetcar named Desire for the Dixie Limited as the symbolic vehicle carrying these popular expectations.

George W. Gable, in his collection of stories *Old Creole Days*, pioneered imaginative writing about New Orleans in English. His stories of picturesque Creoles, dark secrets, and old family feuds transformed the exotic surfaces of New Orleans life into the material of fiction. The many writers who followed him gravitated to the same thematic material and descriptive motifs; consequently, by the middle of the twentieth century, the romantic idea of Old New Orleans had ossified into predictable patterns of character, image, and plot.

Much of the writing about New Orleans since Cable falls into two traditions, one focusing on the French Quarter, the other on the Garden District. The French Quarter tradition belongs largely to outsiders, who often focus on newcomers haunted by the exoticism of the Quarter. The tradition centered on the Garden District (or, more generally, Uptown New Orleans) offers a more domestic mood, focusing on manners and mores and unfolding in private places. Grace King is one founder of this tradition: she began writing to explain the ways of New Orleans to outsiders and to defend these ways against the perceived attacks of Cable, yet her fiction reveals a cautious testing of social beliefs about the roles of women and blacks. Another is Kate Chopin, who writes critically about Creole societies as an adopted insider; Edna Pontellier in *The Awakening* chafes against the rigid strictures of the established society.<sup>2</sup>

The Garden District tradition has particularly influenced the view of the city held by local writers and by New Orleanians themselves. This literature both grows from and contributes to a perception of upper-class New Orleans society as different and a bit precious. This perception may derive in part, as W. Kenneth Holditch has suggested, from the fact that holding center stage in this society is the glittering artifice of a Carnival ball.<sup>3</sup> Whatever its source, this perception results in a population thought to be set apart from the rest of the world, destined for great things—unrequited love, sexual indiscretion, alcoholism, wasted potential, suicide.

In recent years, this Uptown tradition has come under close scrutiny and revision by Ellen Gilchrist, Sheila Bosworth, and Nancy Lemann; each has written a novel depicting the conflict of a central female character with this tradition; their characters and plots, and even their narrative forms, embody the confrontation with tradition. Among the three, Gilchrist's perspective is unique: the protagonists of her fiction inhabit the margins of this society, and their conflicts with the society take place within fairly traditional narrative forms. Both Bosworth and Lemann, by contrast, offer protagonists who have grown up within this society and whose rejection of it is thus more complex. This complexity shapes unusual narrative forms that unify the rejection of social and literary traditions.

Ellen Gilchrist's rejection of Uptown society and its literary tradition is the simplest and, at the same time, the most complete. The New Orleans residents she includes are often marginal characters themselves; to them and to Gilchrist, the shallowness of upper-class New Orleans society is clear. Her central characters can never be accepted into Uptown society, and generally would spurn such acceptance. In her novel *The Annunciation* (1983), a bride new to the city drives down St. Charles Avenue with her housekeeper sitting beside her; feeling a shared alienation, they imagine themselves "new people in the old museum of New Orleans, Louisiana."<sup>4</sup> This image serves as a useful figure for all of Gilchrist's New Orleans

fiction, which places characters new to the city's literary tradition in conflict with the symbols and tokens of the entrenched societal tradition.

Gilchrist's position as an outside observer who sets herself and her main characters in opposition to the Uptown society is most clearly seen in "*Looking over Jordan*," a story that seems based, at least loosely, on the reception of Gilchrist's work in New Orleans. Its two central characters are Lady Margaret Sarpie, a young woman of a distinguished but declining family who has recently chastised in print Anna Hand, the author of a scandalous book ridiculing the city; and Hand herself, who decides to add a hedonistic dimension to her book tour: "The strange lassitude of New Orleans in summer, the wine at the party, the tiredness in her bones. Why not, she thought. I'll be gone tomorrow. Get drunk, eat sugar, get laid by a native, *be here*."<sup>5</sup> The native in question is Lady Margaret's brother Armand, and the three are brought together in the Sarpies' old summer home on the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain. Through the interplay of the two women, Gilchrist aligns herself with Anna Hand in opposition to the community's attachment to faded gentility and remembered glamour.

The title story of Gilchrist's first collection, *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams* (1981), traces the threat an outsider poses to the remnant of this gilded age. The action unfolds at a decisive moment: change has come to the New Orleans Tennis Club. Gone are the days when "waiters had brought steaming cups of thick chicory-flavored café au lait out onto the balcony with cream and sugar in silver servers"; now the members must put up with "percolated coffee in Styrofoam cups with plastic spoons and some kind of powder instead of cream." What's more, in order to pay the mortgage, new members have been allowed in, new members who "didn't belong to the Boston Club or the Southern Yacht Club or Comus or Momus or Proteus."<sup>6</sup>

One of these new members has forced a descendant of the Old Guard to break a once-inviolable code of honor: "There was no denying it. There was no undoing it. At ten o'clock that morning LaGrande McGruder, whose grandfather had been president of the United States Lawn Tennis Association, had cheated a crippled girl out of a tennis match."<sup>7</sup> LaGrande's opponent, Roxanne, is one of the nouveau members; the fact that she and her husband are Jewish makes them even less welcome. The story opens as LaGrande, remembering her Pyrrhic victory over Roxanne, throws her tennis gear into the Mississippi from the Huey P. Long Bridge, marking an ironic populist victory for the Kingfish.

In other stories, Gilchrist creates a variety of characters who, like Roxanne, live on the fringes of Uptown society. An enterprising young pusher sets up shop under an Audubon Park oak tree in "*The President of the Louisiana Live Oak Society*." Nora Jane Whittington robs an Irish Channel bar to finance a trip west in "*The Famous Poll at Jody's Bar*." Crystal Weiss, in a series of stories in *Victory*

over *Japan* (1984) and *Drunk with Love* (1986), exemplifies a different kind of marginality: her unwillingness to adopt the roles of happy socialite, devoted wife, and young mother assigned to her by Uptown society drives her into drunken isolation.

Gilchrist offers a more fully developed version of Crystal in the central character of *The Annunciation*. Like Crystal, Amanda McCamey Ashe is an unhappily married woman whose Mississippi Delta origins conflict with the New Orleans Jewish roots of her husband. As a young girl growing up in the Delta, Amanda was fascinated by New Orleans (an experience shared by young women in the fiction of Eudora Welty and Elizabeth Spencer). She encounters the city firsthand at age fourteen when, pregnant by her older cousin, she is sent to a New Orleans home for unwed mothers to give birth. When she moves to New Orleans years later, after her wedding, she recalls her experience as a pregnant and frightened teenager. As her marriage deteriorates, her thoughts turn increasingly to her lost daughter, whom she imagines she sees throughout the city. In fact, her daughter is herself unhappily married to a New Orleans lawyer and lives a few blocks from Amanda. Although the women do not meet as mother and daughter in the novel, events at its end suggest that a meeting may be imminent. (A later collection, *Light Can Be Both Wave and Particle*, includes two stories that, according to the book jacket, "provide a new ending to" *The Annunciation*. This additional material clarifies some ambiguities and provides a happier conclusion to the earlier book.)

Amanda rejects New Orleans upper-class society as she gradually awakens to the shallowness of those around her. Gilchrist gives us the substance of Amanda's critique through a flurry of cocktail party chatter that reveals a startling variety of oppressive attitudes, ranging from racism ("She told her brother she was pregnant and he said, good, he'd go on safari and bring her back a little Negro") to the use of children as status symbols ("Did she get into Sacred Heart? Oh, that's a shame"); the chatter, reported with an accurate ear for distinctive New Orleans syntax and intonation, builds to a climax that displays the inevitable results of such oppressions:

"Shot himself in front of his girlfriend's house while the party was going on. Oh, yes, barely sixteen. They don't know where he got the gun."

"Hung himself in the closet at Covington."

"Jumped off a bridge. Just like his daddy before him."

"Oh, he's disappeared into the Quarter. Won't even take calls. Of course, everyone's known for years. I heard it was a high school boy, an Italian."

(68–69)

Moving through this world of shallow chatter and deep wounds, Amanda grows ever more conscious that she does not belong in this world of tea parties and suicidal youth. She finds a friend and ally in her housekeeper, Lavertis;

their shared alienation from the community contributes to their common sense that they are "new people in the old museum of New Orleans."

These experiences contribute to Amanda's disaffection with her husband and her eventual flight to Fayetteville, Arkansas, where she translates French poetry and takes a young lover. Although Amanda never returns to New Orleans in the course of the novel, she cannot escape the "cargo" of her unknown daughter. Here Gilchrist adopts a motif common in New Orleans fiction. The lost child, the heritage hidden behind locked gates within mysterious courtyards, the dark family secret: these reappear continually in New Orleans writing—in the stories of George W. Cable and Grace King, in *Absalom, Absalom!*, even in Anne Rice's vampire chronicles. The heritage that Amanda passes unwittingly to her daughter is the oppression of Uptown society, an oppression that Amanda overcomes only through understanding herself and taking responsibility for her life; only by leaving New Orleans entirely can she hope to escape the city's snare.

In the novels of Sheila Bosworth and Nancy Lemann, freedom is not so easily won. Although they perceive, with Gilchrist, fatal flaws in the ways Uptown society constitutes itself, each is too deeply rooted in that society to reject it without a struggle. Bosworth's protagonist must reexamine painful childhood memories, and Lemann's protagonist seems so entrenched that she may never escape. To these authors, the structures and manners of New Orleans society are not merely museum exhibits to be examined, analyzed, perhaps laughed at, but active forces that threaten their protagonists, who are both members of the society and observers of it. Their characters are latter-day Quentin Compsons, wanting to be free of the ruins of the old order yet knowing that it is only from those ruins that their freedom can come.

Clay-Lee Calvert, the protagonist of Bosworth's *Almost Innocent* (1984) is, in many ways, a figure familiar to readers of southern literature. Her search is to understand the past (grounded for her in New Orleans) in order to understand herself. In the narrative of Clay-Lee's search, Bosworth conducts her own analytical search, using the literary material of the grand New Orleans novel to subvert the genre itself. Her subversion takes several forms; the details of plot and character that we have come to expect of New Orleans novels are here in abundance, yet Bosworth sets them in a context that questions both their source and their effect. We see these motifs through the central consciousness of Clay-Lee, and through her we understand their impact. The book's narrative circles through recollections and flashbacks, telling the story of Clay-Lee's past as she herself comes to understand it. We learn the story of Clay-Lee's parents and her early life as Clay-Lee herself hears it from her mother's cousin Felicity Léger de la Corde, then Clay-Lee's own memories move the story toward the present.

This nostalgic tone is set in the novel's opening scene. As Clay-Lee and her father have dinner at Galatoire's, Clay-Lee sees their waiter as a link with the past: "Vallon is old



now, almost eighty. He used to give my father's father red beans and rice in one of the upstairs rooms, generations ago."<sup>8</sup> Looking at her aging father's youthful smile, Clay-Lee begins examining her past, trying to understand the forces that led to the death of her mother, Constance, and the continuing impact of those forces on her own life.

Many of the traditions Clay-Lee encounters during this self-examination are those of a Catholic upbringing: Lenten regulations, parochial school, catechism, and fasting before First Communion. The memories of these rituals are shaded by a mature understanding of the oppressions of childhood, as when Clay-Lee recalls, with wry humor, the inadvertent breaking of her First Communion fast: "It was the day I made my First Communion, and it was the day I consigned my immortal soul to hell" (92). For the young girl, the damnation of her soul is less important than the embarrassment of not going through a ceremony so meaningful to her mother. Clay-Lee inherits this fixation on the past from Constance, lost in the sorrows of her own childhood. When Clay-Lee's great-uncle (called "Uncle Baby Brother" by all) agrees to pay her tuition to Sacred Heart Academy, the exclusive girls' school that Constance attended, her mother urges upon Clay-Lee the importance of this event: "'Just think,' Constance was telling me, 'Saint Madeleine Sophie Barat founded the Society of the Sacred Heart in France, in 1800, and here you are, almost two hundred years later, way over in Louisiana, about to share in all its history and tradition'" (163).

The rebellious young Clay-Lee fights against the strictures of this history and tradition. When her aunt urges her to read *Lives of the Saints for Little People*, she turns instead to *Louisiana Hayride*, a history of Huey Long's tumultuous career; when her aunt warns her to pray to "the saints instead of making fun of them," she retorts, "Maybe I'll pray to Huey Long instead" (195). We chuckle at this youthful rebellion, but underlying Bosworth's humor is a serious point: the mature Clay-Lee must realize how these traditions imposed themselves on her developing sense of self.

And yet the novel's grounding in New Orleans does not derive solely from its repetition of the old chestnuts of the New Orleans literary tradition; Bosworth balances the sentimental perspective of the past with the more realistic appraisal of the present. Bosworth's clearest use of this dual perspective comes through her use of Mardi Gras, always a prominent motif of the grand New Orleans novel. As the central event of New Orleans social life, Carnival often becomes, as here, a prime setting for serendipitous meetings.

The dramatic manner in which Clay-Lee describes her parents' first meeting suggests how completely her mother's identity was bound to the grand artificiality of New Orleans high society: "She was Constance Blaise Alexander, Queen of Comus, the most magnificent of the Carnival balls, on the night they fell in love" (17). Their

masked meeting recalls those that begin George W. Cable's *Grandissimes* and Frances Parkinson Keyes's *Crescent Carnival* and is marked by the equally venerable literary tradition of flaunting custom: "As Constance leaned forward to greet her consort, Rand Calvert, far below, defied tradition by throwing aside his mask to see her face more clearly" (17). The special connection of this family with Mardi Gras goes back even to Constance's birth on Twelfth Night, the traditional beginning of the Carnival season. With the obstetrician still in his satin ball costume, Constance's mother vows to "dress her daughter in only blue or white till she was five years old, as a sign of thanksgiving to the Mother of God for the child's existence" (27).

Yet this romantic view of Carnival is sharply undercut when Constance learns, after her father's sudden death, that he lost most of his money gambling and died penniless because he "borrowed against everything he still owned for the pleasure of seeing you, Mrs. Calvert, as the beautiful debutante and Carnival Queen that you were" (66). We are to see, with Clay-Lee, the absurdity of this gesture, yet Clay-Lee also responds to its grandeur.

As the narrative moves into Clay-Lee's own memories, she recalls a Carnival season that serves as a crucial turning point for the plot. Her recollections of Felicity and her husband Airey's annual Mardi Gras open house are cast as a romantic childhood idyll, yet it sets into motion events that will haunt Clay-Lee well into her adult life. In describing the party, Bosworth captures a certain self-consciously gracious New Orleans social style: "Felicity had not forgotten the light eaters and pregnant ladies, either (and it seemed to me then there were always dozens of the latter, in this city of Catholic wealth and dynasty): waiters circulated with trays of watercress or Virginia ham finger sandwiches, offered iced tea to the mothers-to-be, and poured champagne for their husbands" (125). This fragility cannot prevail against the passage of time: "I don't like the parades any more," recalls Constance; "I used to like them when I lived in the Garden District" (123). Despite the care with which plans have been laid, the party turns out disastrously when Clay-Lee's great-uncle shows up unexpectedly with a surprise guest: "Uncle Baby had brought an octoroon to the de la Cordes' Open House" (131). Damaging as this scene is to the delicate sensibilities of the guests, Uncle Baby Brother's appearance forebodes more lasting damage: his infatuation with Constance will lead to the breakup of the Calverts' marriage and to Constance's death.

The novel's critical view of New Orleans traditions is manifested most clearly in Felicity's narration of the early portion of Constance's story to Clay-Lee. Bosworth draws a sharp contrast between the dying woman and the legendary exploits of her youth: "Tales of her bewitching magnetism, her pitiless heart, ran rife among a certain segment of New Orleans' population. Felicity Léger had trifled with the affections of a brilliant Jewish medical student, wrecked his studies, and robbed him of his future; she had

worn underpants fashioned from a Rebel flag to a childhood friend's coming-out party, lifted her skirt, and shown them to the orchestra leader, whose band then burst into the most rousing rendition of "I Wish I Was in Dixie" ever heard at the Southern Yacht Club" (23). By now Felicity has become the picturesque aging relative, recounting the family history to the adoring Clay-Lee. Bosworth refuses, however, to let Felicity slip fully into a nostalgic haze; into a sensuous account of childhood memories she interjects a jarring reminder of Felicity's present decay:

All through the rooms were the blending, alternating aromas of sachet-scented bed linens, hand-embroidered by French nuns at a convent in Vermilion Parish; of magnolias and camellias, floating in silver bowls in every room, each spring and summer; of pine logs burning in the wide fireplaces in winter; of freshly baked biscuits and of French-drip coffee in the mornings, gumbos and baked hams and honey-basted plantains at dinnertime. . . .

Felicity paused for a minute, to swallow what looked like a Percodan, then went on.

(33–34)

A gashed arm provides the immediate occasion for the Percodan, yet her action suggests that the past itself is a dangerous narcotic, its soothing forces offering both solace and addiction. In her perseverance and her love for Clay-Lee, Felicity recalls other stoic New Orleans ladies, particularly Binx Bolling's aunt, Emily Cutrer, in Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*. Her desire to pass on something of value to future generations is especially clear in her bequest to Clay-Lee of a collection of books, one a leather-bound edition of Ovid with a letter in it: "'Dear Clay-Lee,' the letter read, 'go on without me, from where we stopped our last Friday night together. If you start at the place where you recall things firsthand—that would be your first years at the house on Camp Street—you will look well and fairly at what you know of your mother's life and your own, and eventually you will see cause and effect. Felicity.'" (73). Added to this was a quote from Ovid: "*Parsque meminisse doloris*, she had written; it is part of grief to remember" (73). Like Binx, Clay-Lee must decide how to interpret these hints from the past and how to integrate them with the knowledge she has gained on her own. Only then can she understand who is responsible for the events of her childhood.

The question of responsibility is posed most clearly by the figure of Rand, Clay-Lee's father, the carefree artist and defier of tradition who, in the opening scene that introduces the book's flashbacks, stumbles drunkenly through dinner at Galatoire's. Rand is the central exhibit before whom Clay-Lee stands, aware that she must understand its meaning for her life before she can move on.

A *Times-Picayune* writer has called Rand "an uptown New Orleans archetype," and reported Bosworth's experience with Rand's avatars: "'I know so many men like that. . . . In fact, three different men have said to me, 'Oh, I'm

Rand Calvert.'" And I say "Oh well, yes." . . . I wonder if any other city has them. . . . I'm talking about bright, sophisticated, charming men who have that fatal lethargy. You have a feeling they wouldn't be as charming if they had that drive, that Toledo, Ohio, drive. The charm comes at a price.'"

How to interpret the life of Rand Calvert is a critical question for Bosworth and for her protagonist, just as how to interpret the glamorous fates of men like Rand is a central dilemma in understanding New Orleans and its fiction. To see their doom as a noble expression of the human condition is to risk both sentimentality and the perpetuation of a dangerous myth. To deny any mythic quality is to accept the hard truth of a pathetic and wasted life.

The interpretation of Clay-Lee's story poses another problem, especially for a study of Bosworth in the context of Louisiana women writers, and this problem becomes even more thorny with Lemann's *Lives of the Saints*. Although Bosworth and Lemann trace a woman's search for the meaningful pattern of her life, their protagonists do not, in the end, come to the self-reliant rejection of masculine definitions that Gilchrist's Amanda achieves, and that a feminist viewpoint might lead us to expect and desire. Clay-Lee and, to an even greater extent, Lemann's Louise are obsessed with the doom that defines the lives of the men they love.

Although we may question, and even condemn, the protagonists' concern with taking care of helpless men, the two women make little progress, if any, in escaping this "codependency" in either novel. The narratives of both books circle back again and again to the cultural expectations that circumscribe the lives of the glamorous, doomed men the women love. Clay-Lee and Louise understand the artificiality of this cultural construct, but they are all but powerless to change it. Their only resource is narrative itself; by pushing the tale to its limits, they can demonstrate its essential fictionality. We as readers must wrestle with the same question: are the glittering young men who populate fictional Uptown society pale southern imitations of Jay Gatsby, or are they, as Nancy Lemann's narrator might put it, The Real Thing?

This question lies at the heart of Lemann's *Lives of the Saints* (1985), a book characterized by manic irony from the title onward. Lemann's rejection of the Uptown tradition is more radical than that of either Gilchrist or Bosworth. Although Lemann's narrator, Louise, like Clay-Lee, is a product of New Orleans society, she is unable to reach the freedom from the past that Clay-Lee finally attains. Louise is driven both to "record the passing parade," as she says, and to turn a withering stare on the pretensions of these Doomed Young Men, thereby freeing them (not the least of her ironic strategies is the capitalization of clichéd concepts that have taken on a life and power of their own). The edges of Louise's picture are beginning to fray, the calm hush of Clay-Lee's reverence replaced by disorder and the refusal to consider such accommodation.

The “saints” of her title are the Collier brothers, Saint Claude Collier (called “Claude”) and his younger brother Saint Louis Collier (called “Saint”). Their father, Saint Louis Collier, a former judge and present eccentric, embodies in his dress the fading of a glamorous past: he “always wore seersucker suits that he had had for about fifty years and which were always wrinkled and faded to a kind of yellow color.”<sup>10</sup> In describing a summer evening in the Quarter, Lemann makes explicit the connection between fashion and nostalgia: “It was Latin American Night in the Quarter, in Jackson Square, starting at eight o’clock. The time is gone when we were ‘the gateway to the Americas’ and ships left our harbor daily for Havana with all the men wearing white suits. But all the men still wear white suits in New Orleans, on certain summer days” (56). Even the men’s white suits here offer a glimpse of nostalgia, recalling as they do days before air conditioning, when crisp white suits bespoke a certain elegance.

Lemann’s lack of sympathy for society’s pretensions is seen most clearly in her brief portrait of Judge Collier’s wife, who—like Joseph Frowenfeld in Cable’s *Grandis-simes* or Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*—has had to become acclimated to the city and adapt her exterior view of New Orleans to an understanding of what life there is really like: “She was a Yankee girl Mr. Collier had brought down from Harvard many years ago, and she never got over the shock of New Orleans. As a newlywed, she wanted to wear baggy shirts and work with the professors in her department at Tulane, but somehow this was too unlike her generation, and also, there were always garden parties and witty intrigues and carnival balls. Mrs. Collier had to learn to cope with silver, with crystal, with entertaining, and with other things previously foreign to her” (34). She has made the adjustments that Amanda, in *The Annunciation*, refuses to make, and as a result has become a bitter, pessimistic woman, unable to intervene in her family’s inevitable slide toward doom.

Her husband, the Judge, has made his own adjustments. His three passions—gardening, grand opera, and ancient Greek poetry—mark his detachment from the crazed world around him. Although this response is a version of Felicity’s admirable stoic detachment, its effects on his sons, who have inherited his sense of doom, are severe. Despite Claude’s early promise, he has taken to “hanging around with wino lunatics and racetrack habitués and other weird types of wrecks” (23). His much younger brother, Saint, addicted to Cokes and fatally accident prone, falls to his death from a balcony, a tragedy that leads to his father’s nervous breakdown and Claude’s further decline.

The classic motifs of New Orleans writing all appear in the novel, but unlike the details in Bosworth’s novel, they remain isolated and do not contribute directly to a larger narrative structure. Lemann manifests a curious disinterest in plot; again and again the focus of the narrative shifts from the story to the milieu. One of the narrator’s recurring concerns is the weather: “It was a night in the spring, though in New Orleans you can hardly tell the season as

it’s so often hot. A sweltering night in October can be just the same as a sweltering night in April, for in New Orleans the seasons have only subtle differences, unlike in the North. It was balmy old New Orleans weather in the tropic spring, and everything was green and overgrown” (5).

Again and again Louise tries to define what is distinctive about New Orleans, never finding an answer that satisfies her. Each motif is linked to another in a book-length chain of free association that fails to reveal any larger pattern. The author leads us to the question of what might define New Orleans, yet never settles on an answer that satisfies her. At times an overly close attachment to the past seems to explain the distinctive texture of life in New Orleans: “We got to a bar along the Mississippi coast in one of the small towns. It was a country bar, right on the Gulf, and the entire clientele looked like it had just stepped out of law school, with horn-rimmed glasses predominant. The band was playing old songs from the 1960s era in which New Orleans and environs remain, even though it is twenty years later. They’re just always playing old songs where I live” (137).

New Orleans’ obsession with the past has been noted ever since the first nineteenth-century travel writers visited the city, but in this novel the usual explanations for such a sense of the past (the city’s European heritage or its military defeat) are absent, and the focus instead is on the recent past. For Lemann’s characters, living in the past seems largely a means of avoiding the present, ultimately an unsatisfactory means.

Lemann is concerned as well with the potent cultural images of New Orleans—the book at times seems more concerned with these images than with the city itself, becoming a catalog of literary New Orleans. Beth Cooley effectively summarizes the literary landscape of the novel this way: “There is a strange blend of romantic recklessness reminiscent of Mitchell’s antebellum Georgia and an almost predetermined destruction reminiscent of Faulkner’s antebellum Mississippi. Add to this the nightmarish but voluptuous quality of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and then color it with the ironic humor of Eudora Welty or Walker Percy and you begin to describe the mood of Lemann’s New Orleans.”<sup>11</sup> Lemann acknowledges the power of these images even as she attempts to rob them of their efficacy. Her detailed descriptions offer images that are sensuous and seemingly full of meaning, yet rather than linking these images to create a larger thematic pattern, she abruptly shifts our attention to another scene, only to return, a few pages later, to the original image from another perspective. The resulting multifaceted picture speaks to the fragmentation of Louise’s own consciousness, and her deeply divided response to the city.

Lemann’s fragmentary treatment of Mardi Gras effectively points to differences between Bosworth’s approach and hers. In a mood that recalls Faulkner’s *Pylon*, New Orleans during the Carnival season becomes a wasteland:

The ticket takers were lying around on the stairs looking out at the street with the sallow faces of saints,



black men wearing gold theater uniforms, sprawled on the stairs looking out to Canal Street as though it were some slow jazz party.

Carnival, in fact, was pending.

(103)

The objective, slightly ominous tone of “pending,” more suggestive of a legal judgment than a festival, is a far cry from the vibrancy of earlier literary descriptions of Carnival.

The fragile manners of Felicity’s open house in Bosworth’s *Almost Innocent* have shattered into the jagged fragments of obsolete fantasies. Consider Louise’s artist friend Henry: “In his rooms, Henry hung ominous paintings of Mardi Gras balls, where the queens and debutantes had insanely wide smiles and skeletal frames, holding their scepters rigid in the air. Bland men in tuxedos stood grouped around them, smiling weakly. This was Henry’s plea for satire” (65–66). Yet after Lemann holds the old sham-fantasy up to ridicule, she reclaims it in a striking, unexpected image:

The weather had turned fine. Dark fell. I looked into the glittering night. Suddenly, a parade came out of nowhere and passed through the unsuspecting street, heralded by African drumbeats in the distance vaguely, then the approach of jazz, the smell of sweet olive, ambrosia, the sense of impending spectacle. Then it passed in its fleeting beauty, this glittering dirge, and, as suddenly as it came, I was left, rather stunned, in its wake.

It is this passing parade which I chronicle.

(96)

Only by shattering the old narratives can she regain the experience from the “fragments . . . shored against [her] ruin,” in T.S. Eliot’s words. And yet, to follow Eliot further, Louise has these experiences of beauty but misses their meaning; she is unable to find the perspective that will make the images cohere.

The manic irony that characterizes Louise’s narrative voice is the instrument by which Lemann maintains a distance from the actions she describes. Her aim is to capture the texture of New Orleans life rather than to develop a traditional plot. The novel is divided not into chapters, but into 201 scenes, which range in length from a few lines to a few pages. This formlessness signals a refusal to map out a plot, and hence a doom, for her characters. Given the narrative forms available, Claude’s only choices are suicide or alcoholism. Rather than make this choice, Lemann stops the novel. At its end Claude, apparently implicated in a racing scandal, simply leaves: “He stood in his dark suit, blameless. Then he turned down Bourbon directly into that gaudy crowd of humanity, his polite, unobtrusive figure casting among it something of dignity. With his hands in his pockets and his collar turned up against the rain, my beloved Claude receded—and disappeared for years.” (144). Lemann leaves us, and Louise, to wrestle with the implications of this mysterious departure.

The hagiography in which the narrator’s affections for Claude are masked is heavily ironic; Lemann’s is not an orthodox religious imagination. The novel’s title is, of course, a pun, a play on traditional religious sensibility. Although its male members are named after saints, the Collier family practices no apparent religion. (Or perhaps they were named after streets—they may as well have been.) When Judge Collier, after Saint’s death, begins reading the *Lives of the Saints*, Louise takes it as further evidence of his impending breakdown. Lemann refuses to let her *Lives* become such a martyrology, seemingly the only narrative pattern available. By tracing the surfaces of her characters’ lives, rather than describing their ultimate shape, Louise occupies a netherland between the doomed narrative of Clay-Lee Calvert and the flippant irony of Anna Hand; her fragmented narrative signifies a refusal to accept either alternative, as well as a refusal to reject either completely. Her mixture of affection and hate for the city with disgust and love for its inhabitants leads to her narrative of fragmentation and disillusion.

The accumulated tradition of New Orleans literature weighs heavily in the fiction of Gilchrist, Bosworth, and Lemann. Like the humidity of an August afternoon in the French Quarter, remembered people, places, and actions encourage a lassitude and timidity of thought. Why imagine new stories, why invent new destinies, when the old ones are so full of life? Grace King’s observation in the passage serving as an epigraph to this essay underlines the point: “Romances seem to be furnished real and gratis, in order to save, in a languor-breeding climate, the ennui of reading and writing books.”<sup>12</sup> These furnished romances are not easily ignored.

Gilchrist, Bosworth, and Lemann, each in her own way, have recognized the fatal lethargy of such a course, have understood that the old stories maintain their vitality only by ensnaring new victims and perpetuating their curse. Each writer pits her protagonist against this life-destroying fiction: Amanda and Clay-Lee force the narratives of their lives into new channels; Louise, unable to conceive such a way out, removes herself from the narrative’s inexorable move toward doom. For her, the streetcar still rattles through the city streets, giving form to her nightmarish visions. All three authors transform the accumulated popular vision of New Orleans into narrative forms that offer new perspectives on the city’s social and literary traditions.

#### Notes

1. Flannery O’Connor, “The Grotesque in Southern Fiction,” in *Mystery and Manners*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York, 1961), 41.
2. J. Randal Woodland, “‘In that city foreign and paradoxical’: The Idea of New Orleans in the Southern Literary Imagination” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1987), 134–36.
3. Conversation with W. Kenneth Holditch, August, 1986.

4. Ellen Gilchrist, *The Annunciation* (Boston, 1983), 81, hereinafter cited parenthetically by page number in the text.
5. Ellen Gilchrist, *Victory over Japan* (Boston, 1984), 83.
6. Ellen Gilchrist, *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams* (Fayetteville, 1981), 65, 62.
7. *Ibid.*, 60–61.
8. Sheila Bosworth, *Almost Innocent* (New York, 1984), 13, hereinafter cited parenthetically by page number in the text.
9. New Orleans *Times-Picayune*, January 20, 1985, "Dixie" section, 4.
10. Nancy Lemann, *Lives of the Saints* (New York, 1985), 15, hereinafter cited parenthetically by page number in the text.
11. Beth Cooley, "White Summer Suits," *Spectator* (Raleigh, N.C.), September 26, 1985, p. 24.
12. Grace King, *Balcony Stories* (1893; rpr. Ridgewood, N.J., 1968), 3.

Certain parallels between the works of Ellen Gilchrist and William Faulkner might suggest to the reader that the South has not changed very much during the last century, though writers apparently continue to see the need for change. A comparison of *The Sound and the Fury* with Gilchrist's *The Annunciation* reveals that the South is still filled with individuals who have a false and often destructive sense of themselves. The bitter irony is that those who suffer the consequences are the victims of this hypocrisy rather than its supporters, and two such victims are Caddy Compson and Amanda McCamey, the central characters of these two novels. Both are strong women who choose to live according to their own value systems rather than their families' hypocritical codes of honor and morality.

The love and courage of Faulkner's Caddy are ultimately broken down by her family, leaving her with a destructive self image, which in turn provides the reader with a sense of her ultimate doom. For much of her life, Gilchrist's Amanda McCamey also responds self-destructively to her family's treatment, but she eventually saves herself by recognizing and recollecting her early strengths. Armed with a restored ability to love, she takes what Caddy was first denied and then refused—a second chance. The reader who examines the parallels between these two lives and notes the differences in their fates will realize that the fortitude of people like Amanda, who refuse to break under the pressure of discrimination and hypocrisy, is slowly helping to moderate the traditionally rigid codes of the South.

Ironically, there are two completely opposite ways to view one of the parallels between these two works. One can either see a similarity between Amanda and Guy's incestuous relationship and that of Caddy and Quentin (although the latter is never physically consummated), or one can

argue, equally soundly, from the actions of other characters in both novels that there is no incest in either relationship. Regardless of which view the reader takes, what remains clear is the absence of parental guidance and the consequences of this void. The parents' refusal in both novels to acknowledge such a possibility as incest or their blindness to it reflects their negligence as well as their fear of scandal.

The incest in *The Annunciation* is a physically irrefutable fact: Amanda and Guy are first cousins (raised, in fact, more like brother and sister—Guy even calls Amanda "Sissy"), and they are lovers.<sup>1</sup> This latter fact cannot be denied with any fanciful reading of the text, since Amanda conceives and bears a child as a result of her sexual relations with Guy. The question of incest between Caddy and Quentin, however, has been debated since the novel's publication. In support of the presence of incest, many critics give explanations similar to that of Lee Clinton Jenkins, who writes, "Good Puritan that Quentin is, he feels the prohibition and allure of the forbidden act so strongly that the admission [to his father] of it as a possibility constitutes its enactment" (136).

Other critics, however, assert that Quentin either avoids the subject with Caddy (since he tells his father that he did not, for fear that she would accept) or that he was ultimately unable to go through with it (even if his offering of a double suicide is interpreted as a thinly disguised sexual proposition). But John T. Irwin's interpretation of this episode at the branch disclaims such reasoning against incest:

When Quentin puts his knife to his sister's throat, he is placing his knife at the throat of someone who is an image of himself, thereby evoking the threat of castration—the traditional punishment for incest. The brother seducer with the phallic knife at his sister's throat is as well the brother avenger with the castrating knife at the brother seducer's throat—the father with the castrating knife at the son's penis.

(46)

This view of Quentin acting as Caddy's father is particularly interesting since readers more often comment on the motherliness of Caddy towards her brothers. Once the suggestion is made, however, one should note the significant difference between these two "parents." Acting as a father, since Mr. Compson will not do so, Quentin attempts to punish himself, but Caddy's motherly actions, which are intended to compensate for Mrs. Compson's neglect, involve the nurturing and loving of Benjy. Here one finds still another means of support for the presence of incest. As Constance Hill Hall notes in the introduction to *Incest in Faulkner: A Metaphor for the Fall*, "in cases of sibling incest, the brother and sister are likely to be . . . the children of weak and neglectful parents who fail to provide a strong and positive influence" (4).<sup>2</sup>

In still further support of the incest theory, one can say that Quentin becomes more of a father to Caddy's child

than whoever the natural father may be. First of all, he feels responsible for Caddy's predicament. As John Arthos explains, Quentin

is extremely fond of [Caddy], and her situation thrusts upon him a burden of responsibility he accepts. . . . He comes to believe that his own love has failed her, and in something like adolescent self-torment he thinks his guilt is equivalent to the betrayal itself. He extends his torment to the point where it is as if he himself had betrayed her through incest.

(22)

In addition, Caddy establishes Quentin as the father according to Lawrence Thompson, when she names the child after him.<sup>3</sup> Thompson concludes from this naming that although "in the literal sense, Quentin did not father her child, . . . in some figurative sense he did" (43). In the same figurative sense, then, he also committed incest.

On the other hand entirely, the fact remains that Caddy and Quentin do not actually have sexual intercourse with each other and thus do not commit incest. It could be argued that Quentin does not even want to. Quentin's reasons for contemplating and admitting to incest have little if anything to do with desire for his sister's body. Faulkner's description of Quentin in the appendix reveals the author's support of this notion:

Who loved not his sister's body but some concept of Compson honor precariously and . . . temporarily supported by the minute fragile membrane of her maidenhead. Who loved not the idea of the incest which he could not commit, but some presbyterian concept of its eternal punishment.

(411)

Furthermore, one can view any desires on Quentin's part as more narcissistic than incestuous. Quentin sees Caddy as his other half.<sup>4</sup> She has many of the positive qualities he lacks: for example, she is more courageous than Quentin, a fact established in their childhood when she risks punishment by climbing the tree in order to gain knowledge (ironically, knowledge of death—ironic, since, as is also noted in Faulkner's appendix, Quentin "loved death above all" (411), and yet at that point his cowardice keeps him from knowing it). Conversely, he *sees* a lack in her too, of certain qualities important to him, namely obedience to certain codes of behavior. Also, he is the oldest child, but she is the chosen substitute for their weak parents because of her ability to provide "love, compassion, pity, and sacrifice" (35), all of which are usual offerings from parent to child. Thus, union of the two in Quentin's eyes is necessary; without it they are each incomplete and thus weak.<sup>5</sup> As future head of his family, Quentin will need Caddy's strength and authority; he believes if their family line is to survive in its present state, Caddy must adopt his codes of morality.

In relation to this idea, Quentin's reasons for contemplating a sexual relationship with Caddy may go back to some primitive reasons for incest: first, "to stabilize and unify

the dynasty by limiting the peripheries of a clan", second, "a privilege that . . . was reserved for royalty", and third, an act "necessary to the survival of a race" (Hall 6).<sup>6</sup> Quentin is concerned with the survival of his family, a family which he views as "royal" in the sense that they were the descendants of the aristocracy of the Old South. This elevated perception of his family allows him to contemplate incest in spite of his Puritan nature. In this light, he would view the notion of Caddy committing incest with him as more acceptable than her philandering behavior with "unsuitable" partners which could result in "unsuitable" descendants.

One can repudiate the existence of incest in Gilchrist's novel on similar grounds—despite the child Barrett Clare, whom the reader knows to be the indisputable offspring of first cousins Amanda and Guy. Whether or not sexual intercourse took place is again not really the issue. Rather, as in the other novel, the question is, was it *incest*? From Amanda's perception, the answer is no. First of all, the narrator notes early in the novel that when Amanda was a child "no one minded when they found her in [Guy's] bed" (6); and later, "everyone on Esperanza watched it [the growing love between them] but only the black people knew what they were watching. Only the black people knew what it meant" (12). One can deduce, too, from the position of blacks on a Southern plantation, that these servants would not have spoken up about their understanding of this developing "situation." Given the above narrative comments, one can also say that, to Amanda, a sexual relationship with Guy was a natural development, and thus not incest—incest is a taboo and no one had intimated to her any such prohibitions regarding her *unconcealed* feelings for Guy. To the contrary—they had encouraged it by their silence. Moreover, when Amanda does deliver her baby, it is immediately taken from her and she is told by a *nun*, "Now you can be a girl again" and "put it out of your mind" (20). In addition, the matriarch of the family, her grandmother, welcomes her back into the fold—if not into their home—as if nothing happened.<sup>7</sup> And the ugly word "incest" is *never* mentioned. Both her religion and her family, then, choose to deny Amanda's actions. And the reader recognizes that Amanda did not knowingly commit a sin.

In the relationships between both Amanda and Guy and Caddy and Quentin, the female is the stronger member. In *The Sound and the Fury*, this notion is illustrated in the tree episode. In *The Annunciation*, Amanda finds Guy cleaning some birds killed on a hunting trip: "One of the birds was so warm Guy thought it was still alive. His thumb hit a tendon and it moved in his hands. He leaned over and vomited. . . . Amanda stood beside a rocker watching him" (6). She is not sickened by the dead birds, only concerned for Guy.

Regardless of his weaknesses, Amanda adores Guy. Since the novel is written for the most part in limited omniscience, from Amanda's point of view, one can credit her with the description of "Guy, who could do anything . . .



who was afraid of nothing in the world" (9), and the belief that "there was nothing to fear when Guy was there" (11). Similarly, despite her realization of Quentin's shortcomings, Caddy loves her older brother. Many of her own daring actions, like taking off her dress in front of her brothers or climbing the forbidden tree, are attempts to get Quentin's attention and/or to impress him. As soon as Quentin says, "I bet you won't" (20), little sister Caddy feels compelled to go through with her brave declarations or lose face in front of her big brother.

As I have suggested, the confusion of these four adolescents regarding the morality or immorality of their desires is particularly disturbing because of the failure of their parents to counsel them on the matter. The notorious image of the hypochondriac Mrs. Compson doing little else besides whining about being punished by God for her family's transgressions is evidence of this neglect, as is Mrs. McCamey's constant mourning for her deceased husband, which leaves little time to see to her daughter's emotional needs. The attitudes Caddy and Amanda consequently have towards the idea of motherhood, although in direct contrast to each other, are both typical reactions of motherless children compensating for their loss. By attending to Benjy's emotional needs, Caddy fills the gap she feels from her mother's inattentiveness to her own emotions.<sup>8</sup> Amanda, on the other hand, responds to her mother's rejection with comparable rejection, as is evident in her discomfort with some baby rabbits: "Their little sucking noises bothered her, as though they might get on her and stick to her skin" (5). This reaction clearly reveals a fear of the attachment associated with motherhood.

For a while, with the help of these individual methods of compensation and the care they receive from the rest of their families, neither girl suffers excessively from being essentially motherless. However, the latter indemnity, the love of other members of their families, particularly Quentin and Guy, eventually fails them, and when this happens the former indemnity, their own personal responses to the idea of motherhood, causes certain consequences; hence, the betrayal from outside causes a betrayal from within the self. That both girls' reactions to motherlessness lead them toward doom, despite the noted disparity between their reactions, is largely the responsibility of Quentin and Guy, who remain undeviating in their similarity.

Regarding Caddy, Baum notes:

Ironically enough, those qualities in her character that are admirable are the ones which lead to her fall: her complete selflessness, which leads her to be indifferent to her virginity and to what happens to her; her willingness to put the other person's interests first; and her great desire to communicate love.

(38)

Such a desire leads Caddy to sexual activity, but once she becomes sexually active, Quentin betrays her love as he breaks down her strong self-image in his attempts to make

her see the immorality of her actions. Paradoxically, he is acting from his religious convictions. As Amos Wilder explains it, Quentin believes in a "truncated Christian conception of guilt and retribution, severed from all ideas of grace" (125). This Puritanical perception of God is manifested in Quentin's egotistical view of his family and prejudice against particular outsiders, like Dalton Ames, which demonstrates an acceptance of the Calvinistic concept of the elect and the reprobate. His attempts to force his convictions on Caddy, however, backfire. Once she looks at her sexuality through his eyes, she perceives it as sinful, rather than as a means of loving, and she accepts her damnation and behaves accordingly. The result is pregnancy with no knowledge of the father's identity.<sup>9</sup>

Initially, Caddy's family takes her away to hide her condition. To their seeming good fortune, they even find a husband to "legitimize" Caddy and the child she carries. But the Compson's God is of the Old Testament, too.<sup>10</sup> When Caddy's husband perceives his wife's condition and sends her home, they acknowledge her sin and punish her in the Puritan tradition: they ban her from her home. This rejection reinforces Caddy's acceptance of Quentin's belief in her sinful nature and she loses confidence in her capacity to be a good mother to her child. She believes, rather, that she would be a harmful influence upon her daughter and therefore allows her family to first take and then keep her child from her, despite her justified misgivings about their treatment of the innocent baby as a symbol of its mother's sin, not to mention her first-hand knowledge of their destructiveness. According to Lawrence Bowling, this abandonment of her child is what really dooms Caddy.

She is "damned," not because she committed fornication and bore an illegitimate child but because, living in a state of perpetual sin, she has neither desire nor hope for redemption; but, most of all, she is damned because, instead of accepting her duty to her child and being the best mother she could, she abandoned the child to the same household which had been her own ruin.

(476)

Consequently, the Compson family is doomed as well. "Had Caddy been allowed to return home to care for Quentin and Benjy and thus to fulfill the destiny of her nature, the Compson history might have been different. Instead, the tragedy of Caddy's life is repeated by her child" (Page 66). Both Caddy and her daughter are lost to the Compsons, and since the girl Quentin is the only progeny of this generation of Compsons, this loss means the end of the family line as far as they will ever know.

Paralleling all of these circumstances in *The Sound and the Fury*, as long as Amanda has Guy's attention and affection and hands-on care from the people at Esperanza Plantation, the negative implications of her fear of attachment are not so apparent, for hers is not an all-encompassing attitude against bonding. She allows herself to love Guy; it is only motherly love she protects herself against. Yet, fearing rejection from Guy, too, before he

leaves for college, Amanda gives herself to him completely in order to seal their bond forever. Like Caddy, she uses sex as a means of getting the love she craves but which had been denied her in the past. Like Quentin, unfortunately, Guy ultimately fails her. He silently allows his family to send her away to have his baby, and he does not contact her at the home for unwed mothers or even after the baby is born. Rather, again like Quentin, Guy goes on with his life at college. When he does come to see her at school (at *her* request), he blames her pregnancy on the sinfulness of their actions: "It happened because we did things we weren't supposed to do" (32). Clearly, Guy's God, like Quentin's, is the punishing God of the Old Testament.<sup>11</sup> Guy needs a God who will punish him, since his family fails to do so. He needs to pay for his sin to purge his guilt. When he tells Amanda, "I ask God all the time to forgive us" (32), he forces her to acknowledge their guilt rather than recall their love. Amanda refuses (verbally at least) to do any such thing; rather, she lashes out blasphemously, knowing that her words will terrify her God-fearing cousin: "There isn't any God. . . . Only idiots believe in God. If there was a God I'd hate his guts" (32).

Upon learning of her pregnancy Amanda's family had sent her away to have the baby. Once she had atoned for this sin—by giving up her child to make "a barren woman happy" (20)—she was absolved, according to the Catholic faith of the home for unwed mothers where she spent her pregnancy. Her family can conveniently forget her shame now, so that "she will have her chance" (21), as her grandmother selfishly desires, since Amanda is necessary to the continuation of their family line.<sup>12</sup> However, they do not see the effects of their actions on Amanda. Forgetting or denying is not so easy for her. Since she is not given any chances to deal with her actions, she continues to be haunted by the memory of her baby; for much of her life, she refuses to allow herself to want another child or to find and make amends with her first one. Furthermore, from the time that the baby was born, "the scar was there, and debilitating cramps when she menstruated" (37), and a doctor reports that "she'll probably never conceive again" (41) because of her early pregnancy (although he, too, contributes to the fictions fed to Amanda at this time by not telling her so). Consequently, when she finally allows herself to think of having another baby, she and her husband Malcolm are repeatedly disappointed when they mistake her irregular menstrual cycle for pregnancy. Amanda finally gives up again, announcing to her husband that she refuses to suffer any more such disappointments, so plans to "get an IUD to regulate [her] periods," which will, of course, also prevent conception. Thus, her family's cover-up actually almost insures its sterility and ultimate extinction—*almost* in this case, since Amanda eventually regroups her strength, rejects the negative self-image she has been fostering, and decides to keep the baby she conceives when she is forty-four.

Another parallel between these two Southern novels involves further division among the critics of *The Sound and the Fury*. Since its four sections correspond to the

four days of the Easter weekend, some critics inevitably speculate on which character is the novel's Christ figure. Although many see Benjy as the logical choice, given his age and his suffering, John Edward Hardy names Caddy's daughter Quentin instead.<sup>13</sup> Lyall Powers calls Quentin "a second chance for the Compson family" (35), but in keeping with the myth of the crucifixion, the Compsons are not responsive to the possibility of making up for their actions towards Caddy. On the contrary, the girl Quentin is, in John Edward Hardy's words, "betrayed . . . to her doom of ostracism and exile, . . . [and] denied the love of her people" (152). Finally, flight is, in a sense, a "resurrection" from the corrupt microcosm of the Compson home. However, as John Earl Bassett notes, although her "flight from the tomb of her house is a parodic Easter resurrection," she "does not rise; she descends down a tree" (17). So Quentin is somewhat lacking as a Christ figure, since no glimpse is given of her new life to provide assurance that she has gone on to a better world. Without such knowledge, Caddy is never released from her guilt. She does not gain from her daughter a sense of her own potential for salvation; rather, she continues to believe in her impending damnation.

Gilchrist's novel uses Christian mythology, too, as indicated first of all by its title. Given the circumstances of his birth, this novel's Christ appears to be Amanda's second child.<sup>14</sup> However, it is the abandoned first child, her daughter, who has the potential of releasing her mother from guilt. This child, like Quentin, becomes a more significant Christ figure, especially given the family's complete disregard of the paternity of Amanda's daughter, Barrett Clare, the suffering this child endures throughout her life, and the fact that Amanda does not find peace until she decides to acknowledge her. Barrett Clare, then, is Amanda's means of salvation. Furthermore, when Guy reappears in Amanda's life, the nature of her attraction to him is revealed, within which one can find support for their child as the novel's Christ figure.

He was the same old Guy, direct, *impenetrable, true*. How could [she] have been expected to love an *ordinary* man . . . after loving a man like this? . . . Now, because she had touched him, she came within the circle of his *power*, forgetting as she always did when she came near him where she began or he began.

(287, emphasis added)

In this passage, not only is Guy described in divine terms, but also the reader is reminded of Amanda's narcissism (again, a major motivation for incest). Her earlier admission of Guy into the realm of her protected self can now be viewed not as an ability to bond with another human being, as was suggested previously, but rather as a further rejection of others. To her he is not a separate entity but part of her own self. Hence, taking him as a mate reinforces her aversion to relationships with other human beings. She even tells Guy during this reunion, "I love you as I have always loved you. Like I was loving my own self" (289). If they are two halves of the same person,

then the child is the product of this unity—and therefore not a union of two people but another miracle child of one parent. It should be remembered here, too, that the nuns told Amanda she was as good as new after the birth of this child—hence the notion of a virgin birth.

Jeannie Thompson and Anita Miller Garner point out that “Barrett Clare has suffered from feelings of neglect, isolation, abandonment, and despair” (114), much like the daughter Quentin. Amanda has been carrying the “cargo (title of the novel’s first section) of this guilt since her adolescence. Although her second child gives her a second chance to be a good mother, that would only be a partial atonement for her “sin.” Her decision after he is born to seek out her lost child and make amends finally puts her at peace with herself, and the novel ends with a positive, uplifting sense of hope. Therefore, Amanda’s parody of “The Lord’s Prayer” that closes the novel is not more blasphemy. Rather, it is an affirmation of faith, faith in herself, but also faith in the value of relationships: “My will be done . . . My life on my terms,” she begins, adding “my daughter, my son” (353). Clearly this is a more genuine, more productive view of her life than the one forced upon Caddy Compson. Caddy loses her belief in her right to receive or give love. Amanda allows herself in the end to do both.

That the reader perceives a positive future for Amanda and both of her children contrasts distinctly with the picture Faulkner provides in his appendix of Caddy as the mistress of a Nazi officer.<sup>15</sup> Whereas Caddy continues to live the life of a damned soul, Amanda is ready to start over. She realizes not only that it is never too late to begin anew but that one can make up for past mistakes. Second chances can be taken to improve one’s lot. One’s role in life is not as immutable as the people of the South had traditionally perceived it to be. Gilchrist’s novel, then, provides the reader with a more optimistic view of the future of the guilt-ridden Southerner.

#### Notes

1. A list of people one cannot marry, according to Mississippi Law, now or at the time this part of the novel is set, includes first cousins. Therefore, it is accurate to call the sexual relationship between Amanda and Guy incest.
2. Of the mother in particular (of siblings involved in incest), Hall writes, “[t]ypically she is either passive and dependent or else rigid and puritanical . . . not present to her family, often relinquishing her responsibilities to her daughter and sometimes abandoning her children altogether” (4). It is easy to see that this passage is an accurate description of Mrs. Compson.
3. André Bleikasten apparently agrees with Thompson’s notion when he writes that because of the name Caddy chooses for her child, “symbolically, Quentin II is . . . the fruit of the imaginary incest” (224).
4. John T. Irwin points out that Quentin’s narcissistic view of Caddy is particularly evident in a scene in

which Quentin looks down upon Caddy lying in the water: “The narcissistic implication is that his sister lying on her back in the stream is like a mirror image of himself” (41).

5. Lee Clinton Jenkins explains this “narcissistic self love [as] that [which] seeks others only to the extent that they can be used to fortify the ego against its sense of underlying vulnerability, satisfy its self-justifying needs, and stave off the threat of its own dissolution” (149).
6. In theories similar to Hall’s, Warwick Wadlington describes “Quentin’s desperate fantasy of incest” as “a rigorous extension of the inbreeding attitude of a household that feels itself surrounded by relative nonentities” (416), and André Bleikasten explains that “[i]n sociohistorical terms, [Quentin’s] obsession with incest may reflect the panic of a declining social class which struggles for survival but refuses any influx of outside blood” (227).
7. One of the most obvious echoes of *The Sound and the Fury* occurs at this point in Gilchrist’s novel: just as the Compsons sell Benjy’s pasture to send Quentin to Harvard, Amanda’s grandmother sells a “sixty-acre stand of wooded land, and puts the money into an account for the next six years of Amanda’s life” (21), during which she goes to school away from home. Like Quentin, Amanda will not return home as expected to continue the family line (though she does not commit suicide).
8. In Sally Page’s explanation of “the role of motherhood,” Caddy’s maternal instinct is a positive reaction to her own motherlessness: “The role of motherhood fosters communication and self-transcendence, for child-bearing unites the woman with the ultimate purpose of nature and enables her to defy her own isolation and to create relation through the establishment of the family. The ideal of self-sacrifice on which effective motherhood is based provides mankind with an ethic that can bring moral order to the chaos of existence” (46). Caddy’s ability to love enough for both herself and her mother is quite admirable, given her circumstances.
9. As Peter Swiggart explains, “Caddy becomes a helpless victim both of her capacity for love and of her brother’s efforts to pervert that love into abstract morality. Her promiscuity reflects the self hatred which Quentin has helped to force upon her” (92).
10. Mary Dell Fletcher discusses the Puritanism of the Compsons in detail in “William Faulkner and Residual Calvinism.”
11. Guy’s belief in an Old Testament God is previously revealed when, filled with remorse in the earlier stages of their sexual experimentation, he suddenly puts an end to it, telling Amanda, “I want God to let me be good at baseball, Sissy. I want to be on the football team next year. If I do this he isn’t going to let me” (12).



12. Gilchrist, then, repeats in this novel Faulkner's "warnings," as summarized by Amos N. Wilder, "against fossilized religious sanctions, conceptions, or rituals, which, detached from their healthful or vital sources, become malign tools of social control, thus lending a specious absolute authority to inhuman usage" (125).
13. Elizabeth M. Kerr might also agree with the view of Miss Quentin as the Christ figure, given her notion that Caddy's love for her daughter "might be the only means of saving Caddy" (11). And one can infer agreement as well from the connection Douglas B. Hill makes between Caddy and the Virgin Mary (35).
14. Jeannie Thompson and Anita Miller Garner discuss the Christian imagery surrounding the birth of Amanda's second child, although they warn against too much reliance upon Christian myth in interpreting the novel. Much like Faulkner, Gilchrist "takes what she needs [from Christianity] to *shape* her narrative" (110, emphasis added).
15. Interestingly, Gilchrist also wrote a kind of appendix to her novel. In her fourth collection of short stories, *Light Can Be Bath Wave and Particle*, two of the stories continue *The Annunciation*. The first of these focuses on the life of Barrett Clare and her son; thus, in direct contrast to Faulkner's appendix, we are given a sense of the continuation of the family line.

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- Kathryn Lee Seidel describes the southern belle in the American novel as young, unmarried, skilled in the equestrian arts and in music, and the daughter of a landed (therefore aristocratic) father. Exuberant, vain and naive, she feels she deserves a "gallant cavalier" (10). Certainly that characterization of the southern belle appears in varying disguises in the work of many southern writers from John Pendleton Kennedy and John William De Forest to Ellen Glasgow and Gail Godwin. These characters range in degree of self-awareness from total obliviousness in the holes of their own logic to states of epiphany. One of the most modern treatments of the southern woman is by Ellen Gilchrist, whose female protagonists remain faithful to this tradition and also almost exclusively to that end of the continuum that precludes much self-awareness.
- Ellen Gilchrist portrays many of her protagonists at different stages of their lives, in tragicomic situations, and in such a way that attests to Gilchrist's near-perfect ear for diction and eye for detail. Her protagonists are capable of sparkling observation and charming witticism, and even derring-do, but these characters are incapable of any kind of permanent, positive action in their own lives that actually improves their lot for any length of time. Somehow, of Ellen Gilchrist, we expect more.
- In her first collection of short stories, *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, female protagonists such as Rhoda, Matile, Alisha and Amanda are guided exclusively by their

desires, lusts, greed and rebellious natures. Each is someone's eternal rebel daughter, and they all seem to be caught in some arrested stage of character evolution. Many of these women are spoiled adolescents bent on pleasure, or aging beauties and rich, bored socialites who are capable of pure fearlessness, but never quite capable of real courage. In this collection, Gilchrist gives us only one character, Nora Jane Whittington, who does not fit Seidel's southern belle circumstantial criteria (she is poor and fatherless) and whose spirit is more one of inner tenacity than one of flash and pomp. The rest of these ever rich or *nouveau* poor characters are, as Jonathan Yardley in the *Washington Post* observed, bored, self-indulgent people (B1, B10).

After *The Annunciation* was published critics expressed the hope that Gilchrist was "reversing a trend" set by her initial southern belles (Thompson and Garner 104). Amanda McCamey, the protagonist of this novel, has a bit of the verve of the old characters from *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, but Amanda's main objective, unlike theirs, eventually becomes self-knowledge, in contrast to all those other tortured daughters who have come before her. Jeanie Thompson and Anita Garner acknowledged hopefully that this character might be the positive role model prototype of future Gilchrist characters and that Gilchrist "may go further . . . to develop a realism that not only entertains but ennobles" (114). Unfortunately, so far Gilchrist has not engineered this accomplishment.

In Gilchrist's two short story collections, *Light Can Be Both Wave and Particle* (1989) and *I Cannot Get You Close Enough* (1990), old characters and plot lines weave themselves though the pages and a few new characters are set forth. The old characters are her usual southern belles, with their characteristic ways of handling reality, except, again, for the reappearance of Nora Jean Whittington. Nora Jean, as likable as ever, does not so much do the right things, however, as that she does *not* do the wrong things, yet she is capable of consistently listening to her primary feelings and she acts in small spontaneous ways. And in her charming omniscient style, Gilchrist approves:

A cold wind was blowing off the ocean. She picked up a piece of driftwood and added it to the fire. She sank down upon the sand. She was carrying ten pounds of babies but she moved as gracefully as ever. She wiggled around until her back was against the boulder, sitting up very straight, not giving in to the cold or the wind. I'm one of those people that could go to the Himalayas, she decided. Because I never give in to cold. If you hunch over it will get you.

(*Light Can Be* 34)

Yet Rhoda Manning, shown again as a child in "*The Time Capsule*," like most of the other protagonists in the same collection, continues her fussing and scrapping. Her mother's reaction to one of her explosions sums her up:

Her mother dropped her arms. She sighed a long deep sigh. Rhoda was too much. Too smart for her own good. Too wild, too crazy, too hard to manage or control. She

was a long way from the sweet little redheaded girl Ariane had ordered from Jesus. Thinking of Jesus, Ariane remembered her duty. She fought back. "You just calm down, young lady. You just stop all that talk right this minute."

(24–25)

This is another story in the same vein as a previous one, "*Nineteen Forty-one*" from the collection *Drunk With Love*, where, as in "*The Time Capsule*," Rhoda's hot-headedness may carry the story but rarely wins her more than *little* battles, skirmishes, the last word—never any kind of triumph from being diminished, or more importantly being diminished because of her sex (26–35). In this story Rhoda is stuck on a wild horse at her father's insistence and is consequently thrown and almost killed. Her rudeness comes off as quirky and cute; the focus is on Rhoda as a little toughie, and not on the masculine forces in her life that have sent her on her smashing, downhill gallop in the first place. In effect, "*The Time Capsule*" is a kind of rewrite of "*Nineteen Forty-one*." In "*The Expansion of the Universe*," also from the earlier collection, Rhoda appears as a teenager, loudly defiant, wild on the surface, but at the same time routinely traditional, a young woman who diets and dreams of Bob Rosen who will save her from her life of boredom and tedious everyday people by pinning his fraternity pin on her blouse. Rhoda seems to have matured very little in a later story, "*Mexico*," when, now in her forties, her dreams include running off with a matador and having his children:

I will go back with them [to Mexico] in September. To kill the beautiful and awkward pamplona blanco and pluck them and eat them. Anything is better than being passionless and bored. . . . Bullfighters are waiting and blood on the arena floor. Blood of the bull and fast hot music and Mexico. "I should have left a long time ago," she began humming. Progress is possible, she decided. But it's very, very slow.

(*Light Can Be* 130)

For patient readers, perhaps too slow.

Rhoda appears again, in "*Some Blue Hills at Sundown*" from the *Light Can Be Both Wave and Particle* collection, playing Scarlett O'Hara to a fault. The rebelliousness gimmick here is wrung for all it is worth. At sixteen Rhoda (Gilchrist doesn't mind jumping back and forth in time) is intent on seducing Bob Rosen:

She pulled away. "I want to do it. You said you'd do it to me. You promised me. You swore you would."

"When did I do that?"

"You know."

"Rhoda, Rhoda, Rhoda. Jesus. Exactly where did you envision this deflowering taking place?"

"In the car, I guess. Or anywhere. Where do people go?"

(28)

This is a rendezvous arranged by Rhoda with her supposedly dying boyfriend—Rhoda is a sucker for romanticism, the more histrionic the better. She had “told her mother and father that if they didn’t let her go she would kill herself and they believed her, so caught up in their terrible triangle and half-broken marriage and tears and lies and sadness that they couldn’t fight with her that year” (27). Rhoda’s behavior and personality seem to mirror the image of women as described by George Fitzhugh, an articulate spokesman for slavery and the subordinate role of women in the Old South, who wrote: “So long as she is nervous, fickle, capricious, delicate, diffident and dependent, man will worship and adore her. Her weakness is her strength, and her true art is to cultivate and improve that weakness” (qtd. in Scott 17).

In Gilchrist’s latest book, *Net of Jewels* (1992), we have still yet another version of Rhoda Manning’s life stretching from the time she is a freshman at Vanderbilt to a brief reflection at the end of the book when Rhoda is fifty. Gilchrist’s treatment of Rhoda does not live up to the jacket’s promise, that Rhoda is on “a path of self-assertion, she protests and resists—against her daddy’s will, against her mother’s limited expectations of her, against confines that are too small to contain her burgeoning intuition that life is richer and darker than her complacent surroundings. Rhoda yearns for meaning and beauty, profundity and mystery. . . .” But other than an incredible rudeness to both her mother and father, driving her automobile too fast, attending parties when her parents did not wish her to do so, Rhoda’s “path of assertiveness” is objectified in a vague friendship with a gay decorator who appears briefly, mostly at the beginning of the novel and at its end; one dinner with an intelligent woman lawyer who soon afterwards disappears; and arranging other lawyers for her maid’s murder trial (one with whom she has an affair, thus capitalizing on the situation). Rhoda does not finish college or even her sophomore year at college, and after a brief marriage and two babies, she returns to her father’s home, jobless (almost unaware that a job is an option) and throughout the remainder of the book keeps busy having affairs, an abortion, partying and spending her father’s money. But as if Gilchrist were trying to show some inner vision, the topic of civil rights is bandied about by a few characters and the gay decorator as iconoclast appears briefly from time to time, but their focus is never sustained. The novel sprawls, and Rhoda does not move toward anything in particular, nor are we too sure she wants anything to move forward to. Her indulgence and her spoiled obliviousness ultimately have no point, nor are they redeemed by Gilchrist’s perfunctory insertions concerning civil and gay rights. With all the many current national problems such as environmental protection and homelessness, and on the larger front, starvation in Somalia, violence in Serbia and its neighbors, the Gulf war and its possible recurrence, Rhoda, because she does not clearly square off with the social problems of her times, but merely pretends to—she dabbles in them—comes off not only as a spoiled bore, but as an unconscious, spoiled bore.

Confusing as always is Gilchrist’s attitude toward the character she has created. If dramatic irony is a technique in this book, its goal is never realized, because Gilchrist never ties up ends nor allows Rhoda an iota of insight. She never learns anything. At its best, if this book could be called a slice of life about a southern woman who never matured, perhaps we could feel less cheated, but again, we have uncomfortable flashes all along in the novel that Gilchrist actually respects Rhoda Manning. On the last page, for example, her father is still taking care of her. These pages indicate that he will continue to do so and that Gilchrist feels this is a reasonable conclusion:

“You just stop thinking about all that mess down there in Alexandria. Just try to sleep. Everything’s okay. It’s going to be fine.” He put his hand on my arm and patted me. He leaned up into the cockpit and looked at the pilot’s map. He took dominion everywhere. I closed my eyes and went back to sleep.

(356)

Gilchrist then tacks a coda onto the end: Rhoda is fifty and looking back, in the company of her suddenly reappearing friend, Charles, the decorator, who is dying. In these few pages, *a propos* of nothing, focus is on Rhoda’s friendship with the elusive gay, almost as if she were trying to make him a symbol for injustice. Gilchrist does *not* focus on what logically should follow as implied in the premise of the book (and the promise of the publishers). If Rhoda is satisfied that she is a success, is more sensitive, intelligently retrospective than her family and peers as Gilchrist portrays her, the reader has a right to know how this came about. After all, we left her (a few paragraphs before) in the comfortable hands of her father. And if, instead, she is a failure, why doesn’t Gilchrist show us she believes Rhoda has failed, and why aren’t we allowed an evaluation of a lifetime of selling her soul to her father, to one of the last bastions of a southern patriarchy?

In Rhoda, as well as in most of Gilchrist’s other characters, the image of the southern belle remains, and she has lived her literary life in the pages of Gilchrist’s work singularly oblivious to new realities of career, political activity, education and self-image. When will these characters be allowed to grow up? Readers, no matter how amused by their antics and predicaments, can hardly continue to be charmed by the unthinking, naughty, incorrigible, ineffective and spoiled rich, especially since, in real life, feminist awareness has changed so many people for the better, and the more interesting. Gilchrist’s everyday, yet vivid, outrageous people who have delighted us with such vigor—chauffeurs and hairdressers, nasty children and devious parents, lovers and haters—sustained as they initially were by Gilchrist’s unobtrusive omniscience (as close as anyone to O’Connor’s), apt detail and yes, unmistakable occasional truths, must still grow or move or change, not continually be rewritten or constantly summoned to reappear in new guise. Even were these personalities to reflect what Gilchrist may believe to be the true stasis of the New South, as I doubt seriously they do, eventually some



character needs to tune in to politics, to painful responsibility, to self-awareness, to something outside their own skin. If nothing else, odds demand such a character.

Gilchrist's books are churned out like clockwork almost yearly (1981, 1983, 1984, 1986, 1987, 1988, 1989, 1990, 1992). Perhaps because readers are given this profusion of character eccentricities in such rapid sequence, without any kind of consistently discernible intellectual development or engagement with their situations in any meaningful way, their footstomping has become less amusing. Gilchrist refuses to let her characters rise to certain consciousness, either because her technique is truly entertaining (for a while) and she reasons "why argue with success?" or, more likely, because she herself has mistaken obnoxiousness for the spirit of feminism. Her characters are more thought about than thought through. A classic like *Death of a Salesman* would probably become tiresome too if it were rewritten over the years with different situations but with the same kinds of character responses. Even Archie Bunker managed to grow over the seasons. To write about the same characters and have them evolve is certainly a difficult task, but one can't help thinking that Gilchrist, above all southern writers, has the talent to pull it off.

Sometimes the portrayals of both men and women become close to dangerously overdone: her traditional-minded black servants never once have an active political thought. Men too are fatuously southern, or imperfectly rendered. A Chinese geneticist has thoughts only a little less complicated and naive than Dudley Manning, Rhoda's insensitive, long-suffering father. Unlike Joyce Carol Oates, Gilchrist's skill at dealing with the inner consciousness of the highly educated suffers credibility. And, unlike Glasgow's steel magnolias who are treated in the beginning with irony and at the end with compassion (Scott 222), Gilchrist's characters earn nothing for their pains but a few laughs, and at too few points, glimmers of larger truths. If Gilchrist could only keep her technique, gain some vision. . .

Though Gilchrist's initial success and critical acclaim have cooled considerably, most of us are seduced into buying her books because of our love for her original detail, her witty *bon mot*, the clever vignettes, the sheer talent she has for catching a theme with one or two words, fleeting as it is. In "*The Gauzy Edge of Paradise*," for example, Dianne effectively reflects a rightful ambiguity about dieting: "I was leaning against the portable dishwasher wondering what effect Sandor's coming would have on our diet. A diet's a very delicate thing. You have to keep your momentum going. You have to stick to your routine" (*Victory Over Japan* 97). And the ending of the story shows whole, unfair, priority-skewed worlds:

I pulled my knees up against my soft full stomach. I would never weigh 114 again as long as I lived. *Nothing would change* [emphasis added]. Good girls would press their elegant rib cages against their beautiful rich athletic husbands. Passionate embraces would ensue. I

would be lying on a bed drinking chocolate milkshakes. Eating cookies. Wishing Lanier hadn't given the Escalator away.

(110)

But the themes involving subsequent characters are never developed much further than "people are like this." Themes are invoked, they flash a bit and then are gone, only to reappear again in newer storylines, from the mouths of some similarly hopeless characters. Gilchrist squanders her important themes, her wildly funny and unique characters in lightweight treatment.

Perhaps it is true there are many aging kinds of southern women languishing about who were once rich and bright and new and are now hard-drinking and comically bitter, or worse. But in such profusion? And forever? Ann Firor Scott believes that what has happened to the image of southern women in literature can be discerned from three different novels: Ellen Glasgow's *Virginia* (1913) whose protagonist's romantic illusions end in dust and ash, Mary Johnstone's *Hagar* (1923) in which the protagonist questions cultural tradition from childhood on and Frances Newman's *The Hard-Boiled Virgin* (1926), which is a satire designed to "provide the *coup de grace* to the outworn tradition of the Southern Belle" (224). As far as feminist theory then, Ellen Gilchrist's heroines have managed to take a step backward when compared with the protagonists of these earlier novels. Gilchrist owes us a character who displays her true sensibilities and courage, because isn't this, after all, what feminism demands of us? Mary Allen, writing in *The Necessary Blankness: Women in Major American Fiction of the Sixties*, laments the continued failure of writers to create positive portraits of women. The American woman, she observes, is portrayed as incapable of action and consistently immersed in the dilemmas of men and children. Allen also says they are characterized by four other qualities: they have what she calls a "blankness," a lack of outward, important active response; they lack humor (we can hardly accuse Gilchrist or her characters of this one); they are materialistic; they are failed mothers (7-12). Why is it, Allen wonders, that women's natural need for many kinds of development has not worked its way into our literature? Surely we are not still stuck in the confessional mode, especially if we consider the work of Edna O'Brien, Nadine Gordimer, Bobbie Ann Mason, to name but a few. Gilchrist's characters seem blithely unaware that they have anything to confess. Many or most of them wear masks that demand glorious rebelliousness and self-aggrandizing generalizations about their own natures. This simply precludes much self-awareness. And Gilchrist herself focuses almost exclusively on their actions rather than allowing them to indulge in any kind of self-analysis. In "*Revenge*," for example, Gilchrist promises her readers that she does indeed have a social, problem-solving awareness of women's roles in this Rhoda, a subtly fine rendition of a ten-year-old painfully engaged in a battle with inequality. Rhoda is prompted to steal away in the dark to leap her boy cousin's forbidden broadjump. Her plaid formal lying

in the dust, she sails up into the night and over the obstacle, only to sum up the awful lives of most of Gilchrist's characters: "Sometimes I think whatever has happened since has been of no real interest to me" (*In the Land* 124). We are somehow let down because the promise remains unfulfilled.

A definitive line can be drawn between confessional writings which are associated with the beginnings of consciousness raising and the kind of literature which results when women's writings go beyond. Elinor Langer writes: "In confessional [literature] the self runs rampant; in autobiography, the writer uses the self to inspect the world" (10). Perhaps this should be true for fiction as well. Mary Allen's complaint against Sylvia Plath's *Esther Greenwood*, for example, is that she never engages in self-analysis.

Langer quotes Gloria Steinem's description of the second stage of feminism which illustrates this point: "after the first flush of feminist understanding that women, no matter how diverse, share the common dilemmas of sexual caste, the second stage . . . is measuring the diversity and understanding what chasms there are to bridge" (13). Perhaps then a third stage for writers might be one in which at least an occasional character attains a genuine political conscience. Where in Gilchrist's work is there such a character, and does not a constant exclusion of this kind of character imply a gap in the writer's consciousness?

Allen asks for five major defining character traits in female literary characters: a sense of humor, a job, the ability to intelligently assess their own choices toward motherhood or nonmotherhood, an enlightened attitude toward sexual freedom and some self-analysis (178–85). Gilchrist's Anna Hand (*The Anna Papers*) possesses two of these characteristics, the sense of humor and a job. And to be fair, her actions towards her niece Olivia show at least a semblance of conscious choice about nurturing. Anna does commit suicide, true, but not for a neurotic reason: for her suicide is an escape from her terminal illness. Compared to Gilchrist's other characters, however, Anna, who is a writer and a thinker, seems to lack history and motivation. She is regrettably less interesting than some of Gilchrist's less admirable characters. The characterization of Anna pales beside Gilchrist's treatment of those who lead more shallow lives. Amanda in *The Annunciation*, our best and initial hope, a woman who overcomes her alcoholism, her materialism and in the end embraces a kind of self-determinism, seems contrived, plunked down as she is by Gilchrist among the philosophers and poets and potters in an academic section of the Ozarks. She is not much better off than Alisha Terrebonne in "*There's a Garden of Eden*" who is fully cognizant of the fact that her era of renowned beauty is drawing to a close and that her life has been one of folly: "*And that is what I get for devoting my life to love instead of wisdom*" (*In the Land* 47). Dialogue among the characters deteriorates, too, in *The Annunciation's* second half when Amanda rubs elbows with the more educated and independent. As Yardley observes, their

conversations fall into that "sentimental nonsense of the sort that passed for profundity on the college campus in the 60's or 70's" (10).

Another problem with Gilchrist's development of strong characters is succinctly reflected in the ruminations of one of her own protagonists. LeLe Arnold in "*Traveler*" describes herself: "I was dazzling. I was LeLe Arnold, the wildest girl in the Mississippi Delta, the girl who swam Lake Jefferson without a boat or a life vest. I was LeLe, the girl who would do anything" (*In the Land* 151). Gilchrist evidences such a delight in depravity that it is difficult to conclude that she does not wholeheartedly approve of LeLe's description of herself. Even if it were possible to ascribe this phenomenon as Gilchrist's too subtle control of dramatic irony, we simply do not see any sign of sustained true movement toward a political consciousness in the characters. Those stories that did run on the dramatic irony that so enthralled readers over the years, when reschemed in new settings, now seem sad. In "*Revenge*," for example, Rhoda's hell-bent attitude has not helped shape her life in any positive way because twenty-some-odd years later she remains totally unaware of the terrible irony of reading certain passages from Hemingway as her father drives her to a doctor for an abortion:

The love story had finally started. *Then she came into the room, shining in her youth and tall striding beauty, and the carelessness the wind had made of her hair. She had pale, almost olive-colored skin, a profile that could break your, or anyone's heart, and her dark hair, of a thick texture, hung down over her shoulders. 'Hello, my great beauty,' the Colonel said.* This is more like it, Rhoda thought.

(*In the Land* 87)

And after the abortion, back home:

I'm beautiful, she thought, running her hands over her body. I'm skinny and I'm beautiful . . . I'm skinny and I'm beautiful and no one can make me do anything. . . . She began to laugh. She raised her hand to her lips and great peals of clear abandoned laughter poured out between her fingers, filling the tiny room, laughter back at the wild excited face in the bright mirror.

(95)

(Not so surprisingly, this same scene is rewritten almost word for word in *Net of Jewels*.) As Brian Morton notes, "It is hard to separate Ellen Gilchrist's failures of execution from the emotional failures of her characters" (368). But at any rate the characters are either happily recycled or are spouting comments reminiscent of old, familiar characters. If their stories were sprinkled among other stories whose characters sported some semblance of self-observation and insight, we could then be assured of Gilchrist's use of heavy dramatic irony as a point of interpretation. But not one ever succeeds in lessening her darker forces to any great extent. They are incapable of coping with disruption in their lives, and what solutions these characters do find are indulgent on their part and

overused on Gilchrist's. In the latest stories and novellas, most of the newer characters, as well as the old characters in new situations, are still staying busy getting their rich daddies and husbands to pay, partying, drinking alone, dieting, popping pills, getting married or unmarried. In *Net of Jewels*, after Rhoda's separation and months of living with her rich parents while the maid cares for her children, she is given a stockholder's position in her father's business. This action (on the last page) resolves the conflict. This solution is much like Lelia McLaurin's, in the earlier *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, who escapes from the madness of the sixties social revolution with a temporary fix—she goes off to the Gulf with her solvent husband and a shaker of martinis. What John Melmoth aptly noted about the early *Drunk With Love* pertains to Gilchrist's recent work: there is a sense of "things done well because they have been done before" (246). What is missing is not, as Meg Wolitzer believes, "a thread of commonality rising through the stories" (2, 12)—we have almost too much of that—but instead a linear development in the commonality of the characters that reflects women who show not only a degree of self-awareness, but also some degree of ennoblement.

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- Ellen Gilchrist's writing tumbles and spills off the page, seemingly without effort, like a voluble cousin breathlessly bringing you up to date on the liaisons and adventures of various members of a sprawling family—in this instance, as in several previous works, the Hand clan of Charlotte, N.C. It's worth noting, however, that previous acquaintance with the Hand family is not a prerequisite for understanding *Starcarbon: A Meditation on Love*.
- It's the summer of 1991, the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo is creating beautiful sunsets, the Soviet Union is about to unravel and tornadoes are going to rumble through Oklahoma. A portentous time, indeed, but the Hands have other things on their minds—namely love, in kaleidoscopic variety.
- "One sweet, funny, driven, brown-eyed, nineteen-year-old Scorpio named Olivia de Havilland Hand," the half-Cherokee, only-recently-discovered daughter of Daniel, borrows her father's Mercedes and goes off to Tahlequah, Okla., to study Navajo in summer school and reunite with her roots.
- Her old boyfriend, Bobby Tree, who has been training cutting horses for Pulitzer Prize-winning poet/novelist Tom Macalpin up in Montana on the Starcarbon Ranch, buys a used diamond in a Tiffany setting, puts new tires on his pickup and heads home for Tahlequah as well.
- Also destined for Tahlequah is Georgia Jones, M.D., Ph.D., a "forty-six-year-old control freak" demonstrating autonomy to herself and her lover, Zach, by borrowing his MG and exchanging Fayetteville and the temptations of love for a summer teaching anthropology at Northeastern Oklahoma State University.
- Conventional, ever-fertile Helen, executrix of her sister Anna's papers (see Gilchrist's *The Anna Papers*) is up in Boston having a glorious time with her Irish poet, Mike Carmichael, and is only mildly troubled by the ire this is causing her many children and erstwhile husband.
- Olivia's half-sister, Jesse, is down in New Orleans with the Manning branch of the family, about to have King Mallison's baby while he treads a precarious 12-step path. Meanwhile, Daniel is morose because he's missing his girls, and furthermore, he's broke, or so we're supposed to believe. The swimming pool is dry and full of leaves and the tennis court needs rolling, but he's still got Jade and Spook looking after him with all their wisdom and goodness. And Daniel is medicating his heartache as usual with Chivas and water.
- These are just a few of the characters populating these pages, for one of Gilchrist's gifts is the remarkable abundance of people she introduces. It isn't just the several



generations of the Hand family we have to keep straight; it's their in-laws and their relations, their psychiatrists, and the servants, too, and their relations.

This is a charmed and privileged bunch. They hop in and out of bed with gusto, but always with the appropriate partner. Egos are never bruised, love is always required, even age, impotence and fat don't interfere. Addictions are subdued through love and will and the felicity of wealth.

Psychiatrists are wise and always on call; they dream about their patients and call them "honey." Even a pair of murderous teenage twins seems destined for rehabilitation. As Helen Hand Abadie reminds her cousin Crystal Manning Mallison Weiss, "We live in a rich country and we have roofs over our heads and a Constitution that works and food to eat. This is not a tragedy no matter how much we want to believe it is."

Here, love is easy. Gilchrist is everybody's fairy god-mother, an overly fond *deus ex machina* who lets her charges teeter on the brink of disaster but can't bear to see anyone topple. She snatches them back in the nick of time to avert catastrophe. The gun discharges harmlessly, the tornado is selective in its path, children and parents forgive and embrace.

All of this is quite a lot of fun, but hardly seems to live up to its billing as a "meditation." It's more revelry than reflection, a boisterous accounting of a magical midsummer's dream.

Gilchrist slips into the thoughts of one character after another with blithe authorial license. We know just about everything on anyone's mind. And when it suits her, she gives a glimpse of the future as well, just the hint of a thread destined to reappear as the Hand family saga continues.

Gilchrist also plays with a somewhat self-conscious hall-of-mirrors conceit in which excerpts from the works of her writer characters—of which there are now several—appear within her own pages.

Mike Carmichael, Helen's Irish poet, says of Anna Hand, "She could wield the language," and we are reminded that this is actually Gilchrist commenting on Gilchrist. But wield the language she does, with hard-to-resist exuberance.

When Mike Carmichael sits down to write, he thinks, "The only reader I want is the one with a brain like tinder. Call up an answering cry. Call up wonder, laughter, fear, pain. Evoke Dharma, son of Reason."

Mike's novel is about the Hand clan, renamed and relocated to Australia to placate Helen. Ellen Gilchrist closes *Starcarbon* by quoting the opening page of Mike's novel, which almost exactly echoes the page that begins

*Starcarbon*. This Puckish suggestion that things may not be what they seem leaves us a little befuddled. Is someone pulling our strings?

There are forty-five names mapped on to the family tree that prefaces this novel: forty-five characters, from five generations of Hands and Mannings. Readers who have followed Ellen Gilchrist's saga of the Deep South will have a head start on newcomers and will recognize Olivia de Havilland Hand as the half-Native American niece, rescued by her novelist aunt, Anna (of *The Anna Papers* and elsewhere), and restored, in *I Cannot Get you Close Enough*, to her birthright of wealth and privilege as the long-lost daughter of the feckless and tipsy heart-throb, Daniel Hand. Even those familiar with the intricacies of Hand genealogy, and with its generations of trusty family retainers, will still have to contend with Olivia's equally fecund Cherokee kin. To stay within the compass of human memory, sagas traditionally involve plenty of smiting hip and thigh. This is what Gilchrist's *oeuvre* badly needs: a bout of bloody feuding to dispose of excess personnel.

*Starcarbon* unapologetically rehearses Gilchrist's pet theme: the family romance. Boy meets girl. Girl is in love with her emotionally unavailable father. Boy wins girl by being unlike Daddy—happy ending—or by resembling him—unhappy ending. Either way, droves of psychiatrists are kept in full employment, and the Hand-Manning genes survive to fight another day. It is now the summer of 1991, and Olivia is back in Tahlequah, Oklahoma, trying to balance her allegiance to her tribal roots with her fascination for the glamorous "world of possibility", represented by Daniel and his Old Money. Should Olivia learn to programme computers in Navajo? Should she return to her prissy liberal arts degree in North Carolina? Should she settle down with Bobby Tree, her rodeo-champion boyfriend? Who will pay her therapist if she does? Meanwhile, in New Orleans, her similarly troubled half-sister, Jessie, is paying the price for marrying a Daniel-substitute—the beautiful but unreliable King Mallison. She represents to Olivia all that is disgusting—and seductive—about life within the southern clan. With a new baby pinned to her breast like a brooch, and plagued by a wastrel husband, Jessie may be both bored and beleaguered, but at least there are plenty of cousins, servants and psychiatrists on hand to take the strain.

For all its insistence on history and regional difference, Gilchrist's saga seems to sieve its heroines into a curious uniformity. Olivia's life may have the trappings of modernity; she may be an expert bareback rider; she may even have a surrogate father called Little Sun, who speaks in portentous Tonto-like decrees. Yet with the same armour of "lipstick and powder" and the same flimsy cultural weapons, she seems to be fighting exactly the same battles as her southern foremothers: how to keep two men happy and still have time for an education.

Perhaps the only difference between this young generation of neurotic nineteen-year-olds and their great aunts at the same age is their fluency in pop psychology. When Rhoda

Manning announced, in *Net of Jewels*, that she “was cathected by a narcissist”, it was disturbing and piquant: a painful spitting-out of the obvious. Olivia and her friends have been nursed on “goddamn psychology bullshit”: they spout Jung and Everyday Zen and “interrupted bonding”, and advise each other that “the joy of loving someone is in loving them, not in being loved”.

The problem of reconciling autonomy and love is still a perfectly respectable, even sympathetic, theme. Yet Gilchrist's contemporary protagonists manage somehow to sully the drama with their ersatz knowingness. “Oh, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes”, aunt Helen replies ecstatically to Mike's proposal of marriage. “And the thing Mike liked remembering about that moment was that he knew she had never read Joyce.” Mike should be ashamed of himself.

Away from the hormonal maelstrom, Gilchrist's minor characters are sketched with warmth and zest. The adolescent twins, Taylor and Tucker, are at once nightmarish and horribly plausible. Daniel's farm-manager, Spook, is memorably wry. The novel's ageing roués and their gold-digging mistresses, the psychiatrists, even the horses are crisply drawn. But the central characters lapse too frequently into pretentiousness to ensure our loyalty, and the family tree may soon need pruning.

Most fiction writers create in each of the stories they tell an autonomous world, filled with characters and settings that exist nowhere else. The various worlds they make may be neighborly, like planets in a single solar system, but each is unique. Ellen Gilchrist, however, delights in re-exploring the same world again and again. In nearly a dozen novels and story collections, Gilchrist has embroidered and reembroidered the lives of characters like Miss Crystal and Mr. Manny, an incompatible yet devoted New Orleans society couple; Traceleen, Miss Crystal's adoring, circumspect maid; the Mannings and the Whittingtons, bourgeois Southern families full of dreamy rebels and hard-nosed tycoons.

Such familiars populate *The Age of Miracles*, but it is the irrepressibly scandalous Rhoda Manning who dominates the book; 8 of the 16 stories are hers. Rhoda, whom we met as a child in *Victory Over Japan*, who married and became a mother in *Net of Jewels*, is now a divorced femme fatale on the wrong side of 50, a modestly successful writer and a grandmother several times over. As always, her adventures are brazen and self-indulgent, seedy yet oddly heroic.

Rhoda is struggling to hold onto youth, her very essence, without denying the obligations of motherhood or the affronts of aging (not that she doesn't fail often). In “*A Statue of Aphrodite*,” an ostensibly chivalrous obstetrician falls in love with Rhoda after seeing her airbrushed likeness in the magazine *Southern Living*. She has her doubts but tries to temper them with reality, noting that when “a reasonably good-looking doctor who makes at least two hundred and fifty thousand dollars a year hugs you by the

elevator, you don't forget it. You mull it, fantasize it, angelize it. Was it him? Was it me? Am I still cute or not? Could you get AIDS from a doctor? Maybe and maybe not. All that blood. All those C-sections on fourteen-year-old girls. There is always Nonoxynol-9 and condoms, not that anyone of my generation can take that seriously.” (Rhoda may be romantic, but she doesn't mince words.)

When the doctor tries to cajole her into a Laura Ashley dress, to accompany him to his daughter's wedding, Rhoda finds herself mired in family hysterics and midlife male neurosis. Rueful but nonchalant, her dignity resilient as ever, she extricates herself gamely.

In “*A Wedding in Jackson*,” she hot-roads from Fayetteville, Ark., to Jackson, Miss., to make a family wedding. Overdressed, without an escort, Rhoda ends up dancing with “every little girl at the party who looked like she needed someone to dance with.” She sheds outdated grudges and examines anew the foibles of her extended clan. When her 11-year-old grandson sulks because he does not like his mother's new boyfriend, Rhoda takes him aside and talks to him with whimsical frankness:

“‘I'm going to send you a book about a man named Oedipus,’ I said. ‘It will explain the psychological ramifications of this problem. Call me up when you've read it and we'll talk about it.’”

“‘I don't know what any of that means.’ He raised his head and looked at me. Gave me the full force of his gaze. . . . There is no barrier between him and the world. Not a membrane to separate him from all that burgeoning wonder, all the glorious and inglorious knowledge of our being.

“‘I will love you till I die,’ I said. ‘I love you more than anyone. You are the dearest thing on earth to me.’”

Rhoda's musings on the quicksilver nature of youth are touching, but what makes “*A Wedding in Jackson*” so memorable has less to do with her rhapsodizing than with the reassurance she gives us that even the most emotionally worn, self-involved women may find joy and renewal in the endless chain of maternal love. It is an emphatically feminist story in the most intimate, uplifting sense.

These stories cover a broad spectrum of tone, from coy to forlorn. In “*The Uninsured*,” Rhoda becomes a garrulous pen pal to Blue Cross, Blue Shield. In “*Joyce*,” while taking an inspiring class on *Ulysses*, she has a voracious, loveless affair with a Vietnam vet who is searching in vain to give meaning to his war memories; though this tale is weaker than others here, Gilchrist's portrayal of Rhoda as a postmodern Penelope is daring.

*The Age of Miracles* is not a collection in which every story sings, and one of its flaws is that Rhoda's shadow envelops nearly every other character. Three stories told from the perspective of children grown wise before their

time—"Among the Mourners," "The Stucco House" and "The Blue House"—are engaging, but in the context of Rhoda's recurring narrative, they are little more than genteel interludes. Like an overblown rose, Rhoda fills the book with a fragrance both heady and garish (and sometimes cloying, as in "Love of My Life," a memoir of an affair that, for all its ardent extremes, seems unexceptional and too sentimentally rendered).

Not that she runs away with the show entirely. In two other wonderful stories, marrying fable and farce, Gilchrist lampoons the muddled morality of our times.

In "Madison at 69th, a Fable," three grown children kidnap their mother and hold her hostage to prevent her from getting a face lift—a wholly original comedy that enfolds a dark tangle of fears and betrayed obligations.

The conflict between Edwina Standfield's desperation to buy back youth and her children's imperialist arrogance is rife with irony.

"I am fifty-nine years old," Edwina pleads. "I don't have long enough to live to go saving myself a little pain and discomfort. I want to have this done. I'm having this cone."

"It's a new world," her son says later. "People don't get what they think they ought to have. They have to think up new things to want."

How the tables have turned: the older generation pleading for novelty, the younger generation scorning change.

"The Divorce" is similarly rich. In this computer-age fairy tale, a jilted husband buries his sorrow by opening an espresso cafe in a dull Midwestern town, an asthmatic little girl becomes a gifted trumpeter and an upright citizen puts herself in contempt of court by calling a spade a spade. And love, however pragmatically, conquers all.

If there is a unifying theme in this collection, it lies in the outlook of the various protagonists, nearly all of them past or yet to enter what we call the prime of life. In those before-and-after years—one an age of yearning, the other of reckoning—we take the least for granted and so, Gilchrist suggests, are most capable of recognizing miracles. We do not yet know the random cruelty of love, or we know it all too well.

"I'm a Celt," says Rhoda. "I pile up stones and keep a loaded pistol in my underwear drawer. My ancestors painted themselves blue and impaled each other on oak staves. I can't stand tyranny. From the world outside or the tyranny of the heart."

Like Rhoda, Ellen Gilchrist is an Attila of a romantic who, as a Southerner, a woman and a poet, chooses her weapons from a well-stocked arsenal. In *The Age of Miracles* she continues the fight with shrewd, unstinting passion.

"You might have heard of me," Rhoda Manning says in "A Wedding in Jackson," one of the stories in this collection *The Age of Miracles*. "I'm a famous scandal in some circles in the South." A familiar figure in Ellen Gilchrist's fiction, from *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams* to *Victory Over Japan*, from precocious brat to noted writer, Rhoda at her best has a brassy wit, a kind of overbearing Southern charm. Now 50ish, "mellowed," less concerned with having sex though still sexually frank, her drinking problem, failed marriages and passionate affairs behind her, she still loves to talk about herself. But by the end of the collection, even her fans may have heard enough. Fortunately, not every story puts her ego on parade.

Rhoda rarely sounds like the seasoned writer she claims to be, and from whom we should expect the pleasures and surprises of good storytelling. Self-absorbed, rambling, digressive, she explores nothing (especially her own character) with any depth or freshness. Patches of vivid writing and wit are overwhelmed by incidental details, trivial dialogue, self-indulgent fights—like long phone conversations or letters home to an audience she takes for granted: I know you just love listening to me and will be tickled if I just mention whatever comes along because it's all about me, your spoiled and irrepressible Rhoda. "If you write from the heart, it will be good," she says. Even if that were true, her stories seem halfhearted, rushed, slapdash.

She can tease you with an opening, as in "Paris": "A young man is dead and maybe we could have stopped it. That's what I wake up with every morning." Sounds promising, weighted with responsibility. But soon we are lost again in Rhoda's self-adoring existence; postcard passages, appointments here and there, culture-hopping with her and a young admirer ("in my Senior Citizenship, Tannin had been delivered to me. To love, to understand, to nourish, to adore") while on the sidelines another young man is nudged pointlessly toward a gratuitous death. The story goes nowhere because it has nowhere to go; it only has Rhoda.

However, along about the middle of this book, a handful of stories stand out from the rest, and one reason is clear: Rhoda is not at the microphone. "The Raintree Street Bar and Washataria, A Fable" recreates the atmosphere of a New Orleans hangout favored by jazz and literary artists: It's a eulogy for an era's end and for a poet named Francis, so venerated that his suicide reaches, however obliquely, into two following stories. "Among the Mourners" is narrated by a teenage girl whose first boyfriend experience is threatened by the wake her father wants to hold for Francis. Her voice expresses her character with convincing humor and indignation. "The Stucco House," controlled by a calm third-person narrator, examines the life of Teddy, an appealing kid wise enough to know whom he can find happiness with and when, despite his alcoholic, delusional mother and the prospect of losing to another divorce his best friend, his stepfather Eric. Emphatically portrayed, Teddy's a solid little man, a survivor. The story



is polished, focused, satisfying in its lineaments, its closing lines pitched perfectly to its sentiments and concerns: "He came to get me, Teddy thought, and his heart swung open too. Swung wide as the gate. He got down off the tractor and went running to meet the car. Eric got out of the car and walked to meet him. Crazy little boy, he was thinking. Little friend of mine." The strengths of this piece—its sure touch with character, tone and shape—make the Rhoda stories harder to bear, with her pushy, garrulous voice. The remaining stories are all Rhoda. "*The Divorce*" strains to persuade us that "the worse divorce in the history of Harrisburg, Illinois" is worth the time, but it's thin sitcom. When in "*Uninsured*" Rhoda is reduced to passing off as a story 14 letters to her insurance company, you have to wonder how much minutiae she has left in her file cabinet. "*Love of My Life*" ought to portend something big ("my own true love, my one and only true love"), but it careens from scene to scene, picking up one thread, dropping another, from Rhoda's inexplicably catatonic style (Dexedrine? anorexia?), which vanishes partway through, to her teenage son's flirtation with drugs and back to Raine, her tumultuous love, and "the wild terrible smell of his body."

The "glory" the younger Rhoda achieves as college writer in "*Going To Join the Poets*" seems not obviously deserved since there is nothing in her sensibilities that substantiates a poetic vision. She is petty, catty, self-dramatizing, vain—the wrong Rhoda to end a book with. If the stories Rhoda has to tell us were formed and directed with the same skill and patience that informed "*The Stucco House*," this would be a thinner but much better collection.

Ellen Gilchrist, as readers of her stories will have noticed, has a gift for moving meticulously around the textures and ramifications of an event; and while her novels are always entertaining, this is a gift which lends itself more naturally to the short story, a form where epiphany is distilled and compressed. *The Age of Miracles* is a welcome return to Gilchrist's Southern landscapes and charmingly fallible characters.

Fables depend on a sense of ritual and expectation, and although only "*Madison at 69th*" openly calls itself "A Fable," Gilchrist's talent for noticing the shapes of habit in everyday life runs deep. In "*Statue of Aphrodite*," the disappointment of Rhoda Manning, the author's recurring heroine, is articulated through her clothes. She sets off to meet an unknown admirer with "a sophisticated black three-piece evening suite . . . and an even more sophisticated beige Donna Karan to wear on the plane", and a bathetic weight sounds in the description of the Laura Ashley dress he sends her:

Its full skirt covered up the only thin part of my body. Its coy little neckline made my strong shoulders and arms look absurd. . . . I managed to look like a tennis player masquerading as a shepherdess.

Rhoda is one of a cast of characters who crop up repeatedly in Gilchrist's work, and though she is someone we relish meeting again, her very ubiquity can be self-

defeating, in that a few too many of the other characters and narrators share her taste for loping, paratactic sentences and worldly pronouncements: "Women and their desire to please wealthy, self-made men. Think about that sometime if you get stuck in traffic in the rain." In general, however, the way in which stories and characters intertwine with and comment on each other is one of Gilchrist's signal strengths.

On the simplest level, the overlaps deepen the imaginative reality of her fictional terrain, that Arkansas / Mississippi / Louisiana area which is becoming her answer to Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha. They also enable Gilchrist to display her tonal skill; like musical variations, individual stories can provide different perspectives on the same events. For example, a poet's suicide can precipitate two stories as different as the bitter-sweet "*Raintree Street Bar and Washeteria*" [sic] and the comically petulant "*Among the Mourners*". Where the former traces the impact of the suicide on New Orleans bohemia, the latter is easily the funniest story in the collection, as a female Holden Caulfield moans about her parents and the poet's funeral:

Here's what they do that drives me crazy. They preach all the time about reason. *Dharma*, my dad calls it. He is so big on dharma. Then the first something happens they start acting like these big Christians or something and having all these rituals.

*The Age of Miracles* is not Gilchrist's best book; it doesn't have the consistency of a work like *Drunk with Love*. However, there are in this new collection moments of more profound and graceful achievement than she has shown before. Most notable in this regard is the story which contains the book's title, "*Death Comes to a Hero*". In a tale which itself takes its cue from "A Painful Case" in *Dubliners*, a one-legged Joyce scholar, Morais Wheeler, discovers a soulmate in his aerobics class, only to find that the heart she has stirred is giving up on him. With its turns of phrase ("He wrapped a smile around her embarrassment") and its control of tone, this story of love among the Stairmasters is Gilchrist at her most effective.

Although the book has its fair share of dramatic climaxes, such as Wheeler's heart-attack or the bomb that kills Rhoda's acquaintance in "*Paris*", Gilchrist is less interested in sweeping revelations than were earlier writers such as Flannery O'Connor and Faulkner. In her world, people's plans tend to go awry less obviously, if no less painfully, collapsing in slow motion like ice in spring. The "miracles" in this book are quiet surprises, as when in "*Madison at 69th*", a woman's children persuade her that she doesn't need a facelift—by kidnapping her and slipping her a mickey. Ellen Gilchrist has an ear for the equivocal, as her titles suggest: *Drunk with Love*, *Net of Jewels*, *Light Can Be Both Wave and Particle*. And in her best work, she displays a sensitivity which comprehends its own cost. One view of freedom:

Not a membrane to separate him from all that burgeoning wonder, all the glorious and inglorious knowledge of our being.

measures against another:

They are free, in the deepest and most terrible sense of the word. Cut loose, dismounted, disengaged.

If nothing else, Gilchrist is one of our more intriguing examiners of the pavement on the road to hell.

Ellen Gilchrist has said that in writing she has “finally found a socially desirable use for the fact that I talk too much” (Lyons 83). This statement is not only revealing of Gilchrist but also of her white female characters, who want to establish their independence from the social norm while also being accepted within that same society. The image for such characters to maintain is that of “the belle . . . a beautiful, intelligent, yet modest woman with impeccable morality” (Seidel 13). One of these, Rhoda Manning, the central character in both Gilchrist’s novel *Net of Jewels* and many of her short stories, likes to see herself in the role of rebel, an independent girl/woman who does what she wants to do, yet she never seems to be able to break the strong ties of family and society which bind her to the past.<sup>1</sup> Although she says in *Net of Jewels* that “I wouldn’t be caught dead being a southern belle” (250), Rhoda is most certainly under the influence of this ideal. Her confusion over her own identity is evident when she tries to separate herself from the southern belle ideal, especially through control of her own body, but instead displays how deeply she has internalized the responses to that image.

*Net of Jewels* treats this theme particularly effectively because it covers Rhoda’s late adolescence and early adulthood, times when trying to establish identity apart from the family is customary. Rhoda’s life becomes a delicate balance of pushing against the boundaries, but never so hard or so far that she cannot return to the comforting, if restraining, bounds of “good” southern society. She says in *Net of Jewels* that it is the story of “my setting forth to break the bonds [my father] tied me with” (3), but she does not seem to really want—or to be able—to do so. As long as Rhoda is able to appear to others as a good southern girl/woman, she will be accepted as such, even if the facade is almost completely false.

The process of examining Rhoda’s facades in *Net of Jewels* is complicated by the fact that Rhoda herself is telling her story. In the very first sentence, in a “preface,” she says, “My name is Rhoda Manning and I am a writer” (3). We see her in many other roles throughout the book, but “writer” is the one persona she wants to identify with; she is a storyteller. As such, she wants to entertain us, to tell a good story—not necessarily a true one. In the first Rhoda Manning short story, “1957, a Romance,” we are told that Rhoda “always believed her own stories as soon as she told them” (82). Various discrepancies among the Rhoda short stories and *Net of Jewels* raise the question of how much rewriting of her own life Rhoda does, or that Gilchrist has Rhoda do.<sup>2</sup> In other words, Rhoda learns to see her life the way she thinks the world wants to see it—much as she tries to alter her body so that it will appear pleasing to society.

All of the Rhoda stories, including *Net of Jewels*, are told from Rhoda’s point of view, either in first person, as in the novel, or in third person limited. Thus Rhoda’s voice could be telling us tall tales. In an interview Gilchrist explained that she knew more about Rhoda as she wrote more about her, and that some of the past stories “violated my internal sense of Rhoda’s personality” (Smith 46).<sup>3</sup> But the same could be said of Rhoda as she tells us stories about herself; her sense of self, of what her story should be, changes over time and with the context of the story.<sup>4</sup> Such altering emphasis on Rhoda’s own self-perception could explain why, in parts of her story told in more than one place, one version shows her placing more importance on her appearance than others do.

For Rhoda, physical appearances are extremely important in maintaining the fiction of herself as an accepted member of southern society and her family, for she has to look the part. The role is assigned by “an entire society that boasts of its women as the most splendid examples of feminine pulchritude . . . [and which] produces a woman whose appearance is emphasized from babyhood” (Seidel xv). Obsession with appearance is the most visible way Rhoda shows that she has been successfully socialized. She willingly pursues the perfect body to the point of endangering her own health, even while she tries to rebel against the moral codes which are also part of her “proper” social position.

For Rhoda, dieting and weight loss are the means to achieving this perfect end. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar explain the phenomenon of women in patriarchal societies harming themselves through diet:

Learning to become a beautiful object, this girl learns anxiety about—perhaps even loathing of—her own flesh. Peering obsessively into the real as well as metaphoric looking glasses that surround her, she desires literally to “reduce” her own body. In the nineteenth century . . . this desire led to tight-lacing and vinegar-drinking. In our own era it has spawned innumerable diets and “controlled” fasts.

(295).

Rhoda’s own pursuit of the perfect figure is not entirely harmful since it does encourage her (at times) to swim, but by and large she uses unhealthful means, such as crash diets, drugs and even abortion, to try to maintain the ideal. She also abuses alcohol as an escape from her problems, which include disappointment with her body.

Already a dedicated dieter by the time she reaches the period of her life depicted in *Net of Jewels*, she has been going on diets at least since she was in third grade. At that age Rhoda was being taught not just to be thin, but that somehow ideal appearance was linked to social success which included moral behavior. Rhoda does perform one socially sacrificial action; she volunteers to be partners with Billy Monday, the class “geek.” When she tells her mother this, “she was so proud of me she made me some cookies even though I was supposed to be on a diet”

("Victory Over Japan" 7). Here Rhoda is learning that one social good deed can cancel another social sin, a lesson she later applies in the reverse by keeping the diets while breaking the moral code. Rhoda overhears her mother telling the Episcopal minister, "I think it helped a lot to get her to lose weight. It was smart of you to see that was the problem" ("Victory Over Japan" 8). The message Rhoda receives about physical attractiveness as a moral obligation is reinforced by learning that the minister proposed her diet in the first place.

Such social conditioning leads Rhoda to use her weight as a primary means of identifying herself. In 1944, the year Rhoda is ten, she decides to bury a time capsule, and in the note she includes to introduce herself she begins: "My name is Rhoda Katherine Manning. I weigh 82" ("Time Capsule" 18). She thinks that a stranger would be more interested in her weight than in anything else about her and that she must prove herself acceptable in that way for the reader of her message to want to read the rest.

On occasion Rhoda is led to exercise to keep her body from getting fat. As a child, however, she is also told that exercise can make her unattractive. When she is ten, spending the summer with relatives in the Mississippi Delta, as the only girl she is lonely and wants to play with the five boys. But they will not let her train with them in track because "this is only for boys" ("Revenge" 112). Her grandmother reinforces this message when, in trying to make Rhoda feel better about being left out, tells her, "Even if they let you play with them all it would do is make you a lot of ugly muscles" (119). For women in this society, a good figure has nothing to do with physical well-being and can actually be contrary to it.

By the time Rhoda is a young teenager she has formed a pattern of putting herself on harmful diets in order to turn herself into an object to be looked at. At thirteen, in ninth grade, Rhoda is directing her efforts to make herself look "right" so that she might please men, in this case a specific male, Bob Rosen, a college freshman. She would "do everything he directed her to do. *So he would love her*" ("Expansion" 38). While Bob does try to teach Rhoda to better herself by reading, writing and learning to appreciate music, he also directs her to become a cheerleader and tells her exactly how to dress. He makes seeing her on one of his visits home dependent on her meeting his dictates for her appearance: "If you will be waiting for me wearing a black sweater and skirt and brown shoes and get that hair cut into a pageboy I'll be over about 6:30" (45). Though he does not tell Rhoda that she should also be thin, she can hardly miss the message that she must look perfect if she wants attention from him. Bob does perhaps want her to look thin, since he requests black, traditionally a color that is supposed to make the wearer appear thinner. Rhoda begins to diet on Monday, the day she learns Bob is coming. She resolves, "I am not eating a bite until Friday. I will eat one egg a day until he gets here. I'll be so beautiful. . . . I love him so much I could die" (48). If Rhoda were to keep up such behavior she literally could die from trying to make Bob love her.

Even though this diet lasts less than a week, it does adversely affect Rhoda's health. Her mother tells her on Thursday, "You look terrible, Rhoda. Your cheeks are gaunt and you aren't sleeping well. I heard you last night" (48). But Rhoda does not believe that crash dieting is making her look worse. Instead, she perceives the diet positively: "Already she could feel her rib cage coming out. She would be so beautiful. So thin. Surely he would love her" (49). In an incredible, but socially conditioned, twist of logic, Rhoda seems to think that looking as much like a skeleton as possible will make her sexually desirable.

Rhoda's dieting behavior has many similarities to anorexia nervosa, defined as:

an eating disorder . . . characterized by fear of becoming obese, disturbed body image, inability to maintain body weight within normal range (exemplified by significant weight loss), and, to females, amenorrhea [suppression of menstruation].

("Anorexia" 148)

Except for the final symptom, amenorrhea, Rhoda fits the description. The third time she is pregnant she knows it because, she says, "I was late exactly three times in my life. Once when I had pneumonia and twice when I was pregnant" (*Net of Jewels* 315). Although Rhoda's dieting behavior brings her dangerously close to anorexia, she never appears to cross the line to the extreme.

When Rhoda is fourteen and a sophomore in high school, she begins smoking, another risky behavior which she sees as rebellion against the social order her parents represent. In fact, however, the smoking is connected with her desire to maintain the thin appearance that same society prescribes for her. Rhoda's parents, Dudley and Ariane, recognize the rebellion in the smoking, partly because it makes Rhoda less attractive and less able to fit the image of the perfect southern woman. As her father points out, it makes her smell bad. In an effort to encourage her to quit smoking, Dudley decides to take Rhoda on a trip when she finishes the school year. As usual, Rhoda is on a diet, this time what she calls "a black coffee diet" ("Music" 20), relying on two drugs at the same time, nicotine and caffeine, to suppress her appetite.

Rhoda depends on cigarettes to help herself stay on the diet, as she finds out when her father takes her away to the hills of Kentucky, "God's country . . . [where] people took things like children smoking cigarettes seriously" (28). Rhoda is so addicted to smoking that she starts trying to find ways to replace her cigarettes as soon as her father takes away the ones she brought with her. She succeeds by telling a clerk that she is buying them for her father. While in the store, "Rhoda stared at the cookie jars, wanting to stick her hand down inside and take out great fistfuls of Lorna Doones and Oreos. She fought off her hunger and raised her eyes to the display of chewing tobacco and cigarettes" (30). When Rhoda goes to the re-



stroom to sneak a cigarette, after inhaling she feels “dizzy and full” (31); her diet drug is working. She is found out, however, and is left for a while with no access to her appetite suppressant.

Not coincidentally, at this point Rhoda goes off her diet in a big way. When she and her father return to the car, Rhoda “tore open the lunch and began to devour it, tearing the chicken off the bones with her teeth, swallowing great hunks without even bothering to chew them” (33) and, later that evening, “ate two pieces of pie, covering it with thick whipped cream” (35). She finds that she is unable to follow the diet she has set without something to convince her body that it does not need food. But even more disturbing is that Rhoda does not seem to understand the relationship between her dieting and her smoking. The very action of smoking, through which Rhoda thinks she is asserting her independence, is instead merely helping to confirm her position as an object within the social bounds.

The next step for Rhoda to take in her quest for weight loss is the use of more powerful drugs, and she takes it in *Net of Jewels*. When, in the novel, we initially see her she seems to have a healthier body image than the younger Rhoda portrayed through the various short stories. She has used her freshman year at Vanderbilt to explore and assert her own identity, and she has had time away from the repressive influence of her family for most of a year. She is unconcerned enough about her appearance to let her roommate cut her hair and is successfully competing on the swim team (a sport where some body fat helps for buoyancy). She and her roommate binge periodically at the Waffle House by deciding that they will “go and give a pint of blood and will come out even” (9), but at this point Rhoda is eating regularly and exercising.

Trouble starts, however, when Rhoda returns to the new home in Alabama where her parents have moved from Kentucky while she was away at school. The first words her mother says to her are, “My goodness, honey . . . you’ve gained so much weight” (21). Rhoda at first resists her mother’s suggestion that she take her to the doctor for some weight loss pills, but she eventually gives in. The doctor prescribes “pink pills,” Dexedrine, an addictive stimulant. All Rhoda knows is that after having her prescription filled and taking the first dose of twelve milligrams she is soon “in a marvelous mood” (24). That very day Rhoda tells us, “I was feeling thin already. This was a great diet. You didn’t even get hungry. This was perfect” (24). She finds the stronger drug more efficient than nicotine for controlling her appetite, and the diet requires none of the will power of her old self-imposed crash diets.

The pills are not, however, as benign as they at first seem. When Rhoda returns from swimming one day, her mother reminds her that “Doctor Freer said you had to be sure and eat thirty minutes after you take this pill. You have to eat on time. His said it was very important” (52). Rhoda ignores the doctor’s warning that the drug is strong and dangerous if not tempered by the presence of food in the stomach.

The Dexedrine may also be in part responsible for a tragic accident in which Rhoda is involved that same summer. Partly for weight control, Rhoda had continued her swimming. At the pool she meets an older woman, Patricia Morgan, and they become friends. She accepts a dinner invitation from Patricia, and muses that “I was half thinking of giving up swimming entirely. I had always done it to keep my body thin, but now I didn’t need it anymore” (58). Still on Dexedrine at the time of the dinner, Rhoda does not seem to sense any danger in complete weight control through artificial means.

For dinner, the Morgans serve “asparagus casserole and roast beef and hot homemade bread. There was wine, and later salad.” Rhoda, however, “picked at the food . . . [and] drank more wine” (60). After dinner, there is “the dessert and dessert wine and coffee and brandy.” Rhoda drank the sweet white wine and Dr. Morgan got up and filled my glass. Then I drank brandy and he refilled that” (61). During the evening Rhoda consumes a good amount of alcohol, but eats very little, apparently unaware of the danger of combining alcohol and Dexedrine.

They are a combination that could have killed Rhoda, but instead kill Clay, Patricia’s college-student son. During dinner, Rhoda had volunteered to drive Clay into town so that he could meet some other young people. With Rhoda behind the wheel, “driving sixty miles an hour, then sixty-five, as fast as [she] could drive and make the curves” (61), the car spins out of control and is hit by another car. Rhoda survives, but Clay does not. Rhoda’s parents assure her that the accident was not her fault, but the evidence makes it clear that she was driving impaired.

It could just as easily have been Rhoda killed in that car accident instead of Clay; Rhoda would then literally have killed herself in the pursuit of a perfect body. She does finally make the connection that her use of alcohol contributed to the accident, but it does not seem to occur to her that the Dexedrine had anything to do with it. At this point, alcohol has not yet been used to mask her insecurities about her body and Rhoda can perhaps admit to its effects because she is not yet addicted. But since she already “needs” Dexedrine to feel normal she cannot risk viewing the drug in anything but a positive way.

Addicted to the pills by summer’s end, she has lost more weight but is convinced she needs to lose still more. She does not listen to those who, like her friend Charles Williams, urge her to recognize that she has a dangerous, distorted view of what her body should look like. She is again exhibiting symptoms of anorexia. Charles tells her, “You are getting so thin. You’re almost too thin, Dee [his nickname for her]. Maybe you should go off your diet” (40). When the doctor takes her off Dexedrine, presumably because he feels she has lost enough weight, she searches for another way to obtain the drug, but tells us “it would be almost a year before I found another source” (73). She does not even seem aware of her dangerous course.

Rhoda heads off to her new college, the University of Alabama, with her old desire to stay thin but without her

recent crutch of drugs. She tells her new friend May Garth Sheffield about the wonderful pills and the twenty pounds they helped her lose that summer, and that "I wanted to lose some more but they wouldn't let me. I never eat now. I starve all the time" (82). Rhoda is back to her old dieting habits.

Rhoda admires her new friend May Garth for her willingness to take risks in order to lose weight. May Garth's particular method is "my iodine. I take it every eight hours. Two drops to a glass of milk. It makes you lose weight" (81). Even Rhoda, as enamored as she is with the idea of thinness, has "a vision of poison iodine dripping into milk. Huge globules of iodine falling, falling though the white silky milk" (81–82). She is too afraid to try this method, but eagerly watches May Garth risk her life in the pursuit of the perfect body. This incident, if nothing else, must confirm that she is not overdoing her own weight loss since the dangers to which she has exposed herself pale by comparison. She has never ingested anything with a poison warning on it.

All the attention on dieting and weight loss must be seen in the context of southern eating habits and social life. Southern food is notoriously fattening, and social life (for adults) includes consuming quantities of alcohol, also high in calories. Rhoda's parents turn their new home in Dunlith, Alabama, into a perpetual party with friends and their innumerable relatives coming by daily to "eat and play bridge . . . and [drink] whiskey sours and scotch mists and gin and tonics" (30). Rhoda annoys her parents by avoiding these parties when she is at home, but when she leaves for school, must still contend with the highly caloric southern food and the parties that go with campus and sorority life. Rhoda faces a real dilemma: if she wants to be a social success, she must participate in gatherings where she will be expected to consume the calories she tries so hard to avoid in order to be thin enough to be a social success.

While attending summer school Rhoda's social activity leads her to a whole new world of concern for her figure. She elopes with Malcolm Martin, a fraternity brother of Charles Williams, because they had been having sex for a while and were tired of having to sneak around. Rhoda is enchanted with sex; she says that "the more we did it, the more I wanted to do it and the more he wanted to do it. All we wanted to do was do it. It was what we had in common and it was plenty" (184). In sex Rhoda has discovered her body as a source of pleasure rather than something to torture into shape, but with her relative ignorance about and inconsistent use of birth control she soon finds herself pregnant. The events of this first pregnancy are not discussed in *Net of Jewels*, which moves directly from conception to the birth of her son. They are, however, described in "*Adoration*."<sup>5</sup>

This first pregnancy is difficult. Rhoda's real problems with the pregnancy, however, start after delivery when Malcolm is not as attentive as she thinks he should be. At

the hospital, "he would only stay a little while and he wouldn't touch the baby" (*Net* 216), and Rhoda immediately attributes his behavior to her physical condition. She cannot believe that the baby could be the problem because her husband would hardly be turned off by his namesake. She tells us that "every night after he kissed me gingerly on the cheek and left the room and went away I would turn over into the pillow and cry for a long time. My stomach hurt at night and *I was still fat and my husband didn't even want to kiss me* (*Net* 217; emphasis added). She does not consider that Malcolm might be afraid he would hurt her, or that he might be having difficulty thinking of her as both a mother and an object for sexual affection, or even that he might be so attracted to her that he must keep his distance while she heals. Whatever Malcolm's actual feelings, Rhoda interprets his actions as showing that he no longer feels passion for her because her body is not yet back to its pre-pregnancy shape.

After her hospital stay, she decides that Malcolm's distant behavior has to do with the fact that his body still looks good. "His body was perfect. His body looked like a Greek god. He wasn't lying in a bed with his stomach hurting all night every night and fat all over the sides of his waist" (218). Rhoda is concerned that Malcolm goes out while she has to stay home in bed and concludes that it is no wonder such a fine physical specimen did not want to stay with her. She says, "I decided I was the ugliest person in this world. Fat all over the sides of my waist and milk dripping out of my nipples" (*Net* 219). She wants to go to the beauty parlor so that she can mask what she has been conditioned by her society to see as ugly. Femininity in this social context has nothing or very little to do with the functions women's bodies are actually built for. Malcolm never directly says anything to lead Rhoda to conclude that his behavior is based on changes in her body, but she paranoidly lets herself suspect that he is really "out there with girls talking to them. Girls in bathing suits without any fat on their bodies" (221) instead of out playing golf with his father. Actually, Malcolm acts just about the same towards Rhoda after her pregnancy as he always has, but she is so persistent in believing that how she looks determines the love she will receive that as soon as she has a reason to think her body is the problem she blames it.

Rhoda decides she cannot allow her body to get pregnant-fat again and vows to be extra careful to use birth control whenever she has sex and to have an abortion (illegal at that time) if that fails. Rhoda conceives again, however, only about a month later when she and Malcolm get drunk enough to forget that they are mad at each other. Rhoda seems to lose her resolve when she persuades Malcolm to tell her, "Of course I love you" (228), during their love-making. Rhoda uses her body to obtain affection from her husband, and she does not go through with her earlier threats to abort.

Details surrounding Rhoda's pregnancy with her second son, Jimmy, differ in *Net of Jewels* and "*Adoration*," but

they are recognizably the same pregnancy, which is described as easier this time around. In “*Adoration*” we learn that “Rhoda lived on diet pills and potato chips and gin. She lived on vegetable soup and cornbread and cokes and gin” (62), hardly a diet a doctor would suggest for ensuring a healthy mother and baby. The diet is a strange combination: the vegetable soup and cornbread sound like foods an expectant mother should eat, and are perhaps the foods her doctors suggested, though even these healthy foods do not make a balanced diet. Potato chips and coke might be relatively harmless to the baby but will make Rhoda gain the weight she so dreads. The focus of Rhoda’s diet, though, seems to be gin since it is the one component she mentions twice, and she probably hopes the diet pills will keep her from gaining extra weight during the pregnancy. It is unlikely a doctor would prescribe diet pills to a pregnant woman, so Rhoda must somehow be obtaining the drug illegally. If she is aware of the dangers of combining Dexedrine and alcohol, she may subconsciously be trying to kill the baby. It is more likely, however, that she is as ignorant of what her diet might be doing to her baby as she has shown she is about birth control. Thanks perhaps to regular visits to her doctor (because he is a good-looking man), all turns out well except that she goes into premature labor and has another caesarean delivery.

Rhoda’s description of the delivery in *Net of Jewels* makes it clear that the easier pregnancy has not made her forget the problems she had with her body after the first one:

I looked down beside the operating table at the huge pads soaked with my blood and all I thought about was how much weight it would make me lose. I won’t even be fat this time, I remember thinking. How great, I get the baby out of me and get my figure back at the same time. Sew me up tight, I kept muttering to the doctors. Make my stomach flat.

(229)

Rhoda is so caught up in the need to have a perfect body to keep her husband’s attention that she does not even give a thought to the baby. She treats the delivery more like a plastic surgery to remove a large lump of fat than giving birth to her second child.

Her scheme to come out of the pregnancy with a perfect body for Malcolm to love fails. He is as distant the second time around. “You didn’t even bring me flowers,” Rhoda says. “Why didn’t you bring me flowers?” (229). Malcolm tries to explain, “I would have brought you flowers, Rhoda, but I barely got here. I was taking a test in calculus when they found me. I had to go home and shave. I hope to God I passed it” (229). By going home to shave before coming to the hospital, Malcolm’s concern for his own appearance emphasizes to Rhoda that she is not his first priority. In addition, his worry about his test score reiterates his self-absorption.

Her husband’s lack of affection and his statement that the baby “looks like a monkey,” reaffirm Rhoda’s determination to have an abortion if she ever finds herself pregnant

again. She determines also to leave Malcolm and has her father’s lawyer arrange a divorce and custody of the children for her. She gets as far as signing the papers, but the couple is reconciled when Malcolm asks her to move to Alexandria, Louisiana, with him. The move, however, does not heal the marriage.

Rhoda continues to abuse her body with drugs, adding increased intake of alcohol to her dependence on diet pills. She will not admit to being an alcoholic but does consult a psychiatrist, saying, “I do things I don’t want to do when I get drunk” (229). She insists she can quit, that “I’m not an alcoholic. I only drink to have fun” (300). Partying is her excuse to drink, but, in truth, alcohol helps her forget that her husband pays so little attention to her because she must not be beautiful enough for him. Rhoda never stops trying to look good for men and flirts to assure herself that she is still attractive. The futility of her effort to find love and self worth through her physical appearance goes unrecognized.

Drinking and the need for affection lead Rhoda to stray from her marriage. She tells her maid, “Everyone’s in love with me, except for my husband. I think he hates me. He thinks I’m fat. No matter how thin I get” (300). When she does finally sleep with Robert Haverty, she is struggling to give up alcohol and is feeling abandoned by Malcolm. Robert, owner of the local newspaper, is rich and powerful and sleeping with him validates for her that she can still be attractive to a man who has it all. Sex, says Rhoda, “was not half as good as the passion Malcolm and I lavished on each other . . . but the power of the money Robert had inherited” made up for lack of passion (303).

The affirmation of her desirability leaves Rhoda with another problem: she is pregnant again. Nor does she know whether Robert or Malcolm is the father. This time, rather than struggle through another bout with baby fat, she decides to have an abortion. Both *Net of Jewels* and the short story, “*1957, a Romance*,” the story in which Gilchrist introduces Rhoda, relate the story of her abortion.<sup>6</sup> The significance of the abortion for Rhoda’s life can hardly be overemphasized since it is the first story Gilchrist writes about her character.

In 1957, abortion is illegal, and Rhoda must find a way around the law. Since she has habitually used her body and her father to get what she wants, she does so again. She uses sex to bribe her gynecologist to give her the name of a doctor who does abortions, then she runs back home and has her father take her to the doctor and pay the bills. The excuse she gives her father is that Malcolm has purposely made her pregnant and that to go through with it so soon after the other two would seriously endanger her health. In her own mind she is convinced that the story is true—she “always believed her own stories as soon as she told them.” In both this story and *Net of Jewels*, Rhoda repeats her excuses for having the abortion to several people as if trying to convince herself that her fiction is true.



Rhoda says and does things in both the short story and the novel, however, that suggest that the desire to maintain an attractive body is the real if unacknowledged motive behind her abortion. In *Net of Jewels*, she tries to gloss over her concern with the way she looks, but she cannot completely eliminate the evidence that is much clearer in “1957, a Romance.” In both accounts Rhoda meets Olympic swimmers training at a hotel pool, but only in the short story does she slip off her wedding ring after flirting with one of the men. Perhaps in the telling in *Net of Jewels* Rhoda (and Gilchrist through Rhoda) is afraid her audience will lose sympathy if she admits she had an abortion out of vanity.

In *Net of Jewels* Rhoda does not even mention the effect of this pregnancy on her figure to the abortionist doctor, but in the short story Rhoda tells him, “I blow up like a balloon” (91). She certainly has not forgotten what the process of bringing a baby into the world does to her body. The one hint in the novel that Rhoda has had an abortion so that she might maintain an attractive body comes at the very end, when, as in the short story, Rhoda has returned with her father to a family gathering. “I put on my new bathing suit,” she says, “and admired myself in the mirror for a while” (327).

“1957, a Romance” is much more explicit about the post-abortion sense of pleasure Rhoda takes in the way her body looks. In this account, she glances “down every now and then at her flat stomach, running her hand across it.” When she puts on her swimsuit, “it fit better than ever” (95). The story ends:

“I’m beautiful,” she thought, running her hands over her body. “I’m skinny and I’m beautiful and no one is ever going to cut me open. I’m skinny and I’m beautiful and no one can make me do anything.”

She began to laugh. She raised her hand to her lips and great peals of clear abandoned laughter poured out between her fingers, filling the tiny room, laughing back at the wild excited face in the bright mirror.

(95)

Rhoda’s sense that she is finally in control is false. Whether or not the choice to have an abortion is a woman’s right, in Rhoda’s case the point is moot. Her decision is firmly anchored in expectations about body image that she thinks her society insists she maintain. If she could, in fact, feel beautiful during and after pregnancy, times when the body simply cannot meet the ideals of slender beauty, then she would indeed have been in control.

In the preface to *Net of Jewels*, Rhoda explains that she meant the book to be a collection of short stories, but they bled into each other so she turned it into a novel. By “jewels” she most likely is referring to the events in her life, and “net” to the way the various stories come together as a whole. The title is, however, also an appropriate metaphor for her obsession with her appearance since beauty becomes the means by which Rhoda is trapped.

Being physically attractive is most desirable, but achieving that goal confines and oppresses as she molds herself to conform to a preconceived image.

Though Gilchrist does not offer much hope that Rhoda will ever free herself from the influence of these social constructs, neither does she unduly punish Rhoda for her failure. Rhoda never obsesses with her weight enough to become a true anorexic, and she seems to suffer no serious physical or mental problems due to her drug and alcohol abuse. Even when she causes an accident, she is not seriously injured. Rhoda must lead a charmed life, or Gilchrist may either identify too closely or may like her too much to make her character suffer the consequences of poor choices.

Gilchrist may also be suggesting, however, that Rhoda should be given credit for at times trying to free herself from the constraints of the society in which she was raised. She does resist some of the shortcomings of those around her, such as prejudice against blacks and homosexuals, but she is careful not to rock the boat too much. Ultimately, though, Rhoda seems unable to refrain from seeking acceptance from the society she tries so often to defy. The approval of men is important to her, and especially that of her father, the most significant representative of the southern patriarchal social system in which she is trapped. Rhoda, always herself, continues to be the rebel who maintains a facade.

#### Notes

1. Gilchrist published the Rhoda stories as a collection, *Rhoda: A Life in Stories*, in 1995. This article was written in 1993.
2. Rhoda is, in effect, turning her life story into a myth which can change to fit the needs of the storytelling situation, not unlike distorted retellings of family stories by characters in other southern fiction, such as the train story in Eudora Welty’s *Delta Wedding* and the turning of Amy into a myth after her death in Katherine Anne Porter’s short stories in *The Old Order*.
3. Gilchrist also explains some differences between the short stories and the novel as resulting from the differing demands of the novel form. She says that “this is the difference between writing novels and writing short stories; there aren’t any tricks” (Smith 46).
4. Because of the myth-making quality of the Rhoda stories, it seems quite possible that some Gilchrist stories which bear a remarkable resemblance to the Rhoda stories but which have a protagonist of a different name are actually Rhoda stories. This especially seems to be the case with “Traveler,” one of the stories in the *Land of Dreamy Dreams*. The story’s main character LeLe lives in Indiana and goes to visit a cousin in the Mississippi Delta, as Rhoda has done. Also like Rhoda, LeLe likes to swim, is continually battling fat, is in love with a Jewish college student named Bob who has thyroid cancer and

so on. It seems more than a coincidence that Rhoda has a cousin named LeLe whom we learn about in "Music" in *Victory Over Japan*, a story in which Rhoda is fourteen, just about the age of the LeLe character in "Traveler." LeLe is an inveterate liar and has all of Rhoda's vices, only worse. LeLe is perhaps more the real Rhoda than the Rhoda we actually get to see, because it is one of Rhoda's characteristics to make herself look as good as possible. I strongly suspect that Rhoda in the Rhoda stories does substantial embellishment to make herself look better.

5. There are some differences between the novel and the story. In "Adoration," Rhoda runs off with Malcolm only one week after sleeping with him, but in the novel she waits considerably longer. This change in the novel makes Rhoda look less impulsive and more in control of herself than she usually shows herself to be. There are other differences in details, such as that her doctor is named Freer in the novel and Greer in the story, and her architect friend Charles Williams is an artist friend Daniel in the story. Maybe Rhoda is simply bad at remembering details, but Gilchrist could also be using such differences to remind her audience that Rhoda likes to make stories up.
6. Rhoda's abortion story as told in *Net of Jewels* is in several ways different from that told in "1957, a Romance" other than those discussed in the text. In the short story we are not told that the pregnancy might be the result of an affair or that Rhoda is having problems with alcohol so there is nothing to mask her concern about her appearance as reason for the abortion. Rhoda is portrayed much more sympathetically in the novel. Some little details are different, such as that Rhoda's mother is named Jeannie in the short story while in *Net* and every other Rhoda story her name is Ariane.

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Ellen Gilchrist has written a sweet and enlightened novel in celebration of improbable love. *Nora Jane and Company* traces the randomness of human destiny in a story composed of brightly signposted coincidences, peppered with reflections on DNA and the vastness of the cosmos. "Nineteen ninety-five and we are still in orbit. Keep your fingers crossed", says the prologue.

But this is a novel that is as interested in patterns as in randomness. Its most delightful characters are four girls between the ages of seven and eleven. Two are twins, born to the same mother but from the sperm of different fathers. Two are adopted girls from different families who act like twins. The improbable girl-pairs finally hook up, because their "mothers" are cousins. There is an inevitability about it all. We have a sense that what is most unlikely is most predestined. For a start, these characters, like other folk from Gilchrist's books, are destined to have their lives carry on in further novels. The author plots multiple destinies with a deft mix of long-term vision and lightness of touch. And she is not averse to dropping hints about what is to come. Ellen Gilchrist is, above all, a good, old-fashioned story-teller.

The book's heroine, Nora Jane, has featured in several of Gilchrist's novels; most recently, *The Age of Miracles* (1995). She is a San Francisco mother with a beautiful singing voice; ex-counter culture, presently bourgeois, happily married to Freddy, a man fifteen years her senior, who delivered her, in an emergency, of babies he wasn't sure were his own. The book opens with the couple contentedly making love in the afternoon, only for Nora Jane to leap out of bed on a freak intuition and rescue a small boy from drowning in their swimming-pool. It transpires that the child is the son of her former boyfriend Sandy, who is also father to one of Nora Jane's twins. She and Freddy hurriedly move house to avoid a confrontation, and that is the last we hear of Sandy; for the duration of this novel, at least.

Gilchrist's habit of picking up characters and then dropping them (with the intention, presumably, of returning to them several novels later) makes *Nora Jane and Company*

rather episodic. The murder of a feminist author by Muslim fundamentalists is scarcely integrated into the larger pattern of the novel, and seems only to act as fodder for the characters' musings on destiny and danger. But there are compensations for the loose weave of Gilchrist's books, not least the fact that her characters are so articulate, thoughtful and witty, with a peculiarly West Coast lightness and sense of quest about them. When Nora Jane decides to take the university degree she never got a chance to take before, her husband and Nieman, her husband's best friend, sign up too, so as to keep her company.

Nieman, chief film critic of the Bay area, gives up an illustrious career in order to catch up with the latest scientific thought. In doing so, the confirmed bachelor meets his future wife, a lecturer in biochemistry. With Californian know-how, they check in for an AIDS test on the day they meet, so they can sleep together that night. The novel ends in true comedic style with a wedding and intimations of magical providence.

Finally, however, it is Gilchrist's children who steal the show. They are bright as buttons and provide the measure of the adults' own capacities for the life fully lived. "The continents ride on the seas like patches of weeds in a marsh. Fortunately for us it all moves so slowly that we'll be dead before it changes enough to matter", says one of Nora Jane's twins with wide-eyed wisdom. This is a creature who also says, "I've been waiting all my life to be a bridesmaid. I don't care if it's bourgeois or not. I think it's the best."

Novelist, poet and short-story writer Ellen Gilchrist made an impressive literary debut in 1981 with her book of short stories, *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*. Her 1984 collection, *Victory Over Japan*, won that year's National Book Award for fiction. Since then, more than a dozen books—story collections, novels, autobiographical nonfiction—have appeared: a mixed bag, in which can be found much that is poignant, funny, charming, wry, moving, even wise, but also much that is coy, preachy, self-satisfied, well-nigh insufferable.

By and large, it seems fair to say that Gilchrist's short fiction has been stronger than her novels. And, indeed, her new collection, *Flights of Angels*, contains many stories that well display her talents. Most of these 18 stories are set in the author's native South: Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina or the little town of Fayetteville, Ark., although one takes place in Los Angeles.

Some stories are linked by a common narrator. In "*Miss Crystal Confronts the Past*" and "*A Sordid Tale, or, Traceleen Continues Talking*," our cicerone, Traceleen, is the longtime housekeeper and confidante of Crystal, a middle-aged woman who's managed to break away from her old-style, male chauvinist upbringing but who can never entirely evade the pull of family ties.

Three other stories, "*The Triumph of Reason*," "*Have a Wonderful Nice Walk*" and "*Witness to the Crucifixion*," are narrated by Aurora Harris, a vivacious, precocious 16-

year-old from Fayetteville who faces all kinds of problems, including an unplanned pregnancy, a feckless French boyfriend and a little sister, Jocelyn, who gets caught up in born-again Christianity. Gilchrist's candid treatment of her heroine's dilemma provides an interesting and refreshing contrast to the way that television routinely ducks the issue these days (try to remember the last time any character on a soap or sitcom actually had an abortion rather than a convenient miscarriage).

Indeed, Gilchrist is not one to shy away from social questions. In "*Ocean Springs*," an ultraliberal former college president fights to get psychiatric help for the man who raped her; while in "*Mississippi*," a naive young white woman's hatred of racism combines with her family's tradition of using firearms to settle scores.

Whether her subject is charmingly playful, like the eccentric Los Angeles medical clinic that gives aid and comfort to hypochondriacs in "*Phyladda, or the Mind/Body Problem*," or seriously scary, like "*The Southwest Experimental Fast Oxide Reactor*" that threatens a small community with nuclear contaminants, Gilchrist brings to each story an engaging sense of compassion and a saving sense of humor. While some of the stories may seem a little too pat and some of the narrators a little too pleased with themselves, *Flights of Angels* is on the whole a satisfying collection.

*No poet, no artist of any art has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead.*

T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent"

*For books continue each other, in spite of our habit of judging them separately. And I must also consider her—this unknown woman [writer]—as the descendant of all those other women whose circumstances I have been glancing at and see what she inherits of their characteristics and restrictions.*

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

I first encountered the fiction of Ellen Gilchrist by way of a short story entitled "*Revenge*," in her collection *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, about a little girl who successfully pole-vaults, despite her brother's insistence that such is not an activity for girls. After reading the story's last line, "Sometimes I think whatever has happened since has been of no real interest to me" (LDD 124), I was overwhelmed by a sense of triumph, of empowerment. If it had been in vogue at the time, I would have shouted aloud, "You go, girl," to the child protagonist. But it was only 1986 or so, and I, significantly, had no such phrase of approval and affirmation at the tip of my tongue for the actions of women. Even had I one, I would later realize, it would have been misdirected, for after a subsequent reading of "*Revenge*" some years later, I would recognize that the story is not, after all, triumphant—at least not for the protagonist, the little girl named Rhoda, who would reap-



pear, in various stages of her life, throughout Gilchrist's canon. Rhoda is suggesting in this line that an accomplishment that occurred when she was ten years old seems to remain the highlight of her life. "*Revenge*" is, however, an example of the writer's accomplishments: her depiction of the limitations upon girls and women who grew up during and following World War II and the consequences, particularly to strong girls and women, of those limitations.

In the almost twenty years since the University of Arkansas Press published Ellen Gilchrist's first book of fiction, a collection of short stories entitled *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams* (1981), which includes the short story "*Revenge*," Gilchrist has produced seven additional volumes of short fiction and six novels. Her canon also includes two collections of poetry, both of which appeared before *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams* won her instant attention; a collection of her journal entries and National Public Radio broadcasts; and poems and essays published in a number of different popular and literary magazines. Although no one can foresee the future of an author's critical reputation, my study of Ellen Gilchrist's fiction leads me to believe that she will emerge as a major figure in contemporary southern literature.

#### INTRODUCING GILCHRIST'S ORGANIC STORY CYCLE

In addition to widespread praise, *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams* won its creator a contract with Little, Brown and Company to publish a novel and a second collection of stories. In his review of *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, novelist Mark Childress remarks that Gilchrist's stories "breathe new life into the idea of a short-story collection" (60). I agree and would credit the intratextual nature of her work for much of its appeal. I use the term *intratextual* here as it is used by Thaïs Morgan to refer to the relationships "among earlier and later texts by the same author" (241). The interrelatedness of the individual works within Gilchrist's canon makes it particularly interesting, unique, and worthy of critical analysis. Her narrative technique is not, of course, innovative only because her stories and novels are interrelated; writers have been writing interrelated stories for some time. Indeed, all four of the writers whose works are read intertextually with Gilchrist's in the following four chapters—Ernest Hemingway, Katherine Anne Porter, William Faulkner, and Kate Chopin—have written interrelated stories or novels. Gilchrist's point of uniqueness is that *all* of her work is interrelated to the extent that her whole body of work—that which she has already published and probably that which she will publish—is part of an *organic story cycle*, a story cycle that continues to evolve as each new book appears, comparable to the *roman-fleuve*. It is a story cycle in the full sense of the word: there are no definite endings to the individual books and, distinguishing her work from the *roman-fleuve*, there is no clear beginning to the cycle. For the most part, there is no order in which Gilchrist's books should be read, a characteristic of her canon that

reflects the chaotic contemporary world in which the author sets her fiction (with the single exception of her historical novel *Anabasis*, set in ancient Greece).<sup>1</sup>

Childress's praise for Gilchrist's first book of fiction was to be echoed by reviewers of her later collections of short stories who argue that Gilchrist is at her best with the short story. A more specific point of praise for this first volume of stories is directed toward Gilchrist's criticism of southern aristocracy and the caste system still operating within the contemporary South. Reviewers of *The Annunciation* (1983) also appreciate the focus on these subjects in Gilchrist's first novel. Fiction writer Rosellen Brown, for example, remarks that "Gilchrist describes again, effectively, the codes of the class system, and of the religious system as it is distorted by privilege" (53).

The overall critical reception of *The Annunciation* was mixed, however. A few reviewers speculate that the novel might not suit Gilchrist's talents as well as the short story does, an opinion which would seem to be reinforced by the resounding success of *Victory over Japan*, Gilchrist's second collection of short stories (1984), and which would then be repeated after the publication of her second novel.<sup>2</sup> As is discussed in chapter 5 in relation to this second novel, *The Anna Papers* (1988), the negative reviews reveal more about reader response to strong women characters who are satisfied, even happy with themselves—or who ultimately achieve self-satisfaction: readers seem disturbed by such positive self-images, reflecting the still prevalent attitudes of this country's Puritan roots.

Gilchrist apparently did not lose heart upon reading the negative comments within the reviews of her first novel, as is indicated in particular by a short story in *Victory over Japan*, in which she humorously parodies herself, *The Annunciation*, and the reviewers who criticized her novel (this story, "*Looking over Jordan*," is analyzed in chapter 3). Reviewers began to comment upon Gilchrist's interrelated stories and books with the appearance of this volume. Perhaps one might even argue that the 1984 American Book Award for Fiction granted to *Victory over Japan* is testimony for the theory that it is what I term the organic nature of Gilchrist's story cycle that makes her fiction innovative. This characteristic of her fiction may also be largely responsible for its appeal to the reading public, which usually prefers the novel to the short story, and to the literary community, which often seems to value the novel as the superior form of fiction.

Surprisingly, although Gilchrist's first novel was criticized as inferior to her short stories, at least one reader of *Victory over Japan* praised the interrelated stories because they give one the sense of reading a novel: at the end of his glowing review of the collection for the *Washington Post*, Jonathan Yardley comments that "because many of the stories are connected in ways both obvious and subtle, you feel as though you are reading a novel; at the end you have that satisfied, contented feeling only a good novel can give" (B10). It is interesting to note that Yardley had

ended his earlier critical review of *The Annunciation* saying that “perhaps, like a number of other gifted writers, Gilchrist is simply more suited to the short story than the novel” (3). Also somewhat ironic in light of the reviews of Gilchrist’s novel the year before, the reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* notes how the stories of *Victory over Japan* “feel like sketches for a novel” and wonders if “perhaps Gilchrist needs the space of a novel to develop her characters and our sympathy for them” (rev. of *Victory* 136). I disagree with the implication that a consequence of the serial nature of Gilchrist’s work is that a reader of a single story will not care about the characters within it. At the same time, I would answer this reviewer by pointing out that Gilchrist is taking even more space than that of a novel to develop her plot lines. In spite of the point of contrast noted earlier (the absence of any definite beginning to the story cycle), her organic story cycle is something like a *roman-fleuve*, the appeal of which Lynette Felber relates to its resemblance to the soap opera: “Much of its popularity is based upon its creation of an extended relationship between readers and characters; our familiarity with these seemingly real friends compels us to ‘tune in’ week after week or year after year to see what becomes of them” (4). Also comparable to the *roman-fleuve*, many different plot lines and characters are found in each book Gilchrist writes, some of which are returned to in later books, while others are dropped.

While the reviews of Gilchrist’s first two story collections are overwhelmingly positive, the reviews of her third collection, *Drunk with Love* (1986), are mixed. Whereas reviewers enjoyed the stories about recurring characters in Gilchrist’s body of work thus far, they are discomforted by some of the other stories—in particular, those that deal with race issues. I respond to the misgivings about these stories in chapter 3. For my purposes in this introduction to Gilchrist’s fiction, it is interesting to note that the stories in *Drunk with Love* that most clearly continue her evolving story cycle are the reviewers’ favorites, again supporting my theory about the appeal of this element of her fiction. Similarly, the few reviewers who liked Gilchrist’s journal entries and National Public Radio broadcasts, collected under the title *Falling through Space: The Journals of Ellen Gilchrist* and published by Little, Brown in 1987, were those who enjoyed finding the geneses of Gilchrist’s stories in the recollections of the author’s own past included in this volume. Most reviewers, however, criticized this autobiographical collection as simplistic and self-aggrandizing; they were apparently discomforted by the author’s positive self-image.

Although at least one reviewer, short story writer David Walton, considers *The Anna Papers* the “most balanced, emotionally accomplished sequence in all Gilchrist’s fiction” (an opinion with which I wholeheartedly agree) and wishes it had “been another 50 or even 100 pages longer” (6–7), others criticize Gilchrist’s self-aggrandizement in the characterization of the obviously autobiographical Anna and express distaste for Anna’s egotism. Whereas reviewers of the earlier works did not seem to mind the

fact that several of Gilchrist’s characters seem to be autobiographical, reviewers of this novel were troubled by the autobiographical element. They argue that Gilchrist does not achieve the objective distance from Anna that she demonstrates in her stories about such other autobiographical characters as Rhoda and Crystal Manning. As is proposed in chapter 5, it seems that they are troubled by the character—and perhaps the writer—liking herself. I, in contrast, find it refreshing for its implicit rejection of self-deprecating humility as a feminine virtue.

After *The Anna Papers*, Little, Brown next published a fourth collection of Gilchrist’s short fiction entitled *Light Can Be Both Wave and Particle* (1989). The reviews of this book are overwhelmingly favorable. Reviewers again expressed their approval of Gilchrist’s return to the short story form. Indeed, the stories liked least in this volume, according to the reviews, were the two that provide a new ending to *The Annunciation* and the long story or novella “*Mexico*.” Reviewers clearly favored the new stories about Rhoda Manning’s childhood, some commenting that Gilchrist is at her best not only with the short story but also with child and adolescent protagonists. In “*Mexico*,” Rhoda is a fifty-three-year-old woman whom reviewers did not find as appealing. It is true that Gilchrist is not able to achieve the distance from adult characters living in the present or recent past that she is able to achieve with her child characters growing up in the post-World War II South. I suggest later in this chapter, however, that the source of the readers’ preference is their disappointment at finding in such stories as “*Mexico*” that, in spite of her vivacity and strong will, Rhoda has not overcome the limitations to women’s opportunities in the patriarchal South.

Following *Light Can Be Both Wave and Particle is I Cannot Get You Close Enough* (1990), a collection of three novellas, in two of which Gilchrist focuses mainly upon a new generation of protagonists. This volume also received praise from reviewers for the depiction of youth and was criticized for the development of the older characters. Here, I would suggest that what may actually trouble readers is the absence of Gilchrist’s usual humor in these novellas, as is suggested in the concluding chapter of this study. The author does not present a very uplifting picture of growing up in the 1990s.

In 1992, Little, Brown published Gilchrist’s “first Rhoda novel,” as her readers tend to call her third novel, *Net of Jewels*. Readers who have followed Gilchrist’s work faithfully, anxious to receive a new installment of the life of perhaps her most intriguing, definitely her most popular recurring character, appreciate the author’s full development of quite formative years in this character’s life (as is addressed more fully in the forthcoming section on Gilchrist’s evolving prototype). Again, however, some reviewers commented that the author should confine herself to the short story form, and others lamented the character’s lack of development in the course of the novel. As I discuss later, this complaint also seems related to

readers' apparent desire for a more optimistic view of Rhoda's adult life.

After *Net of Jewels*, Gilchrist returned to the Hand family's story in her fourth novel, *Starcarbon, a Meditation on Love* (1994). At least two reviewers believe that the novel is still autonomous: Victoria Jenkins states early in her review that "previous acquaintance with the Hand family is not a prerequisite for understanding *Starcarbon*" (5), and the *Publishers Weekly* reviewer believes that "Gilchrist skillfully makes [the] complicated relationships [between various characters whose histories are found in earlier books] clear even to those who haven't read her earlier books" (rev. of *Starcarbon* 74). However, the mixed reception of this novel reflects an issue I address in the next section of this introduction to Gilchrist's canon: the decreasing autonomy of her individual volumes as her organic story cycle evolves. One can infer from the reviews of *Starcarbon* that some believe the novel will be particularly enjoyable only to the readers already familiar with Gilchrist's characters, while other readers may become bogged down by the number of different characters. Both Sarah Ferguson, in the *New York Times Book Review*, and the reviewer for the *Kirkus Review*, for example, remark upon the Gilchrist fan's pleasure in receiving a new installment on the Hand family (rev. of *Starcarbon*), while Trev Broughton complains in his *Times Literary Supplement* review about "excess personnel" (21). Returning to the *Publishers Weekly* review quoted previously, one will find, however, an understanding of Gilchrist's achievement with her "multi-volume narrative"—that is, what I consider the story cycle made up of her many volumes of fiction (74). This reviewer argues that Gilchrist's work "offers a tart antidote to the rootlessness of so much American fiction" (74), another way of suggesting that the appeal of her work lies largely in her fiction's kinship to the *roman-fleuve* and the soap opera.

I agree with this reason for Gilchrist's appeal; however, in my assessment of her fiction, *Starcarbon* marks a negative turning point, for I find that the weaknesses of this novel continue to infect her later books. Victoria Jenkins sums up the first weakness most succinctly when she characterizes Gilchrist as a "fairy godmother" to her characters, "an overly fond *deus ex machina* who lets her charges teeter on the brink of disaster but can't bear to see anyone topple. She snatches them back in the nick of time to avert catastrophe. The gun discharges harmlessly, the tornado is selective in its path, children and parents forgive and embrace" (5).<sup>3</sup> Whereas I noted earlier previously that the author's fondness for her protagonists has a refreshing appeal for me, it has unfortunately gotten out of hand in her recent fiction, beginning with *Starcarbon*: Gilchrist seems to have become *too* fond of her characters. She won't let anything "bad" happen to them; consequently, since bad things happen to likable people in real life, her work has become less credible (as well as less interesting). Indeed, while reading the novel, Trev Broughton, who complained about too many characters, admits to longing for "a bout of bloody feuding to dispose of [the] excess personnel" (21).

Another weakness of this novel, which can also be found in the works to follow, is Gilchrist's development of the central character, Olivia de Havilland Hand, whose voice simply does not ring true. It becomes evident when reading this book not only that Gilchrist's strongest medium is the short story but also that her strongest characters are the women she creates of her own generation, whether they be middle-aged women of the 1980s and '90s or young girls growing up in the 1940s and '50s. At the same time, however, the women of Gilchrist's own generation created for this novel (for example, Olivia's therapist and professor) and the volumes to follow are not so appealing to this reader. Like Gilchrist's fondness for her characters, her characters' fondness for themselves has gotten out of hand. Their sense of self-worth has become increasingly narcissistic, the third weakness of Gilchrist's recent fiction (i.e., her post-*Net of Jewels* books). Due to these weaknesses, the consequence of which is that these volumes do not measure up to the quality of Gilchrist's early fiction, I do not treat them in this study as specifically or fully as I treat the early work.

Also in 1994, the University Press of Mississippi published Gilchrist's *Anabasis, a Journey to the Interior*, a historical novel set in ancient Greece. The author explains in a note preceding the beginning of the tale that she had begun making up this story during her childhood. The reviewer of *Anabasis* for *Kirkus* considers its departure from the usual setting and characters something of a relief (rev. of *Anabasis*, 867). Another admires the author's "enthusiasm for her heroine" (S. Smith 128), and a third praises the "uplifting tale of a valiant young woman" (Joyce 23). It is disturbing to me that appreciation of a woman character's strong self-image is so late in coming and directed to a character in a fantasy—indeed one who, as the reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* points out, is not "wholly credible" (rev. of *Anabasis* 382)—when it was denied to the more realistic Anna Hand.

With the publication of *The Age of Miracles* (1995), Gilchrist returns to the medium of the short story; to her first recurring characters, Rhoda, Crystal, and Nora Jane; and, in most of the stories, to New Orleans and Fayetteville, Arkansas. Seemingly as a result, it is the strongest of her recent works, and the reviewers concur with this opinion.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, one can still find in this volume the weaknesses already examined: unbelievable characterizations of young women and narcissistic characterizations of older women—the problem with the latter being that the author does not seem aware of these women's narcissism. She and her characters have lost the self-knowledge praised by such early reviewers as Thulani Davis, who once remarked of Gilchrist's characters, "terrible as they are, these people see themselves so clearly they are both interesting and sympathetic" (12).

In the same year, Little, Brown published a volume entitled *Rhoda, a Life in Stories*, in which Gilchrist has collected and organized in chronological order most of the Rhoda stories from her previous books, an excerpt from *Net of*



*Jewels*, and two additional Rhoda stories. Upon examination of this collection, it is interesting to note that Rhoda's life adventures during her forties are missing, leaving the reader to wonder about how she developed from a philandering wife who is burdened by motherhood (except when she hands her children over to her father, mother, or husband's care), who drinks too much, and who is obsessed with her weight, to the Rhoda approaching her sixties, who is no longer obsessed with finding the perfect lover or escaping her father's influence and who is devoted to her grandchildren.<sup>5</sup> This transition (or rather, lack thereof) is analyzed in the final chapter of this study. The collection itself demonstrates microcosmically the point made repeatedly here regarding how Gilchrist's canon is an organic story cycle. Even after the publication of this collection, because of the missing decade the reader does not feel that Rhoda's story is complete and thus waits for further installments in later books.

Gilchrist's next collection of short stories, *The Courts of Love* (1996), provides one such installment, although half of this volume continues the adventures of another set of recurring characters—Nora Jane, her husband Freddy, her twins, her former lover Sandy—and includes some spin-off tales involving the people they meet during their new adventures. There are dark moments in these stories, but again, everything works out well for those characters in whom Gilchrist has the most invested—that is, Nora Jane, Freddy, and the twins.

Gilchrist's most recent book, the novel *Sarah Conley* (1997), is reminiscent of her first two novels, *The Annunciation* and *The Anna Papers*, in that at its center is a strong female writer. Like the characters in her more recent fiction, however, the title character of this novel never really suffers. Her father's death occurs "off-stage" before the novel's opening, and just after it opens she finds a surrogate father in her best friend's home. The only crisis in her life is that she and her apparent soulmate realize they are in love with each other just before she is to marry his brother and he is to marry her best friend. They consummate this love once, she gets pregnant (although since she has sex with his brother later that same evening, she never knows which brother is the father), and then they marry their original intendeds. The novel then jumps ahead twenty years to just before the death of this same best friend, after which Sarah and her one-time lover rekindle their relationship (she is divorced from his brother by this time). Although most of the novel develops the conflict involved when two career-oriented people try to make a life together, still there is little tension, little of the angst involved in deciding whether to compromise one's career goals for love, and all eventually winds up happily: Sarah gets to keep both her lover and her career.

If one recalls how, early in her career, Gilchrist responded to negative reviews of her novel with a short story that simultaneously parodied the novel and mocked the reviewers, it is troubling to realize that she seems, in most recent years, to be allowing her readers to dictate the tone of her

writing. One can find evidence of this as early as *Light Can Be Both Wave and Particle*, in which she published two more chapters to *The Annunciation*. In an essay for *Southern Magazine*, Gilchrist refers to having "confuse[d] and sadden[ed her] readers" when she killed off a main character in *The Annunciation* ("White" 66). This reference to her readers' disappointment with the novel's original ending supports the view that she wrote the "new ending" to please them. Then one notices that it is after the negative response to the dark tone of *I Cannot Get You Close Enough* and *Net of Jewels* that Gilchrist began—to borrow Victoria Jenkins's analogy—playing fairy godmother to her characters. But rather than focus on the weaknesses of Gilchrist's recent fiction, I turn now to one of her achievements in her early work: the evolution of the composite personality at the center of her organic story cycle.

#### GILCHRIST'S EVOLVING PROTOTYPE

Although Gilchrist's stories and novels can be read and appreciated individually, recognizing their *intratextual* nature reveals the increasing interdependence of each story and novel upon her other works published both earlier and later, which, in turn, contributes to one's sense that the organic story cycle is evolving. So, too, is the composite personality at its center, the initial prototype for which is Rhoda Manning. Rhoda is the protagonist of four stories in Gilchrist's first book of fiction. She appears in most of Gilchrist's subsequent volumes of short fiction and is the central character of one of Gilchrist's novels, but the details of her life are not always consistent, reminding the reader that the individual works are to some extent autonomous. It is undeniable, however, that they are also interrelated; thus, the inconsistencies give the reader pause to consider their significance.

Like Faulkner, Gilchrist sometimes changes the circumstances of Rhoda's life from one work to another. In *The Faulkner-Cowley File*, Cowley lists several discrepancies between details in the novel *The Sound and the Fury* and the appendix Faulkner wrote to the novel for the Viking *Portable Faulkner*, which Cowley edited (41–42). An example of a more significant inconsistency might also be noted between the same novel and the short story "*That Evening Sun*": although Quentin Compson commits suicide at nineteen years old in the novel, a twenty-four-year-old Quentin Compson narrates the short story. If Faulkner can raise a character from the dead, then Gilchrist can give a character back her lost virginity, which is perhaps the most significant instance of an inconsistency from one work to another in her fiction: she presents nineteen-year-old Rhoda as a virgin in the beginning of *Net of Jewels*, in spite of the story "*Music*" in *Victory over Japan*, in which fourteen-year-old Rhoda loses her virginity.

It is not my intention to repeat (within my analysis of Gilchrist's work) Malcolm Cowley's quest to pin Faulkner down on his inconsistencies from one work to another. I

will instead borrow from Faulkner's response to Cowley's endeavors to explain Gilchrist's inconsistencies here and elsewhere in her canon. Referring to the appendix he wrote to *The Sound and the Fury* for Cowley's *Portable Faulkner*, Faulkner explained,

The inconsistencies in the appendix prove to me the book is still alive after 15 years, and being still alive is growing, changing; the appendix was done at the same heat as the book, even though 15 years later, and so it is the book itself which is inconsistent: not the appendix. That is, at the age of 30 I did not know these people as at 45 I now do; that I was even wrong now and then in the very conclusions I drew from watching them, and the information in which I once believed.

(Cowley 90)

Similarly, explaining Rhoda's reinstated virginity, Gilchrist herself has said, "The more I've written about Rhoda, the more I know about her" (W. Smith 46), a statement that prepares for my perception of an evolving prototype at the center of the larger story cycle made up of Gilchrist's whole body of fiction.

Although the Gilchrist enthusiast looks forward to reading new installments of Rhoda's life, knowledge of the events already narrated is not necessary to the understanding and enjoyment of any of the Rhoda stories, until, perhaps, the novella "*Mexico*" (which closes *Light Can Be Both Wave and Particle*) and the novel *Net of Jewels*. To appreciate fully these two later works, both of which have received negative reviews, the reader's understanding of the character of Rhoda Manning, as it has been established in the earlier Rhoda stories, is helpful. Without having read these stories of an intelligent, strong-willed, for the most part likable young girl's battles against the sexism of her community and family, one might have difficulty sympathizing with the spoiled young woman and frustrated older woman she becomes.

*Net of Jewels* covers Rhoda's life from her college years through the early years of her first marriage. In the beginning of the novel, Rhoda's character is shown to be quite like that of the Rhoda in many short stories that recount this protagonist's childhood and adolescence. As a young adult, she is precocious and spoiled and yet, for a while, still endearing because of her vivacity and strong will. Her major weakness is that she allows her concern about winning her father's approval to dictate her life. The reader familiar with Rhoda's childhood and adolescence knows that for many years she has fought the propensity within herself to worship a father who constantly manipulates and criticizes her and rarely recognizes her talents and achievements. Gilchrist shows in the course of this novel, however, that even as strong a person as Rhoda cannot continue to withstand the constant rejection of her achievements by one so loved and revered as a parent, particularly since that rejection seems based solely on the fact that Rhoda is a daughter, rather than a son, and is, for that reason primarily, viewed to be naturally lacking. Rhoda becomes less and less sympathetic to the reader as the

novel progresses and she continues to call on her father for help, regardless of the price she knows she will be made to pay: her independence. The reader wants her to learn to be smarter than that but should realize that her reliance upon her father is a learned behavior after many years of oppression under his empowered will.

In "*Mexico*," too, Gilchrist shows the consequences to Rhoda's development of her not receiving the love she longs for from her father. In her fifties in this novella, Rhoda feels that she has spent her whole life looking for a man who would love her—and the reader familiar with her past knows this to be true. Thus, even at fifty-three she has not matured very far beyond the little girl of the early stories. At the end of the novella, however, Rhoda considers finally growing up, and the result, if one considers the works intratextually, is the novel *Net of Jewels*, which Rhoda has ostensibly written at the age of fifty-five or sometime thereafter, perhaps as a step in that direction. Then, in three of the stories in *The Age of Miracles* ("*A Wedding in Jackson*," "*Paris*," and particularly "*The Uninsured*"), the reader sees the completion of Rhoda's journey. Rhoda seems in these works, in which she is approaching sixty, as vital as ever but more content with herself than she has ever been. This way in which the novella, the novel, and these stories work together again illustrates the cyclical nature of Gilchrist's fiction.

When Rhoda Manning is introduced in *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, she is immediately revealed to be an important figure in Gilchrist's fiction: in that collection, she is the only character to appear in more than one story. Another character in that volume later becomes a recurring figure in Gilchrist's body of work: Nora Jane Whittington of the story "*The Famous Poll at Jody's Bar*." The development of Nora Jane's character from this story to her appearances in *Victory over Japan*, *Light Can Be Both Wave and Particle*, and *The Courts of Love* is further evidence of the growing interdependence of Gilchrist's work. Nora Jane's reappearance in two of the stories in *Victory over Japan*, Gilchrist's second collection, is preceded by a note from the author in which she reviews for the newcomer to her fiction Nora Jane's adventures in the earlier collection. This is the only time Gilchrist includes such a note in one of her books. In later works, when knowledge of events from earlier stories is necessary or relevant to what is happening to the protagonist in the present work, she merely sums up those events within the story she is currently telling, often changing or elaborating upon details to suit the goals of the moment.

As a recurring character Nora Jane is different from Gilchrist's other recurring protagonists in another way as well. She is the only one whose story is told chronologically from story to story, book to book, with two exceptions: "*The Blue House*" of *The Age of Miracles* and "*New Orleans*" of *The Courts of Love*, which are both prequels to the rest of her stories.<sup>6</sup> Still, she is the only one of these characters whose stories could be easily put together into a chronologically consistent novel. Conse-

quently, however, one might not appreciate as fully later Nora Jane stories without knowledge of details in the preceding ones. Also, the prequels might not be so poignant to readers not familiar with her later life adventures. Thus, her stories do not contribute to the cyclical nature of Gilchrist's organic story cycle as well as do the stories of the other recurring characters.

Nora Jane herself differs from other major recurring characters in that she belongs to a generation younger than theirs. In that way, she anticipates, as early as Gilchrist's first book of fiction, a new generation of female protagonists who have stepped to the front of the stage in Gilchrist's more recent works.

But long before she turned her attention to this younger generation, Gilchrist introduced another recurring character, Crystal Manning Mallison Weiss, a cousin and contemporary of Rhoda Manning. Crystal is introduced in *Victory over Japan* by her black maid and closest companion, Traceleen, who narrates several of the five stories in which she appears in this volume and many of the other segments of Crystal's life to follow in later books. The relationship between these two women is perhaps the most positive relationship between any two people in all of Gilchrist's work. Traceleen loves and accepts Crystal as she is, and rather than playing upon Crystal's weaknesses to manipulate her, as Crystal's husband, ex-husband, son, and brother do, Traceleen helps Crystal to overcome these weaknesses.<sup>7</sup>

More Crystal/Traceleen stories can be found in *Drunk with Love* and *Light Can Be Both Wave and Particle*. In between these two volumes, in *The Anna Papers*, Crystal and her family appear as minor characters who attend the funeral of Anna Hand, another Manning cousin. The Weisses and some of the Hands come together again, this time sharing the spotlight more evenly, in "Summer in Maine," the last novella of *I Cannot Get You Close Enough*. And finally, Crystal's family appears sporadically in the latest Hand-focused novel, *Starcarbon*; they are the central focus of one of the stories in *The Age of Miracles* ("Too Much Rain, or The Assault of the Mold Spores"); and they play a minor role in another story in that collection ("The Rain-tree Street Bar and Washerteria").

Anna Hand is the fourth of Gilchrist's major recurring characters and the apex of Gilchrist's development of her prototype. Anna is introduced in "Looking over Jordan" in *Victory over Japan* (the story mentioned previously in which Gilchrist makes fun of her first novel and its reviewers: Anna is an author whose novel *The Ascension* is harshly reviewed by the protagonist of this story). Anna is also the main character of the story "Anna, Part I," which closes *Drunk with Love* and, by its title, anticipates *The Anna Papers*. With the characterization of Anna in the novel, Gilchrist reveals the full potential of her prototype: she can overcome social obstacles and limitations when she recognizes her strengths and does not focus on her weaknesses, and when she uses those strengths toward the

creation of her art (Rhoda and Anna are writers, and Nora Jane sings, to name only the creative pursuits of recurring characters),<sup>8</sup> rather than to attract the attention of a man (indeed, men come to Anna; she does not go after them). As is explored in chapters 5 and 6, Anna is not only a development of the prototype as it is manifested in such characters as Rhoda and Crystal; she can also be viewed as a new prototype upon whom the women she leaves behind when she dies—including women from both her own generation and the next generation—will model their lives. Her role as such for her sister, cousins, friends, and nieces begins within *The Anna Papers* and continues to be evident within the novellas of *I Cannot Get You Close Enough*.

Before pursuing further Anna's role as Gilchrist's second, revised or evolved prototype, one needs to understand Gilchrist's development of an initial prototype. In the tradition of Hemingway's Nick Adams stories, as is examined in chapter 2, Gilchrist created a composite personality for her first collection of stories, which is in itself a story cycle. As Nick Adams is the prototype upon which the other characters in *In Our Time*, the collection in which he first appears, are based, as well as the prototype for the Hemingway hero in general, so is Gilchrist's Rhoda Manning the prototype for the other protagonists in *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams* and her later works of fiction. In preparation for his analysis of Faulkner's various manifestations of a particular character type, John T. Irwin explains, "Sometimes a writer gets an idea for the structure of a character, and one fictional incarnation isn't enough to exhaust the possibilities inherent in it, possibilities for its development that may often be mutually exclusive" ("Horace" 543). Crystal Manning, for example, is another manifestation of the Rhoda character type; so, too, are many one-time-only protagonists, such as the women and girls at the center of the other stories in *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*; Lady Margaret Sarpie of "Looking over Jordan" (discussed in chapter 3), Diane of "The Gauzy Edge of Paradise," and Lilly Kase of "Crazy, Crazy, Now Showing Everywhere" in *Victory over Japan*; and Annalisa Livingston of "First Manhattans" (discussed in chapter 3), JeanAnne Lori Mayfield of "The Last Diet," and Helen Altmont of "Belize" in *Drunk with Love*. However, one might turn to Faulkner's development of a character type for an analogy of how Gilchrist's prototype also evolves in a way that the Hemingway hero does not (as argued more fully in chapter 2).

Critics agree that Faulkner's Horace Benbow and Gavin Stevens share quite similar personality traits with his Quentin Compson. Unlike Quentin, however, these two men live past the age of nineteen, though Horace is emotionally destroyed by the end of the novel *Sanctuary*, in which work he is forty-three.<sup>9</sup> In contrast to both Quentin and Horace, then, Gavin is somehow able to survive physically and emotionally through several works, in spite of the romantic nature and strong attachment to his sister that make him so like his two precursors.<sup>10</sup> The reason that Horace is able, for a while at least, to maintain his ideal-



ism and to defy the sister with whom he is unconsciously obsessed is that he is an *evolution* of the Quentin prototype. Gavin, a further evolution of the same prototype, suffers only in that he appears and feels foolish after his romantic escapades chasing after Eula Varner Snopes; also, he is merely close to rather than obsessed with his own sister. With each manifestation of the prototype subsequent to Quentin, Faulkner's characterization reveals growth in the original spirit, as though each character were able to learn from the mistakes of the earlier version(s) of himself.

Similarly, a few of Gilchrist's protagonists evolve from rather than merely being more manifestations of the Rhoda Manning prototype, as I show in the following chapters. The evolution begins with Amanda McCamey of *The Annunciation* and the two additional chapters to the novel included in *Light Can Be Both Wave and Particle*.<sup>11</sup> As John Irwin sees "Horace Benbow as a transitional figure between Quentin Compson and Gavin Stevens" ("Horace" 544), so, too, can Amanda McCamey be seen as a transitional figure between Rhoda Manning and Anna Hand. In the beginning of her novel, Amanda's character has much in common with Rhoda's: she, too, is spoiled and headstrong and longs for love to replace the parental love she missed out on as a child (due to her father's death and her mother's perpetual mourning). Halfway through *The Annunciation*, however, Amanda focuses her energy upon her power to create art, leaving behind a rich but incompatible husband, as well as the memory of the male cousin with whom she was obsessed for most of her life up to that point, to pursue a career as a translator, with a plan to proceed from translating to writing her own poems and novels. She regresses somewhat when she meets a young man and becomes so caught up in her affair with him that she is unable to work for a while. At the end of her novel, however, Amanda is able to regroup her strengths and is preparing to try again to live her own life as she determines it should be lived. This resolve includes having the baby she conceives even though she is unmarried and in her forties and also finding the daughter she gave up for adoption, under family duress, when she was a teenager. Indeed, she is further empowered by her ability to have children, whereas Rhoda finds pregnancy and motherhood to be debilitating.

Another protagonist whose character is a development of Rhoda's and an anticipation of Anna's is Sally Lanier Sykes of "*The Blue-Eyed Buddhist*" in *Drunk with Love*. As I have argued elsewhere, this story anticipates in a number of ways *The Anna Papers* ("Water" 88–89). "*The Blue-Eyed Buddhist*" opens with the fact stated simply that thirty-four-year-old "Sally Lanier Sykes was going to die" (DL 161). Sally is another of Gilchrist's headstrong women who love life, but her kidneys are failing; so she plans one last adventure before settling herself into the room her husband is equipping with her new dialysis machine. Before allowing herself to be imprisoned to await death, she attempts to set free the sea animals fenced in by a research facility, a feat she "can brag about . . . till the

day [she] die[s]" (DL 183). Ironically, she drowns while trying to accomplish the task. Though not a suicide, her death foreshadows the death that Anna Hand will choose when she learns that she has cancer. That Sally's death is accidental reflects the fact that her character is merely a step toward Anna's. She has not consciously chosen to end her life rather than live it less fully, as Anna does.

Following Anna's development in *The Anna Papers* (analyzed in chapter 5), the women characters in Gilchrist's fiction can be divided into two groups: the women of Anna's own generation, like her sister Helen, Rhoda, Crystal, and Crystal's friend Lydia, who on the one hand are angered by her death but who, on the other, compare themselves to her and strive to be more like her;<sup>12</sup> and the women of the next generation, including, for example, Anna's nieces Olivia and Jessie, Traceleen's niece Andria, and Crystal's daughter Crystal Anne, all of whom take center stage in *I Cannot Get You Close Enough* and appear in *Starcarbon*, though the latter focuses primarily on Olivia alone. One can further classify Gilchrist's new generation of young women characters in these and her other post-*Anna Papers* works into those whose characters are based upon the evolution of the prototype—Anna Hand—and those whose characters are more similar to the original prototype—Rhoda Manning—again reflecting the recursive nature of this organic story cycle.

#### RECOGNIZING THE INTERTEXTS, HEARING THE DIALOGUES

The interconnectedness of Gilchrist's cast of characters reveals that, like her four precursors who are discussed in subsequent chapters, she has created a community of characters, like Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, only extending beyond Mississippi into Louisiana, Arkansas, North Carolina, Indiana, Oklahoma, and even California and New York, to name only those states in which several or major works are set. The large area of her fictional "county" is indicative of the postmodern world she and her characters inhabit. The presence of many of these characters in regions of the country outside the South (occasionally even outside the country, though only temporarily so) reflects both the expansion and the assimilation of the South, just as Gilchrist's connection to Hemingway as well as to Faulkner, Porter, and Chopin reflects her position in the American as well as southern literary traditions.

Within her canon, Gilchrist's works engage provocatively in various dialogues with several literary traditions as they are represented by these writers whose work is analyzed intertextually with hers in the next four chapters. Before proceeding further, given the various ways in which critics have employed the term *intertext* and the various definitions of *intertextuality*, I will define my own use of the term and my method of intertextual criticism as it is practiced in the following four chapters. Put simply, as Michael Riffaterre has done, "the intertext proper is the corpus of texts the reader may legitimately connect with

the one before his[her] eyes, that is, the texts brought to mind by what he[she] is reading" (627).<sup>13</sup> As my explanation of method to follow will reveal, I have combined various critics' theories regarding intertextuality into a practice that allows me to illustrate the way that Gilchrist's works are similar to and/or deviate from other writings within two different traditions of American literature: the short story tradition, specifically the development of a composite personality within a story cycle; and southern literature, specifically the development of female characters and feminist issues within southern literature.

In her explanation of "Textual Feminism," Nelly Furman argues that the work of a woman writer should "be construed as the product of a prior reading" (50). She supports making this assumption of a literary historical sense (as T.S. Eliot would call it): "Writing is an inscription within an existing literary code, either in the form of an appropriation or a rejection. To study women writers as readers is to analyze their interaction with the cultural system, and to determine how their texts propose a critique of the dominant patriarchal tenor of literary expression" (Furman 50). Such is my intention with Gilchrist's work. To accomplish this goal, my approach to Gilchrist follows the example of Nancy A. Walker, who shows in *The Disobedient Writer* "some of the ways in which women writers have worked against, revised, and reinterpreted some of the literary traditions they have known" (18).

Like Walker, I do not spend time in my study proving authorial intention. I have not, for example, found quotations from interviews in which Gilchrist admits that she modeled her first collection of short stories upon Hemingway's *In Our Time* or her prototype upon either Nick Adams or Porter's Miranda Gay; nor have I interviewed the author myself to ask her if she consciously drew her conflicts for her first novel from Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* and began her second novel where Chopin ended *The Awakening*. My contentions may therefore seem presumptuous. In the passage quoted previously, Furman condones the presumption that women writers are also readers, but for those uncomfortable with assumptions not based on concrete evidence, I support my methods with reader-centered intertextual theories. John Frow explains that "the identification of an intertext is an act of interpretation" rather than an argument for influence: "The intertext is not a real and causative source but a theoretical construct formed by and serving the purposes of a reading" (46).

Such perceptions of the intertexts in a work of literature focus on what Jonathan Culler refers to in *The Pursuit of Signs* as the "prior body of discourse" (101) that exists before the text in question. Culler explains that "literary works are to be considered not as autonomous entities, 'organic wholes,' but as intertextual constructs: sequences which have meaning in relation to other texts which they take up, cite, parody, refute, or generally transform. A text can be read only in relation to other texts" (38, emphasis added). As Susan Stanford Friedman has noted, this

perception of the literary tradition transforms Harold Bloom's theories of influence into theories of intertextuality (156). Roland Barthes, in fact, goes so far in his emphasis upon the *reader's* part in the making of the meaning of the text (as opposed to the *writer's*) as to contend that the "site where this multiplicity [of the text, which he notes "consists of multiple writings, proceeding from several cultures and entering into dialogue, into parody, into contestation"] . . . is not the author, as has hitherto been claimed, but the reader" (54). As a reader of the "texts" of Ellen Gilchrist, I hear the echoes of other writers and explore their significance. To a greater extent, then, than Walker, whose primary focus is on the writer's subversive nature, my focus includes the reader's role in recognizing intertextual relationships between texts. I treat these earlier texts by Hemingway, Porter, Faulkner, and Chopin as existing together with the new texts by Ellen Gilchrist within the reader's literary history, and I show how the reader's knowledge of these earlier texts affects one's reading of Gilchrist's work and, conversely, how reading this relatively new writer's work leads one to review the work of her more established forebears.

Already one can see how my *practice* of intertextual criticism is derived from several sources, perhaps beginning with *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, in which Julia Kristeva employs Bakhtin's theory of the dialogic nature of words to set up her own theories of intertextuality (as I employ both of their theories and others to set up mine). Kristeva notes that "Bakhtin situates the text within history and society, which are seen as texts read by the writer, and into which he[she] inserts him[her]self by rewriting them" (65). Kristeva concludes from Bakhtin's "conception of the 'literary word' as an *intersection of textual surfaces*" that each text is "a dialogue among several writings: that of the writer, the addressee . . . and the contemporary or earlier cultural context" (65), which would include the past reading of writer and readers (addressees, as Kristeva calls them). Kristeva, then, supports my combination of textual feminist assumptions about writers' intentions with intertextual critics' focus on the reader.

My employment of Bakhtin's theories by way of Kristeva's is perhaps most akin to Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein's theories of intertextuality. In the first chapter of their collection of essays entitled *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History*, Clayton and Rothstein show how Kristeva's theories of intertextuality, which are usually focused on the historical, social, and cultural intertexts within a literary work, can be employed to examine *literary* intertexts: the history of which the writer and her work is a part includes the literature of and available to that writer's culture. Hence, these literary works are also inevitably being rewritten by the writer (18–20). Clayton and Rothstein turn to Bakhtin, too, then, to allude to the impossibility of critics divorcing themselves from literary history when preparing to assess a particular text:

Bakhtin authorizes this attention to history by shifting linguistic analysis from the grammatical, atemporal plane to that of the individual utterance, which is

always caught up in a context of other utterances. A sign can never be analyzed in isolation, for its meaning is always informed by the many other conflicting ways it has been used by other speakers. Thus one focuses not on the usual linguistic unit, the sign, but on the relation of one sign to other signs.

(18)

In other words, an analysis of a new writer's work *should* include, as this study of Gilchrist's work does, the relation of the work to what has preceded it, indeed has apparently played some role in its existence being what it is. The literary text, as Kristeva notes, "does not simply *exist* but is generated in relation to *another* structure" (64–65). But Bakhtin has noted the reciprocal benefits of reading works of literature together. According to Bakhtin, "every word is directed toward an *answer* and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates" (Bakhtin 280).

As already indicated, another influence upon my practice of intertextual criticism is Barthes's explanation of the function of the reader in determining the meaning of a text: "the reader is the very space in which are inscribed, without any of them being lost, all the citations out of which a writing is made; the unity of a text is not in its origin but in its destination" (54). My employment of Barthes's theory in relation to intertextuality has been anticipated by Tilottama Rajan, who explains the role of the reader in recognizing literary intertexts and thereby justifies intertextual readings by critics. Rajan casts the literary text onto two planes: the horizontal, on which it "operates exclusively as an interchange between the text and contemporaneous writings," and the vertical, on which it "functions . . . in relation to previous and future history" (67). Due to this vertical plane, Rajan says, "it becomes necessary to posit a reader who will effect the transposition of the horizontal into the vertical" (67). This explanation of intertextuality calls to mind T.S. Eliot's notion of the presence of the past and the present's ability to affect the past. Rajan points to that "aspect of the vertical dimension [which] is the reinsertion of the writer's own scripts in that text which calls them into being and also marks their limits and complicities" (67).

In sum, examining Gilchrist's work intertextually with the work of various other writers—that is, examining dialogic relationships between her works and the works of others as well as echoes of other writers' works in her stories—both enhances her themes and conflicts and provides a fresh reading of the themes and conflicts of her predecessors. In "Weavings: Intertextuality and the (Re)Birth of the Author," Susan Friedman defines the purpose of an intertextual reading most succinctly: "The interesting question for the critic [is] how the successor(s) adapted, assimilated, revised, transformed, altered, reshaped, or revised the precursor(s)" (155). Clayton and Rothstein have provided a method for such intertextual readings of literary works akin to the deconstructionist's approach: they suggest that the critic follow Derrida's "active intertextual practice, in

which intertextuality becomes the critic's method of probing, fissuring, disorienting, and dangerously supplementing the text at hand so as to exhibit its implications and implicatedness" (19). For example, reading Gilchrist together with these other writers reveals, first of all, how she has transformed the traditions out of which she is writing: the American patriarchal short-story tradition as it is epitomized in the work of Ernest Hemingway, whose female characters are usually among those who would thwart his male characters' ideals, and the southern patriarchal literary tradition as it is epitomized in the work of William Faulkner, who, even as he depicts the oppression of women, objectifies his female characters. Second, one can see how, as she develops her craft within these traditions, her writings deviate from the examples set by these male models. One is therefore not surprised to find similarities between her work and the work of two southern women writers, Katherine Anne Porter and Kate Chopin. However, Gilchrist also transforms these women's techniques, characters, and themes, at times allowing for more positive development of her characters, reflecting a lessening of female oppression in the more recent South, and at other times showing the continuing, if not increasing, oppression of women in a patriarchal society.

*Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction—is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival.*

Adrienne Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision"

*It was Ernest Hemingway's new book, and it had come from the book club the day she left North Carolina. She had been waiting for it to come for weeks. Now she opened it to the first page, holding it up to her nose and giving it a smell.*

. . . "This is going to be a good one. I can tell."

Ellen Gilchrist, *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*

In Gilchrist's "**1957, a Romance**," as Rhoda Manning begins to read *Across the River and into the Trees*, she tells her father that Ernest Hemingway is her "favorite writer" (LDD 85). In light of this detail about Gilchrist's admittedly most autobiographical character, it is not as surprising as it might otherwise be to find that a contemporary southern woman writer's story cycles have been created in the tradition of the story cycles of Ernest Hemingway and that her prototypical character Rhoda Manning has much in common with Hemingway's Nick Adams. However, the allusions to and parallels with works by Hemingway throughout Gilchrist's work reveal, in addition to Gilchrist's development of story cycles and composite personalities in the tradition of Hemingway, the deconstruction of the Hemingway hero.

Writing of Hemingway's first story cycle, Clinton S. Burhans, Jr., argues that "*In Our Time* is indeed a consciously unified work . . . containing the careful artistry and the central vision of the world and the human



condition which characterize Hemingway's writing from beginning to end. As such, *In Our Time* is not only the first of Hemingway's major works but also the best introduction to his thought and art in the rest" (88). Similarly, Gilchrist's first collection of short stories, *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, provides several avenues of introduction into her canon. First of all, the collection is a well-crafted short story cycle, a medium with which Gilchrist continues to experiment. Second, in *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, Gilchrist begins to develop a composite female personality, which she will continue to draw on in creating other female protagonists for her later stories. Third, this collection introduces two of the major recurring characters of her fiction: Rhoda Manning and Nora Jane Whittington. Fourth, within many of the stories of this volume, one can find the genesis for still other works and characters. And finally, the themes developed in these stories—particularly those concerning issues of class, race, gender, and people's unwillingness to face truths about themselves or others—are all themes Gilchrist will return to again and again in her fiction.

Like *In Our Time*, *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams* is a rendition of a particular kind of short story collection, what Carl Wood calls "a fragmentary novel" and what other critics have termed a short story cycle. Whichever term one prefers, Wood's definition, which he applied to *In Our Time*, can be used to describe *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*: "a collection of short stories which are unified, not merely by a common theme or subject matter, but also by a discernible plot development dealing with a single character or a single personality type represented in several characters" (725).<sup>1</sup> It seems, therefore, that Gilchrist has written her first collection in the same form with which Hemingway began.

As Hemingway did with Nick Adams, then, Gilchrist placed at the center of several of her stories in this collection a single character who ultimately emerges as the prototype for the other characters in the collection, as well as for most of the protagonists of Gilchrist's entire body of fiction. Susan Garland Mann feels that Nick's "presence is almost continuously felt" throughout *In Our Time*. The unnamed protagonists, for example, "so closely resemble [Nick] Adams that many readers assume he is the character involved. Also, some of the other [named] protagonists . . . remind us to Nick because even if they differ from him in some important ways, they still resemble him since they share similar experiences, personality traits, and family or social backgrounds" (Mann 75). Therefore, Mann concludes from Hemingway's use of a "composite personality," "the reader is almost always in the presence of Nick or someone who invites a comparison with Nick" (75). The same can be said of Rhoda Manning. Her presence in four of the fourteen stories in this collection catches the reader's attention. Her character is reinforced each time she appears. The comparisons between Rhoda and many of the other stories' main characters thereby become more significant, and the reader recognizes the unity of the collection. The stories repeatedly show a type

of person who resists maturity and reality. In the stories featuring a child protagonist, the reader can either see or infer the consequences of such resistance in whatever circumstances the protagonist finds herself. In the stories featuring an adult protagonist, Gilchrist depicts the inevitable fate of this type of character.

Illustrating how the adult protagonists of several of the stories of *In Our Time* share a single personality, Carl Wood describes them all as "drifting and disillusioned member[s] of the lost generation who [are] unhappily married and whiling away [their] time in Europe" (722). He then notes that "when Nick appears in an identical situation in . . . 'Cross Country Snow,' the cycle of alternative versions of the same personality is complete" (722). Not only are Gilchrist's characters similar in nature, but also, in the stories with adult protagonists in her first collection, one can see that she, too, has created almost "interchangeable characters in a narrative of the development of a single central personality" (C. Wood 722). Lelia of "*The President of the Louisiana Live Oak Society*," Alisha of "*There's a Garden of Eden*," Nora Jane of "*The Famous Poll at Jody's Bar*," LaGrande of "*In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*," and Melissa's mother (unnamed) of "*Indignities*" anticipate the prototype Rhoda Manning, who will be introduced to the reader as an adult in the story "*1957, a Romance*." Even closer in character to Rhoda, particularly the child Rhoda who is the central character of the three other Rhoda stories from this collection—"Revenge," "1944," and "*Perils of the Nile*"—are the young girls Helen of "*Rich*," Margaret of "*Generous Pieces*," LeLe of "*Traveler*," and Matille of "*Summer, an Elegy*." As Wood says of the resemblance of Hemingway's Harold Krebs to Nick Adams in "background and predicament," these girls and women "may [each] be regarded in some sense as an alternate version of the personality Nick [or, in this case, Rhoda] represents" (721).

Although the development of a composite personality in the course of these two story cycles is similar, the two authors' arrangement of the stories in these volumes is exactly opposite. Susan Mann points out that the stories of *In Our Time* "are arranged so that the composite protagonist gradually grows older" (10). In *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, on the other hand, the protagonists of the first half of the stories are adults, while the protagonists of the second half are children. Reading the two works intertextually, then, illuminates via contrast what Gilchrist achieves by ordering her stories as she does. Hemingway's order shows the gradual development of a personality type out of the character's experiences from childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. Gilchrist chooses, rather, to present the shocking adult personalities first and then to illustrate how these women are products of their common upbringing. In this way, Gilchrist emphasizes the sinister role that society (the same social system that tortures her adult protagonists) plays in the development of her child protagonists.

In comparison, both authors interrupt the chronological progression forward (in Hemingway's case) or backward

(in Gilchrist's). Hemingway places "My Old Man," with its adolescent protagonist, toward the end of his collection, surrounded by adult Nick Adams stories. Positioning this story of the boy Joe Butler in between these Nick Adams stories, Hemingway recalls to the reader's mind the boy Nick of the early stories, thereby reminding the reader of the early experiences that contributed to the development of the adult personality. In the first two stories of Gilchrist's collection, "*Rich*" and "*The President of the Louisiana Live Oak Society*," the narration diverges briefly from the adult protagonists' points of view to their children's perspectives. Similar to what Hemingway has done, Gilchrist is thereby reminding the reader that the adults of these stories were once children growing up within the same social setting, a fact which seems to contribute significantly to their present state of mind. Even more in keeping with Hemingway's interruption of his adult stories with "My Old Man," after the first story with a protagonist based on the child Rhoda prototype, Gilchrist interrupts the (again, backward) progression (or regression, one might say) with a final story with an adult protagonist who looks back on her childhood, during which she suffered "*Indignities*" (the story's title) similar to those the children in the surrounding stories are suffering. The placement of "*Indignities*" again reminds the reader that the little girl in the preceding story and those who will appear in the next stories, Rhoda included, will grow up and continue to be affected by the events of their childhoods.

Clinton Burhans notes of *In Our Time* that, as well as through the use of either the recurring character Nick Adams or "a central character like him in all but name" and the almost consistent chronological order of the stories, unity is achieved by "themes introduced and developed" throughout the collection, by Hemingway's "pattern of alternating locales" (90), and by the vignettes that focus "even more specifically on various ways in which men immediately threatened by [the] human condition respond to it. . . . Together, these vignettes show men responding to harsh experience with fear, drunkenness, disillusion, hypocritical prayer, and dissociation" (92). Gilchrist's collection is also unified by its composite personality, as pointed out by Jeanie Thompson and Anita Miller Garner: "In gathering for the reader a whole cast of female characters in various stages of life, with the character Rhoda appearing by name in four of the stories, Gilchrist achieves a kind of coherence of style and voice that is absent from many first collections of short fiction" (104–5). I would add that this unity is enhanced through the employment of all three of the additional methods that Hemingway uses to achieve unity. Gilchrist develops several recurring themes, including class consciousness and familial discord. The stories in the opening section are all set in New Orleans, and after that, most of them are either set in the South or center around southerners living outside the South. Finally, one can find in these stories all of the responses to the human condition that Burhans lists, though most of the characters whose "respon[s]es" to harsh

experience" are the focus of Gilchrist stories are women. Gilchrist thereby shows that male and female reactions to the "human condition" are not necessarily distinctive.

As already mentioned, Susan Mann explains Hemingway's accomplishment with *In Our Time*'s recurring character and character type: a "composite personality" at the center of a collection that includes several different protagonists. Mann explains that "with Nick Adams, Hemingway provides a substantial, psychologically complex protagonist; and since most of the other major characters closely resemble Nick, the author also successfully creates a composite personality: the Middle American who is wounded in battle and has difficulty readjusting after the war is over" (71). Hemingway's development of a composite personality illuminates the common experiences and attitudes of the male members of the generation of World War I. Upon recognizing that Gilchrist develops a Hemingway-like composite personality in her own collection, the reader should then note how she even draws upon and then transforms his characterization of his composite personality to suit her own purposes. To start, one might note that many of Gilchrist's stories with child protagonists, including several of the Rhoda stories in this first and the later collections, are set during World War II. Although Gilchrist alludes to the war going on in Europe and Asia, she is more concerned with those who stayed at home: the children and wives of soldiers. In her short story "*Revenge*," for example, Rhoda is staying at her grandmother's house while her father is overseas; her consequential sense of displacement is aggravated by being the only girl among several male cousins. Furthermore, she is confused by the discrepancy between women being in charge now that most of the men are away and yet nothing changing in her favor; she is still marginalized and limited because of her sex. In this story, as well as in "*1944*" from this same collection, "*Victory over Japan*" from the next, and the novel *The Annunciation*, Gilchrist alludes to war widows (those who are temporary widows while their husbands are overseas and those who are made widows permanently by the war), though they are not the works' central characters. Still, the child protagonists see the effect of the war on these women; therefore, these women's reactions to their losses are also part of the children's own war experiences.<sup>2</sup>

Also as in Hemingway, then, many of the adult protagonists in Gilchrist's stories who are members of Rhoda's generation have the experience of a world war, though in their case World War II and not combat experience, as part of their implied pasts—which Hemingway would refer to as the part of the iceberg underwater. Of "Big Two-Hearted River," for example, Hemingway explains in *A Moveable Feast*, "The story was about coming back from the war but there was no mention of the war in it" (MF 76), though in this case it is a part of the iceberg that would not have concerned him. His view of women during war is confined to the women his soldier characters meet during their adventures or who are not able to understand their veteran sons', husbands', or lovers' angst following the war.

Hemingway elaborates upon his method of omission in *Death in the Afternoon*: "If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water" (DA 192). Gilchrist also employs the iceberg theory. Consequently, the reader must recognize from the tip of the iceberg provided in a single story that there is much more beneath the surface of that story, which will aid in understanding her characters and their actions. As Sally Helgesen explains in her review of *Victory over Japan*, Gilchrist's stories seek to answer the question asked by her character Traceleen, "How come they went and did that way?" (VJ 223). Helgesen writes, "Gilchrist has found a perfect vehicle for answering this question. Characters from one story meet characters from another, destinies cross, and random events are later seen to make sense" (55). Thus, much of the iceberg beneath the surface of a single Gilchrist story is the material found in other Gilchrist stories. However, just as in "*Big Two-Hearted River*" one does not have to know that Nick has recently returned from fighting in World War I to appreciate much of what the story does, neither does one have to have read Gilchrist's earlier fiction to understand a later work. On the other hand, just as realizing the historical intertext of Hemingway's story does enhance one's appreciation of it, so too does knowledge of the events that have occurred to a Gilchrist protagonist in an earlier work enhance one's reading of a later one.

Recognition of Gilchrist's entire canon as an organic story cycle provides further evidence that she is writing in the tradition of Hemingway, for Hemingway's prototype also continues to develop with each of his books. Joseph DeFalco explains, "The complete journey of Nick Adams is not contained in a full cycle of stories; rather his ultimate destiny is involved with that of the other characters. All are to some extent victims of the same plight, and Nick's fate can be judged according to the reactions of characters with a similar background" (3). The similar development of Gilchrist's Rhoda Manning prototype should be assessed, therefore, not only by her experiences within the stories in which she appears but also by the author's development of her prototype as it is manifested in each new character she creates. As Jeanie Thompson and Anita Garner point out in their discussion of *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, Gilchrist "invites us to compare these women with each other and determine whether or not the sum of their experiences adds up to more than just their individual lives" (105).

In subsequent works Gilchrist transforms this Hemingway technique as the character of her later manifestations of the prototype evolves. In contrast, Hemingway's prototype does not *evolve*. Perhaps Hemingway was happy with his initial development of the prototype's personality; he did, after all, focus most of his criticism outward on the *causes* of the character's conflicts (the demands of his parents, the

war, women upon him). His protagonists turn inward for the strength to deal with their troubles. Hemingway offers, via their actions, a mode of behavior—always to exercise grace under pressure—for men. Gilchrist's development of her characters' conflicts also reveals society's role as antagonist; however, she makes clear her protagonists' responsibility for what befalls them as well. As her later characters recognize their own culpability, they are able to learn from their mistakes and grow from their experiences. Gilchrist seems, therefore, more interested than Hemingway in having an individual recognize what she can do to improve rather than merely "gracefully" endure her life.

As she allows her prototype to evolve—from Rhoda to Anna Hand—Gilchrist undermines the Hemingway hero's philosophizing about life and death. In her first two novels, *The Annunciation* and *The Anna Papers* the central characters echo the older waiter of Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" in *Winner Take Nothing*. Alluding to Hemingway in these works, Gilchrist mocks his character's fear of death in the face of no danger, reducing it to being afraid of the dark. Kenneth G. Johnston explains that at the end of the Hemingway story, the old waiter's "reluctan[ce] to leave the well-lighted café" is due to his lack of a "comforting belief in God, the protecting Father and Shepherd," a lack Johnston sees reflected in the old waiter's parody of the Lord's Prayer and the Hail Mary effected by his "substitut[ing] *nada* for every important word in the prayers" (163). At the end of *The Annunciation*, Amanda, too, transforms the Lord's Prayer to reflect her own state of mind—not at the end of an ordinary day's labor but after the labor of childbirth. Feeling empowered and awed by the experience of giving birth, she changes the words of this patriarchal prayer to "My will be done. . . . My life on my terms, my daughter, my son. My life leading to my lands forever and ever and ever, hallowed be my name, goddammit, my kingdom come, my will be done, amen, so be it, Amanda" (A 353). This is, however, neither parody nor blasphemy. Like the old waiter, Amanda does not believe in God, but unlike him, she does have another source of strength: her faith in herself.<sup>3</sup> She, an evolved manifestation of the Rhoda prototype, achieves this feeling of self-worth by the end of her novel. She has decided to have this baby by herself and for herself and is thus empowered rather than entrapped and endangered by pregnancy and childbirth. Thus, her development reflects an evolutionary step in the development of the prototype.

In a less uplifting echo of the old waiter, Anna Hand leaves a doctor/friend's office at the beginning of *The Anna Papers* after refusing an examination to find out what is wrong with her. She thinks, "No doctors. . . . No checkups. No hospitals, no operating rooms, no chemicals, no nothing. *Nada, de nada, de nada*. . . . You are not sick. There is nothing wrong with you" (AP 20).<sup>4</sup> However, there *is* something very much wrong with her—not the fact that she is going to die "someday," which is at the root of what troubles Hemingway's protagonist, but that she is going to die soon. In Hemingway's story, the older waiter tells the younger waiter, "I have never had confidence and I am not



young" (WTN 22). If one substitutes the word "faith" for "confidence," which is an appropriate substitution given his later ruminations that "it was all a nothing and a man was nothing too" (WTN 23), and then notes his reference to his age, one understands that his insomnia reflects his fear of dying and the "*nada*" which follows. In contrast to the old waiter, who may have many years still ahead of him, Anna has cancer, and no amount of positive thinking is going to stop it from growing within her. But like Amanda, Anna has "confidence"—not in a religious faith but in herself and in the order of things in the universe. She will accept her death as part of that order. In fact, she will walk right into it—committing suicide by stepping off a pier with a cyanide tablet in her mouth—rather than try to hide from it in lighted rooms (in her case operating rooms) as the old waiter does in "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place." She is both much like Rhoda—a redhead, a writer, a reader of Hemingway, an overbearing personality, in conflict with her father and brother—and yet an evolution of Rhoda and, even, of Amanda. At the start of her novel, she has achieved the self-acceptance that Amanda reaches only at the end of hers.

#### PARALLELS BETWEEN PROTOTYPES

In spite of this significant contrast in the authors' development—and lack thereof—of their prototypes, something else beneath the surface of Gilchrist's stories is the similarities between the personalities of the original prototypes Nick Adams and Rhoda Manning. Recognizing the parallels prepares the reader for the conflicts that burden the Gilchrist protagonists, though as already suggested, Gilchrist ultimately transforms the Hemingway hero into a more positive heroine. Susan Mann provides three characteristics of the protagonists of *In Our Time*: "they are generally expatriates, committed to some sport, and unhappily married or unhappy in some other relationship" (75). The Gilchrist protagonists in *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams* share at least two of these characteristics, the first and third: they are often outsiders, in attitude if not in actuality, and they suffer in unhappy relationships. Ironically, their communal conflicts and failed relationships are a result of the very kind of male-centered society that Hemingway lauded in his fiction. Perhaps to emphasize this connection, Gilchrist draws upon the second characteristic of Hemingway's protagonists that Mann mentions. In several of the stories of *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, some sport plays a significant role: tennis in "*The President of the Louisiana Live Oak Society*" and "*In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*," both of which take place among the New Orleans upper class; swimming in "*1957, a Romance*" and "*Traveler*," both of which are set in the Deep South in the summer, the latter in the Mississippi Delta; and pole-vaulting in "*Revenge*," a story in which the end of World War II is prematurely anticipated so that the characters look forward to the 1944 Olympic Games.

Since three of the Rhoda stories in *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams* take place when Rhoda is a child, and half of the stories in this collection also focus on children (or more

than half when one includes "*Rich*" and "*The President of the Louisiana Live Oak Society*," which have both child and adult protagonists), it is not surprising that a recurring plot line of these stories involves initiation. This unifying element is another significant point of comparison between *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams* and *In Our Time*, an exploration of which leads the Gilchrist reader to recognize the recurrent failure of her child characters to learn a lesson from their experiences. Susan Mann explains that "the process of initiation is so centrally important in *In Our Time* that it almost overshadows the knowledge that should result from the test" (72). She attributes this characteristic to the ironic handling of "the epiphanies or moments of recognition that end many of the . . . stories" (72). Mann calls these "parodies of Joycean epiphanies": "Nick at the conclusion of 'Indian Camp' comforts himself with the thought that he will never die. Similarly, at the end of 'Soldier's Home,' Harold Krebs convinces himself that he can escape his adjustment problems by leaving home for Kansas City" (72).

"*Revenge*" ends with an ironic epiphany much like the ones Susan Mann points to in the stories of *In Our Time*. As previously mentioned, at the end of this story, Rhoda accomplishes her desire to pole-vault like her brother and male cousins. Everyone is there to see it—including her brother, who earlier denied her access to their "broad jump pit" because of her sex. However, her triumph is paradoxically transformed into defeat by the last sentence of the story: "Sometimes I think whatever has happened since has been of no real interest to me" (LDD 124). This sentence foreshadows the stasis of Rhoda's character in later stories. She is only ten years old when this event occurs, and yet apparently at times she thinks of it as the highlight of her life. One gets the sense from this final comment that she has not had many such victories over the oppressive patriarchal society from which she comes. Reviewer Susan Wood suggests that "*Revenge*" . . . would have been better without this last sentence" (13). Rather, it would have been *different*. Without the last sentence, the story would have ended with a sense of triumph. The last sentence undermines Rhoda's triumph, which is central to Gilchrist's point regarding the perpetual influence of the patriarchy.

The recurring initiation theme in both collections illuminates the fact that in the four Rhoda stories in this collection, as well as most of the Rhoda stories throughout Gilchrist's canon, Rhoda resists growth. Indeed, Mann's assessment of Hemingway's protagonists—that they "cannot tolerate too much truth . . . [and] often sidestep the difficulties that confront them at the ends of the stories" (72)—applies well to Gilchrist's initial prototype for her composite personality. Again, though, Gilchrist is not so ambiguous as Hemingway: her character may resist the truths facing her, but her readers can't miss them. In contrast, as Mann points out, Hemingway's stories "are riddled with ambiguity, because with Hemingway it is often impossible to distinguish between escapism and the kind of temporary retreat [which Hemingway seems to be

suggesting] one *needs* in order to regain a sense of equilibrium" (72, emphasis added). In further contrast, the comic elements of Gilchrist's stories lead the reader to laugh with her at her character's foibles even as we sympathize with her dilemmas, while Hemingway's serious tone fails to suggest that any such mockery is due his character.

As Kenneth Johnston says of Nick Adams, "Nick will suffer through the painful lessons of boyhood and adolescence only to discover the even more terrifying insecurities of adult life" (58), so it will be for Rhoda Manning. Unfortunately, women are less likely to get away with acting according to the Hemingway code of conduct, and this compounds their alienation within and conflict with the patriarchal community. For example, the southern lady is revered for enduring, not escaping, the conflicts she faces. Looking ahead only as far as Rhoda at nineteen, in "*1957, a Romance*," one finds that she is considered more stubborn than stoic as she resists her "duties" as wife and mother, and furthermore, although she is able to get the abortion she seeks, Gilchrist's novel *Net of Jewels*, which continues this episode in Rhoda's life, shows that this same act may free her from having another child, but it also binds her more tightly to her father, whom she tries unsuccessfully throughout the novel to escape.

"*1957, a Romance*," which concerns primarily Rhoda's abortion, can be viewed as a deconstruction of Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" (from *Men without Women*), at the center of which is also the subject of abortion. In this first Rhoda story in Gilchrist's first book (thus the story in which she introduces her prototype), Gilchrist establishes Rhoda's connection with the Hemingway prototype. Rhoda's view of her pregnancy is surprisingly similar to the male character's view in "Hills Like White Elephants"—who, unnamed in the story, could easily be Nick Adams; he shares, in any case, the composite personality of which Nick is the prototype.<sup>5</sup> As Kenneth Johnston assesses him, he is an "eternal adolescent who refuses to put down roots, or to shoulder the responsibilities which are rightfully his" (129).

Like Hemingway's male character, Rhoda does not want to have the baby, and one can infer, too, that, like the woman in Hemingway's story, Rhoda's husband would have a different opinion on the subject, if he knew about it. Thus, in her story, Gilchrist has reversed the attitudes of her characters toward having a baby, thereby undermining any gendered stereotype regarding distinctions between male and female responses to pregnancy or babies. She is not retelling the worn-out story of a man trying to convince a woman to get rid of a baby (found also, for example, in Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*). Gilchrist recognizes that women are often just as likely not to be enthusiastic about unplanned pregnancies as their lovers and that many such women would willingly abort their unwanted babies if not for the risks to their health. Her limited focus on Rhoda, in contrast to the way Hemingway deals with this conflict from both the man's and the woman's perspec-

tives, suggests her belief, during the current period of so much conflict over the morality of abortion, in a woman's rights regarding her own body. The morality of the issue was not so much a social concern during the period in which Hemingway wrote his story. Hemingway alludes to the health risks merely in order to develop the selfishness of his male character, who is willing to risk his lover's life in order to remain unencumbered by a child. His story takes no stand regarding whether abortion is murder. Although Gilchrist apparently does not consider abortion to be murder either, writing her story post-Roe v. Wade, she does propose the opposite view of abortion in contemporary times—that it is a woman's right to choose to terminate her pregnancy if she does not wish to have a baby.

In further contrast to Hemingway's story, from the beginning of Gilchrist's story the female protagonist is shown to be a strong-willed individual: she wants an abortion and goes to significant lengths to get one without concerning herself with her husband's wishes. Her characterization, however, may again put one in mind of the man in "Hills Like White Elephants," whose desire that his lover get an abortion reflects his wish to get rid of a problem rather than take responsibility for his actions. Later stories will reveal that this kind of action is typical of Rhoda, as it is of other Gilchrist female characters: more often than not, Gilchrist's heroines use their strengths to shirk rather than to take responsibility for their actions.

In spite of Rhoda's immaturity and irresponsibility, one does not totally blame her for her decision to terminate her pregnancy. Only nineteen years old, she already has two children, both of whom were delivered by cesarean section, a detail that, given the Hemingway connections already noted, might remind the reader of "Indian Camp," the first Nick Adams story in *In Our Time*. Rhoda's very difficult and terrifying first pregnancy is described in "*Adoration*," a Rhoda story in *Drunk with Love*.<sup>6</sup> In that story, Rhoda's husband Malcolm, like the husband of the woman suffering through labor in "Indian Camp," is unable to deal with the complications of her pregnancy: "He was scared to death of Rhoda's terrible blood" (*DL* 58). Although Malcolm does not commit suicide like the Indian husband, he does turn Rhoda over to the care of her parents by bringing her to a hospital in the town where they live; and he is not seen again in the story until after the crisis has passed.

The Indian father does not behave well, according to the Hemingway code. He is one of the negative examples from whom Nick should learn a lesson. Susan Mann notes of Hemingway's characters that "what is most important is the manner in which they are able to meet present challenges. Therefore, the actual test in the present tense—whether it is breaking off a relationship that isn't fun anymore or trying to maintain one's equilibrium as chaos threatens—is the heart of each story, its major plot and purpose" (72). Applying Mann's view of the important element in Hemingway's stories to Gilchrist's "*1957, a*

*Romance*,” one can see that Rhoda responds to her “test” by lying, which also goes against Hemingway’s honor codes. In this way, Gilchrist uses her protagonist, rather than a minor character, as a negative example.

Here again Gilchrist’s objectivity toward her characters is evident. She may limit her concern to Rhoda’s dilemma, but she explores this dilemma from all sides. She risks losing the reader’s sympathy for Rhoda by having her lie about and cast the blame elsewhere for her plight. For instance, Gilchrist’s narrator reveals that the explanation for her pregnancy Rhoda gives her father—that her husband “got [her] pregnant on purpose . . . because he knew [she] was going to leave him”—is untrue: “She always believed her own stories as soon as she told them” (LDD 82). This narrative comment casts suspicion upon Rhoda’s later stories about her husband’s recent behavior, which, in essence, accuse him of raping her to produce this child. Furthermore, Rhoda’s explanation to the doctor as to why she wants an abortion is different from the one she gives her father: to convince the doctor of the necessity of the abortion, she asks, “What would happen to my babies if I died?”—that is, if she were not to survive her next cesarean (LDD 90). Her stories explaining her pregnancy and telling of the problems with her marriage, including an accusation that her husband wants to kill her, become less believable as further evidence of her irresponsible behavior toward her husband and children is revealed by the narrator. The narrator explains, for example, that “this was the third time in two years that Rhoda had run away from her husband and come home to live” (LDD 84). Rhoda’s mother attributes Rhoda’s returns to her wanting someone to take care of her children rather than to problems in her marriage. Mrs. Manning says to Rhoda’s father, “she has to learn to accept some responsibility for something” (LDD 84).<sup>7</sup> Further development of the story, however, brings the reader back around to Rhoda’s side once the reader understands her past, including being spoiled by a Hemingway-like father and living in a patriarchal society, the limitations of which extend even to what she can and cannot do with her own body.

Rhoda’s choice of accomplice in her plan to get an abortion—her father—reveals one condition of her background that somewhat lessens her responsibility for her actions in this story: her upbringing. Her father admits he has “spoiled her rotten” (LDD 82). His prayer promising “a stained-glass window with nobody’s name on it, or a new roof for the vestry” if God will help them get through this ordeal successfully suggests that he believes, and has probably taught Rhoda, that money can buy anything (LDD 82). It also recalls one of the responses from Clinton Burhans’s list of how Hemingway’s characters deal with “harsh experience”—hypocritical prayer. This echo thereby supports my view that Gilchrist’s protagonists were raised by Hemingway-like men who shaped their characters, which in turn explains their own likenesses to the Hemingway hero. Recall again the parallel between Rhoda’s reaction to her pregnancy and that of the man to his lover’s in “Hills Like White Elephants.”

Applying Susan Mann’s assessment of the Hemingway prototype unable to “tolerate too much truth” and “sidestep[ing] the difficulties that confront them at the end of the stories” (72), one can find another parallel between Rhoda and Nick in the ending to “1957, a Romance.” Joseph DeFalco notes of “the infantile and illusory attitudes expressed” at the end of “Indian Camp,” “This is not adjustment to the experience—a necessary step toward development; it is a direct denial of the implications of that experience. Poised on the threshold of illumination, Nick takes a step backward. He is not capable of crossing the threshold into more vital experiences as yet” (48). Neither does Rhoda, although several years older than Nick, gain insight from her ordeal in “1957, a Romance,” in spite of its serious nature. Here, too, her father is partly to blame for her ability to dismiss so easily her experience: after her abortion, “whenever she woke up he was there beside her and nothing could harm her ever as long as he lived. No one could harm her or have power over her or make her do anything as long as he lived” (LDD 92). He takes such good care of her, in fact, that, feeling completely safe, Rhoda has “a dreamless sleep” (LDD 92). She suffers no nightmares from which one could infer subconscious guilt or regret for choosing to terminate her pregnancy. Furthermore, the next day, as she thinks about what she has accomplished, she reduces her abortion to the fact that she will not “have to have any more babies this year” (LDD 92). Regarding her future handling of possible pregnancies, she decides, “All I have to do is have one more and they’ll give me a tubal ligation. . . . It would be worth having another baby for that. Oh well . . . at least I don’t have to worry about it anymore for now” (LDD 92). She has just had an abortion and she is already thinking about having a baby, just so the doctor will tie her tubes and she will thereafter no longer have to worry about unplanned pregnancies. Rhoda misses the irony of her future plans entirely. She turns calmly to her book—a Hemingway novel—and falls asleep to dream, not of babies but of “leaning across a table staring into Ernest Hemingway’s eyes” (LDD 93).

It is significant that Rhoda is reading a Hemingway novel during the time of her ordeal, not only because of her inability to gain insight about herself from her experiences but also because of her attitude toward pregnancy, which she would find corroborated in Hemingway’s fiction. Debra A. Modellmog traces Hemingway’s depiction of pregnancy and childbirth throughout *In Our Time* and concludes that “nowhere . . . are the joys of pregnancy and young children described. Whenever mentioned, children and having babies are associated with suffering, unhappiness, an end of freedom and innocence, even death” (“Unifying” 28).<sup>8</sup> More recently, Nancy R. Comley and Robert Scholes have discussed the “number of [Hemingway’s] finest early stories [with] a male protagonist . . . who resists fatherhood in one way or another” (13), the reason being, they argue, that “evidence in the larger Hemingway Text indicated that to father a son is to write your own death warrant” (15). With this characteristic of Hemingway’s fiction in mind, one can see that, after her



abortion and because of the memory of her first bloody pregnancy, Rhoda might find in Hemingway's books validation of the rightness of her choice to terminate her pregnancy.

It is also particularly appropriate that the Hemingway novel Rhoda is reading is *Across the River and into the Trees*, in which, as Richard B. Hovey puts it, "Hemingway . . . takes us into the dream world of adolescence" (179). Surprisingly, given this assessment, *Across the River and into the Trees* is a novel about an aging and dying American colonel who has never grown up—and neither will Rhoda have matured by the time she has reached the colonel's age (in Gilchrist's "*Mexico*" of *Light Can Be Both Wave and Particle*, in the preface and coda to her novel *Net of Jewels*, and in "*A Statue of Aphrodite*" of *The Age of Miracles*). Certainly her lightheartedness about having an abortion reflects her current immaturity. At the end of "*1957, a Romance*," looking at herself in a mirror, Rhoda exults in her appearance in her new bathing suit and laughs "clear abandoned laughter . . . at the wild excited face in the bright mirror" (LDD 95). One could use Joseph DeFalco's description of the final view of Nick given in "Indian Camp" to describe Rhoda's attitude here: "infantile optimism" (49). There is no mention of either any guilt for her actions or plans to divorce the husband whom she has described as being such a dangerous bully.<sup>9</sup> Rather, she luxuriates in the false sense of freedom that the abortion has given her and responds with generous goodwill to the members of her family gathered for Fourth of July festivities.

In another Rhoda story in *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, "Perils of the Nile," Rhoda is given another chance to learn a truth about life but rejects it by turning to one of humanity's sources of comfort: religion. Upon losing her new ring, Rhoda prays for its recovery—although "usually Rhoda wasn't much on praying" (LDD 133). She has earlier in her life associated religion with death and thus has not found the comfort in it that others do:

When she said her prayers at night all she thought about was Jesus coming to get her in a chariot filled with angels. She didn't want Jesus to come get her. She didn't want to be lying in a box like Jerry Hollister, who was run over in his driveway. . . .

Rhoda didn't want anything to do with that. She didn't want anything to do with Jesus or religion or little boys lying on their dining room tables with their eyes closed.

. . . She didn't want anything to do with God and Jesus and dead people and people nailed up on crosses or eaten by lions or tortured by Romans.

(LDD 133–34)

Rhoda is apparently repelled by the violence that has been directed historically toward those who profess to be Christians, and she has associated this violence with the death of her young friend. However, faced with personal "tragedy" (the loss of her ring), she seeks the comfort that faith provides—or at least the sense that she is doing

something, praying in this case, toward rectifying the disagreeable situation. Therefore, as do many people—like her father in "*1957, a Romance*" and like the soldier (who might be Nick Adams) in the vignette of chapter 7 of *In Our Time*—Rhoda makes a deal with God: "If you will get it back to me I promise I'll start believing in you. . . . If you'll help me find it I'll be nice to everyone from now on. . . . I'll quit lying so much. . . . I'll do everything you want from now on. I'll even go overseas and be a missionary if that's what you want" (LDD 134–35).

Not only are such deals with God too common for the reader to entertain the idea that Rhoda will keep her promises after Bebbler brings the ring back, but Rhoda also undermines her promise immediately by getting caught up in another egocentric fantasy, which she builds around the thought of herself as a missionary: "She could see herself standing on a distant seashore handing out bright fabrics to the childlike natives. Rhoda was beginning to feel quite holy. She was beginning to like talking to Jesus" (LDD 135). She concludes her prayer, then, by lying about her devotion and qualifying it at the same time: "To tell the truth I have always believed in you. And I'll be going to Sunday school all the time now if I get my ring back" (LDD 135, emphasis added). She is comforted by her prayer, since she has placed the responsibility for finding the ring in someone else's hands, and she is distracted from her misfortune by her fantasies. Since the reader knows by story's end that Rhoda's ring will be returned, one can see that once again Rhoda has evaded a harsh truth about life: that things do not always go one's way.

In the Hemingway vignette just mentioned, the soldier prays, "*Dear Jesus please get me out. Christ please please please Christ. If you'll only keep me from getting killed I'll do anything you say. I believe in you and I'll tell every one in the world that you are the only one that matters. Please please dear Jesus*" (IOT 67). Like Rhoda's, the soldier's prayer is "answered": he is not killed. Using *In Our Time* as an intertext of *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, one can find in the soldier's actions support for the argument that Rhoda does not follow through on her promises to God: "*The next night back at Mestre he did not tell the girl he went upstairs with at the Villa Rossa about Jesus. And he never told anybody*" (67). If this young man's life has been spared and yet he fails to live up to his end of the bargain he made with God, then it is not difficult to surmise that Rhoda, too, who was never in such real danger, will not feel compelled to hold up her end of her bargain.

Although their situations are so completely different, one is reminded by the comparable response to "crisis" of the similarities between the prototypes, a result, perhaps, of the Gilchrist character's Hemingway-like father, who has had such a strong influence upon the development of his daughter's personality. Indeed, one might recall Dudley Manning's own bargain with God in "*1957, a Romance*." Rhoda resists her father's influence in the story "*Music*" in *Victory over Japan*, in which her father takes her on a

trip to get her to stop smoking, to be more respectful to her parents, and to calm her overall demeanor and behavior. Furthermore, during their journey he tries to impress upon her an appreciation of the beauty and wonder of God's world; but Rhoda does not share her father's values. She does not believe in God and resists her father's attempts to force his cosmic view on her as much as she resists his social view. She is frustrated in her inability to support her theories of evolution against her father's creation theories and strikes out at him by trying to get another man's approval and thus a man's validation of her worth—the consequence of which is the loss of her virginity.

Like the Nick Adams story "Ten Indians" in *Men without Women*, "*Music*" centers on the protagonist's relationship with her father as well as her first sexual experience. However, in contrast, whereas Dr. Adams comforts Nick after his Indian girlfriend has been seen with another boy, Mr. Manning's harsh treatment of Rhoda drives her to her sexual encounter with a stranger. This time, the comparison has led to an analysis of the point of its ceasing, for the men react quite differently to their children's bittersweet introductions to sex. It should not be surprising that, while the young man's father would not be too upset by his son's emerging sexuality and thus can concentrate on his son's feelings about being cuckolded by his "first love," the young woman's father is so distressed by the idea of his daughter as a sexual being that he does not consider her probably tumultuous emotions after her sexual encounter as he rages about her affair.

"*Music*" also recalls the earlier Hemingway story "Indian Camp" in that both stories begin with the protagonist and his or her father setting off on a journey, during which the protagonist is initiated into adulthood: Nick observes both birth and death, and Rhoda participates in sexual relations. In "Indian Camp," the characterization of Dr. Adams is much less positive than in "Ten Indians": he is less nurturing of Nick, determined as he is to "make a man of" his son. In his reading of "Indian Camp," Kenneth Johnston argues that

Nick's father must bear much of the blame for the failure of the initiation. In his attempt to educate Nick in the facts of life—the lesson will get out of hand and will include the facts of death, too—he thrusts his son into a situation, brutal and shocking, from which he can not escape. . . . As one recalls, the journey began with Dr. Adams' protecting Nick from the cold world with his cradling arm and his euphemistic language. Actually, Dr. Adams is not well prepared for his dual role of medicine man and moral guide.

(53)

Comparably, one realizes that in "*Music*" Rhoda's father takes her to the site of her deflowering. This turn of events becomes even more ironic when one realizes that, as Nick's father intended to make a man out of his son, Rhoda's father's intention upon deciding to take her on this trip with him was to make her behave more in line

with his concept of a young lady. Johnston's assessment of Nick's experience in "Indian Camp" can be applied to Rhoda's experience in "*Music*": "The initiation has miscarried. Nick Adams has not been matured by the experience; rather, he has regressed toward childhood, comforted by an illusion which the events of the night should have destroyed" (51).<sup>10</sup> After Rhoda's sexual encounter, she is seen lost in a fantasy in which some young man—either her current love interest back home or the young man who has just used her or the pilot who is, while Rhoda is fantasizing, flying her back home—stands at a bookstore window in which he sees her latest book, which is dedicated to him. In her fantasy, he is "crying and broken-hearted because Rhoda was lost to him forever, this famous author, who could have been his, lost to him forever" (VJ 50).

"*Music*" ends years later when Rhoda receives a letter from her father saying, "Take my name off that book. . . . Imagine a girl with your advantages writing a book like that. Your mother is so ashamed of you" (VJ 51). Like Nick Adams, Rhoda has become a writer. But a more interesting parallel between this Rhoda story and Hemingway himself can be found in Philip Young's report of Hemingway's father returning six copies of *in our time* (an earlier version of *In Our Time*) to his son. Young quotes Hemingway as saying that his own father "would not tolerate such filth in his home" (18). Young continues on the subject of Hemingway's father: "Later on when his son was becoming famous he is known to have answered sadly the question of how the boy was making out: 'Ernest's written another dirty book'" (18). I will leave it to the Hemingway scholars to analyze his father's influence upon his life, work, and apparently his death. Turning to Gilchrist, then, the reader will find that she, too, has commented outside her fiction upon her relationship with her own father: "There is an old gorgeous man living right here in Jackson, Mississippi, that I have been loving and fighting with and showing off for since I was born. . . . My father" (FS 155). Gilchrist's conflict with her father has influenced much of her fiction. Since this is not a biographical study, a discussion of the influence of this relationship upon her *life* is not appropriate, though I will add that she suggests in the same journal entry that the conflict is resolving itself—"My father and I have almost stopped arguing now that he is seventy-seven and I am fifty-one" (FS 155)—given its apparent effect on her writing. She has since allowed her prototype to experience a similar beginning of the end of her conflict with her father. In the first story of *The Age of Miracles*, "A Statue of Aphrodite," a "pushing sixty"-year-old Rhoda, who introduces herself as an established writer, explains that she decided to move to Jackson some years back (when she was around fifty) "to make my peace with my old man. 'The finest man I've ever known,' as I wrote in the dedication to a book of poems [which explains how his name got on her book, as indicated by the lines quoted from "*Music*"]. I don't think he ever read them" (AM 3). Even while perceiving the possibility of resolution, then, the reader is reminded of the earlier story, which suggests

in turn that at some level the conflict will always be present. She can forgive and learn to get along with her father, but how can she forget his earlier rejection of her work?

Although several of Hemingway's stories do focus on father-son relationships, Richard Hovey notes that it is Hemingway's *mother* characters who "regularly appear as domineering over their families; as destroyers, actual or potential, of their children; as champions of respectability and defenders of cruel sentimentalities and false values" (43)—all of which roles are demonstrated in "Soldier's Home" of *In Our Time* and "A Canary for One" and "Now I Lay Me" of *Men without Women*. He calls the fathers "weak . . . men on whom sons dare not wholly rely" (43), as is also demonstrated in "Soldier's Home" and "Now I Lay Me," as well as in "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife" and "My Old Man" of *In Our Time*. It is not surprising that a male author (Hemingway) would portray sons set against domineering mothers while a female author (Gilchrist) would portray daughters set against domineering fathers. Besides Rhoda, whose tumultuous relationship with her father is the central conflict of "*1957, a Romance*," "*Music*," and the novel *Net of Jewels*, Gilchrist's Anna Hand has a domineering father whom she loves and fights her whole life. Neither Gilchrist's female protagonists nor Hemingway's male protagonists receive much help from the parent of their own sex in their battles against the will of the other parent. Most of the mothers in Gilchrist's fiction support the patriarchy, as in "*Revenge*"; accept its double standards, as in "*A Wedding in Jackson*"; and do not understand their daughters who struggle for independence, as in "*1957, a Romance*."<sup>11</sup>

As the fathers in Hemingway's fiction are often employed as negative examples of dealing with confrontation, Gilchrist's mother-characters are certainly not role models for their daughters. Indeed, Gilchrist's little girls and young women have as much difficulty with their mothers as do Hemingway's boys and young men (though, again, these are not likely to be central conflicts in their lives as their mothers are easily ignored). These Hemingway and Gilchrist mothers are products of similar environments, the same environment that is trying to turn Gilchrist's characters into their mothers—and these girls and young women do not find their mothers any more likable than Nick or Krebs find theirs. Once the nature of the mother-daughter relationship is recognized, Rhoda's choice of parent—her father—to turn to for help with her abortion is less surprising. Rhoda knows who has the power in her society. Therefore, the reader should not be surprised to find that, like Nick Adams and Joe Butler, Gilchrist's young girl characters have more significant relationships with their fathers than with their mothers. Their fathers may not have the best characters, but they are more positive role models than their weak mothers.

Neither Hemingway nor Gilchrist heeds chronology in telling his or her prototype's story, although in *In Our Time* the stories are arranged almost chronologically. The

first four Nick Adams stories proceed in order from his childhood to his adolescence.<sup>12</sup> The vignette of chapter 6, which takes place in the middle of battle, is the next time Nick is mentioned by name; and then the last two Nick Adams stories occur after the war. Similarly, in Gilchrist's second collection, *Victory over Japan*, the reader is given one story each, from Rhoda's childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. However, in *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, Gilchrist ignores chronology entirely in her arrangement of the Rhoda stories, introducing Rhoda in this first collection at the age of nineteen in "*1957, a Romance*," then portraying in the story "*Revenge*" a ten-year-old Rhoda. In the third Rhoda story, entitled "*1944*," she is eight, and in the last Rhoda story in this collection, "*Perils of the Nile*," she is twelve. Thus, Gilchrist has arranged the Rhoda Manning stories in her first collection more like Hemingway's arrangement of the Nick Adams stories in *Men without Women*, where Nick first appears as a soldier, then as a younger man, the next time as an adolescent, and finally as a soldier again (counting only the stories that refer to the protagonist by the name Nick Adams).

Noting the connection to this later Hemingway collection may lead one to ponder its significance and realize that many of the Rhoda stories in one way or another focus on "women without men." Although Rhoda's father plays a significant role in "*1957, a Romance*," she herself has left her husband; furthermore, she has made her decision to have an abortion without consulting him. In "*Revenge*" and "*1944*," Rhoda experiences and witnesses, respectively, part of the effects of her country's involvement in a world war: men like her father had to leave their families for a while, and their families had to get along without them during this period; some of these men, husbands of people she knew, did not return after the war was over, and their wives had to learn to get along without them forever. On the other hand, as these Gilchrist stories reveal, even in these situations of "women without men," the influence of the patriarchy continues. In "*Revenge*," for example, Rhoda's father writes to his son from Europe, where he is serving during World War II, "to take good care of [Rhoda] as [she] was [her] father's own dear sweet little girl" (*LDD* 112). Rhoda's brother, Dudley, Jr., interprets the letter to mean that Rhoda is not to participate in their "Olympic training" in spite of the fact that the Rhoda he is in conflict with throughout the story is no "dear sweet little girl." Surprisingly, no one on the plantation overrides young Dudley's edict that "this is only for boys" (*LDD* 112), even though Rhoda's grandmother is the voice of authority on the place at this time. Rather than admonish the boys for excluding Rhoda from their games and force them to let her play, their grandmother and the housekeeper suggest to Rhoda other forms of amusement that are more suitable for girls: playing with a little girl at a neighboring plantation and learning to dance.

#### MORE ECHOES OF HEMINGWAY

Tom and Letty Wilson were rich in everything. They were rich in friends because Tom was a vice-president of the Whitney Bank of New Orleans and liked doing



business with his friends, and because Letty was vice-president of the Junior League of New Orleans and had her picture in *Town and Country* every year at the Symphony Ball.

The Wilsons were rich in knowing exactly who they were because every year from Epiphany to Fat Tuesday they flew the beautiful green and gold and purple flag outside their house that meant that Letty had been queen of the Mardi Gras the year she was a debutante. Not that Letty was foolish enough to take the flag seriously.

(LDD 3)

This passage, from Gilchrist's "*Rich*," unmistakably echoes the tone of the opening of Hemingway's "Mr. and Mrs. Elliot":

Mr. and Mrs. Elliot tried very hard to have a baby. They tried as often as Mrs. Elliot could stand it. They tried in Boston after they were married and they tried coming over on the boat. They did not try very often on the boat because Mrs. Elliot was quite sick. She was sick and when she was sick she was sick as Southern women are sick. That is women from the Southern part of the United States. Like all Southern women Mrs. Elliot disintegrated very quickly under sea sickness.

(IOT 85)

Regarding the content of the Hemingway passage and the two stories as a whole, there are parallels as well. Both couples are southern, and the Wilsons have difficulty conceiving, too. In point of contrast, Gilchrist's female character is not a stereotypical swooning southern lady. In the course of this story she will withstand several tragedies, including the violent deaths of two of her children and her husband. Echoing the tone of this particular Hemingway story—reputed to be Hemingway's way of parodying T.S. Eliot, whom he supposedly did not consider much of a "man"—Gilchrist calls attention from the very first story in her first book of fiction to one of the accomplishments of her writing: her parodying and thereby re-visioning of Hemingway's depiction of women.

Gilchrist echoes "*Mr. and Mrs. Elliot*" again in *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams* within the story "*Suicides*." Comparing these stories, one finds that the two authors are more sympathetic toward the character of their own sex: Hemingway toward Mr. Elliot (even as he employs the character to mock the "unmanly man"), Gilchrist toward Janet Treadway. In both stories, a person of the opposite sex to these two characters intrudes upon the marriage: Mrs. Elliot's girlfriend and Philip Treadway's dead brother. Finally, in both stories a baby is seen as an answer to the couples' problems—but fails to be so: the Elliots are unsuccessful in their attempts to have a baby; Philip and Janet do have one, but, if anything, the baby serves to loosen further Philip's tenuous hold on his sanity. Given these parallels and Philip's suicide, Gilchrist's story seems once again to deconstruct Hemingway's promulgation, in his fiction and his life, of escaping life's "pressures" via

any means necessary, even suicide if that is the only way. Indeed, Gilchrist emphasizes with her character's death that there is sometimes nothing "graceful" about suicide.

In contrast, in her story "*Indignities*," also in *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, Gilchrist seems to suggest that the Hemingway code of grace under pressure might in some situations be put to good use. In this story, too, she introduces a motif that will recur throughout her canon: cancer. Once characters are struck with the disease or face it in a loved one, the focus of their story is on their reactions, the grace and courage with which they deal with the situation. One might compare Gilchrist's development of this conflict with the recurrent war wounds suffered by Hemingway's protagonists and his focus on how each man deals with the wound. However, although Gilchrist may make incredible heroes out of her cancer victims, she never romanticizes the disease the way that Hemingway romanticizes war. The victim of cancer in this story has just had a mastectomy when "*Indignities*" opens, and she dies before its close.

I mentioned previously the role of cancer in *The Anna Papers* as a much more real threat than the waiter's fear of the dark in Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place." Another parallel with Hemingway can be found in this novel. Like Hemingway, Gilchrist identifies very closely with her protagonists, and both writers often have their protagonists be writers. Speaking through the thoughts of his prototype in "On Writing," a Nick Adams sketch that at one time concluded "Big Two-Hearted River," Hemingway explains how he transforms fact into fiction: "Of course he'd never seen an Indian woman having a baby. . . . He'd seen a woman have a baby on the road to Karagatch and tried to help her. That was the way it was" (NAS 238). Gilchrist, too, speaks through a character to explain how she transforms fact into fiction. In *The Anna Papers*, Anna tells her lover that he has inspired her to write a love story and that he will "be in it" (AP 112). However, she explains, she will transform him into "a Chinese graduate student who meets a girl at dawn on a bridge" (AP 112). The story she is planning here appears in Gilchrist's next book of fiction, *Light Can Be Both Wave and Particle*. Also like Nick when he refers in his thoughts to Hemingway's "Indian Camp," Anna claims her creator's work as her own when she describes two other stories she will write, both of which appear in Gilchrist's collection of novellas, *I Cannot Get You Close Enough*.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, Gilchrist's fiction is becoming increasingly metafictional in this way.<sup>14</sup> *Net of Jewels* begins with Rhoda introducing herself to the reader, comparing herself to Anna ("I'm not a great writer like my cousin Anna Hand, but I'm not bad either" [NJ 3]), and explaining how the novel came to be: "I meant this as a book of short stories and I started writing it that way. Then the stories started to bleed into each other and I decided to go on and let them bleed" (NJ 3). This explanation seems to sum up how Gilchrist's organic story cycle developed. Other metafictional instances of this type can be found in the

Rhoda stories of *The Age of Miracles*. In “A Wedding in Jackson,” Rhoda remarks that she “once killed a character in a novel on that road” and later “brought him back to life in a short story” (AM 37), which events can be found in Gilchrist’s *The Annunciation* and one of its sequel short stories in *Light Can Be Both Wave and Particle*. In “Joyce” (also in *The Age of Miracles*), she tells about the acceptance of her first stories for publication in *Prairie Schooner* and *Intro*, magazines in which Gilchrist also published early stories.

While the metafictional elements in Gilchrist’s fiction remind the reader of her kinship with Hemingway—like him, she has difficulty divorcing her own ego from her fiction—two of the most interesting allusions to Hemingway in Gilchrist’s fiction (in the short story “Traceleen, She’s Still Talking” in *Victory over Japan* and in the novella “Mexico” in *Light Can Be Both Wave and Particle*) illuminate, perhaps best, how Gilchrist ultimately questions this model. In her essay on intertextual readings for Patrick O’Donnell and Robert Con Davis’s *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*, Thais Morgan argues that Julia Kristeva’s “most valuable contribution to the debate on intertextuality” is “the idea that an intertextual citation is never innocent or direct, but always *transformed, distorted, displaced, condensed, or edited* in some way in order to suit the speaking subject’s value system” (Morgan 260, emphasis added). Reading Gilchrist intertextually with Hemingway, for example, shows how Gilchrist has both “transformed” Hemingway’s masculine prototype into a quite feminine character type and “distorted” the reader’s perception of the original Hemingway hero by refocusing the reader’s attention onto the effects of the ultramacho character’s actions upon the women around him. In the characterization of Rhoda, the prototype for all of Gilchrist’s protagonists, the small detail that Hemingway is her favorite writer illuminates what is perhaps the central conflict for all of Gilchrist’s female characters, most particularly Rhoda and her cousin Crystal. They have been raised by and alongside and are repeatedly attracted to men who would qualify as Hemingway heroes. Consequently, these women follow the examples of their fathers, brothers, and other male relatives to become Hemingway heroes themselves—“they can wisecrack and drink as hard as their male counterparts,” as one reviewer says of Gilchrist’s “New South heroines” (Carper 5)—while at the same time they strive to be less strong-willed and more dependent in order to be the kind of woman such men would find appealing. Their personalities are unable to reconcile with their desires, and therein lies the conflict of many of Gilchrist’s stories.

Returning briefly to “*Perils of the Nile*,” for example, one realizes that although Bebbler Dyson seems to admire Rhoda’s unique and brazen personality, he is more attracted to her soft-spoken, less self-centered mother: “Bebbler thought about Rhoda’s mother a lot. She was very beautiful and had looked straight at him out of sad blue eyes while he talked about himself” (LDD 131, emphasis added). Consequently, in spite of the anguish he knows

Rhoda is experiencing over the loss of her ring, he withholds it from her to present it to her mother.

“Traceleen, She’s Still Talking” reaches its climax during a parody of a Hemingwayesque safari, a sport Hemingway expects his reader to accept as a serious test of “manhood.” Crystal’s brother Phelan imports wild game from various countries and sets up “safaris” on his Texas ranch for businessmen too busy to go to Africa. In the course of the narration of this hilarious story, Gilchrist mocks the safaris in Hemingway’s stories by emphasizing their falseness. One of the characters explains the way Phelan’s “safari” works:

“Now the boys will let ’em wait a while and get all hot and bothered. Then they’ll let one of the boars go. . . . Then Mr. Phelan’ll let somebody shoot and he’ll shoot too in case they miss and then they’ll keep letting them loose till everybody that paid gets to shoot one. Then they’ll be through and Rainey’ll put the boars in a tarp and take them off to be stuffed unless somebody wants to drive home with it tied to the hood of the jeep.”

(VJ 270)

The reader might remember from Hemingway’s “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber” the safari guide’s various thoughts alluding to how the African safaris are similarly set up. Part of his job, too, is to back up the shooting of the paying participants, and there are natives on hand to take care of the kill for them. The description of the safari in Gilchrist’s story also reminds the reader that although Francis Macomber supposedly finally behaves courageously when he hunts the buffalo, Robert Wilson was there to back him up. Thus, Gilchrist’s story is not as much of a parody as it at first seems, recognition of which undermines Francis Macomber’s achievement of “manhood” before his death.

In Gilchrist’s story, no one is killed or even hurt and, not surprising, Gilchrist’s female character is much more sympathetically drawn. Crystal’s conflict with her macho brother does not end in her shooting him in order to maintain the power in their relationship. Indeed, she has no such power; their conflict, in fact, involves her desire to *share* power with him: to be allowed to control her half of their inheritance so that all of it is not thrown away on such schemes as this one. Instead of killing him, then, she drives his Mercedes Benz, only just imported from Germany, right into the middle of the set-up chase for a boar and then into the cages where other “wild” animals are kept. Here again, Gilchrist reminds the reader of the Hemingway story and undermines its protagonist’s development, for Francis begins shooting at the buffalo from their car. Beneath this parody—or perhaps comic deconstruction—of Hemingway is a serious complaint against the macho hero he lauded, for this is the type of man Crystal grew up with and keeps marrying, according to the other Crystal stories of *Victory over Japan*, *Drunk with Love*, *The Age of Miracles*, and the novella “*Summer in Maine*” in *I Cannot Get You Close Enough*.

Crystal is repeatedly hurt by such men. Unlike Amanda and Anna, Crystal does not develop beyond Rhoda in recognition of her abilities and in utilization of them for purposes other than attracting a man's attention.

Rhoda, the reader of Hemingway, not only finds herself confronted time and again with this same type of man but also admires such men. She marries her first husband because of his physical appeal to her, and in "*Mexico*," which takes place when she is fifty-three, she is still measuring her own value according to the opinions held of her by macho men. Even more Hemingwayesque than Rhoda's brother and cousin in this story is Rhoda's behavior at a bullfight. Her repeated reference to bullfighting as "Death in the afternoon" reflects her consciousness of her chance, finally, to live a Hemingway novel—as she dreamed of doing in "*1957, a Romance*" when she fell asleep after reading Hemingway's *Across the River and into the Trees*. At the bullfight in Mexico, she, like Lady Brett Ashley in *The Sun Also Rises*, attracts the attention of a young matador. She does not, however, possess the same scruples that keep Brett from continuing her affair and thus "ruining" the bullfighter's career. In order to keep Rhoda from her rendezvous, her brother and cousin must ply her with alcohol all afternoon so that she is too drunk to meet the young man. It is not that they are concerned with the bullfighter's career either, however. Rather, they are worried about Rhoda's meeting and having an affair with a strange Mexican. In this story, as in the Crystal story, then, Gilchrist finally mocks not safaris and bullfights but bored Americans—like Hemingway's heroes—who are chasing after such thrills because of their own empty lives.

Returning to *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*, one finds, in the story "*There's a Garden of Eden*," another character seeking adventure to fill the boredom of her seemingly Edenic life: "Scores of men, including an ex-governor and the owner of a football team, consider Alisha Terrebone to be the most beautiful woman in the state of Louisiana. If she is unhappy what hope is there for ordinary mortals? Yet here is Alisha, cold and bored and lonely, smoking in bed" (LDD 38). The narrator's tone is clearly ironic, mocking those who presume that a beautiful, wealthy woman is without problems. But Alisha is dissatisfied with her empty life, not content to be a trophy wife or sex object. She longs for love, not just lovers, and her beauty and wealth apparently attract the wrong men.

The image of Alisha presented in this opening, together with the pouring rain outside, which emphasizes her entrapment, might call to mind the young woman in Hemingway's "Cat in the Rain." Alisha's story, then, provides the reader another focus on Hemingway's female character, a more fully developed view of the inner turmoil of this whiny woman who is seemingly close to becoming hysterical over a wet cat. Although this is one of Hemingway's more sympathetic depictions of women, his central concern is still the consequences of World War I. The woman's husband is apparently another member of

the Lost Generation who is unable to face returning to the United States and starting a home and family.

To be fair, Hemingway does show in this story the consequential suffering of the veteran's wife as she must wander around with this man to whom she is committed. But reading the two stories together, one realizes more fully the woman's entrapment. As a middle-class American woman, she has been raised to one occupation, homemaker. Her value system and sense of social order has not been upset by firsthand experiences of a world war, so how is she to understand her husband's refusal to allow her to fulfill her role in life? And, given the time difference between this story and Alisha's, one realizes that she doesn't even really have the option, which Alisha has exercised repeatedly, of divorcing her husband in hopes of finding a more satisfying relationship.

Returning to Gilchrist's story, however, one realizes that although Alisha's options seem to be more open than this woman's, her chances of fulfillment are not much better.<sup>15</sup> She has had three disappointing marriages. Consequently, she has since insulated herself within her home, choosing tedium over the hurt of disappointment, until the day she takes a risk by having an affair with a young carpenter whom she has called to do some repairs around her home. Sexual relations with this man, whose occupation recalls that of Christ, seem to give Alisha new life, just when she "was going to stop dying [her] hair" (LDD 47)—that is, just when she was going to resign herself to old age. But his role in the story as an apparent savior is undermined by an earlier exchange between Alisha and her maid. When the maid reports that the carpenter has arrived, Alisha asks, "Which carpenter?" (LDD 39). The maid's answer, "Now it's going to be blue-collar workers," suggests that she knows why Alisha is asking—because Alisha will get up and dress to speak with the carpenter if he is "the young one"—and that this is not the first time that Alisha has taken a lover so spontaneously (LDD 39). The probability of other impulsive affairs deflates Alisha's later romantic idealizing of her affair with the carpenter. Looking back into the story provides a second point compromising its seemingly optimistic ending. Alisha's and her lover's thoughts reveal that they both fantasize during their love-making; thus, they are not making love to each other but rather to ideas they have of each other, and they are simultaneously creating false images of themselves: "Then Alisha closed her eyes and pretended she was an Indian princess lying in a tent deep in a forest, dressed in a long white deerskin robe, waiting for Jeff Chandler to come and claim her for his bride. . . . Then Michael closed his eyes and pretended he was a millionaire going to bed with a beautiful, sad old actress" (LDD 44). Not even Michael, who leads Alisha out of her false paradise at the end of the story, can rescue her if she chooses fantasy over reality. Furthermore, Michael's potential to be Alisha's savior is undermined by his desire for wealth, apparent in his fantasy; he seems to want to share Alisha's lifestyle rather than help her to escape it.



Also calling to mind the young wife of “*Cat in the Rain*,” Margaret of “*Generous Pieces*” (and Rhoda in later stories) longs for a real home. Her family, like Hemingway’s couple, moves around a lot. With their most recent move, the stability of Margaret’s life has been further threatened by her friend’s mother, with whom, Margaret has discovered, her father is having an affair. Still, Margaret clings to her father’s promise that “this time we are going to stay put” (LDD 97). She tries “not to think about Christina’s mother . . . how she leans over my father’s chair handing him things when they have dinner at our house” (LDD 100); she concentrates, rather, on her friendship with Christina and the security it offers of being part of the popular crowd at school (another concern she shares with Rhoda, thus reminding the reader of Gilchrist’s female composite personality).

The story’s climax reveals that Margaret is finally unable to dispel completely her fears that her family, the one constant in her life, will be torn apart by her father’s affair. Walking home late one day, she is chased by a group of boys who throw clods of dirt at her. This somewhat typical incident of boys trying to get a little girl’s attention terrifies Margaret. Even after they are gone, she continues to run, feeling suddenly “afraid of falling down, afraid of every shadow, afraid to look up, afraid of the trees, afraid of the moon” (LDD 101). As is the case for the woman in “*Cat in the Rain*,” who is unduly upset over not finding the cat she has seen outside her hotel window, the true reason for Margaret’s seemingly exaggerated dismay over having dirt thrown at her by some strange boys is her precarious family life. With the cat, Hemingway’s protagonist could pretend for a while that her hotel room is a home, which, one can see by the list of her desires, is what she really wants: “I want to eat at a table with my own silver and I want candles. . . . I want to brush my hair out in front of a mirror and I want a kitty” (IOT 94). Similarly, what Margaret is really afraid of is finding herself in another strange place, this time without both of her parents there to protect her. Both the young wife and Margaret are thwarted in their desire for a stable home by a dominating male—the woman’s husband and Margaret’s father.

Such a comparison serves to undermine somewhat Hemingway’s reputation for being misogynous in his characterization of women, for reading “*Cat in the Rain*” intertextually with “*Generous Pieces*” can lead to an understanding of Hemingway’s female character’s desires. “*Generous Pieces*” concludes with no resolution to Margaret’s terror, which is “watching [her] with cold eyes from the mirror on [her] father’s dresser” (LDD 102). This lack of resolution, taken together with the connection between this story and Hemingway’s “*Cat in the Rain*,” emphasizes the absence of any resolution to that story’s protagonist’s problem: although the woman finally gets the cat, the reader knows that this temporary consolation will not solve her conflict. Thus, reading these works intertextually allows the reader a deeper sympathy for Hemingway’s character than his characterization of her by itself might otherwise elicit.

Reading the two works together also brings up another point of contrast between the two writers—in the role of food in their works. In “*Generous Pieces*,” Margaret refuses to try on the skirt Mrs. Carver has made for her, not because she is angry with Mrs. Carver for having an affair with her father but because of her own self-consciousness about “how big [her] waist is” (LDD 99). A concern with weight is expressed by several of the characters throughout Gilchrist’s canon, young girls to middle-aged women, who share the composite personality. Eating is, according to Joseph Flora, “an important literary motif in most of the Nick Adams stories,” too (Hemingway’s 161).<sup>16</sup> In contrast to eating in Gilchrist’s fiction, in Hemingway’s it is not associated with guilt. Indeed, in a Hemingway scene involving food, the characters are most often enjoying their meal. Furthermore, Hemingway gives much more leisurely descriptions of the process of preparing meals and eating than does Gilchrist. Her characters are most often driven to food by frustration; thus, they are usually eating in a frenzy, sometimes right out of the refrigerator, as LeLe does in “*Traveler*” (also in *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*).

One notable example of the contrasting role of food in the work of these two authors is that whereas Nick’s father comforts his son with food in “*Ten Indians*” (MWW 102), Rhoda’s mother insists that Rhoda go on a diet in *Net of Jewels* (NJ 21). This difference is not so surprising, of course, given the different sexes of their protagonists: Hemingway’s protagonists are usually male and thus not as likely to be concerned about their weight as are Gilchrist’s female protagonists. In this contrast one sees another instance of the double standard for men and women regarding weight, which Gilchrist alludes to directly in “*Rich*” when Letty Wilson attempts to help her daughter Helen curb her appetite, telling her, “You’re so pretty . . . we don’t want you to get too fat,” while she says nothing to her husband about his weight gain (LDD 12). In “*Traveler*,” LeLe’s friend Fielding also mixes a compliment in with his *well-intentioned* advice about her weight: “You would be a really beautiful girl if you lost ten pounds” (LDD 147). The reader is thoroughly disgusted when he follows this statement up with “I’m only saying this because we’ve gotten to be such good friends” (LDD 147), but sadly, his rude comments do not diminish his appeal to LeLe. Instead of telling him off, she lies to him, offering a medical excuse for her weight: “I’m not really this fat. . . . I’ve been having a lot of trouble with my thyroid” (LDD 147).

The central plot of “*Traveler*” involves LeLe’s desire to attract the attention of this young man in spite of his rude comment about her weight. Her attraction to an undeserving male is common in the characters who share the composite personality. LeLe ultimately swims five miles across a lake—quite an endeavor, though it is important to her only in that it involves “a first-rate boy . . . coming to take [her] somewhere” (LDD 85).

As in “*Revenge*,” the climax of “*Traveler*” occurs when LeLe accomplishes this feat thus far allowed only to boys,

for when LeLe suggests to Fielding that she swim across the lake with him, her cousin Baby Gwen says, “Girls don’t ever swim across the lake” (*LDD* 149). In the water, though, LeLe feels empowered, “beautiful,” “perfect,” and thin (*LDD* 150). Her swim is a baptismal experience, a chance to start over and honestly *earn* the reputation she has sought via manipulation since arriving in Mississippi. Gilchrist uses water in this and other stories in much the same way that Hemingway does in such stories as “Out of Season” and “Big Two-Hearted River” in *In Our Time*: as representative of the source of life, of cleansing, rejuvenation, and second chances.

The ending to Hemingway’s “Out of Season” is ambiguous; indeed, the whole story is. Many readers infer from the story’s events that at issue is whether the young gentleman and his wife will have a child or abort their child, much as in “Hills Like White Elephants.” The gentleman’s apparent decision at the story’s end not to fish out of season after all suggests that, just as he will not risk taking the life of a spawning fish, neither will he allow anyone to terminate his wife’s pregnancy (or, if the issue is not abortion but merely whether they should have a child or not, not to do anything that would keep her from conceiving).

Just as “Out of Season” reminds the reader of “Hills Like White Elephants,” but with a more positive, though ambiguous ending, so, too, does “*Traveler*” remind the reader of “*Revenge*.” As in “*Revenge*,” the ending of “*Traveler*” undermines somewhat the sense of LeLe’s triumph. Although the reader does not know if LeLe’s success remains as important to her as Rhoda’s pole vault does to her (there are no final comments from an older LeLe), clearly it is a profound experience in her life, for she is striving to recall it in detail when the story closes: “I was dreaming of the lake, trying to remember how the water turned into diamonds in my hands” (*LDD* 153). Like Rhoda’s triumph over gender roles, which the reader understands to be only a momentary one, LeLe’s memory of her achievements is described in terms of illusion—the water as diamonds—which brings the reader back to the reality of LeLe’s life: it is for the most part based on illusions she creates about herself. Consequently, she probably will not sustain the true empowerment she achieved in the water. Indeed, by the end of the story, her travels have come full circle, returning her to Indiana where she

continues to tell exaggerated versions of the truth, if not outright lies. One is reminded by this falsely positive ending that Hemingway wrote “Hills Like White Elephants” after “Out of Season.” He, too, seems to have had second thoughts about the positive ending to his earlier story—the young gentleman’s decision to bring a new life into the world. In the later story, the young man is not yet ready for such a responsibility and encourages his lover to abort their baby.

Gilchrist again uses water as a central symbol in the last story of *In the Land of Dreamy Dreams*. “*Summer, an Elegy*” ends with Matille staring down into the river, calling to mind one last time the story cycle on which Gilchrist seems to have modeled her own first collection, Hemingway’s *In Our Time*, which ends with Nick Adams staring into the swamp in “Big Two-Hearted River.” Again, however, one cannot help but notice the differences between the two protagonists. Besides the obvious differences of sex, age, and recent experiences with death there is the distinct contrast in their attitudes toward the futures they are contemplating in these last scenes: Nick’s one-day-at-a-time caution versus Matille’s *joie de vivre* impatience. Of course this distinction is not surprising given the difference in kind between their recent tragic experiences—Nick has been to war while Matille has merely learned that her playmate/cousin has died—which is exactly why, although Hemingway’s work serves well as a model of the craft of writing the short story and organizing the short story cycle, Gilchrist would have to turn to other writers to find someone *simpatico* with her subject matter.

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## FURTHER READING

### Criticism

Bain, Robert. “Ellen Gilchrist.” *Contemporary Fiction Writers of the South*. Greenwood Press, 1993, pp. 169-84.

Presents a brief overview of Gilchrist’s life and career, and traces both her major themes and critical response to her work.

**Additional coverage of Gilchrist’s life and career is contained in the following sources published by the Gale Group:** *Contemporary Authors*, Vols. 113, and 116; *Contemporary Authors New Revision Series*, Vols. 41, and 61; *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Vol. 130; *DIScovering Authors Modules: Popular Fiction and Genre Authors*; *Major 20th-Century Writers*, Vols. 1, and 2; *Short Story Criticism*, Vol. 14.

# Jim Harrison

## 1937-

(Full name James Thomas Harrison; has also written under the name James Harrison) American novelist, poet, essayist, screenplay writer, illustrator, and critic.

The following entry provides an overview of Harrison's career through 2000. For further information on his life and works, see *CLC*, Volumes 6, 14, 33, and 66.

### INTRODUCTION

Often considered a unique and experimental writer, Harrison has reworked many literary forms, such as the memoir, the adventure story, historically-based fiction, romance, and poetry. Central to most of his work is a strong sense of the outdoors. He frequently employs allusion and figurative language in narratives that offer energetic and humorous accounts of displacement, violence, sexuality, and the destruction of the environment. Harrison's refreshing blend of rural colloquialisms, affinity for understatement, metaphysical speculations, and natural images all help to create thoroughly multidimensional stories and poems.

### BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Born in 1937 in Grayling, a rural northern Michigan town, Harrison grew up surrounded by forests, rivers, and wildlife; images of which abound in both his poetry and prose. He began writing poetry in college, and published his first poetry collection, *Plain Song* (1965), while studying for his Master's degree at Michigan State University. He decided to attempt to write a novel during a period of immobility that occurred after a fall from a cliff while bird-hunting. That novel, *Wolf: A False Memoir* (1971), successfully launched his fiction writing career, but he did not attain significant financial success until the release of *Legends of the Fall*, a trio of novellas, in 1979. He continues to write poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, and also enjoys a busy career as a screenplay writer. He maintains a residence in northern Michigan, at a farm located approximately fifty miles north of Grayling, and owns a cabin in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, where he retreats during warmer weather to write.

### MAJOR WORKS

Harrison began his writing career as a poet. He has experimented with various poetic forms throughout his eleven poetry collections. In *Locations* (1968), his second volume of poetry, Harrison created his own versions of the

suite, a lyrical form related to musical composition, and also modified variations of the ghazal, a grouping of couplets first used in ancient Persia. Although his poetry is generally favorably reviewed, Harrison received scant critical acclaim until the publication of his first work of fiction, *Wolf: A False Memoir*. This story focuses on a disillusioned young man who abandons urban life in exchange for the less complex life in the woods of northern Michigan. *Wolf* addresses man's struggle for identity in modern American society. This theme is further explored in *A Good Day to Die* (1973) and *Farmer* (1975).

Harrison received both popular and critical acclaim for *Legends of the Fall*, which contained novellas widely differing in terms of plot and subject matter, but which are bound by a common focus on revenge, obsession, sex, and violence. *Warlock* (1981) and *Sundog* (1984) also share a theme; that of man's struggle with himself. Both stories focus on middle-aged men who overindulge in eating, drinking, and women. These novels were received favorably, particularly by male readers, but Harrison's writing was often viewed as sexist. Many commentators compare Harrison's work to that of Ernest Hemingway, due to the abundance of outdoor imagery, strong male characters, vast appetites, and a focus on travel in both author's work.

*Dalva* (1988) marked a departure for Harrison as he turned from the exploration of male concerns and experiences and chose to write about a strong female protagonist in this story. Although Dalva possesses characteristics that are generally thought of as "male" traits (such as a love for the outdoors, a strong bond with wildlife, and sexual promiscuity), she is a well drawn, genuine, feminine protagonist. Harrison continues to create strong female voices in the title novellas from the collections *The Woman Lit By Fireflies* (1990) and *Julip* (1994). *The Road Home* (1998) continues the story of Dalva and her family.

### CRITICAL RECEPTION

Harrison's poetry has been favorably received and reviewers frequently praise his poetic skills. Reaction to his novels and shorter fiction has been mixed. Some critics disparage Harrison's male protagonists for their adherence to antiquated codes of honor and exaggerated instances of machismo. His earlier novels and novellas primarily treat male-centered issues, and his audiences tended to be largely male. With the publication of *Dalva*, Harrison was lauded for his ability to write a compassionate story with a believable and strong female protagonist. *Dalva* expanded his readership to include both men and women, and signi-



fied a change in reviewer's preconceived ideas about his work. While an occasional critic finds his verbiage to be clumsy, commentators generally agree that Harrison's success with the short story form derives from his strong poetic talents, which include an economy of language, apt phrasing, and structural experimentation. His considerable wit and self-deprecating attitude lend a natural narrative style that is also widely praised.

## PRINCIPAL WORKS

### Fiction

*Wolf: A False Memoir* (novel) 1971  
*A Good Day to Die* (novel) 1973  
*Farmer* 1975  
*Legends of the Fall* (novellas) 1979  
*Warlock* 1981  
*Sundog: The Story of an American Foreman, Robert Corvus Strang, as Told by Jim Harrison* 1984  
*Dalva* (novel) 1988  
*The Woman Lit By Fireflies* (novellas) 1990  
*Julip* (novellas) 1994  
*The Road Home* 1998  
*The Boy Who Ran to the Woods* (juvenilia) 2000  
*The Beast God Forgot to Invent* 2000

### Poetry

*Plain Song* (poetry) 1965  
*Locations* (poetry) 1968  
*Walking* (poetry) 1969  
*Outlyer and Ghazals* (poetry) 1971  
*Letters to Yessenin* (poetry) 1973  
*Returning to Earth* (poetry) 1979  
*Selected and New Poems 1961–1981* (poetry) 1982  
*The Theory and Practice of Rivers* (poetry) 1986  
*The Theory and Practice of Rivers and New Poems* (poetry) 1989  
*After Ikkyu and Other Poems* (poetry) 1996  
*The Shape of the Journey: New and Collected Poems* (poetry) 1998

### Other Major Works

*Pathways to a Southern Coast* [with Jerry Blackwelder] (essays and illustrations) 1986  
*The Passing: Perspectives of Rural America* [with Ferrol Sams] (essays and illustrations) 1988  
*Just before Dark* (nonfiction) 1991  
*Country Stores* (essays and illustrations) 1993  
*Wolf* [with Wesley Strick] (screenplay) 1994  
*American Christmas* (essays and illustrations) 1994

## CRITICISM

Vernon Scanell (review date 21 March 1980)

SOURCE: "Wilfully Waffling," in *Times Literary Supplement*, March 21, 1980, p. 326.

[In the following review, Scanell finds *Legends of the Fall* to be a horribly written book.]

"**Legends of the Fall**" is the title-story of a volume containing three novellas by Jim Harrison who, the blurb tells us, "has already won literary acclaim in the States for his poetry and novels". The jacket also carries some extracts from admiring American reviewers of the book, including these words from that notable arbiter of literary excellence, *Playboy*: "These three novellas are so good and so well crafted, it's a little scary . . . You have to be very goddamned good to write that way."

It is perhaps worth quoting the opening sentence of the first of the stories, "Revenge": "You could not tell if you were a bird descending (and there was a bird descending, a vulture) if the naked man was dead or alive." What Harrison wishes to say is clear enough—though it took me two or three readings to be quite sure—but the manner of its saying is extraordinarily clumsy, and indeed an elephantine clumsiness is a feature of this author's style. It seems that he is resolved not to say anything directly, and his painful circumlocutions and torturing of syntax are not so much evidence of the writer's "intolerable wrestle with words and meanings" as a self-conscious attempt to claim a depth of thought and feeling which is in fact lamentably absent, as when, a few pages later he writes: "It's not necessary to know too much about the man who was wounded so badly because he was wounded badly enough to alter his course of life radically, somewhat in the manner that conversion, the sacrament of baptism, not the less an upheaval for being commonplace, alters the Christian, satori the Buddhist." You have to be very goddamned bad to write that way.

Beneath the pretentious waffle of his first novella here, "**Revenge**", is a crude tale of pathological violence and sex, a melange of sadism and mawkish slop, with a conclusion so preposterously melodramatic and sentimental that laughter almost defuses the nausea. But not quite. The second novella, "**The Man Who Gave Up His Name**", is about a character called Nordstrom who attends dancing classes as part of his university education, becomes a wealthy businessman, marries, divorces and gives away most of his worldly possessions, kills a hoodlum who is trying to intimidate him and becomes a cook in a sea-food restaurant in Florida. I think Harrison is trying to con his readers into accepting this rubbish as some kind of allegory of thwarted ambition, of disillusionment with, or renunciation of, the things of this world. But the truth is that, like "Revenge" the story is a mishmash of brutality, sentimentality and absurd pretentiousness.

The last of the novellas, the title-story, is a little different in intention but no less painful to read. In the words of the blurb, "this tale of high adventure and romantic obsession ranges back to the 1870s and forward to 1977". It reads like an inept treatment for a movie that mercifully never got made. Ill-written, trite, and maudlin, all three of these stories would seem to be products of a vulgar, dubiously illiterate and rather unpleasant mind.

#### Jack Beatty (review date 29 November 1981)

SOURCE: "Double, Double, Toil and Trouble," in *Washington Post Book World*, November 29, 1981, p. 4.

[In the following review, Beatty states that although Harrison's earlier novels may be worthy of praise, *Warlock* is poorly written.]

According to his publisher's publicity material, Jim Harrison is an "outdoorsman and man of letters who lives with his family in Northern Michigan." His five novels, the same source goes on, "have received serious literary attention." Examples follow. "It is touching and slightly fearsome," writes Christopher Lehmann-Haupt of Harrison's *Wolf*. "This is a poet's novel, adding up to nothing but its boisterous and eloquent self." *The New York Times Book Review* weighs in with "an epic storyteller who deals in great vistas and vast distances." *The Boston Globe* hails "one of the most important writers of today." "This man can write!" says *Playboy* (I'd recognize that exclamation point anywhere).

These ecstasies were generated by Harrison's earlier work, of which the three novellas gathered in *Legends of the Fall* are worth at least a peep or two of praise. Now comes *Warlock*. It is so bad that the only one of these critical appraisals that could possibly apply to it is an amended version of *Playboy*'s quote: "This man can write." But to say that "this man can write" is to say no more than the unexciting truth.

In fact, in *Warlock* he writes very poorly. Indeed he cannot be taken seriously as a writer because he writes sentences that teeter on the ludicrous, sentences like "He opened a can of dog food with abandon," and "He had driven Diana to work with a special intensity," and "An entire bottle of Bordeaux . . . had soothed his frayed snypases"; and also because he more or less mauls the language, using infer when he means imply, ambivalence when he means ambiguity, and making other such condign gaffes.

He cannot be taken seriously as a novelist because *Warlock* at any rate, his story about an unemployed Michigan man who goes to work as a private detective for a rich doctor, is insipidly told, unbelievable in its events, devoid of even minimally credible characters, and dominated by a distasteful sexual preening. One sees, though, why he is published in men's magazines: he awkwardly articulates the *Playboy*

reader's fascination with oral sex and fears about losing sexual potency, as if for his years of pleasure with sundry Miss Mays and Miss Junes he must pay the penalty with which priests, ministers, and rabbis once frightened young men, as if indeed that dark day were always, so to speak, at hand. His aim as a writer is to give this audience what it wants: a sexual fantasy figure with whom it may identify. He belongs, therefore, not to literary history, but to the history of hygiene.

In reading a novel as bad as *Warlock* your mind has to have something to do, and mine took to noticing the euphemisms Harrison employs for the male organ. My favorite is "rude rouser," but many others have undeniable appeal. Harrison uses the familiar unprintable words, of course, but it is delightful how he keeps coming up with unexpected ones like "evidence," as in "The evidence coiled and moved in his bathing suit . . ."

By contrast the female part receives no such sportive cognomens, being referred to in blunt biological terms, though I did notice it being called "the article," and smiled. I also smiled—and perhaps, in fairness and charity, I was meant to smile—at such profundities as "Sometimes the only answer to death is lunch," and "The real trouble with walking a long ways is that you usually have to walk back." How true! I only wish I had said that myself.

If you must know something of the plot, let me say that *Warlock* is the nickname of the hero, a 42-year-old feeb who is married to a lusty nurse. She is having an affair with his new employer, a tinkering doctor who has invented an electric tube next to which a rude rouser must look like a thin reed, and which he tests on Warlock's willing wife. The plot sets Warlock rambling in the wilds of northern Michigan; also in Florida. I read the book for pay, but you can have no such excuse.

#### T. O. Treadwell (review date 15 January 1982)

SOURCE: "Fantasist in the Shopping Mall," in *Times Literary Supplement*, January 15, 1982, p. 48.

[In the following review, Treadwell mentions that although Warlock is somewhat lacking in plot, it is ambitious and is salvaged by Harrison's incredible wit.]

*Warlock* is a comic novel which rests on the premise that beneath the slick and sophisticated surface of American life the old nature gods still exercise their capricious power. This fauns-in-the-shopping-mall territory has been explored before, by writers as various as John Cheever, Peter De Vries and John Irving, but the landscape is a rich one, and to it Jim Harrison has brought a fresh and original eye.

Johnny Lundgren, the novel's central character, is forty-two and lives in rural Northern Michigan with Diana, his glamorous second wife. He has worked as an executive for

a family foundation but the revenue authorities have come to view these institutions as elaborate tax-avoidance schemes, and Lundgren has been unemployed for a year, living on his wife's earnings as a nurse. Lundgren leads an elaborate fantasy life centered on his private identity as "Warlock", a secret name given him in boyhood during a cub-scout initiation ceremony. As the novel opens, he is emerging from a powerful and mysterious dream at the climax of which a voice from the earth has commanded him to change his future. He finds the idea a compelling one, but in spite of the magical and diabolical associations of his secret name. Lundgren-Warlock does not find it easy to take charge of his own destiny.

It is his wife, more intelligent and energetic than himself, who at length finds him a job with the sinister Dr Rabun, a millionaire inventor whose masterpiece is "an absurdly effective prosthetic device for men made impotent by severe diabetes and other biological rather than imaginary causes", and whose weird balloon-like shoes may well hide cloven feet. Lundgren is to act as a sort of private detective, defending the far-flung outposts of Dr Rabun's financial empire from the depredations of swindlers and bloodsuckers, chief among whom are the doctor's hostile wife and homosexual son.

As a job for a fantasist this could hardly be bettered, and Lundgren sets out on the trail—the lone wanderer, master of his fate and captain of his soul. For a time, he's successful (though his successes depend more on chance encounters and coincidence than on his own enterprise) but as the novel reaches its climax, life turns bafflingly perverse. Nothing is as it appears to be, nothing has been as it seemed; life and the future won't be imposed upon, and the novel ends with Lundgren's acquiescence in his own bewilderment.

*Warlock* carries an epigraph from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the lines in which Bottom speaks of having had "a most rare vision . . . a dream past the wit of man to say what dream it was." Like Bottom's, Lundgren's dream is misleading and only partially understood; misleading because the boundaries between dream and reality are blurred. Both Bottom and Lundgren become actors in a fatal tragedy of love which, by their own incompetence, they reduce to farce; both are fools with access to an instinctive wisdom denied to the wiser folk around them.

In wishing to change his future, Lundgren aspires to change the world. We are told that "on a mostly subconscious level he was vitally concerned with the world conforming to his idea of it." This ambition allies him to another potent literary archetype, the Knight of La Mancha (Lundgren characteristically prefers his story in the Broadway-musical form his wife finds disgusting) who travels over the landscape in a doomed attempt to impose a set of crazy but noble ideals on recalcitrant everyday reality. Lundgren's dreams are less than chivalric, but they are generous and humane. There is nothing evil about Lundgren, and "Warlock" is at this level an inappropriate

way for him to think of himself. But Harrison is a self-conscious writer and knows that "warlock" derives from the Old English *wárloga* which means, literally, "liar against the truth", and thus gets at Lundgren's refusal (like Bottom's and Don Quixote's) to see his relationship with the rest of the world in an objective light. Our of this refusal comes comedy, but something deeper too.

*Warlock* is an ambitious novel, and it must be said that the plot is a bit too slight for the thematic weight it is expected to bear. What satisfies most, perhaps, is the author's vigorous and often acerbic wit. This comment on changing fashions in adolescent reading-matter is a representative example: "After all, the most obnoxious young people are those who read Thomas Wolfe and take that great burly oaf to heart. In the following generation Kahlil Gibran and Hermann Hesse were to cause fewer problems, albeit their brand of pap seemed to cause early senescence among the young." Exactly so.

#### Thomas Maher Gilligan (essay date Spring 1984)

SOURCE: "Myth and Reality in Jim Harrison's *Warlock*," in *Critique: Studies in Modern Fiction*, Vol. 25, No. 3, Spring, 1984, pp. 147-53.

[In the following essay, Gilligan discusses Harrison's subtle and overt uses of mythology in *Warlock*.]

Jim Harrison's recent book, *Warlock* (1981), resists critical analysis because it is so obviously so many things at the same time. A sexy trip through the mythology of middle-age, it stops along the way to poke at art history ("The Great Gauguin would have had the girls back in his studio in a trice") and at artists ("He dressed for a stroll, then endured the manic indecision of putting on and taking off the beret a dozen times"), at religion ("the god of the Brownian movement had stretched his loins otherwise"), at the social significance of food ("Many of the problems the world has had with Germany in the past century, he felt, could be traced to this leaden, fascistic diet"), and at American society ("nearly all of the huge institutions of the Midwest were not so much universities as jerrybuilt vocational centers providing bumwads for the economy").<sup>1</sup> And Harrison finds time to comment on the humanity of used-car salesmen, the insensitivity of large dogs, the weather patterns of northern Michigan, the brotherhood of cops and the brotherhood of crooks, the oddities of sexual inversions and perversions, the dangers and pleasures of recreational drugs, the utilitarian differences between BMW's and Subaru station wagons, the varied effects of exercise and meditation, and the courage of late night talk show hosts to say nothing of any value. Harrison chooses not to develop many of the motifs he introduces, and he introduces a great many more than I have listed; and that tantalizing tendency to underplay much of what he presents and the humorous, irreverent manner in which he presents so many of the undeveloped



motifs suggest how we should read those that he chooses to develop at length.<sup>2</sup> Kurt Vonnegut has, for years, gotten a great deal of mileage out of undeveloped motifs, recognizing that the attentive reader can fill in for himself most of the pedestrian fare that a less confident novelist would feel required to include.<sup>3</sup> And Harrison, like Vonnegut, allows the small touches, the sharp but shallow thrusts, to set the tone of the novel and indicate how we are to view the large issues. We may find that ultimately the larger issues are not simply humorous and irreverent, but if we do not view, first, their humor and irreverence we may never understand what they really are. Take, for example, the pervasive references to classical and popular mythology.

Near the end of the book, as Johnny "Warlock" Lundgren patches up the problems of the previous pages, he joins his wife, Diana, on a nature walk, and as he kisses her he sees a motion in the bushes behind her that turns out to be his dog, but that elicits an important thought:

An idea entered his mind that nature walks would be more interesting if there were mythological guidebooks and you could find Toad and the great god Pan out in the forest.

(261)

And in a sense, *Warlock* is such a guidebook; but we have to be careful because Harrison is capable of lampooning even his most central themes. Consider the part of the fair Diana on which Warlock dwells the most:

For the first time in their seven years of marriage he did not stare at her beautiful bottom—oh gates of hell—when she got out of bed. And it wasn't that this particular bottom was framed by a foreshortened, satin slip nightie gotten mail order from Los Angeles; no, it was simply one of the best on earth, way up in that realm where comparisons are truly odious.

(4)

And again:

Those few who have seen her bending over nude to fetch her clothes are likely to remember it on their deathbed (sic) in their respective retirement colonies in Florida, Arizona, California.

(39)

Diana, pardon my pointing it out, was the Roman goddess of the moon.

And this sort of comic mythology pervades the book. Warlock drives Diana to work, a "Hermes" briefcase between them to deliver to her the message that he would seriously look for a job that day. His avante garde artist friend, Garth, builds "a huge painted plaster contraption called *The New Leda* that shows a swan doing what the title implies, "with Ralph Garth there in a railroad engineer's cap, and a can to oil the flanges" (31). Dr. Rabun is a "tall, knobby, saturnine figure," (76) and when

Warlock gets to know him they become "cronies" (111). Warlock sleeps with Aurora who proves much better than her name (after the Roman goddess of the dawn) might imply. He sleeps with Laura who, as Housman might have said, "withers," for him, "quicker than a rose." And he sleeps with Lucette, whose name is a diminutive of Lucinda, one of the names associated with the goddess Diana, indicating the girl is a poor substitute for the moon-goddess waiting at home. Laura, by the way, emphasizes her own connection with Diana and the whole series of classical allusions when she writes, in her put-on letter of farewell to Warlock, that she will recall the moments he shared with her when they "became one with the moon" (214). These references are funny rather than serious, and clever to the extent that tracing the connection of one mythological element after another becomes a game. And were they not funny, Harrison would be hard-pressed to justify including them because they are so unlikely, and a reader would be hard-pressed to justify picking them out because they are so obscure. The oblique references to mythology that occur in every important scene in the book become delightful, and necessarily deflating to the melodramatic seriousness with which Warlock views his situation.

Living his life on the strength of a dream, Warlock attributes real-world significance to the workings of the unconscious mind. He is an intellectual dabbler who sees little beyond surface values, and who rarely pursues an answer that does not appear to him quickly. As a child, we are told, "he always confused reality with reality, staring in silent confusion from the back of their two-tone '47 Chevy, as his father drove past a realty office" (72). As an adult, the dream on which he restructures his future could mean anything. He finds himself dead on the kitchen floor. But Diana deflates the significance of the dream immediately: "There's nothing on the kitchen floor but the tipped over garbage can. I think it's fair to presume the garbage can isn't you." Eventually Harrison allows the deflation to take a mock-classic form:

If a Greek chorus had been present they would have been chanting, in effect: "Woe, a dream is not a map or manual, stupid. Woe, run to the church or psychiatrist. Head for the bar and your favorite beverage, kneel before womankind. Do not separate yourself. Join the army, get a job, help others. Do not act upon this dark secret. Woe, etc."

(46)

But Warlock does act upon this dark dream-secret, ignoring both the pragmatic Diana and the advice of a mentor named Vergil—Vergil Schmidt, as it turns out—who tells him,

You don't live in the actual world. You live in a far inferior world where you dissipate all your energies making the world conform to your wishes.

(75)

And Vergil is right. Warlock, always willing to cross cultural boundaries in his fantastic reveries, becomes, at various times, a grail-knight crossing the Rubicon (119),

an image of "Cain or Ishmael, at full roam" (142), and a hero "at the awesome crossroads" where he must "continue the quest or turn his back on it" an image from "the revived memory of a college mythology course" (144). And, of course, all of the postures are absurd, as Warlock almost allows himself to realize at times. And they seem all designed, however unconsciously on his part, to hide from him the reality of middle-age. The book spans exactly one calendar year in the life of a man turning forty-three, unable to cope with getting older, still dissipating his energies precisely as the sage Vergil had warned.

Warlock's attempts to cope with the continuing process of aging are childish in themselves and therefore indicative of his inability to grow significantly as a person. After posing for himself the sophomoric philosophical question, "How can the self measure the self?" a remnant from an old college ethics class, and recalling, in response to that question, the shallowness of a convention of wood stove dealers he had one attended where he had seen the depths of their shallowness (a seminar on the philosophy of wood-burning pales next to a memory of his grandfather who "cut wood to keep the house warm because it was cold outside" (51), Warlock shows his own incredible capacity for shallowness by making a list of rules to govern his life-change:

- Number One: Eat Sparingly
- Number Two: Avoid Adultery
- Number Three: Do Your Best in Everything
- Number Four: Get in First Rate Shape.

(54)

But even these simple (-minded?) rules show Warlock to be a fool: each carries with it a deflation. "He thrummed the growing ring of lard around his waist. Writing this first rule made him feel thinner" (52). The second rule elicits lustful thoughts of Patty, "the Unemployment Office cheerleader," and Harrison makes sure we see the point: "It seemed the act of making a coda defiled the spirit of the coda" (53). The third rule reminds Warlock that he is "fast becoming quite the cook" (54), even though we've seen him boil turkey soup down into something that resembles turkey gravy and fill a rutabaga with it, and even though on the following page we are introduced to ox-tail vegetable soup in which he "used perhaps a teaspoon of freshly grated horseradish in each of his bowls" (55). As he considers how to get in first rate shape, he falls asleep.

But the most pointed indication of Warlock's inability to deal in a reasonable manner with his growing older is his obsession with the life (but significantly not the art) of "the great Gaugin."<sup>4</sup> Certainly Gaugin's story can inspire the aging middle-class, those Norman Mailer once termed "the wad" and that Thoreau melodramatically said "lead lives of quiet desperation." But Gaugin's story can only reasonably inspire a man to develop his own talent, which Warlock fails to do even as he becomes a financial suc-

cess; and besides, the Gaugin story is so well-known that it has become, itself, a myth— cliché-ridden, oversimplified, and even a bit foolish, especially for a grown man to pattern his life on.

As readers, we will fail to grasp this book unless we recognize that Warlock's success has virtually nothing to do with himself. Pushed into a created job so that Rabun and Diana will be less inhibited, he stumbles upon (or more correctly is stumbled upon by—even the initial stumbling isn't Warlock's doing) a young forest ranger who shows him how Rabun's trees have been pilfered and thereby wins Warlock a large reward, paid in cash and confidence. Warlock stumbles across (his experience allows him to do his own stumbling), "quite by accident," Gloria Rabun's gallery in Miami and Ted Rabun's charter boat in Key West, and as a result of meeting them both he makes a great deal of money by simply revealing what he knows about Rabun; and what he knows is simply that Rabun told him to get him out of town and away from Diana. Had he fallen for Ralph Garth's obvious ploys to get him away from Diana for a while, Warlock would have looked like a fool. The fact that he fell for Rabun's ploy instead and lucked into a great deal of money makes him no less a fool. In the only instance we see in which Warlock does not stumble upon what success he has, his inability as an investigator is made clear:

The case was simple: an audit had revealed a pathetically obvious kickback scheme where far too much was being paid for the raw lumber to make the shipping pallets.

(165)

But the case, it turns out, was not so simple—Warlock was. As the clearheaded Cletis points out to him after they have set-up and caught the crooked buyer, Warlock has failed to look any deeper than the surface:

"How do you know the plant manager wasn't involved? Or the accountants? That poor little shit will spend the holidays in jail taking a fall for the others. Use your head."

(165)

Warlock's success depends upon luck, circumstance, ultimately coincidence. And Harrison realizes that coincidence, while it certainly occurs in the real world, is an element of fiction. Harrison even allows Warlock himself to understand what coincidence is, as he stumbles upon Mrs. Laura Fardel, who has been injured in Rabun's spa and who is suing:

The name Fardel lit up like a forty watt bulb as he made the drinks, then exploded in the manner of an unpunctured baked potato in a hot oven. Oh my god! His mind raced back to the coincidences found in *Dr. Zhivago* that last spring of graduate school. . . .

And Warlock shows his tendency to live according to the patterns he has studied:

. . . the palms became linden trees, the lowering tropical sun shown on the Baltic outside St. Petersburg, rather than the Atlantic off Palm Beach. Laura looked like Julie Christie, only better.

(198)

But such posturing, while funny, is vaguely pathetic, and it is meant to be both funny and pathetic because Harrison is aware that he is writing fiction and he wants us to recognize all the way through that only in fiction does the coincidental tie together so nicely at the end.

In the beginning of the book he shows us the absence of any novelistic connection between real-world events. Warlock was born, we are told, "December 11, 1937, at 12:11:37 A.M., the same time that a piece of meteorite killed an elephant in distant Tanzania, Hitler brushed his teeth with some vigor, Einstein yawned." But when Harrison wants Warlock to find out about Diana's affair with Rabun, the coincidences within a single paragraph recall Dickens at his worst:

He called Clete because he somehow wanted to talk to Hudley, which wasn't possible. Clete said it was urgent that he call Patty. . . . Clete was a roamer, running into Patty at the selfsame bowling alley. Warlock contacted Patty and . . . was informed that her mother was Dr. Rabun's cleaning woman, and this selfsame Rabun was having a long-standing affair with Warlock's wife, Diana.

(242)

And the point of such obviously coincidental occurrences is precisely that fiction is not reality.

In one spot only, but in one spot undeniably, Harrison intrudes upon the narrative and admits to the non-reality of the novel. At the beginning of the eighth chapter he writes:

Who was this man? Or who is this man? As he is still very much alive and doing quite well. His wife Diana is also doing very well though she has an uncomfortably close call with death by gunshot wound in the confines of our story.

(39)

At the end of *Tom Jones*, or *Pride and Prejudice*, we can find such indications of how the story progresses beyond its own boundaries, but Fielding and Austen were well aware that they were writing for a readership that looked at their work as non-reality because the concept of realism as we know it had not yet been developed and they were not concerned with causing readers to suspend, as Coleridge put it, their tendency to disbelieve. The twentieth century reader, with a background of realism, looks to suspend his tendency to disbelieve and when he does, he becomes emotionally caught in a fictional story of which he can dismiss the reality when he is finished reading. The unique addition to literary art to come out of the mid-to-late twentieth century is the realization that the reader can

receive a more powerful emotional jolt if he is not led to believe in the reality of the narrative but is made aware of the mechanics of the artwork as we are aware of the brush strokes in a painting or the chisel marks in a piece of sculpture.<sup>5</sup>

And ultimately, *Warlock* admits the unreality of its own mythological base. On the penultimate page, as Warlock walks through the potentially mythological forest with his ex-moon goddess wife, whose neck is emphasized now rather than her lunar regions, we are told that he was offered, and he refused, a new assignment. The tracking down of a rich-kid runaway who had joined, of course, the Moonies. A movement in the bushes turns out to be only Hadley, the dog, and the "mythological guidebooks" mentioned earlier would help very little anyway since Warlock's experience with Diana's field-study manuals have indicated to him that "nothing out in nature . . . resembled anything in the guidebooks." And, although Warlock's recognition of the difference between Myth and reality may not be complete by the end of the book (since he does, in the final paragraph, consider again the possibility of hearing the piping of Pan), when the horn blows once more, indicating that Diana has found the car, that Pan is a fantasy, that Warlock has been misdirected, and that reality is not structured along the guidelines of myth, or of any art form, we, along with him, have "no real reason to doubt it" (262).

#### Notes

1. Jim Harrison, *Warlock* (New York: Delacorte, 1981), pp. 22, 187, 211, 122, and 126. All subsequent reference to *Warlock* will be to this edition and will be included within the text.
2. Harrison's best work, prior to *Warlock*, may well have been the novella entitled "Legends of the Fall", which is so spare in spots that it resembles a plot outline but which succeeds, within eighty pages, in establishing the sort of multigenerational family biography to which James Michener might devote a thousand.
3. Consider the Kilgore Trout novels mentioned in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, (New York, 1969) *The Gutless Wonder*, for instance, allows Vonnegut to comment on man's greater concern for his immediate well-being than for the well-being of the race in general. The central figure of the book is reported to be a robot with bad breath who drops jellied gasoline on people for a living, and who is not accepted socially until he does something about his breath.
4. See, for example, pp. 21, 73, 87, 127, 179, 194, and 202.
5. This concept has been of central importance in the work of many of our most important writers. In addition to Vonnegut, who in *Slaughterhouse-Five* becomes a character in what he admits all along is a *novel* about real experience, consider how Joseph Heller plays around with time sequence in *Catch-22*



(New York, 1961) and how John Fowles shifts tense and person in *Daniel Martin* (Boston, 1977). Interestingly enough, the movies have recently taken to using the technique. The film version of Fowles' novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* presents two parallel stories, one of which involves the supposed real lives of the actors who are playing roles in the other, thus emphasizing the non-reality of both stories. Of course, the stage has always admitted to being illusory by allowing even those characters who have died during the play to answer a curtain call. Heller, incidentally, tried to upset that tradition as well in *We Bombed in New Haven* (New York, 1967), in which actors supposedly do die for real.

#### Dennis Drabelle (review date 17 June 1984)

SOURCE: "When Tough Guys Touch Middle Age," in *Washington Post Book World*, June 17, 1984, p. 5.

[In the following review, Drabelle explains his disappointment in *Sundog*, feeling that Harrison's new style of story telling lacks the honesty of his earlier style.]

At about midpoint in his new novel [*Sundog*], Jim Harrison frames a simile of Virgilian beauty that sums up much of his work. In the Caribbean he used to watch the tide go out through a channel. "The sun-blasted shallow water yields up nearly everything it holds in a swimming, tumbling stream. . . . The rearrival on the incoming tide is much more gradual and ordered, a processional, much like the paradigm of our own early years, which appear so painfully slow when we live them. No one is ready, it seems, for the loss of control, the ineluctable character of acceleration that gathers around the later years."

Growing old is one of Harrison's preoccupations, and few other Americans write so perceptively about middle-aged men. His protagonists tend to have outsized appetites for food, drink, and sex; waistlines slackening for the last, irretrievable time; and chronic insomnia. Even so, there is a charming courtesy about them. Still earnest, they pursue an accommodation with decline, seek the Tao of Pushing Fifty.

*Sundog* features two such men, Harrison himself, who serves as narrator, and Robert Corvus Strang, a builder of dams, now holed up in Michigan's Upper Peninsula for recuperation. A sufferer from epilepsy since he was struck by lightning as a boy, Strang met disaster while on location in the Venezuelan highlands. When he ran out of the medicine that controls his seizures, he resorted to a substitute recommended by local Indians. Atop the dam-in-progress, he blacked out and fell 300 feet into the river. Back home he is reduced to crawling around the woods to regain his strength.

Harrison shows up to interview Strang for a projected feature article. But his concentration is fitful, and there are so many interruptions by visiting children and ex-wives

that his story unfolds like a reluctant century plant. Somewhere along the line Harrison scraps the notion of an article in favor of a nonfiction novel. Oppressed by the tedium of recovery, Strang summons the strength to cut it short.

In addition to that tidal simile, *Sundog* contains several aperçus worth copying into a commonplace book. One of them offers the cleverest explanation I've heard as to why we're becoming a bicoastal people. Lust for food, Harrison muses, "is, after all, the sublimated reason why many of us leave the Midwest in the first place. . . . For a young poet from the Midwest, the discovery of garlic can be as poignant as the discovery of Rimbaud and Federico Garcia Lorca. Art without sensuality dwindles into the Episcopalian." The characters are vivid and amusing—especially Emmeline, Strang's robust first wife—and, as always, Harrison's prose is a precision instrument.

Yet overall *Sundog* disappoints. One reason is that it sounds idolatrous. Harrison and Strang are so much the same Rabelaisian type that the book lacks tension. Strang's profession bears the seeds of conflict—these days many Americans look upon dams as environmental Edsels—but Harrison throws them away: inasmuch as Strang sticks to poverty-stricken regions of Third World countries, he builds only good dams. The result is that he and Harrison tend to echo each other, and the novel takes on a testimonial air.

The other shortcoming has to do with originality. *Legends of the Fall*, Harrison's 1979 trio of novellas, was an inverted tour de force. Here was a gifted contemporary writer breaking off chunks of mythic American material (two of the three tales concern revenge wrought in distant Western precincts) and not tarding them up or clowning around with them. Unlike, say, John Barth in *The Sot-Weed Factor* or Thomas Berger in *Little Big Man*, Harrison told his brutal, lilting stories with an old-fashioned straight face. And such was the power of his plotting and the purity of his language that he achieved a reviving triumph.

*Sundog*, in contrast, is a conventionally fragmented product—even, with its new-journalistic trappings, a trendy one. The book's very design smacks of up-to-the-minute self-consciousness. The reader has to contend with several typefaces: one for scene-setting passages, a second for Harrison's taped comments, a third for Strang's transcribed reminiscences. Instead of the bold-faced vigor driving *Legends of the Fall*, we have three types of ambiguity. I'm not suggesting that Harrison keep reworking the same material—only that he think again about discarding what seemed a fresh and distinctive approach to storytelling.

#### Kay Bonetti and Jim Harrison (interview date 1985)

SOURCE: "An Interview with Jim Harrison" in *Missouri Review*, Vol. 8, No. 3, 1985, pp. 65-86.

[In the following interview, Bonetti and Harrison discuss the autobiographical aspects of Harrison's novels and the thought processes that go into the creation of his stories.]

[Kay Bonetti:] *Could you tell us about your publishing history? You published a whole book of poems without ever having a single poem published.*

[Jim Harrison:] I'd heard Denise Levertov read and I never published anything in my life. So I sent her poems and she wrote back that she'd just become the consulting editor at Norton and if I had more poems like this she would publish a book. After I got the book contract, I sent some poems off and they came out about the same time as the book, but that was true. It was an accident.

*What happened with **Wolf**? How come you moved from three volumes of poetry to the novel?*

I fell off a cliff. I was in the hospital for a month and went into a coma and almost died. I sort of woke up and I couldn't do anything. I had to wear a body corset because I'd torn the muscles away from my lower spine. So Tom McGuane called me up and says, "Now that you're laid up, why don't you write a novel?" I said, "Jeez, I don't want to think about writing a novel." "Write a sort of autobiographical novel," he said and I said, "Okay, goodbye." Then I started writing the novel. I wrote **Wolf** in six weeks or a month. I sent it off the day before the mail strike, years ago, and the only copy of it was lost for a full month. I didn't even think it was important, because I didn't think of myself as a novelist. I wasn't very attached to it. I'd sent it to my brother to make a copy because we were real broke. So he finally went into the New Haven post office and dug it out of the pile of mail there. I don't know how he managed that, but he's authoritative. Then the publisher got it and took it.

*You also wrote some novellas . . .*

I always loved the work of Isak Dinesen, and Knut Hamsun, who wrote three or four short novels, so I thought I would have a try at it. I called the first one "**Revenge**"—my Sicilian agent gave me a little motto that struck me: "Revenge is a dish better served cold." The second of the novellas is called "**The Man Who Gave Up His Name**". I wrote it in a time of extreme mental duress. I envisioned a man getting out of the life he had created with the same intricate carefulness that he'd got into it in the first place. I suppose I was pointing out that if you're ethical you can't just disappear.

*You've described yourself as a sensual Calvinist.*

Maybe that's true. I wrote a poem in which I said John Calvin's down there under the floorboards telling me I don't get a glass of wine till four o'clock. Not 3:57, but 4:00. I was talking to Kurt Ludkey last night about how if you're a total workaholic and you also drink too much you tend to control it, but that doesn't make you less of an alcoholic. It's just that you never, never have more drinks than you can remember.

*Can you really drink like that?*

I have done that for years. I had a little trouble in my early thirties with it and then I began tightly controlling it. I went down to a Mexican fat farm in January because I was so exhausted from my novel. And I felt grotesque. I felt about like I do right now. So I didn't drink anything. I expected it would be awful and nothing happened. I didn't feel anything. Reagan's immigration chief was at this fat farm, and I said to him "don't you realize that you guys are hassling the greatest writer in the world about getting in and out of the United States?" I was talking about Marquez, who's the only writer on earth that I admire without qualification. He said, "Oh I didn't know that, what's the guy's name, we'll see what we can do."

*Have they been denying him a visa?*

Yeah, they've been giving him trouble because they know he stops and sees Castro. But you know what he and Castro do all the time? Cook. They cook all night. He gets there and he has fresh stuff he's picked up in Caracas or Mexico City. They cook veal and chicken, everything like that. And drink of course.

*Your books are full of great cooks.*

What I always liked in Boswell is the idea that if you're obligated to eat two or three times a day, you may as well do a good job of it. I once stopped to see John McDonald and Betty Friedan was there and she asked me why I was so obsessed with cooking. I said, "Why, I cook to avoid adultery." And she says, "My God! are you a mess. To say such a thing." But it's sort of true. When I started cooking frequently, at least three times a week, my wife enjoyed it because it's no fun cooking if you have to cook all the time. And I could also avoid going to the bar when I finished my work day.

*A lot of writers seem to have problems with alcohol. Do you think there's anything necessary about the life of the writer that leads to extreme pain?*

Well, no. I think it's partly the profession. You're alone most of the time. You're creating other worlds all the time. And it's what Walker Percy talks about in that last book of his—it's the reentry problem. You know how I say, or, I have my narrator say, "It's your return to earth like some kind of burned out satellite." Something like that. Alcohol is the sedative when you finish the day's work—it helps you to re-emerge into the world.

*Would you say that your personal life has been something of a stabilizing force?*

Oh my, yeah. You know I've been married twenty-four and a half years. Not in the clingy sense, it's just the way I prefer to live. Every time I think I'm a mess, a total mess, I sort of look around and find out that I'm not quite a total mess. It's like McGuane said, that alcoholism is a

writer's black lung disease. Which is sort of true. But even that I seem to have under control. I suppose that's a moralistic urge. Just to control. To control it.

*You have that passage in **Sundog** where Strang says something about having made up rules when he was a kid. The narrator, Harrison, says, "I love rules." Can you tell me some of the rules?*

Do I have any fresh rules? Yeah. I was on page like 197 of that novel manuscript before I realized I was writing about my alter ego, and it blew one writing day. It totally terrified me.

*How so?*

Strang worked on eleven dams, and I'd written eleven books. I mean it got that bad. And I felt utterly crippled. Just like Strang's been crippled by his work. I said, "Oh my god! Can I go on?" Well the energy of the novel had taken over, so it didn't matter.

*The book is, by no means like, but reminds me of, The Secret Sharer. You wonder at the end about the secret sharer. Whether or not it's one person or two.*

That's giving me goosebumps. James Hillman, who's a Jungian psychiatrist said that thing I quoted "The notion that there's a light at the end of the tunnel has mostly been a boon to pharmaceutical companies." I love that.

*Would you explain that?*

Well, tranquilizers and everything like that. It's because people think they can't bear the nowness of now. They can't bear the present tense. In Zen terms they're either rehearsing something they've already done, to make it come out right. Or they're expecting something to occur in the future. Or trying to change the past. It's like somebody might say, I'm revising my memoirs. I mean something ludicrous like that. A person like Strang is free from dread because he's consented totally to the present. Whereas the narrator, which is another portion of me, can't, can't accept anything.

*Where did you get the character Strang?*

My brain. I met a few people, in an outward way, that did what he did. And I tried to create the kind of person they would become. On frequent trips all over the world. I would meet these men sometimes in hotels, and I'd ask them what they do. I met one in Costa Rica that was a foreman on a huge construction project, and in charge of 32,000 workers on this dam in the Amazon Basin. He was self-educated, from Tennessee. I became more and more interested in these people and then the character took shape. I wanted to create a hero who was free from dread. Dread and irony have gotten to be literary addictions. And I noticed there are some people that live without it. So I created this character named Strang. When I was thirteen I read about King Strang over here on Beaver Island. He

was a Mormon apostate, and he had fifty girlfriends or wives. When you're thirteen you're horny as a toad and you don't even have one girlfriend and here's a guy that's got fifty. So this is what I had in mind. A man free from dread. Maybe that's what I wanted—to be free from dread. I mean besides wanting a drink, I also want to be free from dread.

*It has been said that Strang is the metaphor for the artist. How much do you use yourself, in your work?*

Strang isn't me though.

*What about the sub-title, As Told to Jim Harrison.*

That was just to have fun. Like Nabokov, I did that to throw people off the track. It is a little bit myself, but I had to have a contrast to Strang. I had to have somebody coming from way outside, coming into this world. And I had to know both people. You could say they're almost extremities of the right and left lobes of the same head.

*You wrote this novel as a para-journalistic escapade.*

I was just pissed off. Everything is a novelty. Somebody's most utter and terrible grief is a minute and a half of the evening news. That kind of thing. I was thinking of David Kennedy at twelve sitting in that hotel room watching his father die. He didn't ever get over it.

*Strang says almost immediately, "Tell me something bad that you've never really gotten over."*

I forgot I said that. But that's it. Like his niece can't get over being raped, any better than Karl can get over it. Karl was a strange character. Some people wanted more of him but Karl's effective because there's not more of him. He's the kind of guy that's terribly sensitive but often verges on being the town bully, because he is so eccentric. Karl on a surface level is very attractive to some people for the same reason they like Clint Eastwood. He got back at them. Tom McGuane had a motto over his kitchen door saying "Getting even is the best revenge." And that's okay, but Steve McQueen was out there and he looked at the motto and he said, "Tom, even I'm not that bad. That's really going too far."

*In many ways that book is as much the narrator's book as it is Strang's.*

Well, it's unpleasant because everything the narrator could say is true to my experience. But you need a contrast. Strang isn't Strang if the whole book is Strang. The narrator comes to Strang. It's almost like that notion of monkey brain. You can't often evaluate yourself because it's your own brain that's evaluating your own brain. Supposedly what removes us from animals is that we can stand back and look. But it's sometimes confusing. My cabin is the cabin that Strang is living in. So I go up there and I say, "Oh, my god, now I'm living in this novel, and I'm not sure which one I am."



*And you took a swim like Strang, to test that swim.*

Last summer I did. I swam down the river.

*Are you that strong a swimmer? Can you swim like Strang swims?*

Yeah, I used to swim. I remember when I was ten I swam twelve miles. When I was seven, there was a loon on our lake, and I never could get close to it so I thought, "I'll trick the loon, go out at night and try to catch her." So I snuck out of the cabin, off I went in the dark. When I was getting ready finally to write that novel, I did something similar for that last scene. It's two o'clock in the morning, I've had a few drinks. I locked my dog in the cabin, went down the steps to the river, took off my clothes and swam with the current way down the river, and over two log jams in the middle of the night so I could get that feeling. It's very strange to swim down a river at night alone, naked. But that enabled me to imagine that last scene, say Julian and his son were down there, you'd see those lights off the trees, just the car lights way down.

*The narrator and Strang are two sides of one being, together, it seems like. And the telling of the tale is the revelation of the wedding.*

What the narrator was finding in Strang is maybe what I found in the left side of my brain. And the tape device amplifies it, which is fun, because you have the more formal narrator, then you have the narrator off-the-wall. And some of the inserts have the narrator wondering what he's going to eat, wondering how he's going to get laid. Textural concretia, the "thinginess" of life. That's an old rule I have on the wall. Make it vivid.

*Did you feel like you were taking a chance by letting in the possibility that Strang and the narrator really are brothers?*

No, I was flirting with that. No one will ever know. The only one that knew died.

*The narrator is flirting with it. He wants to play with it and he doesn't.*

It was just an interesting possibility. But of course it's true.

*They are brothers?*

It doesn't matter if they're blood brothers or what kind of brothers. That was all sort of unconscious. You write and you don't even know what you're writing when you're writing it. It just emerges.

*At what point did you start realizing that you had a subject out of writing from what you know?*

Well, death did it to me. You can see it in my first book, **Plain Song**. If people die then you better get down to business.

*This was your father and sister? They died in a car accident.*

That was part of it. That was when I was twenty-two and I'd been writing since I was sixteen. I wanted to write poems like John Keats.

*You started out wanting to be a poet?*

It was all the same to me. I'd read those romantic novels about artists like Vincent Van Gogh and I was thinking that's what I want to be. I wanted to be a wild artist and have lots of love affairs and live in strange places. I have.

*But I take it you're found out it's a lot more of a discipline than you thought?*

Oh, that's all it is. It's what Stevens said: technique is the proof of your seriousness.

*Are you happy with **Sundog**?*

I don't know. It wouldn't occur to me to be happy with something I wrote. It's not healthy to even think about it.

*After you've done it?*

Nope. It's all gone. I mean you're making me think about it now and it's not unpleasant. It's sort of interesting to get somebody else's point of view.

*So you don't worry about judging or assessing your work?*

I don't think I'm very competitive about it. I don't see it as a horserace, the way some novelists are always rating each other. You know how in New York every day they take each other's temperature to see who's hot. I don't think that way too much.

*You don't look back on a book and say I learned this problem in this novel?*

Oh, yeah. You do that to some extent. You write sometimes to find out what you know.

*Do you think that the skills you learned in writing poetry transferred into your novels?*

Very much. Trying to bear down on the singularity of images. Movement. Those suites were good training for moving from image to mood to mood. It's like Mailer says, "Boy if you're worried about getting people in and out of rooms, you've already blown it." The reader can get anybody they want in and out of rooms. They don't need your help.

*You often use animals in your work.*

It's the same idea that the Indians had. One is naturally drawn to certain animals more than other animals. Now I like cows and coyotes and pigs for some reason.

*Have you ever thought that out?*

I could pretend that I don't know what the associations are, but I do. The coyote is a sorcerer amongst animals. He's the trickster, he's the humpbacked flute player. He's an animal of immaculate, precise and varied means. Intense curiosity, but cagey. I think I like that idea. And a crow is a garrulous semi-predator, semi-scavenger. Sort of foolish, but smarter than other birds. He just likes to fool around. Squawk all the time.

*You mentioned pigs.. . .*

Yeah, I had a pet pig when I was a kid. But you know they're all going to get killed in November. It's a bit of a disappointment. Was it Hugo that said, "All of us are condemned to death with an indefinite reprieve." A sort of catchy idea. He says that the ultimate that a human leaves is his skull.

*You use the animal point of view without it being a pathetic fallacy. To use one of those school terms.*

As Strang says, "What's the sense in drawing conclusions about human behavior from animals when you can draw conclusions about human behavior from humans?" There's a danger of extrapolating, but they're our fellow creatures and always have been. What's the sense of ignoring them? I'm writing now about the drama of an English department. Lots of writers are going to start writing about Government intervention in the arts. It's quieted literary magazines a great deal, you know.

*You want to talk about that?*

I've just noticed it. Just like all the writers' schools have created less variety—there's a sameness. I said once that the Iowa Writers School on a yearly basis outproduces the English Romantic movement. It's all a delusion. What are you going to do with 4,000 MFA's? It's ludicrous.

*You did pay your dues though. You went through and got a Masters yourself, didn't you?*

In Comparative Literature. I never took a writing course of any sort. In my life.

*Do you advise against that across the board?*

No. Sometimes they're good. Look at Wallace Stegner's thing out there. I mean, my god, look at the people he got out. Kesey, Robert Stone, McGuane. But you know what he did. They sat around and talked a little and he just sent them off to write.

*You have a lot of friends who are writers. And then there are writers who avoid that sort of thing.*

Well, I don't see them that much and I think a lot of other writers partly like me because I'm not competitive. I simply don't care. Frankly. I mean I don't ever think about

being number one or number seven or number three. Self-publicity or valuation isn't a productive thing for writers. Mailer's *A View from Here* was marvelous because it just totally pissed everybody off. And it was also so on the money. I love novels like his *Barbary Shore* and *Deerpark*. But the critics were totally unpleasant; those novels weren't part of the nativist tradition. That's why a lot of people hated *A Good Day to Die*. Kazin told me these are simply the nastiest people, they don't exist. I says, "Alfred, they're all over. It's just that people don't write about them." *Sundog* came out of my conviction that the American literary novel as opposed to a more commercial kind of novel tends to ignore about seven-eighths of the people. The literary novel often concentrates itself on people in New York, Los Angeles, academic and scientific communities. People don't write about the Strangs of the world because they don't know any of them. You're not going to meet any in Cambridge or New Haven. People like Strang don't loiter around universities and they don't feed at the public trough.

*So you think that the academy has had a negative effect.*

I think I would agree with Faulkner when he said, "A writer can't be ruined by having a swimming pool if he's a good writer. If he's a bad writer, it doesn't matter if he has a swimming pool." So I don't think it matters, but it's had a tremendous leveling effect.

*On the kinds of books written?*

Yeah, they're not as idiosyncratic. They've lost a charm and a self-taught aspect. These people keep track of their credits and that's how they get jobs. They say, "I have been published in *Shenandoah*, *Sewanee*, *Lust*, *Spook*, etc, etc." Where I pointedly have no notion of where I published anything, or little memory of it. I've never kept track.

*So you'd approve of someone like Wallace Stevens, who sold insurance and wrote.*

It's important to know something. Knowing literature is different. Hollywood's always making movies about making movies. Or the movie business. Well, that doesn't play in Kansas. Who gives a shit? It's like making movies about dope. They think everybody does dope. Well, very few people do dope. Why do people in Topeka want to go see a movie about cocaine? They don't know shit from cocaine. Why should they? It's a sense of fungoid self-congratulation that you see in academic communities.

*You think it leads to a more narrow vision in literature?*

Well, that's true. Its just like academic types who say to me, "Oh Jesse Jackson, yuk, oh he's fascist." "Oh stop," I say, "He got jobs for 200,000 blacks in Chicago, what have you ever done? He's a great orator. So he's a little spooky in some areas. But why are you talking about this man this way?"

*Henry James said experience is never limited. It's the atmosphere of the mind.*

Well, that's true. You make your own environment wherever you go. I don't like to be exclusionary. I don't like art which, I think Williams says, cuts off the horse's legs to get him in the box.

*You taught once, didn't you?*

[indelicate sound]

*You felt like the town clown, is that what you said?*

No, it's just that teaching is overrated. It's just not very interesting. You're never done with the job, time's never your own.

*As somebody who's worked as a journeyman writer for films in order to survive, what do you think about books being made from films, or movies being made from books.*

I don't have any feeling about it; they're different mediums and you're a fool if you don't realize that. Even when I write an adaptation of my own work, I like to feel free to change it as much as possible to adapt it to another medium. My ambition is to write a good movie; I want desperately to write a good movie.

*Does it bother you that none of your books have become films?*

I only have one regret. John Huston and Jack Nicholson were going to do "**Revenge**" and Warner's backed out because they didn't want John Huston to direct it. I felt badly then because I thought he would do a good job.

*They pay you a lot of money don't they?*

For some things they do. One time Sean Connery had read "**Revenge**" in *Esquire* and wanted me to write something for him. He found I was under contract to Warners and Warners got excited and says, "You gotta come out here." I says, "No, I'm not coming back out there, ever!" They sent a plane all the way from Burbank to Traverse City Airport and I got on it with a bottle of whiskey and a six-pack of beer and some deli sandwiches they'd got me and flew out there on condition they would fly me back the next day at noon. They'll do anything for you. It's curious isn't it, all those years when people were saying, "Poor Faulkner, he had to go to Hollywood." He wasn't nearly as unhappy as he pretended to be, because he had that dancing girl out there all that time. Though Blotner refused to acknowledge it in his biography. Where she said, "Billy liked to take baths together and sometimes we'd buy toys like rubber ducks" and you think, this is William Faulkner. I loved it. Faulkner for awhile was getting \$3,000 a week during the depression to write screenplays. That's good money now, that was great money then.

*Is the writing you do for the movies your substitute for teaching? I mean in the sense of surviving.*

Yeah. It is about the same thing and sometimes worse and sometimes better. It's better because it pays better.

*Does that mean you can do it less often? Or less frequently?*

Maybe, but you get greedy. Somebody gives you \$150,000 for a screenplay, you think, well why not write two. Get more. And then you say, well why not write three, and get even more. And by then, you're retired.

*Does writing for the movies drain you?*

No. In the last twelve months I wrote three screenplays and that novel, and I don't think the three screenplays detracted from the novel. Just makes you tired generally. And I'm the most tired I've ever been in my whole life, right now.

*You say that when a book comes out you get depressed.*

Uh huh, I don't like judgment. I can't stand criticism.

*Not even good criticism?*

When Bernard Levin of the London *Times* decided I was immortal, I says, "Does that mean I have to take out my laundry in 300 years?" No, it's okay. If you work very hard, what's wrong with getting admired.

*But there's something in you that doesn't think that's right?*

Well, it's because people you love died, and they didn't get admired. That's part of it. It's stupid. I mean, you ought to be able to be valedictorian once in a while. It's like pursuing a beautiful model and seducing her and then feeling real bad after you'd literally been thinking about doing it for seven or eight years. Why bother? Why should I kill myself writing a book if I don't want to at least accept one pat on the back for what I'm doing?

*What about the sense of place for you? It seems to me that you're a writer that has to be grounded in place.*

I think everybody does. I wrote *Locations* partly from that sensibility. But I'm no more a rural writer than Judy Rossner is a New York writer.

*And yet, Northern Michigan is pervasive in your work.*

Yeah, that's because that's where I was born and raised. When I get away from there, I don't think the writing is necessarily weaker as long as I know the other place.

*Do you think there's a basic superiority in that "heart of the country" notion?*



I think what I believe most is actually, as Rilke said, "It's only in the ratrace of the arena that the heart learns to beat." I think you have to do that. It's hard to find more small-minded people than you can find in some areas of Montana, in the most gorgeous part of the United States.

*But they're also in New York City.*

Well, sure they are, but I mean the country in and of itself isn't going to do anybody any good.

*It's what you bring to it.*

I was being evasive. I was thinking about an uncapped city water well that I almost fell into in Reed City. Memories are evoked by a location, and I was thinking of San Francisco, the bridge. Six hundred and ninety-three people have jumped off that goddamned bridge. There's something sort of haunted in the air there. Nobody would do that in Missouri, and they don't do it in Northern Michigan. But in New Orleans, and San Francisco, these apparently perfect places where everybody's so happy, well that's why there are 400,000 homosexuals there. I mean, what the hell's going on? It's a spooky place, but very beautiful. Maybe it attracts them from the midwest. None of those people ever even want to come to the midwest, ever.

*In Farmer the doctor tells Joseph that, yes, Robert's a homosexual and not to worry about it. He'll go to the city and find other people like him.*

Homosexuals will gather in one place, for the same reason that the rich all want to be in Palm Beach or Beverly Hills, or Grosse Point, or farmers all go to the Grange. I mean it's natural. And it's not all bad. Think of jazz clubs. If you have 300 Sonny Rollins nuts and half are black and half are white, then there's no barrier left. It's the same with literature. I'm not a nationalist. I don't want to hear about American literature. It's world literature. And all this sniping about who's good in America is nonsense when you've got Gunter Grass, and Gabriel Márquez. Who is good is who is good wherever they are.

*You're a wonderful reader. How much do you write for the ear?*

I don't consciously, but as a poet you do. Yeats would think of the entire rhythm of the poem before he would fill in the words. You know he says, "'I am of Ireland and the Holy land of Ireland and time runs on,' cried she." You say Jesus Christ, I don't know if it makes any sense, but it's beautiful. I think it comes from my early addiction to Stravinsky or Sonny Rollins or Miles Davis or Thelonious Monk. And that's finally the music you hear in your head and you hear word music in that way. I think I was seventeen when I read Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* four or five times. I used to carry it around with me. It was my main sexual reading, I still think it's the sexiest book I've ever read. So *Hustler* magazine doesn't work with me at all. *Vogue* is better than *Hustler*.

*Do you think your reputation as a macho writer is the source of the negative criticism your work has gotten?*

It's just faddism. When Prescott owned *Newsweek* rather than talking about my book he used me as an object lesson in what's wrong with contemporary writing because, he said, I had none of the new feminine sensibility. He's talking about a public movement, a woman's movement, that I don't think has anything to do with the novel. I mean you write novels. I'm not trying to get out the vote when I write a novel. A novel's a novel. Everybody can't be everything. I don't like to be attacked for reasons anterior to my work.

*Do you think it's because you so often seem to use the stuff of yourself in your work?*

You are what you are. I'm not going to pretend that I'm a Manhattan restaurateur when I'm not. But it's the illusion, too. I've worked very hard to create the illusion. Wouldn't I be something if I was all the people that people think I am in all these books. God, what a mess.

*Does the misunderstanding bother you?*

I don't actually care. I pretend to be more upset. *Esquire* offered me a case of whiskey if I would write two paragraphs answering a review. I wrote that it's a misuse of the word. Actually what macho is in Spanish is someone who would fuck a virgin with a swan or throw a rattlesnake into a baby's carriage. Screw his mother. You know, cut his sister. So that's macho. I don't know what it has to do with me. I don't care about being misunderstood. I'm not pretending that I'm right and there's not a lot of my stuff that might be terribly cheap and wrong. That's neither here nor there if that's what they're dealing with. I don't want to be attacked for my failures as a supporter of the woman's movement. Because I'm a novelist.

*Where do you find your characters? Do you use people whom you really know?*

Just modifications of them. There's such a crazed variety of people that you can take an eighth of this and a third of that and make a human being. In "Legends of the Fall" I found the character William Ludlow in journals; he's actually my wife's great grandfather. But I've changed all the details of his life except the initial ones. He did lead an expedition into the Black Hills with Custer as his adjutant; he also did loathe Custer. And in real life he ended up owning some copper mines in Northern Michigan, but I'd read his journals and was fascinated by the kind of man he was.

*You've complained someplace about the fact that there's so little useful information in novels, nowadays.*

I mean useful to, as Robert Duncan would say, your soul. Life information without which we cannot live. Like Pound says, "Poetry is news that stays news."

*Larry Woiwode says he's read that most writers are manic-depressive. Have you ever thought that you might be a manic-depressive?*

Oh, absolutely, but not to the point where I would need lithium and not so much in recent years. About ten years ago I went through a self-taught Zen training. I had severe colitis from a parasite I got in Leningrad and I thought I was going to go insane with the mood swings combined with physical problems. I got rid of the colitis by sitting. Usually I would go sit on a stump and then on a rock for three or four hours. For some reason that eased all that out, I'm still not sure why. Psychosomatic maybe. For instance I've had a chest cold off and on for a month and a half. I know I have it because I have a novel coming out. No one in the history of my family, including my father, was successful, and I have a lot of questions about whether it's proper to be successful. It's like the craving for anonymity—I've already blown the anonymity shot, but I'm still looking for it. I'm like the kid hiding under the bush or behind the barn. I've gotten so weary or strange about interviews because I've been too trusting on a couple of occasions. The trouble is anything you read about yourself seems to be sort of inaccurate; well, maybe everything that everybody writes about everybody is inaccurate. I've never been really keelhaunched, but I read once an article about McGuane in *Village Voice* where they really did a job on him.

*That can lead to the "gunfighter syndrome." Whenever a celebrity goes to a party you know that somebody there is going to become an asshole and you never know who it's going to be. I've seen people literally get up in Norman Mailer's face and stand on his feet.*

They never do that to McGuane who's 6'4" and weighs 220. It's because Mailer's shorter.

*You said someplace that to be an artist you have to be able to hold a thousand different contradictory notions in your head all at once.*

I was thinking about that when you brought up that question on *Sundog*. Hillman said, "What have we done with this other who is given us at birth?" Well that's like that Secret Sharer idea or Rimbaud talking about my "other" and so on. The unrevealed heart of your personality.

*Does that relate to the idea that the essence of all art is the ability to recognize paradox, irony?*

Or to be able to accept that good art does not specialize in cheap solutions.

*Do you think, at least in the sense that Pound used the words, that all art is didactic?*

It's didactic, but boy you better hide it. I can't stand art that's preachy. I think Pound's best poems are free of obvious didacticism. The test is the aesthetic test. If somebody tells me has things he wants to say, I say "Well,

I don't care, everybody has things they want to say." It's like Philip Roth puts it, anybody on the subway usually has a better story than an artist does. Because they're intensely occupied with life. Whereas we can't see a cow without saying cow. I want to get to the point where I see a cow without saying cow. It's never going to happen in my life. My particular burden is to make sentences. My wife and I saw a man commit suicide in San Francisco last week. We were down under the Golden Gate Bridge and this asshole jumps off. I had a driver that day, sort of an elegant, faggy character, much better dressed than I was. He and my wife and I were standing down under the fort looking over this area, nothing was there. I was watching a man fish. Then I heard a gargle, we looked back and a man had just jumped off the bridge, missed the water by twelve feet and his head was even gone. You know the impact of three hundred feet onto cement, your head vaporizes. My wife and the driver were contorted with horror, and trembling, and I immediately started making sentences. That's my only defense against this world: to build a sentence out of it.

#### Richard Deveson (review date 23 August 1985)

SOURCE: "Call of the Wild," in *New Statesman*, August 23, 1985, p. 28.

*[In the following excerpt, Deveson questions the hero-worshipping aspects contained in Sundog.]*

Here, in one week, are two novels each of which is an exercise in a very American kind of hero-worship involving swimming at night in the icy waters of Wisconsin and the northern Michigan wilderness. In Jim Harrison's *Sundog* the narrator, a professional writer, travels beyond the Straits of Mackinac to the Upper Peninsula of Michigan to seek out a man who is not only eccentric and remarkable but is clearly needed by the self-disguised writer as a superman before whom to demean himself. The narrator has been challenged: 'You might try writing about someone who actually does something.'

Well, Strang, the man of action, has preached at tent meetings, has built huge dams in the jungles of Africa and Latin America, has left wives and mistresses and prostitutes scattered around the globe and dispenses casual macho erudition about machines, rivers, concrete, tropical diseases, fish, 'wholeness, harmony and radiance'. His beautiful Costa Rican 'daughter' slinks around his remote log house wearing a minuscule bikini, practicing her dancing and arousing the lust and envy of the over-eating, voyeuristic, womanless 'I'.

Strang suffers from epileptic seizures; he has taken Amerindian ground-root potions; he has been crippled in a fall from a dam in Venezuela; he is the son of his sister and an illegitimate blood relation of the narrator (an alter ego with a vengeance). Despite these handicaps, he manages

finally to give a castrating ex-wife the slip by disappearing into the frozen waters, either to continue his unconquerable freedom elsewhere or to come to rest on the bed of Lake Superior, reunited (by the good offices of some pantheistic frontier mysticism) with the Wholeness of which he has always been a part in any case.

Nature is nearly at the centre of this novel, which creates powerful impressions of swamps and creeks, timber and rain, mosquitoes and blackflies, pink fog and the northern lights. But the book's real core is the narrator's hero-worship of Strang, and this is never properly subjected to scrutiny. Why *is* there an American need for supermen who stalk the wilderness? Why does Harrison seem at pains to avoid asking the question?

**Michiko Kakutani (review date 9 March 1988)**

SOURCE: "Epic America in a Woman's Quest," in *New York Times*, March 9, 1988, p. C25

[In the following favorable review of Dalva, Kakutani compliments Harrison's narrative abilities.]

Nearly a decade ago, Jim Harrison wrote "Legends of the Fall," a fluently orchestrated novella, whose brief pages opened out to disclose epic vistas: Through one family's fortunes, a full half-century of American history stood revealed. Now, after several novels that proved either less ambitious (*Warlock*) or less persuasive (*Sundog*), Mr. Harrison has returned to some of the themes and narrative methods that served him so well in "Legends."

In his latest novel, *Dalva*, he attempts to give us a mythic portrait of America—from the Indian wars of the last century through the confusions of Vietnam and the cynicism of the 1980's—by chronicling the life and memories of a single woman. Through the prism of her experience, we see refracted the events that shaped five generations of her pioneer family; and through their adventures, the fierce (and often bloody) forces that helped transform the wild innocence of this continent into the country we know today.

As she almost immediately informs us, Dalva received her unusual name after her parents listened to—and fell in love with—a Portuguese song called "Estrella Dalva" or "Morning Star." And the name, with all its romantic connotations, proves a fitting one for a woman who would spend her life wandering America and the world, searching for something or someone to fill the hole in her heart, left when she was 16, and ceded both the boy she loved and their child to the demands of society and decorum.

In the years since, Dalva has ventured beyond the bounds of her family's hermetic, Edenic world—there, in the beautiful, desolate back country of the northern Midwest. She has had dozens of affairs, she has traveled to France and England, Mexico and Brazil, but always she has

returned to America—to New York or Los Angeles or to "areas so remote that my friends in those cities found them laughable."

When we first meet Dalva, it's 1986, and she's living in Santa Monica, Calif.—at 45, still an impulsive, willful girl, reluctant to compromise her feelings or edit her thoughts, and increasingly obsessed with finding her son, whom she gave up for adoption some 30 years earlier. The baby was the product of a passionate romance with a young cowboy named Duane, a half-Sioux teen-ager who turns out to have been her half-brother. Duane, Dalva now knows, is dead—having committed suicide after being wounded in Vietnam; their child may or may not be alive.

In searching for her lost son, Dalva joins forces with one of her lovers, a professor named Michael who wants to use her family's papers as the basis for a scholarly study about "the advent of farming in the Great Plains and the final solution of the Indian question." And as the two of them proceed with their research, we are slowly, inexorably, drawn back into the past.

We meet Duane, the product of a brief fling between Dalva's father and a young Sioux woman—an angry, sullen teen-ager, said to have "secret powers," who "could beat up the toughest men, ride his horse at night while standing on it, and talk with wild animals." We meet Dalva's father—a sketchily drawn fellow, who's killed in Korea and abruptly disappears from this story; her uncle Paul, a kind and compassionate man, disguised as an adventurer out of "The Treasure of the Sierre Madre;" and her grandfather, a rich old man, who thinks nothing of spending \$10,000 on a horse but regards a car as "nothing more than a vulgar convenience."

Haunting the lives of all these characters is the indomitable figure of great-grandfather Northridge, a strange, solitary man, trained as a missionary and a botanist, and sent west to the Great Plains "to help the native population, the Indians, to make the inevitable transition from warriors to tillers of the soil." In the waning days of the 19th century, Northridge grows skeptical of his mission—a front, as it were, for the naked appropriation of the Indians' land. Instead, he earns the trust of the Sioux, becomes a student of their language and dialects, and in the shadow of the showdown with Custer, begins to be troubled by intimations of their doom.

We receive Northridge's story—like that of his great-granddaughter Dalva—in bits and pieces, from his journals, and from reminiscences delivered by members of his family. Meanwhile, Mr. Harrison is busily cutting back and forth between the past and present, weaving in information about Dalva's current life and her relationship with Michael the professor. Some of this information is extraneous and needlessly melodramatic. A gruesome case of child abuse and rape, handled by Dalva in her capacity as a social worker; a messy seduction scene between Michael and an underage girl that results in a bloody fist-



fight with her father—such events have a contrived, sensationalistic air about them, and they also serve to distract us from Dalva's real story.

When Mr. Harrison sticks to this narrative thread, however, his storytelling instincts are nearly flawless. Whereas the characters in *Sundog* devolved into blunt, easy-to-read symbols, the people in *Dalva* emerge as full-blooded individuals, who almost incidentally embody much of the innocence, carelessness and urgency that played so large a part in the settling of this country. Best of all, perhaps, are Mr. Harrison's descriptions of the land—the untamed deserts, plains, forests and arroyos of what was once the Western frontier. Unlike many nature writers, he adamantly refuses to sentimentalize the landscape, but instead takes it on its own terms, delineating—in tough, but rhapsodic language—both the physical beauty and danger of those empty spaces, and its effect on the people (the Sioux, and other Indian tribes, as well as the farmers) who lived there and made it their home.

#### Georgia Jones-Davis (review date 10 April 1988)

SOURCE: "The Literary Seductions of a Macho Woman," in *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, April 10, 1988, p. 12.

[In the following review, Jones-Davis praises Harrison's novel *Dalva* for being a compassionate story with well drawn characters.]

Dalva has kept a light burning in her heart for a dead husband of less than a day; for her father lost in Korea, and most of all, it seems, for the Sioux nation driven out of their rich Nebraska grasslands a century ago. She comes from a family strangely at home among the dead. She's inherited a farmhouse from a beloved grandfather that is more than adjacent to a gardenlike cemetery full of ancestors; in the house itself, death maintains a terrifying, literal presence.

Jim Harrison's new novel, *Dalva*, is not a story of the supernatural, but it is a tale about ghosts, haunting, about the continuing presence of those departed from this world. It is also the story of a remarkably modern woman's search for her son relinquished at his birth. At the same time, it is the saga of a fascinating, eccentric pioneer befriended by the beleaguered native peoples of the Plains at the time that their world is closing in on them.

I've never read another Harrison novel, but I've spoken with several men—writer John Nichols among them—who are passionate fans of his work. His books that are repeatedly recommended are *Legends of the Fall* and *A Good Day to Die*. No woman I know has expressed an interest in Harrison. So *Dalva* may be an important departure for this Michigan writer so associated with the outdoors, with what might be termed "macho," since the central figure here is a woman. He could win a whole new readership. He certainly deserves it.

Harrison is not a very neat, linear storyteller. Like a photographer, he's interested in the angles. He works in vignettes, in half-formed, half-finished episodes. (Reading Harrison is a little bit like eavesdropping on a couple of people engaged in a conversation in an elevator who step out at the very point where their exchange becomes gossip—the doors close and those of us left inside never get to hear who did what to whom.) Dalva has a sister, for instance, Ruth, a wealthy divorcee in her 40s who is messing around with a priest that she's trying to get to impregnate her. What we are allowed to listen in on is lurid and humorous, but we are cut off, finally, with no sense of what actually drives Ruth to such extreme behavior.

Harrison gives us fleeting, fragmented portraits. Even his main characters slip in and out of focus as frequently as they make entrances and exits. Some of his most colorful, vivid characters make the briefest of appearances: the restless Uncle Paul (with his multigenerational seraglio of Mexican mistresses)—a wonderful naturalist and writer. We are privy to a sample of his writing in one instance, and then, never read another written word of Paul's innermost thoughts; a taciturn, gentle cowboy selling puppies who becomes a lover of Dalva's, then sort of drifts off; an elderly Sioux woman, Rachel, whose greatest treat is a short road trip and whose candy-pink, dime-store scarf signifies for Dalva the extreme poverty the Sioux have been reduced to.

Duane Stone Horse, Dalva's lover-husband, is the central romantic figure here. His presence is felt by the very fact of his absence. Duane's spirit hovers everywhere over the story, guiding Dalva like a guardian angel. He's leading her home.

The poetic love story between Dalva and Duane is only one-third of the three points of view that Harrison exercises here. Dalva narrates parts one and three. Part two comes to us via professor Michael—more about him later. The third story line comes to us through journal entries about the frontier adventures of Dalva's amazing ancestor, Northridge.

At 45, Dalva's been married once—for less than a whole day—a strange and tragic sequence) but has essentially remained a single woman who has been on the move most of her life. She grows up the daughter of a well-to-do, Nebraska farming family of mixed Anglo and Sioux blood. The name Dalva is derived from a Brazilian samba: "Estrella Dalva," Portuguese for morning as in Morning Star. Morning, of course, also brings to mind "mourning."

Dalva wanders through the Southwest; travels abroad; drifts to New York, where she lands a job with a sleazy documentary film maker; she winds up employed as a social worker in Santa Monica, which is where we find her when the novel opens.

There's something profoundly troubling about the ocean for Dalva. It remains a great, unfathomable thing in her life, associated with mystery and loss. The coasts represent

a physical and psychic edge to her. How she has lived her life in New York, or Los Angeles, reflects this—nothing seems wholesome or particularly healthy in either environment. Earth is her anchor. After Dalva undergoes a personal tragedy involving the ocean in Florida, her Uncle Paul brings her back to the Baja coast, as much desert as it is seashore, where she psychically heals. Later, when she departs Los Angeles to return to Nebraska, Dalva camps in the Arizona desert alone; she strips naked in front of the fire and meditates in what might approximate a Native American ritual of purification, a homecoming of sorts.

Water also signifies baptism and it is the baptism of the adolescent Dalva that literally plunges her into a passionate union with Duane, a wild, moody, half-Sioux boy her grandfather mysteriously brings to the farm.

Dalva's reunion with Duane in Florida many years later contains some of the finest writing in the book—intense, dreamlike, nightmarish. It vibrates with a psychedelic-like intensity, so surreal and eerie a sequence of events it is.

Along with contemporary events, the history of Dalva's family in Nebraska unfolds in vivid, sometimes shocking and always moving journal entrees made by the pioneer Northridge, the great-grandfather of Dalva. He comes West driven by the desire to convert the Indians to Christianity (a longing that dissolves with his increased familiarity with the native tribes) and to plant trees. Word passes tribe to tribe about this nutty, lone, white man who goes around planting things, talking to trees, talking to the elements. The Indians hear that the whites themselves think Northridge is a little crazy. At one of his first encounters with the Sioux, he is told: "You are too strange to kill." He fraternizes with warriors whose names Dalva loves to roll off her tongue, names that haunt the entire narrative: Joe White Coyote, Daniel Blue Horse, Kills a Hundred, He Dog, Crazy Horse. Eventually Northridge converts to the ways of the Sioux, even as they are hunted, massacred and cornered.

The Northridge journals hold the key to tenure for history professor Michael, who shares certain qualities with other Harrison characters I've been told about. He has a passion for fine food and a predilection for excessive drinking. He is both intelligently introspective and at the same time cynical about his chosen line of work, about how he has lived his whole life. One gets a handle on him more so than on any other character in the book. Michael—with all his foibles and frustrating ways—is presented with unflinching clarity.

Michael's research permits him to become a house guest at Dalva's Nebraska homestead, a situation that leads to sometimes sadly comical misadventures. While Dalva is at home on horseback, out in nature, among farm animals, urbanite Michael couldn't be more out of his element. His first hike ends up a disaster: He gets lost and wakes up from a nap surrounded by snakes.

Michael and Dalva have made a pact: She'll let him be the first outsider to have access to a protected, personal history, and he will help her locate her son. They have been occasional lovers, but Michael knows he will never possess this intimidating, self-possessed woman of means.

Harrison beautifully conveys Dalva's essential femininity despite his character's qualities that are undeniably androgynous, perhaps even masculine: a comfort in the outdoors, a reticent and independent nature, even her sad and undeniable promiscuity. Dalva asserts that she has never been seduced—has always, subtly, done the seducing of lovers herself.

A novel of considerable ambiguity and hard-edged compassion, Harrison's *Dalva* may well seduce you too.

#### Raymond Abbott (review date 12 June 1988)

SOURCE: "Savages and Sioux," in *New York Times Book Review*, June 12, 1988, p. 28.

[In the following review, Abbott explains his dislike for the political views contained in *Dalva*.]

Jim Harrison's new novel [*Dalva*] is an ambitious work in which he portrays several generations of a pioneer American family living (mostly) in Nebraska. The story is told from the viewpoint of the heroine, Dalva, except for about 100 pages in which Michael, one of Dalva's lovers, is the narrator.

The novel opens with Dalva middle-aged and living in California but wishing she were someplace else. That someplace is Nebraska; there, 30 years before, at the age of 15, Dalva had a son, fathered by a half-breed Indian named Duane, and gave the child up. Now she wishes to find the boy; she knows only that he is living somewhere in the Midwest. So back to Nebraska Dalva goes, taking with her Michael, an alcoholic, somewhat crazy character from California. Michael, a professor at Stanford, wants to get tenure and sees an opportunity to do this by studying the Northridge journals—records kept by Dalva's great-grandfather Northridge about his years on the prairie and his dealings with Indians, mostly the Sioux. Michael and Dalva have an understanding. He is to help her find her son; in return, she is to let him loose at the journals. These writings hint at a dark secret locked in the basement of the Northridge home. Even Dalva doesn't know what's down there because she has honored the wishes of her grandfather not to investigate until she reaches the age of 45.

This novel is less about Dalva than it is about the Northridge journals. Clearly the author wants us to take a hard look at Indian policy, and so we must. Northridge's mission among the Indians was mostly agricultural, but he observed and recorded many abuses of the Sioux by whites. Much of what he relates we have heard or read before. What is different, however, are those times when

the journals turn to attacks of persons like Senator Henry Dawes—author of the Dawes Act of 1887, which caused enormous heirship problems and losses of land for Indian peoples—or the president of Amherst College, the Rev. M.E. Gates, when he speaks on “the Indian question.” It is under these circumstances that this very political book gets into trouble.

Northridge writes, for example: “I have written my many articles, traveled to Washington & have bribed Congressmen & Senators only to be betrayed. In the fire I see I must murder Senator Dawes. I howl into the fire until I begin to weep.”

Northridge relates in the journals that he has physically attacked Mr. Gates at a conference because he had said, among other things, “The desire for property of his own may become an intense educating force” for the Indian.

It seems all too easy for Mr. Harrison (or anyone) to sit in judgment on events a century after they took place. To write, for example, that Senator Dawes or Mr. Gates are evil and, in the case of Dawes, deserving of death, because they advocated assimilation (what many, many people, indeed the so-called progressive and enlightened folks were promoting in the last century) strikes me as just plain wrong. The evil persons, to my mind, were those saying, “Let’s shoot the savages and be done with them.”

I think of another assimilationist of that period, Elaine Goodale Eastman, who wrote a memoir, *Sister to the Sioux*. She spent a lifetime working with Indians, helping and encouraging them to become farmers; in an effort to help them assimilate, Eastman encouraged them to cut off their long hair. I suppose it can be said Eastman was wrong, but one must also acknowledge that she was a product of her time, just as we are of ours. You cannot say she was a worthless person, not to my way of thinking anyway. It is condemnation such as this that Mr. Harrison adopts in *Dalva*. It is a popular thing to do, I suppose, to oppose assimilation and advocate self-determination for Native Americans but it is done here simply by ridiculing those involved in Indian affairs of another era. This is too pat, too easy for my tastes. Perhaps that’s the problem with *Dalva*, for in a political sense it is much too simplistic a novel.

#### Julia Reed (essay date September 1989)

SOURCE: An essay on Jim Harrison in *Vogue*, Vol. 179, No. 9, September, 1989, pp. 502, 506, 510.

[In the following essay, Reed explores Harrison’s past and discusses his current writing projects.]

Jim Harrison does not summer in the Hamptons or on Martha’s Vineyard with the fellow authors of his generation. He has never been to Nell’s or M.K. When he writes, it is in his cabin on Michigan’s isolated, Upper Peninsula,

and when he drinks, it is at the nearby Dune Saloon. It takes almost a day to get to him from either of what he invariably refers to as the “dream coasts.” And when he’s not there, he’s home at his farm five hours south.

In this era of the literary starlet, when publicity has become a stand-in for talent, Harrison’s relentlessly low profile seems suspect, almost perverse. His devoted readership has grown steadily, organically spurred on the old-fashioned way, by the writing itself. Bernard Levin, in *The Sunday Times* of London, called Harrison “a writer with immortality in him”; the *Boston Globe* compared him to no less than Melville and Faulkner. A few years ago Harrison looked at the crowd of about twenty-five thousand attending his oldest daughter’s graduation from the University of Michigan and estimated, with some satisfaction, that the same number of people probably read his books.

No longer. All seven of his novels and a collection of his poetry have now been reissued in quality paperback editions by Washington Square Press (*Sundog* and *Dalva*) and Delta (*Wolf, Farmer, Warlock, A Good Day to Die, Legends of the Fall*, and *Selected and New Poems*). Kevin Costner stars in the upcoming film version of “Revenge”, a novella from *Legends of the Fall*. The movie *Cold Feet*, from a long-dormant screenplay he wrote with novelist Tom McGuane, was released this summer, and Harrison has just completed a screenplay for his friend Harrison Ford. And in *Roadhouse*, Patrick Swayze reads a Harrison novel in one of the film’s pivotal scenes—a dubious honor to be sure, but significant in that the movie was a decidedly mainstream effort. It is, in short, Jim Harrison’s moment. He probably won’t notice.

Harrison published his first volume of poetry in 1965 while still a student at Michigan State, where he and McGuane forged their friendship. McGuane lives in Montana, godfather of an ersatz literary mafia that includes painter and author Russell Chatham, another close Harrison friend. Harrison is often mistakenly considered a member of this macho bunch, a confusion he attributes to the fact that both Michigan and Montana “are M-words. Our dream coasts are not conscious of the geography of the interior.”

To support his writing—as well as his wife and two daughters—he “did journalism.” *Sports Illustrated* editors Ray Cave and Pat Ryan liked his work—they sent him tarpon fishing in the Keys, stag hunting in France. Gradually he became what is known in certain circles as “one of the good guys,” but it was always the work itself that found him benefactors. Sean Connery read one of his novels and insisted that Warner Brothers give him a contract. He met Jack Nicholson on the set of *The Missouri Breaks*, for which McGuane had written the screenplay, and Nicholson lent him the money to write *Legends of the Fall*. “A certain leading-man type liked my novels,” Harrison says, “and I just did the work.” The work—an average of a screenplay a year—supports the art, but he calculates that one more screenplay will get him out of debt and bring his Hollywood career to a merci-



ful close. "I was not a wise person financially." He bought his cabin eleven years ago, after a nervous breakdown brought on by "success. My income went from twelve thousand dollars a year to about seventy times that."

This fall, he will begin another novel, which will emerge, like the others, in a single exhausting burst. He learned to avoid revision by typing his first two novels with one finger on a manual typewriter; now he writes in longhand. He collects images, and sensations—what something smelled like, how cold something was—in a box. When they have festered, he organizes them in his head, usually while driving the distance between his cabin and his farm. "Virtually everything of consequence in *Dalva* got done on solo driving trips," says Harrison.

Chatham, whose work graces the covers of all but one of Harrison's books, says that "like all great artists, Jim doesn't repeat himself." Indeed, there is no formal relationship between any of the books: *Wolf* is a "false memoir," *Sundog* a novel presented as nonfiction, *A Good Day to Die* a thriller. *Legends of the Fall* is a collection of three novellas. His most critically acclaimed book, *Dalva*, is a novel told in three first-person voices: "a woman, an old man, and a dipshit," says Chatham. *Dalva* herself is one of the most compelling characters in contemporary fiction, the kind of woman everyone wishes he knew. Chatham said he spent a year trying to paint her picture. Harrison told him, "I invented the woman I wanted to be in love with."

If there are recurring strains of violence in his work, it is no wonder—at seven he lost the sight in his left eye in what he calls his first sexual experience. During a game of doctor, his young girlfriend accidentally stabbed him with a piece of jagged glass, an event he calls "a bit of a setback." When he was nineteen, his father and his sister were killed in an automobile accident. His brother's daughter, to whom he dedicated his remarkable volume of poetry *The Theory and Practice of Rivers*, died at age sixteen when hit by a car.

His language is hypnotic, poetic; his heroes romantic. They build bridges, plant trees, teach children. They try touchingly, often valiantly, to simply muddle through. Like their creator, they are vital, curious, elemental. Harrison has been known to actually sniff a visitor's skin. He often performs semi-dances with his beloved Tess, an Old Hemlock English setter. His characters are forever stripping off their clothes and diving into lakes and rivers, or literally crawling through the woods—it is as though twentieth-century man is so far removed from the earth that he must get down on all fours and smell it to feel some connection.

Harrison's favorite poets are Rilke, Lorca, and Neruda because "they lived life and wrote about anything they wanted to." His characters, too, as one of the narrators in *Dalva* comments, live their lives "at an uncommon level of attentiveness," their senses so attuned that they become

raw. The net effect on the reader is that everyone else seems numb, only half awake. It is all too much for the most jaded critics, who find these people frankly unbelievable. After *Legends of the Fall*, *The Nation* asked if Harrison had perhaps seen "too many Westerns. . . . He actually seems to believe all this."

Inevitably, there have been comparisons to Hemingway. Harrison is indeed a man of vast appetites, an avid sportsman and seasoned traveler. But two things keep the comparison from ultimately taking hold. One, his relentless vigil against pretension of any kind; for all his exuberance and magnanimity, he is in fact rather shy. When he says he no longer hunts mammals he is quick to point out, lest he sound remotely self-righteous, that he is not above eating them. Two, the self-destructive tendencies seem to be in check, and he has curtailed the hard living. "Any habitual pattern distracts you, whether it's in love or work habits or vices. You're a train more than a human being." He gave up cocaine early on. "When a half dozen friends of yours die, that's the tip-off that it isn't too smart."

He and McGuane have corresponded weekly since 1966, and the letters are surely a publisher's dream. Chatham, who has seen some, says they are "unlike anything anybody would even imagine existed. They really show off for each other."

Now that Harrison is at the point where he can support himself and his family solely with the earnings from his novels, he feels that he is at last an artist in the true sense of the word—unaffiliated with a university (he tried teaching for a year, hated it) and unaffected by the literary machinations of the eastern dream coast. "I felt that I had won a big way when people wanted to publish my books, and I could make a living writing," he says. "I didn't care what I had to write. I could make a living writing. To the boy hoeing corn for thirty-five cents an hour, this was a tremendous thing."

There is a Cree Indian jazz band that he listens to as he drives a visitor along the banks of Lake Superior. The music is marked by a plaintive saxophone riff that ends in a startlingly beautiful, soul-searing note—the kind of virtuoso performance that everyone would like to give just once. "Don't you wish you could play the sax?" the visitor asks. The author replies, "That's what I try to do in my novels."

#### Wendy Smith and Jim Harrison (interview date 3 August 1990)

SOURCE: "PW Interviews: Jim Harrison," in *Publishers Weekly*, August 3, 1990, pp. 59-60.

[In the following interview, Smith delves into Harrison's past to discuss his published works and screenplays.]

Though he spent brief periods in New York and Boston during his restless youth and though his riotous visits to Key West, Fla., and Hollywood with his friend Tom

McGuane have been the subject of numerous journalistic accounts, Jim Harrison's home has always been in northern Michigan. He and his wife, Linda, live on a farm about 50 miles as the crow flies from Grayling, where he grew up. It's only a short drive from their house to Lake Michigan, across which lies the Upper Peninsula, even more rural and remote, where Harrison has a cabin he retreats to in the warmer weather—"Summer," wisecracks a character in his new book, *The Woman Lit by Fireflies*, out this month from Houghton Mifflin/Seymour Lawrence (Fiction Forecasts, June 1), "being known locally as three months of bad sledding."

The initial reason Harrison decided to return to the Midwest was financial. "After my first book was published [the poetry collection *Plain Song*, in 1965] we had nearly 15 years where I averaged only 10 grand a year," he says candidly. "I needed a place with a low overhead."

But there was more to it than that; when *Legends of the Fall*, a trio of novellas released in 1979, added a measure of economic security to his already established critical reputation, he chose to remain in Michigan. "Ever since I was seven and had my eye put out, I'd turn for solace to rivers, rain, trees, birds, lakes, animals," he explains. "If things are terrible beyond conception and I walk for 25 miles in the forest, they tend to go away for a while. Whereas if I lived in Manhattan I couldn't escape them."

He steers clear of urban literary life for the same reason he has steadfastly turned down academic jobs. "I had this whole heroic notion of being a novelist," he says. "I wanted to be a writer in the old sense of staying on the outside. I can live for about a year on the proceeds from the first draft of a screenplay, which sometimes takes only six weeks, and I think that's more fun than hanging around some fucking college town for 10 months waiting for summer vacation."

Like his characters, the author is blunt and outspoken, with an earthy sense of humor and a boundless supply of charm that take the sting out of his sallies. When he's said something especially outrageous, he glances slyly at *PW*, inviting us to share his enjoyment of how wicked he is. Yet he also sprinkles his conversation with quotes from Yeats, Camus, Santayana and Wittgenstein—Harrison is a complex man, by no means the macho figure some critics have taken him for.

This complexity can be seen in his work, both in the poetry collected in such volumes as *Returning to Earth* and, most recently, *The Theory and Practice of Rivers*, and in the series of novels and novellas for which he is best known, including *A Good Day to Die*, *Warlock*, *Sundog*, the remarkable *Dalva*—in which he definitively refuted the claim that he couldn't create believable women—and his latest. Though Harrison writes of such contemporary subjects as the rape of the natural landscape and the search for a meaning beyond materialism, none of his books can be reduced to a simple, one-sentence thesis. There is a

mystery at the heart of each, a sense that beneath his beautiful, deceptively simple language lie deeper truths that can only be hinted at with words.

All of his ideas, he says, come to him in the form of images. The heroine of the title story in *The Woman Lit by Fireflies* first appeared as "a lady of about 49 climbing a fence behind a Welcome Center in tennis shoes. I had been thinking about Clare for years, worrying about her—you make somebody up and then you worry if she's going to be okay. I usually think about a novella or a novel for three or four years; all these images collect—Wallace Stevens said that images tend to collect in pools in your brain—and then when it's no longer bearable not to write it down, I start writing."

"The images emerge from dreams, or the period at 5:30 in the morning between sleeping and waking when you have that single durable image, like 'Nordstrom had taken to dancing alone' [the opening line of "*The Man Who Gave Up His Name*" in *Legends of the Fall*], which totally concentrates the character. I think you try *not* to figure out what they mean at that point, because what you're trying to do in fiction is reinvent the form; I want every fictional experience I have to be new. Once it gets didactic, than I say, Well, why not just write an essay? You don't create something so that people can draw conclusions, but to enlarge them, just as you have been enlarged by the experience of making it up. Art should be a process of discovery, or it's boring."

Harrison's own life has been a process of discovery. At age 16, in 1954, he decided he wanted to be a writer and headed for New York City, where he stumbled on "what I at the time called Greenwich Village," he says, pronouncing it like the color and laughing. "That's when I knew I wanted to be a bohemian; I wanted to meet a girl with black hair and a black turtleneck—and I did! Then I lived in Boston when I was 19; I went up there because I'd heard Boston was America's St. Petersburg, and my biggest enthusiasm in my teens was for Russian literature." He managed to squeeze in an education around his voyages, graduating from Michigan State in 1960, the same year he got married.

"I started out as a prose writer," he says. "Prose, poetry, I never separated them. But in your first notebook stage you tend toward poetry, because it's easier at that age. I tried to write prose, but I was never any good at the short story." In his mid-20s, while living in Cambridge, Mass., with his wife and baby daughter, "I discovered the Grolier Bookstore, where I used to hang out with other poets. I'd written some poems and sent them to Denise Levertov, who was the only poet I'd ever met. My friends at Grolier had mixed feelings when I arrived one Saturday with my first contract for a book of poems—that wasn't supposed to happen for a long time!"

But the proceeds from poetry weren't sufficient to keep Harrison in the East after a year at Stony Brook convinced him he wasn't cut out to be a teacher. By 1966 he and his

family were settled in Michigan. It was nearly five years before he made another try at prose, prompted by his friend and fellow Michigan State grad, novelist Tom McGuane. "I fell off a cliff bird-hunting and hurt my back. Tom said—he barely remembers this—'Well, you're not doing anything else, so why not write a novel?' I thought, Yeah, that's the ticket, and so I wrote *Wolf*; I had a Guggenheim, which made it easier. I sent my only copy to my brother, who was the science librarian at Yale, because I didn't want to pay to have it copied, but I sent it away two days before the mail strike, and it was lost. He went down to the main post office and finally dug it up. I had a book of poems [*Outlyer and Ghazals*, 1971] coming out with Simon & Schuster at the time, and they took the novel too, so I started out with a bang."

Alix Nelson at S & S was the first in a long line of nurturing women editors for Harrison. He speaks warmly of Pat Irving at Viking, who published his third novel, *Farmer*, and Pat Ryan, "who saved my neck, because she would give me assignments to write outdoor pieces for *Sports Illustrated*, and they paid well enough for us to live up here for several months."

The period after *Farmer* was published in 1976 was a difficult one, however. "It sold only a couple thousand copies—it sold 10 times as many copies last year as when it came out—and it was a terrible disappointment. I thought, If this is the best I can do, and it's utterly and totally rejected, then I don't know where I'm even supposed to be. There didn't seem to be any room for what I wanted to do; what I valued most, no one in the literary community valued. I went into a long clinical depression, but I gradually recovered."

Professional salvation came in the form of Seymour Lawrence, then affiliated with Delacorte, who made *Legends of the Fall* Harrison's first commercially successful book. "I had written these three novellas, and my agent at the time said, 'No one's going to publish these; they're not short stories and they're not novels.' I thought, Sam Lawrence has a good record for taking literary writers and giving them a shot, so I sent them to him. Then Clay Felker did the whole of "*Legends of the Fall*" and three-quarters of "*Revenge*" [the third novella] in *Esquire*."

If *Legends* didn't exactly make Harrison rich, it did make him much more widely known; the sale of film rights to all three novellas enabled him to buy land in Michigan and launched the screenwriting career that now allows him to attend to his real writing with a minimum of distractions. Since that book, Harrison has followed Lawrence from house to house. "Sam's mostly a publisher and a very acute reader," he says. "The kind of author he wants is someone who knows his stuff."

For the line work every novel needs, the author has relied on his eldest daughter, who reads his manuscripts before anyone else, and two editors associated with Lawrence. "Leslie Wells edited *Dalva* at Dutton, and she is so

pointed. I tend to organize something dramatic and then back away from it, and she can always see it. The first sexual scene between Duane and Dalva was too emotional for me to write, and both Leslie and my daughter said, 'Hey, let's let 'em really do it!' Now there's a wonderful girl who works for Sam, Camille Hykes, who's a good editor too." His financial negotiations are handled by "my Sicilian agent, Bob Dattila, which obviously means 'from Attila'—so he has always been my main protector!"

In recent years, Harrison's ride on what he describes as "this shuddering elevator that is the writer's life" has been relatively smooth. Though he considers poetry and fiction his primary work, he doesn't disdain the movies. "I'll keep writing screenplays even if I don't need the money, because I want to write one really good one. You can't write novels all the time, and I'm intrigued by the screenplay form." He is polite about the recent film made from "*Revenge*," starring Kevin Costner. "John Huston wanted to direct it 12 years ago, with Jack Nicholson, and Warner Brothers turned him down. It was disappointing to me at the time, but when they finally made it, it was almost a real good movie—almost. It did well in California, the South and the Midwest, but not in New York. I doubt your average yuppie would think much of somebody dying for love—it would be out of the question."

There's a certain combativeness in Harrison's attitude toward the New York literary establishment but, he says, "it would be pompous of me to feel ignored when all nine of my books are in print. It's just that the nature of my books isn't by and large the kind of thing that interests Upper East Side New Yorkers."

"I like grit, I like love and death, I'm tired of irony. As we know from the Russians, a lot of good fiction is sentimental. I had this argument in Hollywood; I said, 'You guys out here in Glitzville don't realize that life is Dickensian.' Everywhere you look people are deeply totemistic without knowing it: they have their lucky objects and secret feelings from childhood. The trouble in New York is, urban novelists don't want to give people the dimensions they deserve."

"The novelist who refuses sentiment refuses the full spectrum of human behavior, and then he just dries up. Irony is always scratching your tired ass, whatever way you look at it. I would rather give full vent to all human loves and disappointments, and take a chance on being corny, than die a smartass."

#### John Jerome (review date 28 July 1991)

SOURCE: "Caution: Men Writing," in *Washington Post Book World*, July 28, 1991, p. 6.

[In the following review, Jerome compares and contrasts Harrison's *Just before Dark* and *Andre Dubas' Broken Vessels*.]



"Because of horrors inflicted on too many women I love, I carry a licensed handgun," says Andre Dubus, in an essay called "The Judge and Other Snakes," "Lately, because one is liable now in America to turn a street corner and walk into lethal violence whose target is of either gender, and of any age—a small child, an old woman or man—I have begun to carry a gun whenever I go to Boston."

"I looked at my pistol, a Ruger Magnum, lying on the railing of the deck," says Jim Harrison, in an essay called "The Preparation of Thomas Hearn." "The pistol was bought this spring not to defend myself against people, but porcupines." He also uses it, he confesses, to shoot eels.

Having thus waved their roscoes in our faces, these two talented writers proceed to plead their cases as sensitive, caring, perceptive American males. And they are, they are; they are also powerful writers, extremely readable, engaging, holding your attention. Reading them is a treat—for fellow males, anyway. Women (and non-fellow males) might better be forewarned.

Andre Dubus's first work of nonfiction comes after eight books have quietly established him in the top ranks of contemporary short-story writers. *Broken Vessels* is a 20-year collection of autobiographical essays covering such matters as caring for a land-lord's sheep in New Hampshire, hanging around Class A baseball as a kid, surviving as an impecunious grad student, and seeing ghosts on Cape Cod and in the Navy. Most were written before the culminating group of essays, which tell, excruciatingly, of the traffic accident that cost Dubus one leg and the use of the other, and the aftermath thereof.

His tone even in the early pieces is one of unrelieved sorrow and loss: "So that woman and I had none of the solace that comes when you can rage at someone, can blame them," he says, in a piece called "Marketing." "Like doomed adulterous lovers, we could only share our passion and futility and the wish that our lives had not come to this impasse. And we shared our hope." He is talking not of the difficulties of human relations but the indignities visited upon short-story writers who won't write novels. His is not exactly an upbeat palette; in the page preceding that quote one finds "pain and joy," "passion and rage," "yearning," "cry against injustice," "misunderstanding," "sorrow," "acreaming at each other," "sulking about the house," "dying" (a marriage), "more embarrassing than painful," "hurt," "rejections which hurt deeply," "futile," and "neglect."

Tobias Wolff's admiring introduction reveals, perhaps unfortunately, that before the end of the book an infant daughter will crawl across the floor and stick her finger in the sprocket of an exercise bike, amputating a joint. This doesn't occur until the final essay, and one reads the book twitching with nervousness, knowing that that scene is coming and that it's going to be devastating. It is. Dubus witnesses the accident from his wheel-chair, and his desolate inability to keep it from happening is somehow

forecast in every aching sentence in the book. Absolutely riveting though *Broken Vessels* is, reading it is a little like a six-hour group-therapy session.

Dubus is a lover eternally explaining himself, convinced that if he does so sufficiently love will come and, perhaps, finally stay. He writes with anguished seriousness, out of agony over the human condition. Jim Harrison, with a lighter touch, is more like a teenage boy telling you how drunk he got last night: what a good time he had and how awful it was when he didn't.

*Just Before Dark* consists largely of previously published magazine writing, divided into food, travel, "sport" (hunting and fishing) and literary criticism. Harrison, a poet and novelist, also a sometime screenwriter and magazine journalist, can be very funny: "While I have the gravest doubts about the durability of any of my writing, few can beat me at the graceful dance of knife, fork, and spoon across the plate . . . I have thought of rigging tiny lights to my eating utensils and getting myself filmed while eating in the near dark: imagine, if you will, the dancelike swirl of these points of light. Just last evening in my cabin, the performance took place over a humble, reduced-calorie Tuscan stew (very lean Muscovy duck, *pancetta*, white beans, copious garlic, fresh sage, and thyme). Since I was alone in the twilight, the applause rang a bit hollow."

Harrison favors hanging game birds for a few days to touch up the flavor; his menus mention pounds of garlic, bottles of tabasco, washed down with bottles of neat whiskey. The food and travel sections, for all their wit and sophistication, tend to blur with names and quantities of bottles killed and creatures eaten. What he seems mostly to want to tell us is how terrific (and gargantuan) are his own delights, and how irritatingly boorish and tasteless those of everybody else. Choose your excess: His are epicurean evidences of good taste, everyone else's are part of "the brown-shoe-white-sock syndrome" or the enthusiasms of "assistant professor mentalities" (who accuse him at least three times in this connection of "the Hemingway bit"), "Reaganite bliss-ninnies," "yuppie nitwits," or "body-Nazi fitness mystics." This reductionism does not apply to his literary criticism (which I found impenetrable).

Dubus's writing is characterized by great dignity, meticulous detail, searingly candid observation; Harrison's is illuminated by a great feel for the land and nature, despite the fact he so often goes there armed. Both men are enormously physical, and enormously connected to the physical world, with great strength and sinew to their work. Although Dubus is attempting art and Harrison committing journalism, both have great respect for the written word, and both are damned good with it. Dubus seems to have made a splendid psychological recovery from his terrible accident. (He was rescuing a woman at the time.) Harrison mentions a long history of severe depression and, in passing, a problem with cocaine, both now under control. That is, neither is without scars. (Literal and otherwise: Harrison is one-eyed from a childhood accident; Dubus of course is now one-legged.)

Both are hypnotically readable, but not about much of anything. Their collections are writing about writing, even if strewn over guns and foods and wines and trips in Harrison's case, over moments of great emotional tension and physical disaster in Dubus's. They are utterly different kinds of writers, utterly different in sensibility as well as subject matters, but the pain that drives the writing of both seems to emerge somehow out of being male, out of the bewildered masculinity of our age. And both of them are, finally, Tough Guys, busily still trying to explain why that is an important thing to be.

#### Jonis Agee (review date 22 May 1994)

SOURCE: "The Macho Chronicles," in *New York Times Book Review*, May 22, 1994, p. 41.

[In the following review, Agee describes the three novellas contained in *Julip* and the prevalent themes that the stories share.]

More than any other writer today, Jim Harrison has been saddled by the critics with Hemingway's ghost. While it is true that Mr. Harrison's best work depicts, as did Hemingway's, individuals facing the uncertainty of the future with sheer will in a natural setting, his new collection of novellas, *Julip*, recasts such myths of male initiation and redemption. Finally, Mr. Harrison has exorcised the ghost and, in the process, established himself as a genuinely comic writer.

All three novellas are set in American landscapes traditionally used as testing grounds for men: the fishing waters of the South, the hunting woods of the North and the cattle ranches of the West. But, as Mr. Harrison comically demonstrates, the mythology of maleness often fails; appropriately enough, it is a woman, Julip, in the novella that bears her name, who comes most decisively to wisdom.

The hero of the second novella, "The Seven-Ounce Man," isn't fooled by any myth of nature, either, and, while he doesn't mind hard physical labor, he has to have his weekly forays to the local bar, cavorting with the waitresses because "women still beat the hell out of men to be around." He heads to the wilds of Los Angeles as soon as he gets a chance. In the final story, "The Beige Dolorosa," a professor is able to discard his intellectual baggage when he stops mythologizing, escaping delivery into yet another form of macho doom simply by walking away.

In the perennial war between the sexes that underlies each of the novellas in this book, it is the women who have successfully negotiated the dark waters of strife; they wait on the shore while the men remain at sea, distracted by, or lost or entrenched in, a kind of suspended animation, the result of their failure to achieve any formal or significant

end to their rituals of male initiation. These women range from crones to young seductresses, and they're mostly struggling against laughter at the absurdity of living with men.

In the novella "Julip," the main character's brother, Bobby, is the only man who tires of the game; in a heroic gesture, he tries to right an assault on his sister's womanhood in one fell swoop, by taking a gun to three of those who have tarnished her. It's a gesture worthy of Faulkner's Quentin Compson, but time has eroded its tragic potential; here the action is reduced to a ritual leg-wounding of a group of over-the-hill alcoholics, referred to as "the Boys," who are sitting ducks when Bobby ambushes them on a fishing trip.

Unlike the characters in Hemingway's world, no one in the novella dies from such nonsense—because, Mr. Harrison suggests, nothing much is really at stake. "These men develop an unbalanced affection for . . . outdoorsmen," he explains, because they "appear to be less abstract and venal (untrue)" and "are leading a more manly life than can be led in a law office or brokerage house." The "Boys" have already forfeited their manhood, their identities. They are permanently doomed to an annual repetition of their initiation out in the wilderness, laboriously shoring up their innocence and manhood with pretty young women like Julip for housekeepers.

However, in the novella's casual reference to those who have killed themselves after serving as "house frauleins, or lust slaves," we glimpse the dark wreckage that lurks behind the facade of these seemingly happy-go-lucky good ol' boys. Despite their professional achievements, they know they are failures in the greater scheme of things, that they will constantly fall on the lesser side of male endeavor. Women end up the witnesses to and casualties of such slavery to male myths, while at the same time they are seen as reservoirs of power, redemption and damnation.

It is Julip who understands her own experience well enough to use it as the launching point for gaining wisdom, for taking care of the business of freeing her brother and establishing a life for herself that preserves what she loves best: her hunting dogs and the time she spends in the wilderness training them. In her quest to understand the truth about the death of her father, about the shootings that her brother is jailed for, about her own fall into the world of love and loss, Julip takes on comic and often truly heroic stature. By freeing herself from male mythology, she can use it to manipulate and control the "Boys" around her, who remain its slave. "Julip dressed in a sleeveless blouse, white shorts tight across her bottom, and sandals, putting a dab of lavender scent on her neck. The outfit and scent tended to send all of them into a hormonal trance."

The second novella, "The Seven-Ounce Man," revisits a picaresque hero called Brown Dog, about whom Mr. Harrison has written before. Although he's as much the

romantic and sentimentalist as the other men in this book, Brown Dog possesses enough wit to laugh at himself, to remain open and curious about the convolutions of human endeavor. By refusing to be locked into a single pattern, ritual or myth—including that offered by the American Indian family friend who gives him a cabin and work—Brown Dog remains true to himself. “There didn’t seem to be a philosophical or theological palliative,” he notes early on, considering his lack of money and love. But after he finally sleeps with his childhood sweetheart, he realizes that “it can be a blessed event when a dream dies.”

A collector of wisdom (“even gravy couldn’t help fruitcake”), Brown Dog is light and mobile, seen by others as “a goof . . . a long-lost retarded brother” not about to be circumscribed by traditions, cultures, systems of belief. “He liked a genuinely empty future.” Instead, in appropriately canine fashion, he wanders from one place to another, sampling the scents lapping at the tastes, taking rewards and woundings in equal stride and with equal grace. Not surprisingly, he’s an eminently likable character.

There is a development of ideas from one novella to another in this book, and it comes full circle in the third novella, “The Beige Dolorosa.” Phillip Caulkins, a middle-aged professor, has been driven out of academia, ostensibly by political correctness, but actually by his failure to relinquish old forms, by his attraction to the mythic female and by his near-fatal marriage to reason. In retirement from love, he has adopted a sort of neurasthenic posture, forced by his passivity to live off the kindness of strangers on an isolated Arizona ranch.

Unable even to cook, he lives for a while like some enervated drunk until women and circumstance force him out of his shell-shocked remorse and self-pity, back into the world of work and self-awareness. He begins his recovery by undertaking to rename all the birds of North America, a grandiose intellectual gesture, but soon gives up and submits to the simple pleasures of repairing barbed-wire fencing, rediscovering his lost sexuality—and recovering his life itself. Finally he recognizes what’s at stake: “What I want to know is if I don’t find freedom in this life, when will I find it?”

What makes these novellas work best is the authority of Mr. Harrison’s voice, expressed via a curiously old-fashioned, ironic yet earnest narrator who acts as a kind of moral and ethical guide through the shorthand of the sharp cinematic moments of the plots. “She was born mean, cap-tious, sullen,” this narrator observes at one point, “with occasional small dirty windows of charm.”

In the novellas of *Julip* Jim Harrison suggests that what is suspect in our lives are the grand gestures we invent, the sentimental versions of reality we refuse to discard. The puniness of our lives, which Hemingway could only accept by creating yet another myth, is really, in Mr. Harrison’s view, an opportunity for making do, for creating out of nothing something that is authentic and individual. As

his characters discover, there’s no reason to see life as tragic. Julip’s father wasn’t a suicide, as she was led to believe; he passed out drunk in a public park and was run over. It was just a stupid accident, not a fatal, romantic gesture.

### Kelly Cherry (review date 14 August 1994)

SOURCE: “At Home in the World,” in *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, August 14, 1994, p. 8.

[In the following review, Cherry finds that the novellas contained in *Julip*, are beautifully written and fit well together as a collection.]

How life gets into art is mysterious and miraculous. A writer shapes some fictional clay, breathes a few words and then—maybe!—the clay stands up and goes for a walk. Jim Harrison’s new book, *Julip*, performs this amazing act of creation three times, in three novellas that seize us by the hand and take us on three different paths through the world.

In the title novella, we experience the world among women; in “The Seven-Ounce Man” we experience a Native American world; and in “The Beige Dolorosa” we visit a largely Latino world. What is surpassingly wonderful is that all three fictional experiences are so lively. Rolling and sad, hilarious and startlingly sweet smart and never cynical, these are stories that remind us no life should be overlooked or taken for granted.

In the first novella “Julip,” a young woman who trains dogs and keeps three older men on a tighter leash than they know, is not “particularly pretty or classically handsome” but “vivid, immediate, and [has] almost involuntarily filed out her life to its limits, moment by moment, with a rare emotional energy.” She is determined to have her brother, Bobby, moved from prison—where he is doing 7-to-10 for shooting and wounding three lovers—to a mental hospital.

To do this, she must visit various people, including the lovers, a photographer, a painter and a writer, referred to collectively as “the Boys.” The Boys, despite being middle-aged and successful, are boys. “When camera, paintbrush, and pen were put aside, they were right out there in la-la land with the Bloomingdale’s teenyboppers.” They are “unquestionably kind and generous,” but desire—a nameless desire, a vague American hankering for something different, something better or else simply more—has permanently befuddled them, and apparently they eye Julip as a possible fulfillment of that desire. Julip is smart, and how she accomplishes her mission and leaves the Boys behind is the witty trajectory of this fast-moving narrative.

“The Seven-Ounce Man” continues the adventures of Brown Dog, who previously appeared in Harrison’s *The Woman Lit by Fireflies*. Brown Dog might be described



as a first-rate under-achiever. He's a hormone-addled happy-go-lucky sometime pulp-cutter in Michigan's Upper Peninsula whose most recent run-in with the law revolves around the illicit transportation of a fossilized Indian corpse. His intention had been to protect a Native graveyard from scientific excavation. Brown Dog is always well-intentioned—to the extent that he is capable of intention. Mostly, he lives from day to day, and it is his innate knack for relishing each day in turn that wins a reader to his side. Wanted by assorted law officers, social workers, journalists, relatives and girlfriends' boyfriends and husbands, he never fails to appreciate "a big nature day." Brown Dog, although not an Indian, nevertheless feels honor-bound to risk all to defend the burial site, and ends up becoming part of the Wild Wild Midwest Show—a concept that still makes me laugh out loud.

The last narrative gives us Phillip Caulkins, a 50-year-old divorced professor whose career has been overturned by a charge of sexual harassment. Where this story might have bogged down in academic discourse or in recycled satirical potshots, Harrison offers a touching portrait of a man reinventing himself. Caulkins' daughter sets him up on her in-laws' ranch in southeast Arizona.

There, he reviews his life until he begins to be aware of the new life he is leading—outdoors, riding horses, mending fences. Not to mention rediscovering sex and tangling with drug smugglers. "I meant to get rid of my personality which insisted on maintaining a world that no longer existed. . . . I must reshape myself to fully in-habit the earth." He also has a dream in which he is told to attach new names to the birds, because "so many of the current names of birds are humiliating and vulgar. . . . The thrasher is now called the 'beige dolorosa,' which is reminiscent of a musical phrase in Mozart, one that makes your heart pulse with mystery, as does the bird."

It is the "otherness" of birds that intrigues and attracts Caulkins, as it is, one suspects, the otherness of these characters that has intrigued the author. I can imagine a reader who might be offended at the author's excursions into ethnic and sexual territories that are not his home place, but I cannot imagine taking such a reader seriously. There is no slumming among sub-cultures here. Like Caulkins, one may feel "at home, whether I deserved to or not."

These three novellas work beautifully together, composing a true triptych whose panels complete and comment upon one another. Motifs and references recur, patterning a book as artistically whole as it is emotionally revivifying.

**Alexander Harrison (review date 25 November 1994)**

SOURCE: "Seeking New Frontiers," in *Times Literary Supplement*, November 25, 1994, p. 20.

[In the following review, Alexander Harrison analyzes the prevalent themes of sex, wildlife, nature, and escapism in *Julip*.]

The novella is an unfashionable and indeterminate form: is it a short novel or a long short story? What can a writer do with it, that cannot be achieved more concisely or completely in its shorter or longer cousin? The answer, in Jim Harrison's *Julip*, is a tremendous amount. The book consists of three sections, "Julip", "The Seven Ounce Man" and "The Beige Dolorosa", which are linked by the shared concerns of the main characters—sex, animals and escape—and by the inversions which Harrison subtly brings about. The eponymous heroine of the first story has three lovers all in their fifties. Bobby, Julip's brother, one year younger than her at twenty-one, has inflicted minor injuries on them with a gun. He is imprisoned in Raiford, obviously mad, and Julip must secure the consent of her lovers to move him to a psychiatric hospital, rather than prison, until he is better.

"The Beige Dolorosa", the third story, finds fifty-year-old Philip Caulkins, a disgraced English professor, working as a cowpoke in Arizona. He gets mixed up with Magdalena, a tempestuously sexy young woman, and ends up alone in Mexico, the back of his truck, full of statues of the Virgin Mary, all of them chock-full of rich-smelling Mexican weed.

If, as is apparent, Julip and Caulkins have their share of problems, Brown Dog, the hero of "The Seven Ounce Man", suffers and overcomes on a higher plane. He has never had a social security number and is being sought by the police for his hapless involvement in a plan to save a Hopewell burial site from excavation. He has no Indian blood despite his name, and his involvement with native American activists seems foisted on him by the media. He would rather get drunk and screw around. "The Seven Ounce Man" is dark, hilarious and poignant, and when Brown Dog ends up heading west with a Canadian Mohawk on the run from the government, there is a sense of wonder and possibility.

It would be wrong to say that these characters are alienated. It is true that they draw solace from the country as well as alcohol and drugs, but it is largely through their relationship with animals that their humanity is manifested. Julip and Brown Dog are both dignified and rendered inadequate by this relationship: Julip religiously writes a diary about the dogs she meets and trains, and discusses her animal dreams with psychiatrists; Brown Dog seeks the bear medicine which his aged friend and malefactor, Delmore Short Bear, brings to life for him.

Dealings with animals and birds, in his case, are initially more arcane. However, his mission comes to him in a Technicolor dream, and it is "to rename the birds of North America [to] publish a new guidebook". The quest becomes meaningless when Mona, his horse, leads him up a narrow gully. There, birds of all colours and sounds stupefy him. At the story's start, fresh from his disgrace at the university, he can hear nothing but the pulsing of his own blood. By the end, he hears the birds and believes that the "future was acceptable rather than promising". However, he concludes, "it was certainly my choice."

Perhaps the strength of the novella form is that, freed from the expectations and complexities of the long novel, it demands a proper resolution. Jim Harrison is a writer of exceptional humanity, and he has written a book with a broad range of settings, about a broad range of characters who live and will go on living.

Writers such as Bret Easton Ellis are fond of suggesting that the world is coming to an end—in Los Angeles, a place of grotesque and inhuman difficulty, where blankness and confusion are the only measures of character. Harrison has no time for moribund old frontiers. He prefers to write of wild states—Michigan, Arizona and Wisconsin—new frontiers, where action and change are not only possible, but within reach.

**Joseph Bednarik and Jim Harrison (interview date 1995)**

SOURCE: "A Conversation with Jim Harrison" in *Northwest Review*, Vol. 33, No. 2, 1995, pp. 106-18.

[In the following interview, Harrison and Bednarik discuss topics such as Harrison's poetry, his love of nature, and his philosophical outlook on life.]

Depending on whom you ask, Jim Harrison is a poet writing novels, a novelist writing screenplays, a gourmand writing passionate articles about red wine and garlic, or an amateur naturalist practicing Zen.

In late April, 1994, Harrison set foot in San Francisco as part of a reading tour for *Julip*, his latest trilogy of novels. The morning after his "fandango" (as he called it) we were due to meet in his hotel room. A *privacy please* sign was hanging from the doorknob, but since we had an appointment I knocked. Harrison opened to a room accented by American Spirit cigarette smoke, a tray of dirty breakfast dishes, and the metallic rumble of trolley cars. "The trolley's a little noisy but I got to like the trolley."

When we talked earlier that week, I suggested he visit the San Francisco Public Library to see the permanent murals painted by Gottardo Piazzoni, the grandfather of Russell Chatham—the landscape painter who provides the cover art for all of Harrison's books.

[Bednarik:] Did you get a chance to see the Piazzoni murals?

[Harrison:] No I didn't. I visited with Barry Gifford and he took me out to the track. He's a racetrack tout. He knows everybody there so we went way up on the roof on this sunny afternoon. He's good friends with the official timer for California racetracks so we sat in the timer's shack. It was just beautiful. The whole bay, the whole world is out there. We stayed for five races. It's what I used to think of as a "Brautigan afternoon." You know, you wake up with a hang-over and Richard says, "We

must start today with a meatloaf." So we go to a cafeteria and have meatloaf. Well Barry is such a track sophisticate he says stuff like "Jesus, I'm going to baseball this bet." It's all that racetrack slang. And I of course just sit there listening to it because I like the sound of it, but I hadn't the foggiest fucking notion what was going on. But people traditionally have always been that way about horses. I know several people whose lives were literally saved by horses. McGuane, for example, raising and training cutting horses. He does it all himself. It's very moving to watch—like I train bird dogs.

*Is that where the dog training information for **Julip** comes?*

Yes. I didn't really mean that when I wrote it, not consciously. It seems *Julip* survives these men and survives everything because she has this *very* specific skill in relationship with animals. It's a tremendous focus for her life, like in our darkest times we always have our poetry.

*The line in **Julip** that stands out is that the three rounders, as you called them, were "still flipping books of poems open at random, hoping for secrets."*

I had to speak at Sam Lawrence's memorial service in New York and I was flipping through books again. Stephen Mitchell's translation of the *Duino Elegies*. At the end there are what show business calls "out takes," intended lines that Rilke didn't use. I said one at the memorial service: "Beware, oh wanderer, the road is walking too."

*Last night at the reading you mentioned that you were writing poetry again.*

Yes, I wrote two long poems this winter. One I had started earlier, and then one called "Sonoran Radio." Where I live part of the year in the southwest there's no contact, you can't get television. We don't have anything there except a VCR to watch movies. The only radio I can get to play at night is from Mexico. I don't really know Spanish but I was amalgamating all of my feelings about Mexico. It's a long suite. I am getting closer to having another book but I'm going slow. Also, I just feel tremendously overexposed now and I don't want to publish any more books for a while. It's flattering in an odd way because I never expected to have the range of audience I do.

*Do you have a sense that there's an audience interested in your poetry, and another in your fiction, and more readers who discovered you through your Esquire food column?*

Or the movie business. Although it was odd in Mississippi—where for some reason I have a lot of readers—and they really are *readers* in Mississippi. But down there they usually have the poems and the novels and they never ask about the movie business. It's a living, certainly, but it's a relief not to have to deal with the torpidity that comes with being in the business. Because Hollywood was just an option instead of teaching, which I simply couldn't do

temperamentally. All your energy being sucked out. You're a walking blood bank for students, which you understand and respect, but for writing you have to save up for yourself and silence until the right time to release it.

*Torpidity aside, you've been noted as saying that you desperately want to write a good screenplay.*

I do because I love movies.

*Do you feel that you've done it?*

I had a good start on *Wolf* before I was interfered with, but that's the luck of the draw in showbiz. For a while when I was writing that screenplay—this is how we don't know what's really going on—I had a hard time because naturally I was re-living the experience that I had of lycanthropy and then my hair—my eyebrows—kept growing faster and faster and I was having to clip my nails every day, if you can believe this. I thought: "I can't deal with this craziness that I have anymore." And there were dreams I'd be sitting with the producer and director in New York and suddenly the hair started growing through my shirt and I'd throw them out the window. I thought: "Slow down boy."

*Did you write the screenplay for "Legends of the Fall"?*

I wrote the first couple versions, but I didn't claim credit on that one. The man who did the *real* work was Bill Wirtliff. He's a marvelous Western writer and his screenplay was so much better than mine it was humiliating. I said that to him. "God, how long did you take? I spent a whole month on mine." He had spent a year on his, naturally. I was trying to rip them off for some quick bucks to buy cocaine at the time. Pack up my nose, you know. Should've stayed back on the farm like Bob Frost.

*When you were back on the farm you helped co-edit Sumac with Dan Gerber. Did you enjoy the work?*

Well, Dan worked harder on it. When you start an appreciable literary magazine you're absolutely deluged with manuscripts. We didn't realize it at the time but the problems in those magazines is that every MFA in the United States is trying to get credits, and they keep track. Of course the nightmare in editing *Just Before Dark* was I never kept track of anything. I just simply forgot about a lot of the stuff. That's when I began to think that maybe I was writing too much.

*In "The Seven-Ounce Man," Brown Dog has his "best nature day" when he finds a bear's blow hole. That's a beautiful image.*

He says: "What luck." It's a miniaturization of the Delphic oracle. That's a god sleeping down there and you smell the breath and hear the snoring.

*In your TriCycle piece, "Sitting Around," you called bears your "dharma gate."*

I never associated that at the time. Everything can be a dharma gate but there's this enormous specificity in bears. And you know, one's animal changes. When I finally got to see a wolf where I lived, that meant an enormous amount to me. To hear her three nights and to see her. And then there are bears up there and bears are mostly nocturnal but to see them occasionally, to follow them and to sense them—I wrote a poem about one—he fed on the sweet pea and the wild strawberries. He was a huge, gaunt male. I watched him for about an hour. Probably too close. They can get a little irritable in the spring when they're hungry.

*I was interested to hear that black bears actually attacked more humans than grizzlies, and grizzlies have the bad reputation.*

Well, of course there are more of them. We've had a couple deaths up in the Porcupine Mountains. But generally you just have to exercise the same caution you do in New York and Los Angeles.

*Maybe less so, actually. In terms of your writing do you consider anything out of bounds?*

What's out of bounds for me is somebody else's religious rituals. The most disgusting thing you see now is the "new age" appropriation of what's Native American. That just terrifies me. How could they do that? Just like that old Chippewa shaman seeing his first picture of a white man who shot a deer with his foot on the deer—Oh, God—you don't fool with that. Oddly enough, that's just like if a Catholic went into a teepee and saw all these priest vestments hanging there as well decoration. I mean there's something tremendously inappropriate about one writer fooling with another person's secret religion or public religion, or using it for his own purposes. That would be the only bar, nothing else. You know, Terry Tempest Williams said something very odd the other day. She and her husband went down to Mexico and went to about 10,000 feet in this forest, where all the Monarch butterflies in North America go. As she said, "I don't know how they count them." There were twenty-five *million*. She could hear the twenty-five million. You can't typify the sound but she says: "It was just like being in God's brain." And I says, "That's it!"

*What an unforgettable sound that must be. When I first heard Terry Tempest Williams read aloud I was utterly intoxicated by her voice.*

There's a woman with a lot of mojo. She's dealing in an area now that's quite scary, or strange—calls it the "panerotics of nature." We're lucky that there are wonders.

*And that the natural world is teeming with sound.*

I had in this one part of a poem: "The cat drinking water was insufferably loud." [Harrison rummages for, then reads from a typescript]:

At first the sound  
of the cat drinking water



was unendurable,  
 then it was broken by a fly  
 heading north,  
 a curve-billed thrasher  
 swallowing a red berry,  
 a dead sycamore leaf  
 suspended on its way to earth  
 by a breeze so slight  
 it went otherwise unnoticed.

If you want to read this one you can take it and send it back to me. I don't know if I have another copy. [Harrison hands over a six-page suite.]

*I'm sure we can get it copied here in the hotel.*

It doesn't matter, just send it to me.

*Thanks. I look forward to reading this. In regards to some of your earlier work George Quasha, in Stony Brook, wrote about your second book, **Locations**. He claimed there was a story afoot about the poem "After the Anonymous Swedish": That you woke from a dream having been a pond and recited the poem in Swedish, a language you don't speak, then translated it to your wife at 3 A.M. Is that bullshit?*

That's bullshit. I was so envious at the time that I didn't know any languages, so I wanted to translate a poem too. So I just made one up. It sounds like a Swedish poem. I've been thinking about writing more of them. Drummond Hadley, who's an extraordinary poet and an old friend of Gary Snyder's, is a cowboy poet. He lives on this vast, strange fiefdom out in the southwest. We were walking down the road and he quoted the entirety of the "Tenth Duino Elegy" in German. Then he told me a funny story. He's from a wealthy family and he'd run off to be a cowboy down in the Sierra Madres. He wanted to be a Mexican cowboy, so he camped for months with this group of Mexican cowboys. Locating cattle is hard work, but they always told stories at night. And he didn't have any stories. He *does* have this gifted memory, and he loves Lorca, so he thought "Well . . ." So he stands by the fireside and recites a poem: "La luna, la luna, la luna," about the moon spilling like milk over the mountain onto this young girl in her torment. So every night: "Drum, we want to hear the luna poem," and they'd sit there and listen to it. They couldn't read, any of them. The beauty of that.

*Do you memorize any of your own poems?*

Never. Sometimes I surprise myself, I remember whole parts of them. I remember other people's lines. That is odd, I never have—I suppose I don't want any knots between the next one.

*Do certain parts of your suites emerge at different times and in different places?*

Oh, absolutely. The suite form I like is when all these little wedges are intended to *suggest*; then, finally, a whole—almost topographically. It's a *map*, the sacred, though they

were written before I read that book by Bruce Chatwin, *Songlines*. That's a monster of a book because he determined—which was known only by anthropologists for a long while—that the Aborigines navigate by singing, knowing the songs of an area. So this guy's walking twenty-two hundred miles to see this girl he had dreamed about. Twenty-two hundred *miles*, and he's trotting along with his stick and he's singing the songs of the area that tell him how to go, where to go. It's just an unbelievable, utterly transcendent idea.

*In your essay "Going Places" you talk about your seduction with maps. The first map being wooden puzzle pieces shaped like the states in different colors—*

Iowa is yellow. It's the corn, you know.

*—and the last map, to a remote, secret place, is drawn on thin buckskin which is slowly cut up for stew.*

Eating your map. It seems certain things are ineffable and that's the barrier, back to writing what you can't quite reach. I was thinking that the whole notion of *zazen* is to be able to speak the language you spoke before you were born and the language you speak after you die, that's part of it. Writing is a lifetime pursuit. You never come up with anything.

*Well, there's the old stories of the Zen poets writing on leaves and tossing the poems into the river.*

Well, that's old Li Po. The river, in you go. Do you read Stephen Mitchell's translations?

*I've read his Tao Te Ching.*

*The Gospel According to Jesus* is a tremendous book because he's reduced the entirety of the whole thing to what Jesus actually said, separated from church history and all the gloss and accumulation, so the actual text is quite slender. It's very similar to what both Gandhi and Thomas Jefferson did with the *New Testament*.

*In "Sitting Around" you wrote that you were creating your own religion called Bobo. Are there any holy books in Bobo?*

Snyder's *The Practice of the Wild* probably comes closest. It's an incredible book. But Bobo. "Bobo knows all modernity is just a flaky paint job." That kind of thing. It goes on and on from there.

*From Bobo back to the silver screen: Have any of your books ever been made into a foreign film?*

No, although the French have owned *A Good Day to Die* for years now and the guy claims he's going to make it. I was ignoring him and then I was appalled—I saw this film I love, I've watched it three or four times now called *The Hairdresser's Husband*. Just a transcendent film about this little French boy. He likes to dance to Egyptian music.

And he likes to get his hair cut by this sexy sort of woman, so he's always waiting for his to grow. His dad asks him at dinner what he wants to do when he grows up and he says "I want to get my hair cut." So his dad of course slugs him. He meets this beautiful hairdresser, gets his hair cut, and keeps coming back. Then they get married and he just sits around in the barber shop, talking, as other people get hair cuts. It's just a beautiful film. So then I found out the people that own *A Good Day to Die* are the ones that did this. And then I feel stupid. Because I couldn't see how they would make *A Good Day to Die*. Or why, but then I thought this is the kind of thing the French are interested in—and the Spanish. The Spanish liked the book too, for obvious reasons: a good day to die.

*Do you think A Good Day to Die sealed your fate in the feminist world?*

Oh, everyone forgets everything. Nobody reads very much. That did at the time, but I don't care. I mean, nobody knows how to locate *anybody*, and then I published *Dalva* and *The Woman Lit By Fireflies*.

*Was there an equal and opposite reaction?*

Oh, tremendously, to both those books. It was very overwhelming to me, in the pleasant sense. I must've received a couple hundred letters from women on *Dalva* and only one didn't like it, or was upset at my temerity. But we can't have abridgments of our freedom. I mean I don't even accept the abridgments that I mentioned to you, other than implicitly, it's just that I would fear to fool with somebody else's medicine. I know people do, and then the Native Americans justly get pissed off. There's some wonderful poems in Elizabeth Woody. She's an Indian poet up in Washington. Her book's coming out with University of Arizona Press. Some of her first poems are quite formal and not too interesting to me and then she hits some kind of really strange, powerful stride in a long poem about her sister. Crazy. It's like Louise Erdrich's poem to her sister who got beaten up by a drunk white guy. Overpowering poem. Elizabeth told this story when we all met in Wyoming. Matthiessen and Lopez and everybody was there—writers and nature. It was intriguing because I never met Lopez though we corresponded. We never met in what we call "real life." I like that, don't you? Anyway, Elizabeth got up—everybody's making very elaborate speeches, except Sam Hamill who's just sitting back there as Sam Hamill, which is quite wonderful—and she says: "I come out of the store." She lived way up in the reservation at the time. "I get in my car and then these two ravens come down that like to fool around, and they sit on the hood of my car and they grab my windshield wipers and snap them, looking at me," and so there we get the relation of writers and nature. It doesn't need many big adjectives.

*Have you read Gerald Vizenor's Dead Voices?*

I just ordered it. He's just a marvelous author. Nicholson's a great fan of his. I gave him *Griever: An American Monkey King in China* and *The Trickster of Liberty* because he's a real coyote figure.

*In the magazine Caliban you dedicated the poem "Counting Birds" to Vizenor.*

Because of that line in there about all those swallow holes. I was thinking that these are the eyes of the Anasazi bringing me the Manitou, because they look at the Manitou Islands. Sometimes when you look the Manitou are sleeping bears. I wrote the introduction, a couple years ago, for the local Ottawa-Chippewa tribal history and went to the dedication of their new motel and casino. It was wonderful. They had a drum group and the smoking of the pipe. It was just gorgeous. I went to the ghost supper with all these very loud and very old Chippewa, and the one turns to me and says: "We were really something once, weren't we." [Harrison excuses himself and finishes packing.] I used to get terrified of missing planes, but then oddly enough I would think that everything will be OK if I get home. In recent years, I suppose because of my practice and what I've been doing, it doesn't come out anymore. It's Dogen's whole idea: Practice is finding yourself where you already are. So consequently sometimes when I'm in airports now I think maybe I'll go someplace else. You look at the tote boards and think—

*"Well, there's a four o'clock flight to Rio."*

*Yeah.* Or there are all these different Fayettevilles and Charlottevilles in the southeast, so you think "maybe I'll just check 'em all out." I think it first happened when I was writing "Brown Dog," the illusion that there is a home if you're not at home everywhere. I forgot that I could only write at home so then in this motel in Livingston, Montana, I started writing "Brown Dog." I just completely forgot that I could only write at home, which is like some sort of idiot savant bullshit.

*There's the argument to be made, though, that Brown Dog's voice is very familiar, much easier to access for you than Dalva.*

Oh, infinitely. He's sort of my survival mechanism. In an odd sense he's a true Zennist while I'm only a student.

*Right. He's the one who's there.*

*Always.* He says: "This gravy is not pork gravy." She says: "Of course not, it's generic. You wanna make something of it?" "I was just saying it isn't pork gravy." And he says: "She was beautiful. Her one leg was too short but it looked just like the other leg only shorter." You know, that kind of thing. It was just his immediate contact with life. And he can always get out of being cornered. "You don't have a social security card? How do you pay your taxes?" He only gets one letter every couple years and that's to renew his driver's license. He has no other official contact with anything. And he's always lived in unoccupied deer cabins. Well, Brown Dog's the emotional equivalent of what keeps me alive. In France I think I did thirteen interviews and nine photo ops, two lectures, three book signings, a couple talk shows in five days. I get a little walk in the Luxem-

bourg Gardens and for some reason there's a lovely girl in a pink rabbit suit flouncing around in some promotion of some product. And the Luxembourg Gardens are overwhelming because I know Rilke walked through them. Every day, starting the next day, on French TV there's going to be this film about me on Cinéma 3, and they repeat it every day in the afternoon. I says: "I gotta get out of this fucking place before they blow my cover." I think: "Ah, pink rabbit suit." Weird. And then walking up: "Where's the zipper?" You know, reverting to Brown Dog emotions.

*You didn't pack your green janitor's suit from **The Theory & Practice of Rivers** ?*

No, although that's from the same lineage, the green janitor's suit. I think that's partly the spirit of my father who was immediate like that. He said to me when I went off to New York: "Well James, maybe you should just stay there 'til the pissants carry you out through the keyhole." This is wonderful and I'm lucky I don't spend my adult life fighting against my dead father, because he was very pleased that I wanted to be a writer. I wasn't even sure I should bother that much with college because Hemingway and Faulkner didn't bother with it, and Sherwood Anderson. All these people he liked. That's not where you learn how to write. His roots were real Brown Dogian. He went to college to study agriculture. He and his brother worked for two years digging pipeline and living in tents in Michigan during the winter.

*To pay for school?*

Yeah. Living in tents during the winter in Michigan and hand digging up pipeline. Well, give me a break. Now everybody wants a fucking grant before they read a book.

*Was Clare in "**The Woman Lit by Fireflies**" named after John Clare?*

I wondered about that later. Maybe a little subconsciously. I was always obsessed with Clare and Christopher Smart. Like Clare I've had periods of mental instability, as it were, and one always fears being locked up because there's no food. I couldn't deal with institutional food.

*One final question with an eye toward the future. **Dalva** was originally going to be the story of Dalva's grandfather. What's the status of Northridge's novel?*

That's what I'm working on now. How I originally planned the book was to write about her grandfather, her son, and her. But then Dalva just completely took over the whole thing. So I have nine cartons of unused notes and I can't afford to let them just go away. They're in the attic of my granary if they haven't been chewed by mice. I found three galleys of *Dalva* the other day, but they'd been chewed up by mice. That kind of thing really disturbs my librarian brother.

**Gerald Locklin (review date Winter 1996)**

SOURCE: A review of *Julip*, in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 33, No. 1, Winter, 1996, pp. 126-27.

*[In the following review, Locklin praises Harrison's collection of novellas Julip, giving special praise to the novella entitled "The Beige Dolorosa."]*

I loved the movie version of Jim Harrison's novella, "**Legends of the Fall**", and I knew many Eastern critics would not. The novella is a good length for adaptation, and Harrison is as comfortable with the form—this is his third volume of three—as anyone writing today, but one of the last tacitly condoned biases is that of the East against the West, and it flourishes ironically among those who would be most at pain to dissociate themselves from the more conventional prejudices. Harrison still investigates frontier (and erstwhile transcendentalist) categories such as self-reliance, honor, courage, masculinity, and womanhood, whereas the very word *manhood* evokes derision in many circles today. The less ideological common moviegoer, however, responded deeply to the film's archetypes.

But there are many sides to the stories Harrison spins. "**Julip**," for instance, depicts the absurd lengths to which traditional male values may be taken and that it often falls to a capable woman to unravel the complications created by men. Julip's addled brother has landed himself behind bars after a botched attempt to avenge her "defilement" by three middle-aged lovers. An experienced but uncoarsened 21, she is a pillar of savvy in a world of weak and loony males, but she likes men and deals kindly and effectively with them. Like the title protagonist of Harrison's novel *Dalva*, Julip has inherited from male ancestors traits that are often either absent or present only in parody in the men of her generation. Harrison's women are almost too good in too many ways to ring entirely true, but they are certainly not stereotypes.

"**The Seven-Ounce Man**" continues the adventures of Brown Dog—formerly of the novella ["Brown Dog" contained in] *The Woman Lit by Fireflies*—once again drawn into conflicts with various women, anthropologists, and law enforcement agencies. B.D. is a survivor but no stock *picaro*. He is capable of sacrificing himself on behalf of native burial remains, while parrying an attack on hunting with, "Tell it to someone who gives a shit." He leads a man's life, but prefers the company of women: "You weren't always cutting and bruising yourself on their edges." We will no doubt be learning more of this anti-hero of the Upper Peninsula.

Since I love the Tucson area almost as much as I loathe our current political rectitude, I found "The Beige Dolorosa" one of my most pleasurable reading experiences of recent years. It is more than the cautionary tale of an impotent historian set up for a sexual harassment charge. It is a parable of rebirth through intimacy with the natural world; its living things; its cycles, songs and silences; its timelessness; its repose. Drugs—and their profitability, born of their prohibition—have made their way into this landscape also, but Harrison suggests there are ways of co-existing with the insanities of contemporary life (which include an academic world that "resembles the cell



structure of political life in Cuba”), of laughing at them while reintegrating ourselves with “the ordinary life of incomprehension.” Robinson Jeffers would concur.

Surely teachers will recognize a system in which they are obsolete at 50, only the rarest of students expresses a love of Mozart, and scholarship is reduced to “Sexism in Yeats.” Harrison, like Sartre, reminds us that a realm of possibilities confronts us and that the choice, ultimately, is our own.

Harrison has spoken ill of Hemingway in interviews, but this may be a case of influence-anxiety. His characters bathe as often as Brett Ashley, and they find their solace in the woods. He is, along with Cormac McCarthy, Tom McGuane, Thom Jones, Chris Offutt, and Gerald Haslam a sustainer of the tradition that asks “How should a person live?” and finds the answer in the natural, the perennial, the ancient, the quest itself. Hemingway never excluded women from his world, and their inclusion is even more explicit in Harrison. At times, Harrison could use a refresher course in the clarity of Hemingway’s prose, and financial exigencies are sometimes too easily resolved. He has, however, like Hemingway, known both hardship and well-earned rewards, and has had similar entrée to wide experience and expertise. He even, like Hemingway, has only one good eye. Harrison has been a better literary son than he realizes, and we are the richer for it.

#### Thomas McNamee (review date 8 November 1998)

SOURCE: “O Pioneers!” in *New York Times Book Review*, November 8, 1998, p. 11.

[In the following review, McNamee finds *The Road Home* to be a superbly written novel with many intricate layers.]

There is a singular comfort in knowing, on the first page of a novel, that you are in the hands of a master:

“It is easy to forget that in the main we die only seven times more slowly than our dogs. The simplicity of this law of proportion came to me early in life, growing up as I did so remotely that dogs were my closest childhood friends. It is for this reason I’ve always been a slow talker, though if my vocal cords had been otherwise constructed I may have done well at a growl or bark or howl at scented but unseen dangers beyond the light we think surrounds us, but more often enshrouds us.”

These are the first words of *The Road Home*, and they accurately prefigure the idiosyncratic grace of the narrative to come. “My mother was an Oglala Sioux,” this introductory voice tells us, “my father was an orphan from the East . . . intermittently mad as he was over a life largely spent on helping the Natives accommodate themselves to their conquerors.”

If you have read Jim Harrison’s 1988 novel, *Dalva*, the intricately layered world of *The Road Home* will be immediately familiar. Like *Dalva*, this novel has multiple narrators, the first of whom is Dalva’s grandfather, John Wesley Northridge 2d, a Nebraska country gentleman of moderate wealth and immoderate awareness—the one giving him the time and the other the means to look deep into human experience. If you don’t already know the Northridge family, you soon will, so vividly does Harrison render them, and with such economy: “When you tell me stories about your life.” Dalva demands of the old man, “why do you always pretend you were such a nice person? . . . Everyone in town says you were the scariest man in the county. . . . So I wish you wouldn’t just tell the good parts about yourself. I’m not some little kid, I’m 11.”

Within the space of a few pages, Northridge’s impetuous mind will plunge into the past, leap decades forward in time, then snap back to the present like a whip crack as he assembles what at first seem unrelated fragments into a comprehensive and harmonious composition. Northridge’s childhood best friend, now a Lakota medicine man, has prophesied that Northridge is soon to die, and Northridge takes him at his word. “I have settled down to enjoy what I now truly believe to be the last year of my life,” he says. The old man returns to the calling he gave up long ago, making sketches of the things and people he has loved. This too is a way of coming to terms with his life: “Art-ists,” he remembers his first wife saying, “paint the world so they can understand its beauty.”

The novel’s shifts of mood are as wrenching as those in its time line; merriment topples into horror in a heartbeat: Northridge, in 1952, remembers his art school classmate Davis, on a trip back in 1909, “swigging tequila for a toothache when he said he was going to climb a mountain to catch the breeze. This irritated me and I said, ‘Go ahead, you fool, you’ll break your neck,’ and he did. . . . He said no last words so crushed was his face but his eyes still moved for a moment or two after I reached him.”

This book’s view of the world emphasizes connectedness, from generation to generation and between the earth and its furred, feathered and human inhabitants. Northridge sees these fragile bonds as the pattern for human love, the best of all willable emotions in a landscape of pain and sorrow. Even as an adolescent, Northridge could manage to feel both awe and love in the midst of fear; he remembers facing the terrifying tribal elders of a girl whom he had impermissibly (being only half Indian and therefore, in their view, white) pursued: “These were not Methodist Indians but warriors with a lineage that owed nothing to the white man. We did not live upon the same earth that they did and we flatter ourselves when we think we understand them. To pity these men is to pity the gods.”

Each of the novel’s narrative voices so fills the mind that no other seems possible. Then suddenly another is speaking, equally convincingly, apparently whirling away with different concerns but in time woven into interlacing

stories of cousins, daughters, friends, dogs, horses, heartbreak, folly, violence and illness. Hard on the death of the gentle John Wesley Northridge 2d, the voice of his great-grandson Nelse seems at first a belligerent slacker whine. But as the young man discovers and rejoins the family from which he was severed at birth—when Dalva, then 15, was forced to give him up for adoption—his deepening knowledge of the never-ending waste of Indian greatness darkens the novel's tone shade by shade, edging toward the anguish and compassion that are the irrecusable estate of his bloodline.

The nature-nurture conundrum that runs throughout *The Road Home* comes nearest the surface in Nelse's narrative, in which adoption removes him from Northridge nurture even as his Northridge nature drives him back into the arms of his biological family. Nevertheless, Harrison repeatedly insists that having Indian blood does not make Nelse—or his grandfather, for that matter—an Indian. ("Though I was half Lakota," the old man observes, "I lived as a white man and that's what mattered.") Do these narrators sound so much alike because of their shared nature—or is each speaker an inflection of the author's sensibility? Surely, the answer is both; the coexistence of contradictions, as Grandfather Northridge makes clear, is a problem only for those who do not pay full attention to life

Harrison's voice is at its richest in the older narrators, particularly Naomi Northridge, the widow of John W. 3d and the mother of Dalva. Her history is the obverse of Nelse's: without Northridge blood but immersed in Northridge heritage, she has escaped the family curses of violence and excessive introspection, and she shares their gifts for contemplation and bold action. "I'm just Naomi," she says, "definitely an older woman looking at the moon and stars, ordinary as the earth they shine down upon"—which is to say, not ordinary at all.

Paul Northridge, the fourth narrator, the brother of Naomi's dead husband, also finds exaltation in the everyday. Echoing Yeats, he wonders "how you make your soul clap its hands and sing." The answer, he discovers at last, lies in "my very ordinariness," which leads him back home. "The central thing about loving someone," he concludes, "is that it very much made you want to continue living."

Dalva returns, in middle age, as the last narrator, reunited with her son and, like her uncle, drawn by a mysterious magnetism back to the Sand Hills of Nebraska. If, ultimately, this novel offers the sort of practical wisdom suggested by the title of Wallace Stevens's great poem "How to Live What to Do," Dalva takes us to its home, a place beyond speech—"the natural world, the grace of the divinely ordinary." In the mind that is sufficiently mindful, the world as it is is enough, and transcendence is not necessary. Love is always available, inside oneself, to be lavished on "the sound of horses eating oats, the crunch," on "birds and flowers, including also bird and flower shadows," on "the presence of underground rivers." For Dalva, this even extends to "my first car, the aqua convertible," and to "a rooster named Bob."

Such awareness makes the ordinary extraordinary, the unnamable unforgettable. To read this book is to feel the luminosity of nature in one's own being.

#### Scott Veale (review date 3 January 1999)

SOURCE: "Eat Drink Man Woman," in *New York Times Book Review*, January 3, 1999, p. 15.

[In the following review, Veale favorably reviews *The Shape of the Journey: New and Collected Poems*, stating that Harrison's poetry is graceful and in tune with nature.]

Jim Harrison is best known for his novels and essays, but in the introduction to *The Shape of the Journey: New and Collected Poems* maintains that poetry "is the portion of my life that means the most to me." In fact, Harrison has published nearly as many books of poetry as prose, from the youthfully expansive *Plain Song* (1965) to the Zen-inflected *After Ikkyu* (1996). This large collection, which also includes a new grab bag of nature verse and prose poems called "Geo-Bestiar," has a meandering feel, although Harrison's concerns—aging, women, eating and drinking, hunting, the craft of writing and above all the spirit and rhythms of the natural world—are remarkably constant, as are his intentions: "In our poetry we want to rub our nose hard / into whatever is before it; to purge / these dreams of pictures, photos, phantom people." His voice is obsessively unaffected and colloquial, which is surprising for someone so quick to acknowledge his lifelong debt to poets as diverse as Apollinaire, Rimbaud, Li Po and Keats, and who experiments with Buddhist-inspired verse and obscure poetic forms like ghazels. Harrison's writing is graceful, direct and muscular, even in those occasional places where the poems feel like dashed-off diary entries or, rarer still, when they hit a mawkish note. Much of the best verse—particularly the fine introspective reveries in *The Theory and Practice of Rivers & New Poems*—is set in rural Michigan, where Harrison is clearly most comfortable, pacing through the woods or confronting his appetites and his mortality: "It is not so much that I got / there from here, which is everyone's / story; but the shape / of the voyage, how it pushed / outward in every direction / until it stopped." Throughout his wanderings he is great company—a restless, self-questioning, intelligent writer, humble before nature and above all grounded in the flesh and blood and feathers of the planet "A modern man, I do not make undue connections though my heart wrenches daily against the unknowable, almighty throb an i heave of the universe against my skin that sings a song for which we haven't quite found the words.

#### Lee Oser (review date Autumn 1999)

SOURCE: A review of *The Shape of the Journey: New and Collected Poems*, in *World Literature Today*, Vol. 73, No. 4, Autumn, 1999, p. 742.

[In the following review, Oser describes his mixed feelings about Harrison's *The Shape of the Journey: New and Collected Poems*. While he admires Harrison's wit and "warts and all" mentality, he finds fault with Harrison's technique and tendency to rant.]

As a whopping book by an American poet, Jim Harrison's *Shape of the Journey* comes in the tradition of *Leaves of Grass* and *The Cantos*. In other words, you get the whole man here, blotches and brilliance, bathed in a kind of epic grandeur. And what Pound said of Whitman, we can generally say for Harrison: "He is America. . . . He is disgusting. He is an exceedingly nauseating pill, but he accomplishes his mission. . . . He is a genius because he has a vision of what he is and of his function." Whitman and Pound and Harrison are not only heirs of the ages; they are rebels against American Calvinism.

I respect any author who can mine his world for gold. Still, my response to this collection is ambivalence. It was probably a hankering after completeness that led Harrison to include his first, very voting book, 1965's *Plain Song*. For this reader, the influence of Robert Bly on the early Harrison dates him like an echoey sound-effect on a 1960s record. Generation-Xers might even derive a kitschy pleasure from the long dinosaur-jam or sequences that typify Harrison's early writing.

Alongside Adrienne Rich, the protest-era Harrison experiments with ghazals. As in Rich's case, the experiment yields mixed results. Many of the ghazala feature an interesting surrealism, or reflect curious reading in anthropology. But you cannot adopt a challenging Middle Eastern form by jettisoning the hard parts. Unlike Harrison, I hesitate to defend associate leaps of thought in terms of organic form: the associations can be mechanical or clever. But the first few books offer many accurate and useful writings on the northern Michigan landscape, riot without inspired turns of phrase.

At his best, the later Harrison is a formidable wit, a Zen rambling man capable of fabulous drolleries and vertiginous shifts of perspective. There is, moreover, considerable thoughtfulness and religious feeling in the recent poetry, as in the opening stanza of the sequence "After Ikkyu" (named after the fifteenth-century Zen master of the Rinzai school in Japan): "Our minds buzz like bees / but not the bees' minds. / It's just wings not heart / they say, moving to another flower." Detecting a hint of moral allegory in these rich verses, I begin to suspect that Harrison owes a debt to his Calvinist past. We read him, much as we read Gary Snyder, by shuttling between East and West.

*The Shape of the Journey* has two important defects. First, it rants. Harrison has a penchant for facile dichotomies (good writers versus evil politicians, pure Indians versus corrupt whites). This depressing Manichean strain allows him to shake his fist at civilization while partaking of its best fruits: he is yet another high-maintenance rebel.

Second, I am not satisfied with Harrison from a technical standpoint. With respect to technique, his best poem is probably "The Theory and Practice of Rivers" (indeed a good poem). Here, for sustained passages, we find noble accents and an arresting rhythmical texture. I would grant that Harrison gets the form right in his more deeply meditative poems. Too often, though, he shuns formal constraints, and makes things rather too easy for himself.

#### James J. McClintock (essay date Winter 2000)

SOURCE: "Jim Harrison, Soul-Maker," in *Midwest Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 2, Winter, 2000, pp. 191-207.

[In the following essay, McClintock gives examples of the influences of psychologist James Hillman and poet John Keats on Harrison's writing.]

The jackets on Jim Harrison's books used to note that he lives in northern Michigan and "is a keen fisherman" and "bird hunter." They don't now, not even for a work like his collection of essays, *Just Before Dark* (1991), a third of which is devoted to outdoor sport. The change is wise because Harrison's novels, novellas, poems, and essays have never been merely neo-realist narratives about adventurous men; nevertheless, they have been unfairly criticized for being macho derivatives of Hemingway. That criticism has diminished since *Dalva* (1988), "The Woman Lit By Fireflies" (1990), and "Julip" (1994), all narratives of women's lives.

Harrison's works, in fact, have always been as much about the interior life of men—and, now, of women—as the external life of action. Harrison has consistently explored the workings of imagination, the nature of consciousness, and the mystery of personality, developing his art in the service of what post-Jungian psychologist James Hillman, and before him the poet John Keats, called "soul-making." Hillman, an American who spent nearly twenty years at the Jung Institute in Zurich, Switzerland, began publishing his major works in the mid-seventies. His psychological views about creativity and the connections among imagination, imagery, dreams, and the soul have aided Harrison in shaping and articulating his own literary vision and life's work.

Explicit references to Hillman's ideas begin as early as 1981 in *Warlock*, part two of which has an epigraph from Hillman's *The Dream and the Underworld*: "There is an imagination below the earth that abounds in animal forms, that revels and makes music" (117). Thereafter, Harrison mentions Hillman by name on the first page of *Sundog* (1984), in *Dalva* (122), and in a number of essays, most notably "Fording and Dread" ([*Just before*] *Dark*, 1982; 258, 259), "Passacaglia on Getting Lost" (*Dark*, 1986, 252), and "From the *Dalva* Notebooks, 1985-87" (*Dark*, 1988, 285). Furthermore, Harrison alludes to Hillman's ideas in nearly every work from "The Man Who Gave Up His Name" (1980) to "Julip" (1994).



Allusions to a Keats passage signifies the commonality between Jim Harrison's literature and James Hillman's psychology. Hillman quotes that passage frequently as capturing the purview of his "archetypal psychology" (*Blue Fire*, 6); and Harrison alludes to the same passage in a number of works, quoting it in "The Beige Dolorosa" (*Julip*, 248). In a letter to his brother, Keats wrote, "Call the world if you please, 'The vale of Soul-making.' Then you will find out the use of the world" (*Re-Visioning*, xv).

For Hillman, the soul refers to "that unknown human factor which turns events into experiences," investing the ordinary with significance. It is "the imaginative possibility in our natures . . . that mode which recognizes all realities as primarily symbolic." Hillman says of soul that it is "a perspective rather than a substance, a viewpoint toward things rather than a thing itself" (*Archetypal Psych*, 16–17). Not the Christian idea of soul, Hillman's conception is interchangeable with the Greek "psyche" and Latin "anima," a mediator between matter and spirit, body and mind (*Re-Visioning*, xvi).

The making of soul, Hillman writes, "calls for dreaming, fantasizing [sic], imaging" because "in the beginning is the image; first imagination then perception; first fantasy then reality" (*Re-Visioning*, 23). The psychologist's views about access to and development of soul through imaginative acts are, therefore, close to ideas of what writers do, especially since Hillman believes that imagined figures and persons are personifications of powers of the psyche, the soul. "In dreams, we are visited by the *daimones*, nymphs, heroes, and Gods shaped like our friends of last evening," Hillman writes (*Dreams*, 61–62). The courage to attend to such dreams, to participate in soul-making, is for Hillman synonymous with the novelist's courage:

Entering one's interior story takes a courage similar to starting a novel. We have to engage with persons whose autonomy may radically alter, even dominate our thoughts and feeling. . . . *It is a rare courage that submits to this middle region of psychic reality where the supposed surety of fact and illusion of fiction exchange their clothes.*

(*Healing*, 54–55, in *Blue*, 49)

The challenge to do this is so great, Hillman often asserts, that writers (and others) suffer from depression and turn for relief to obsessive drinking, eating, and sexual encounters, exercising "Herculean" efforts to dominate their surroundings. These are familiar problems in Harrison's autobiographical writing; and they are prominent in his fiction and poetry. Harrison's troubled male protagonists often try to overcome painful experience through obsessive drinking, womanizing, eating, hunting and fishing—masculine pursuits that readers and reviewers have believed epitomize Harrison's major interests.

But readers who consider Harrison's portrayals Hemingwayesque in romanticizing masculine adventurers, are wrong. As William H. Roberson has argued convincingly, "Harrison's protagonists may aspire to the 'tough guy' im-

age . . . [but] they are characters constantly questioning themselves, their lives, their purposes . . . and any pretense at macho is more an example of their own narcissism . . . than any reflection of male dominance" (241).

Harrison's failed-macho characters seek to lose themselves by trying to master their problems heroically. Their failures, ironically, are directly proportional to their tenacity in trying to dominate their "dayworld" lives (the common sense world of daily activities); they desperately need to give themselves over to the process of soul-making that occurs while dreaming and when opening to the indeterminate possibilities of dream images. Encouraged by many forces in American culture, men and women divorce themselves from reality, Hillman argues, by trying to achieve full control over circumstances. Ironically, they experience "loss of soul"; "All particular functions of ego-consciousness operate as before; associating, remembering, perceiving, feeling, and thinking are unimpaired. But one's conviction in oneself as a person and the sense of reality of the world have departed" (*Re-Visioning*, 44).

Certainly, this is true for failed artist, then unsuccessful foundation executive, Johnny "Warlock" Ludgren, in *Warlock*. Here is a mock-macho, fumbling, private detective who drives a four-cylinder Subaru rather than a black Trans Am, experiences terror in the woods of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, and is a would-be ladies' man whose sexual imagination is shaped by his stack of *Playboy*, *Oui*, and *Penthouse* magazines (30). In this comic novel, Warlock is so self-preoccupied, sitting for hours thinking at the kitchen table, that his wife, Diana, sneaks up behind him and screams, "Leave yourself alone!" (154). Good advice, Hillman would say. Warlock needs to plunge into the underworld through dreaming, where roles and personae are neither simple nor culturally determined.

Harrison's invitation for us to read the novel from that perspective is offered in the epigraphs to each of the novel's two sections which draw attention to Hillman's *The Dream and the Underworld* (1979) and emphasize Hillman's major premise that soul-making is associated with dreams and a bottomless downward movement. Quoting *A Midsummer Night's Dream* exactly as Hillman has edited the same passage, Harrison opens *Warlock* with the Shakespearean epigraph for *the Dream and the Underworld*:

I have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was: man is but an ass, if he go about to expound this dream. . . . The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was. . . . It shall be called "Bottom's Dream," because it hath no bottom; and I will sing it in the latter end of a play . . . to make it the more gracious, I shall sing it at her death.

The second epigraph in *Warlock*, a direct quotation from Hillman's book, mentions the downward movement again but emphasizes imagination's role: "*There is an imagina-*

tion below the earth that abounds in animal forms, that revels and makes music" (117). In addition, and underscoring the importance to Harrison of archetypal psychology, the companion epigraph to *The Dream and the Underworld* is from Carl G. Jung's *Psychology and Alchemy*: "The dread and resistance which every natural human being experiences when it comes to delving too deeply into himself is, at bottom, the fear of the journey to Hades."

Dread accounts for macho (Herculean) avoidance, but one must engage death (understood metaphorically) by taking the dream bridge to the underworld, to Hades, if soul-making is to occur. According to Hillman, the archetypal, mythic, transpersonal experience in those dreams has a salutary effect on our lives: because "We move from dream to . . . joyfulness" (132). In *Warlock*, Harrison engages these ideas with a brilliantly comic use of myth.

By alluding to Hillman's first chapter of *The Dream and the Underworld*, "The Bridge," Harrison reveals that his character, Warlock, without knowing, is embarking on a soul-making journey. As Warlock crosses the Mackinac Bridge to Michigan's Upper Peninsula, it seems to him a path over "some sort of holy Rubicon," an experience which resonates with an earlier dream; and the novel's narrator tells us that Warlock "did not know that the bridge of dreams is the bridge downward, and that in entering this terrain of sleep he had ruffled the ghastly feathers of the strange gods" (119).

Harrison's comic use of the many mythic elements in *Warlock* deflates the "melodramatic seriousness with which Warlock views his situation" (Gilligan, 149). Eventually Warlock grows away from his life-long confusion between the "day-world" of personal self or ego and the dream-infused world of the soul-making self. At first Warlock had tried to control and change his life "heroically," vowing to live by simple rules:

Number One: Eat Sparingly  
Number Two: Avoid Adultery  
Number Three: Do Your best in Everything  
Number Four: Get in First Rate Shape.

(54)

He had quickly and repeatedly failed to follow any of the rules. Warlock needs to heed the admonition of his mentor—significantly named Vergil—who gives advice Hillman might give about abandoning efforts to control one's life: "You don't live in the actual world. You live in a far inferior world where you dissipate all your energies making the world conform to your wishes" (75).

Ultimately, Warlock silences his obsessional concern with Self by crossing the bridge that draws him downward into the rich and potent world of his interior life, the world of personified images, of myth, of material for soul-making. We learn with Warlock that "beneath the slick and sophisticated surface of American life the old nature gods still exercise their capricious power" (Treadwell, 225).

Thus the novel ends joyfully, with human wishes in concert with nature. Warlock confidently heads in the right direction after hearing the goddess of this hunt's horn (his wife Diana's car horn). The horn sounds to Warlock like Pan piping; the night world has invigorated his day world experience. Harrison's and Hillman's point is that "the surety of fact and illusion of fiction [have] exchange[d] clothes" during soul-making.

That exchange between fact and fiction is apparent even in the title of Harrison's next novel directly influenced by Hillman's ideas: *Sundog, a Novel, The Story of an American Foreman, Robert Corvus Strang, as Told to Jim Harrison* (1984).

In *Sundog* a fictional Jim Harrison is a depressed novelist whose work has deteriorated to writing a book about game cookery and who has found that "gluttony, alcohol, painkillers . . . didn't work anymore" (xii; while discussing *Sundog*, I will refer to the fictional character as "Jim Harrison" and the author as "Harrison"). In this enervated state, Jim Harrison is invited to write about "someone who has actually done something," Robert Corvus Strang, an extraordinary hydraulic engineer who builds dams for irrigation systems in third world countries (xi). *Sundog* consists of taped interviews with Strang and of protagonist Jim Harrison's comments upon Strang's process of self-healing. Strang had injured leg nerves in a fall from a dam, a problem compounded by physical and mental effects of an Indian herbal medication he had taken since childhood for epilepsy. These problems not only parallel the fictional Jim Harrison's "nerves" and alcohol abuse, they are problems the living Harrison faced while writing this novel. In "Fording and Dread," Harrison portrays himself as resembling the novel's Jim Harrison. During four months alone in an Upper Peninsula Michigan cabin, the setting for *Sundog*, Harrison had notes for the novel but nothing written, as he worried about "lost energy and interest," wanting freedom from "dread, alcohol, gluttony, habits of all sorts" and wondering if "the character [Strang] I'm inventing is the one I wish to become" (*Dark*, 257). Strang's overarching motivation is to continue his work, the problem both the fictional and real life Harrisons confront. The question is, Harrison says in "Fording and Dread," "How does one regenerate?" *Sundog* seeks the answer. The protagonist Jim Harrison says in the aptly titled first section, "Author's Note" (the living Jim Harrison, inevitably present), that the Strang writing project began "the rather nagging and painful beginning for me of a long voyage back toward Earth" (xi).

James Hillman is on the mind of both Jim Harrisons. The novel's opening paragraph mentions Hillman: "The contemporary mage James Hillman has told us that the notion that there is a light at the end of the tunnel has mostly been a boon to pharmaceutical companies," referring to Hillman's contention that efforts at soul-making through therapy or other efforts, including Christian dogmas such as the resurrection, cannot obliterate depression (*Sundog*, ix; *Inter Views*, 19–21). There is no final cure for suffering

and no fixed point of rest; “fluidity and grace are all” (ix; *Inter Views*, 17). Author Harrison learned this lesson and found an answer to his question, “How does one regenerate?” when he stopped taking notes for *Sundog* and “read the galleries of the new James Hillman book,” *Healing Fictions* (*Dark*, 258).

*Healing Fictions*—like *Sundog, a Novel, The Story of an American Foreman, Robert Corvus Strang, as Told to Jim Harrison*—is a title with multiple meanings: narratives that heal people and the healing of narratives, both applicable to *Sundog*. The book’s underlying themes are that “our reality is created through our fictions; to be conscious of these fictions is to gain creative access to, and participation in, the poetics or making of our psyche or soul-life” (George Quasha, “Preface,” ix). And Harrison must have been struck by Hillman’s assertion in *Healing Fictions* that “the act of turning to imagination is not an act of introspection: it is a negative capability, a willful suspension of disbelief in [one’s] works of the imagination] and belief in oneself as their author” (58–59). That, we know, for Hillman and Harrison both, is the ground for soul-making. “According to Hillman,” Harrison writes, “our main guide is the story we have already collected and written for ourselves” (*Dark*, 258). It does no good, Harrison continues, to “hammer at our psyches as if they were tract houses” in order to avoid painful emotions and assure “self-improvement,” using an idea Harrison attributes to Hillman and a phrase he puts in the mouth of the character Jim Harrison in *Sundog* (18). Harrison learns from Hillman that “dread and all her improbabilities are an inevitability we must make our lover” (*Dark*, 260).

Strang does make dread his lover. Rather than avoiding his pain by drinking compulsively and womanizing, he embraces it. His therapy is to crawl for miles through difficult terrain and, later, day after day, to swim in a river’s cold waters, even at night, periodically telling his story, his fiction, to Jim Harrison. Strang’s disease and disability, in Hillman’s view, does not indicate something essentially wrong with him. On the contrary, “whatever appears wounded, sick, or dying may be understood as that content leading . . . into the House of Hades,” a sign of the soul’s necessary movement into the realm of psyche in the process of soul-making (*Dream*, 146–47). There, images—not ideas or words—are the language of soul; Strang has a waking night-time experience when “all my thoughts illustrated themselves by vividly colored pictures” (213; *Archetypal Psych*, 6).

Strang, clearly, is a soul-maker. His story is a healing fiction which emphasizes two symbolic foci: women and the river. Too complex to discuss fully here, I will comment only on the symbols’ basic thematic implications for *Sundog*. Women and the river are linked imaginatively, if not logically. This is first indicated when Strang’s daughter, Evelyn, tells Jim Harrison early that information about Strang’s illnesses and physical limitations isn’t helpful compared with paying attention to what Strang calls “the theory and practice of rivers” and knowing that Strang

“understands women better than any man I have ever known” (5). The unfolding of Strang’s tale that becomes *Sundog* details his insights derived from relations with women and his theory and practice of rivers.

There are many women: Strang’s childhood friend, Edith; his nurse-lover in Africa; Violet his sister-mother; and Eulia, his adopted daughter who seems his lover. They, in the aggregate, are the voices of his anima, which express what lies below his story and complete it. Of his love for the nurse, Strang says “it was a frightening love that I embraced,” the answer in some measure to the question “someone asked, ‘What have you done with the twin that was given us when we were given our soul?’” (164). “Someone” was James Hillman, whom Harrison says is “an unbelievably brilliant [sic] man” who helped him understand that the male artist must have a highly developed feminine aspect (*Dark*, 259; “Art of Fiction,” 73). The twin-anima figure, a favorite among Harrison’s symbols, has a meaning so rich for him that he ends *Just Before Dark* with a poem to her, the mysterious secret sharer of his soul who is met in dreams that “dream myself back to what I lost, and continue to lose and regain, to an earth where I am a fellow creature and to a landscape I can call HOME”:

Who is the other,  
this secret sharer  
Who directs the hand  
that twists the heart,  
the voice calling out to me  
between feather and stone  
the hour before dawn?

(317)

These women, faces of the anima, which personify the soul’s powers of the imagination, even the soul itself (*Re-Vision*, 43), are fittingly associated with Strang’s “theory and practice of rivers,” which, of course, is the title of Harrison’s own poem published five years after *Sundog*. Hillman writes that “Anima means both psyche and soul, and we meet her in her numerous embodiments as soul of waters without whom we dry . . .” (*Re-Visioning*, 42).

Rivers give Strang “that incredible sweet feeling I once got from religion” as he gives himself over to psyche and soul-making (197). His life’s work with hydrology, which had begun as an extension of his Christian evangelism, had led to a theory and practice of rivers related to the making of his own soul. Strang’s last interview with Jim Harrison affirms connections between river symbolism, dreams, full consciousness, and soul-making:

Do you realize how unspeakably grand it was to come up to this cabin, the area of my youth, after that long in a hospital. . . . That’s why I refused all those drugs after awhile. I had to be conscious. That’s all. How could I bear not being conscious? Last night I was swimming in the dark in my dreams and it was wonderful.

(235)



The novel's Jim Harrison thinks he is not yet ready to emulate Strang, admits that "I tried to imagine what it would be like to swim down a large river at night, but couldn't quite make it," and turns in his imagination for a moment to a pornographically inspired fantasy "vision of a buttocks as big as the Ritz" (236–37, 240). Nevertheless, Jim Harrison has been in a significant way restored by his working relationship with Strang. The taping complete, packing his bags to leave, Jim Harrison reveals that he stopped to "reread Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* for the umpteenth time," saying "There aren't any old myths, just new people," referring of course to Strang as a journeying hero but as well to himself as one called to the vocation of writing (236). That calling for Harrison, the author, is understood as religious, and "the worst thing is the refusal of the call" ("Art of Fiction," 92). The character Jim Harrison hears the call and begins the "long voyage back towards Earth."

Harrison's long poem, "The Theory and Practice of Rivers," integrates and elaborates the Jim Harrison and Robert Corvus Strang figures into a single speaker close to the writer Harrison. As well, it elaborates Hillman's ideas about waking the gods within. The poem's speaker, a poet, like *Sundog*'s Jim Harrison, is "drowning in a bourgeois trough, a *bourride* or gruel of money, drugs, / whiskey, hotels, the dream coasts . . ." and has forgotten "what it was I liked / about life" (20, 24). He sits on the banks of an unnamed northern Michigan river, thinking through his pain, making his way eventually into the water and a healing process that will restore his will to live and power to create. Harrison's poem itself is "designed to waken sleeping gods," for Hillman mythic personifications of the psyche (21).

Harrison experienced such integration in his own life, and expressed it in terms similar to those in "The Theory and Practice of Rivers" and *Sundog*. Recalling the traumas of an eye blinded in childhood, the deaths of his sister and father in a car accident, his young niece's death, his continuing financial and alcohol problems, ensuing psychoanalysis with Lawrence Sullivan, and dreams of many years—Harrison reports his own healing in language consonant with Hillman's language and concepts. In "Dream as a Metaphor of Survival," Harrison writes:

Slowly, and mostly in my imagination, I had begun to swim in waters that sensible folks would readily drown in, mostly in the area of consensual reality. . . . Concurrently my work began to revolve around more 'feminine' subjects, the acquiring of new voices, and away from a concern with the "men at loose ends" that tends to characterize the fiction of most male writers.

(*Dark*, 312)

He discovers "the evident attempt of my dream life to relocate me, to protect me from an apparent fragility I tried to overcome with drugs and alcohol, the over dominance in my life of 'manly' pursuits. I no longer try to 'guts out' anything" (317).

After *Sundog*, not surprisingly, Harrison wrote three works with women protagonists: the novel *Dalva* (1988) and two novellas, "The Woman Lit By Fireflies" (1990) and "Julip" (1994). None is as directly and pervasively shaped by Hillman's works as *Sundog*, but all reflect his influence. For example, Michael, Dalva's misdirected lover, an alcoholic Stanford University historian, displays his spiritual blindness and inferiority to Dalva by making an acerbic remark about Hillman. After Dalva speculates about connections between her waking life and her dreams about Nebraska, Indians, and animals, Michael parades his erudition by lecturing about Freud, commenting on Otto Rank and Karen Horney, and "in the interest of winning the point" deliberately overlooks "those irrational mush-mouths Carl Jung and his contemporary camp follower, James Hillman" (122).

In many ways, *Dalva* is an answer to Hillman's question, "What have you done with the twin that was given us when we were given our soul?" Harrison, while writing the novel, noted that "Dalva is probably my twin sister who was taken away at birth" (*Dark*, 288). She is his psyche, the mysterious sharer of his soul that makes soul-making possible, whom he meets in dreams that "dream myself back to what I lost . . . to an earth where I am a fellow creature and to a landscape I can call HOME" (*Dark*, 317). "Going Home" is the title of the novel's third and final section, in which Dalva returns to the Nebraska prairie, the landscape of her family history.

The novel ends with reconciliation between Dalva and that place, between Dalva and her mixed-blood son whom she had given up for adoption at birth, and between the living and the dead. This last is especially important because she reconciles with a past that is the nation's "soul" history—another concept Harrison and Hillman share (*Archetypal Psych*, 26; *Blue*, 95–111, 166–92). In *Dalva* the white settlers' mistreatment of the Sioux is a cause of the nation's soul sickness. Dalva's family's history involved trying to help the Sioux but, ironically, prospering from Indian lands the family acquired. Some basis for reconciliation is symbolized by her great-great grandfather (whose Indian name, "Earth-diver," alludes to Hillman's idea that in dreams we go "under the earth") marrying a Sioux woman; Dalva, herself, having a child by her mixed-blood half-brother, Duane Stonehorse; Dalva's eventual reunion with her son; and her loving relationship with Sam Creekmouth (*Re-Visioning*, 33).

Of the other two works focused on women's consciousness, "The Woman Lit By Fireflies" owes most to Hillman. In it Clare, at fifty and on impulse, leaves her self-centered husband at a highway rest stop, climbs the fence into a corn field, and spends the night in memory and dream until "relocated" in relation to herself, nature, and others. The situation is archetypal: she makes an animal's lair—a "green cave"—for herself, builds a fire, and is interrupted from her dreams and reflections only by a companionable awareness of animals and birds nearby (a rabbit, opossum, cock pheasant) and in dreams (bear,

horse). Animals and birds that come to her mind and imagination are “soul doctors” (*Dream*, 150). Harrison has frequently cited Hillman’s remarks in *Dream and the Underworld* that animals are “carriers of soul . . . there to help us see in the dark” (*Dream*, 148; *Dark*, 285). Clare, whose veterinarian daughter observes that she behaves as if her spirit is detached from her body, comes back to her body, waking in the morning to a “green odor transmitting a sense she belonged to the earth as much as any living thing” (*Woman [Lit By Fireflies]*, 237). Eventually, she feels blessed by “countless thousands of fireflies” surrounding her and, closing her eyes, “felt herself floating in memory from her beginning, as if on a river” (239–40). Having reached into herself to a level that transcends the personal, Clare is “at home.”

“The Beige Dolorosa,” in *Julip*, Harrison’s most recent volume of novellas, is thoroughly indebted to Hillman’s concept of “coming home” through a change in personality resulting from soul-making; and it can serve to summarize the impact of Hillman’s ideas on Harrison’s writings. The work’s connections among dreaming as soulful activity, nature’s creatures as soul doctors, and an eventual return to an acceptable ordinary life are consistently articulated with Hillman’s ideas.

In this comic work, the first-person protagonist, a disgraced, minimally functioning, midwestern college English professor, is on forced leave, staying in a cabin on a small southeastern Arizona ranch. After a year’s work on a paper-back edition of John Clare’s poetry, he has managed to write only “Clare was Clare” on a three-by-five card (*Julip*, 199). His spiritual resources seem as minimal as his professional accomplishments.

The novella dramatizes the professor’s change in personality, a spiritual renewal. Dreams are central to the novella. One “instructed me to walk the border of the forest and open land, and at the same time to rename the birds of North America,” which he suspects will develop a “taxonomy . . . based on the spiritual consequences of the natural world” (246; Harrison’s identical dream is recorded in *Dark*, 316). Hillman argues that naming, as Adam named animals in Eden, is part of personification, of creating images and metaphors, that relate to others as “living psychic subjects,” not objects (*Re-Visioning*, 31–32). To rename the brown thrasher the “beige dolorosa,” is a spiritual decision for the protagonist for the richly metaphorical name suggests the sorrow and depression Hillman sees as a necessary prelude to entering the underworld and soul-making. The name remains the protagonist of a musical phrase from Mozart (the “Jupiter” symphony is mentioned earlier), “one that makes your heart pulse with mystery. . . .” Such mystery occurs when “you were exercising the glories of your negative capability and thus were plumb in the vale of soul-making.” Remaining in the “forest glade,” continuing to meditate on “Keats’s notions of ‘the value of soul-making,’ which [he] had never properly understood,” the professor realizes that “I had been guilty like so many in controlling myself when

there was nothing left to control.” He “tingle(s) with pleasure” as he understands fully that he is, at that very moment, in the “value of soul-making” (248).

Thereafter, he experiences that profound mystery in a series of encounters with birds—an unnamed warbler, dozens of tiny elf owls who speak to him, and the beige dolorosa itself, who peered up at him “as if I might be a tree” (252, 258, 257). The birds are signs of soul-healing, for here and elsewhere in both Hillman and Harrison birds are associated with angels on the one hand and words on the other, both bearing messages for the soul’s nourishment (*Blue*, 28; *Re-Visioning*, 216; *Archetypal Psych*, 13–14; *Dark*, 260). Among the birds, the protagonist of “The Beige Dolorosa” is overcome by “feeling at home, whether I deserved to or not” (258–59), the same feeling of blessing Clare experienced in “The Woman Lit By Fireflies” (239) and which pervades the final scene of *Dalva*’s “Book III, Going Home.”

Jim Harrison has often been misread as primarily concerned with the natural world—with fishing, hunting, eating, and sex. But that is a diminished and, finally, distorted view of his ambition and achievement. Both Jim Harrison and James Hillman envision the physical, natural world as crucial to spiritual growth. An understanding of Harrison’s descriptions of the external world, especially nature, is more complex if it begins in Thomas Moore’s characterization of Hillman’s ideas about relationships between the material and spiritual—that “Soul is always tethered to life in the world” (*Blue*, 112). Harrison has said of his own life that immersion in nature has saved him from suicide. While that may be literally understood, it should be understood metaphorically as well, since “soul-making” takes place in “the vale of this world” when the ordinary ego dies. Significantly, both Harrison and Hillman allude to alchemy as a precursor to modern soul-making because alchemy was created to locate soul in the materials of this world (*Blue*, 55–56; *Julip*, 187).

Harrison’s literary and spiritual vision insists that he explore the world in ways that evoke the images of a “common dream” that alters consciousness. Hillman writes that a faith that begins in the love of images and “flows mainly through the shapes of persons in reveries, fantasies, reflections, and imaginings,” gives one an “increasing conviction of having . . . an interior reality of deep significance transcending one’s personal life” (*Re-Visioning*, 50). This is a faith that Jim Harrison has deepened through his art, a faith that his soul-making characters—Warlock, Strang, Dalva, Clare, the professor—come to experience. Jim Harrison’s complex body of work, indebted in part to James Hillman’s “archetypal psychology,” is reason to remember, in Hillman’s language, that words are “carriers of soul between people” (*Re-Visioning*, 9). In turning our world into language, Harrison is, finally, fully engaged in exploring the nature of consciousness as the expression of, as well as site for,

soul-making. As he has emphasized in many places, Harrison—quoting D.H. Lawrence this time—believes that the writer is “a hero of consciousness” (“The Art of Fiction,” 89).

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## FURTHER READING

### Criticism

*Americana*. A review of *The Passing: Perspectives of Rural America*. *Americana* 16, No. 6 (January-February 1989): 14.

Provides an overview of the blending of illustrations and stories in *The Passing: Perspectives of Rural America*.

Kauffmann, Stanley. “Stanley Kauffmann on Films: Under Western Skies.” In *New Republic* 212, No. 1 (2 January 1995): 26–7.

Discusses the plot and flaws of director Edward Zwick’s adaptation of “Legends of the Fall” to film.

**Additional coverage of Harrison’s life and career is contained in the following sources published by the Gale Group: *Contemporary Authors*, Volumes 13-16R; *Contemporary Authors New Revision Series*, Volumes 8, 51, 79; *Contemporary Novelists*; *Contemporary Poets*. *Dictionary of Literary Biography Yearbook*, Volume 82; *Short Story Criticism*, Volume 19.**



