

Journals

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ENGL 525

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14 July 2008

Journal #1

Kurt Vonnegut, “Harrison Bergeron”

In the space of just a few short pages, Kurt Vonnegut’s “Harrison Bergeron” manages to convey the anger and frustration with complete social control that takes several hundred in Orwell’s classic “1984.”

Yet the system of control in “Harrison Bergeron” is a product of seemingly benevolent concerns. The desire for “equality” or equal opportunity stems directly from the right to pursue happiness set forth in the American Declaration of Independence. What it is meant to establish is that everyone should have the opportunity to reach a state of happiness under the protection of the law. The inherent problem with the America seen in Vonnegut’s story is that this same right has been so twisted that by forcing everyone to have the exact same opportunity, the law is essentially denying the ability for many people to achieve happiness.

Not everyone is created equal, regardless of position upon birth; every person exists with a unique set of skills they can develop. The America that Vonnegut creates is one where every person is altered to become “equal every which way” (1332). The problem with this scenario is the method in which this is enforced. How can you equalize the most handicapped with the most able person? Without a means of “raising” the disabled, the only solution is to handicap the strongest to make everyone equal. This America is a chain that is only as strong as its weakest link. Is this situation

inherently prohibitive of progress? With total equality is there any potential for change? Not when the catalyst is deliberately stifled.

The use of mental handicap radios, sash-weights, bags of birdshot, and masks are intended to control aspects of humanity that are often envied by others. Intelligence, physical strength, beauty and ability are controlled by the United States “Handicapper General.” In such a tightly controlled environment, how or why would Harrison Bergeron break free from his chains? Especially when he has incredibly “heavy” limits placed upon him. In a way, Harrison is both the embodiment of individualism as well as the greatest fear for a world “contained” by total equality. Vonnegut’s world is the diametric opposite of the current American mindset that prides itself on the individuality and subsequent progress it receives from its diverse citizenry.

Does this mean that Vonnegut is against equality? Not at all. However, there is an underlying message that warns us against the extreme possibilities that result from radical reinterpretation of centuries old idealism in America.

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15 July 2008

Journal #2

Bernard Malamud, “The Model”

Bernard Malamud’s “The Model” examines the need and motivations for human connection in a very honest, almost hauntingly sad way. When Malamud’s main character Mr. Elihu asks himself “is there nothing more to my life than it is now? Is this all that is left to me?” (225), he is not referring to an abstract hope of returning to activities (such as painting) to fulfill his life, but rather to the emptiness that consumes him in a world where he is unable to connect with others easily.

Specifically, Mr. Elihu is distraught by his lack of “women friends at this time of [his] ... life” (225). A crucial part of determining modern American social status and value is derived from “success” in interaction with the opposite sex. There is significant pressure to view the value of one’s life as a result. However, Mr. Elihu is presented as a man who once had these things that are now lost to him, and despite his age is assaulted by the same unconscious expectations and animalistic desire that is rarely explored in those nearing the end of their lives. This social component or need to find value in his life through women is only half of the story.

Mr. Elihu’s motivations for hiring a nude model are complex. At first, it appears that he is more interested in companionship when “he wanted to talk longer” to the receptionist at the modeling agency (221). His interaction with the model, Miss Perry, generally reinforces the idea that he is not interested in her body alone. When painting

her, “his expression is objective,” he “studied her momentarily to see what she might have seen in [the ailanthus tree],” and he “did not often look at her” (225). Mr. Elihu’s actions seem to suggest sincerity, or merely a timid interest in her body, but at the same time why did he choose a “nude” model in the first place? While not sinister by any means, the choice is not entirely innocent either. Perhaps this is why he feels so “ashamed to sign his name” on the payment check for Miss Perry (225).

Additionally, because he resorts to using a ploy to meet women, his question at the end of the story has a secondary meaning. As an older man, he might feel that there are no other options available to him, that “this” process of tricking people into seeing him is “all that is left to [him]” (225). In this case Malamud paints a genuinely bleak outlook on the final years of the lives of many.

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16 July 2008

Journal #3

William S. Burroughs, “The Coming of the Purple Better One”

By approaching the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago from a near surrealist perspective, William S. Burroughs’ “The Coming of the Purple Better One” has the luxury of addressing serious anti-establishment sentiments as if they were a farce. Burroughs’ imagery is used to represent his three primary concerns: Politics, Enforcement, and Revolution. The (then) current political system is represented by a purple assed baboon that can’t speak for itself and its actions and emotions controlled by an electronic stimulus device. His choice suggests that of a figurehead that is being controlled by a “political machine.” The police and judicial system (enforcement) are best represented when Burroughs states, “And what [are] the phantom fuzz screaming from Chicago to Berlin ... ? ‘We are REAL REAL REAL!! REAL as this NIGHTSTICK!” (97). Where Burroughs creates a foolish, machine controlled image of political control, the idea of equating the policing force with a symbol of brutality is just as shocking. At the same time, both are represented as systems of control that are no longer in control of themselves.

Is Burroughs’ “youth rebellion [that] is a worldwide phenomenon that has not been seen before in history” the inevitable solution to a broken system of control? Burroughs seems to believe that the eventual turnover must bring change on a “basic level” to five issues facing America in the 1960s: “Vietnam”, “Alienated Youth”, “Black

Power”, “Our Police and Judicial System”, and “the disappearing dollar” (97-101). In retrospect, outside of Vietnam and some (though not complete) progress with racism and civil rights in America, very few fundamental changes have been made since 1968. Is the “youth rebellion” itself a repeating cycle that has now lost its potency in 2008? Has it also become a system that has lost control of itself? Burroughs’ concept of “total confrontation,” his assertion that “all Americans are being shoved by the deadweight of a broken control machine right in front of each other’s faces” is just as relevant today as it was when Burroughs wrote it.

This is the major issue with the effectiveness of the text. Burroughs acknowledges major issues within America but does not propose a solution. Essentially the story is a masterful piece of torch lighting. However, the fact that some of his concerns still exist today in full force show both the lasting quality of the story, and also its inability to truly create a genuine effect on American society.

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17 July 2008

Journal #4

Gwendolyn Brooks, "We Real Cool"

Gwendolyn Brooks' short poem "We Real Cool" is the embodiment of the live fast, die hard mentality that American youth culture has embraced for the last fifty years. The short line structure of the poem "strike[s] straight" as a punch to the gut. Short lines allow Brooks to speak her message both through words as well as form.

"We Real Cool" attempts to tell a story that has become somewhat of an urban archetype. One following the lives of the kids that are "too cool for school," that turn to the excesses of life and end up dying before their time, like a brilliant flame on a short fuse. The poem serves both as a commendation and as a condemnation of this lifestyle. Each line presents a connection between being "cool" and some sort of nefarious behavior. Her subjects are uneducated ("lurk late"), fighters ("strike straight" though not necessarily in the physical sense), sinners ("sing sin"), drinkers ("thin gin"), that revel in their own life choices ("Jazz June"). The use of alliteration to empower these messages only makes them stronger. Ultimately this message culminates when she presents the final line of the poem "die soon." The word "we," which is present in every other line of the poem, is absent in the final line. This truncates the poem, similar to the action of the imminent death spoken of in the last line. Brooks seems to be preaching that this is the eventual result of leading this type of life. However, there is a certain quality of rebelliousness present in the words. It is almost as if the speakers in

the poem are claiming that no one has the right to tell them when they can die. Even if they make poor choices, it is their right to make those choices. Even if Brooks were to tell them not to, there is power in the message.

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21 July 2008

Journal #5

Frank O'Hara, "Having a Coke with You"

Should there be a limitation on how conversational poetry can be? Frank O'Hara's poetic style flows as if the author himself were actually speaking to the reader. It is as if O'Hara were taking a verbal "slice" of a conversation in order to write. It resembles the rambling stream of consciousness of someone who talks too much. "Having a Coke with You" demonstrates this by connecting lines as ideas that are in a constant flux, the words flow without having a chance to catch up with the images being presented. As if he is speaking before the words had been fully formulated in his mind. The four line section where O'Hara begins each line with "partly" is an excellent example. While he is attempting to explain why "having a coke with" the subject is more fun than traveling, or being sick to his stomach, he jumps constantly from one subset of reasoning to the next. From the way the subject looks in an "orange shirt" to O'Hara's love for them, to the subject's love of yoghurt, to the scenery or the "orange tulips around the birches" around the place he is speaking in, to returning back to the subject and the surroundings with "secrecy of smiles ... before people and statuary." This gives the reader the impression that O'Hara is speaking what he is seeing, or thinking as he is looking around. O'Hara uses the conversational, stream of consciousness style to create a realistic sense of time, a sense of presence that roots the reader firmly in the same moment, as well as to express multiple layers of detail both inside and

outside of O'Hara's mind. Essentially, O'Hara is trying to prevent the reader from being "cheated of some marvelous experience," which is why he is "telling you about it" in the first place. The imagery is concrete, and O'Hara's unique style gives him the ability to create something that a more focused "poetic" form would be unable to express.

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22 July 2008

Journal #6

Denise Levertov, Selected Poems

Is anyone truly blameless during war? Do some carry more of the blame than others? Is war a fundamental practice of human nature? Denise Levertov's writings on the Vietnam and the First Gulf wars relate disturbing perspectives on both willing and unwilling participants. In "What Were They Like," Levertov creates a dialogue between an uninformed officer (or otherwise higher up who has not seen combat experience) and a soldier who has been active in Vietnam. The question "Did the people of Viet Nam use lanterns of stone" that reflect the early American view of the Vietnamese as little more than savages. The question "Had they an epic poem?" is ethnocentric, and shows that the officer must find a relative common ground within western ideals. Who is to say that the Vietnamese would even *have* the same forms of expressing themselves? The question is incredibly naive. The soldier responds to the officer's questions with bitter answers, that Levertov is able to show that the soldier is *sympathetic* to the plight of the Vietnamese people. However, the poem shows that neither is blameless regardless of their individual experience. The officer's disdainful curiosity is almost less sinister than the solder's bitter knowledge of what he has been a direct participant of.

"The Pilots" further extends Levertov's viewpoint on who exactly she feels can be responsible for the actions of war. When Levertov asks "if they did understand precisely

/ what they were doing, and did it anyway, and would do it again/ ... how shall I ever again/ be able to meet the eyes of Mrs. Brown," she is questioning the motives for more than the active and inactive participants of the war effort (102). The problem with this is that this type of reasoning can continue to be stretched out, from citizens who support the war, to those who disapprove but take no action, even to those who take action but have made no lasting changes. Perhaps this is why Levertov wrote, "Life at War." In it she writes that the "knowledge that humankind ... still turns without surprise, with mere regret" to the horrific images of war is a proof that we as humans have not reached our full potential. Yet, "Life at War" has the most promising message out of all her selected (for class) poetry. The ultimate statement of the poem wants readers to believe that there is a very real possibility for the human race to achieve the "deep intelligence living at peace would have." We are just not there yet.

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23 July 2008

Journal #7

Philip Lamantia, Selected Poems

Reading Philip Lamantia is like experiencing a lucid dream. The strength of his poetry lies in the juxtaposition of seemingly unrelated concepts in order to create impossible imagery. His poetry is decidedly surreal, a window to the unconscious mind, a constructed and organized view of the world through the eyes of a madman. Yet this strength also makes gathering conventional "meaning" from Lamantia's poetry nearly impossible. The sensation is similar to viewing a Remedios Varo painting: it doesn't explicitly make sense, but at the same time it is beautiful. For example, Lamantia begins "Infernal Landscape" with "A window that never ends." The concept is impossible, yet there is a reason why Lamantia chose the image in the first place. Considering that if there were to be a window of infinite dimensions (on a two dimensional plane) you would have to be either on one side, or the other. Yet the "Infernal Landscape" appears to exist *within* the window "where infant eyes are unhooked/ from the paper clown/ who stands on a shattered mirror/ picking rocks from his heart" (92). In the first stanza alone, Lamantia is able to shift the focus from an impossible place, to an impossible *action*, to the image of a shattered mirror (within an infinite window, broken glass within solid glass), to another impossible action (how could a *paper* clown take *rocks* from its *heart*?). None of this could ever exist outside of this kind of writing, and yet his choices of imagery are not without reasoning. Lamantia's poetry is not *randomly*

designed to create the most unrealistic mental conceptualizations. "Awakened from Sleep" is written almost as an explanation of the source of his ideas. He writes, "There is no rule here, / No seasons and no misery; / There are only our desires" (75). This is a direct reference to the Freudian concept of the *id*, which is presumably the part of our consciousness where our desires exist.

Additionally Lamantia's use of language and structure show writing that operates on a higher level. The point is to expose the mind to verbal experiences that would otherwise be ignored during conscious cognitive processes. Lamantia asks readers to access unfamiliar or unexplored areas of the mind in order to experience something incredible.

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24 July 2008

Journal #8

Toni Morrison, from "Sula"

At what point does the human mind break when confronted with the reality of its own mortality? Does every near death experience have the potential to change someone irrevocably? Private Shadrack in Toni Morrison's "Sula" is left broken by his experience in war. At first I didn't buy that the first scene was enough to leave him permanently disabled. If this was his first combat experience, why leave him with hallucinations of gigantic hands? The hands symbolize that he fears something that he has done, or created. However, he did not even get a chance to shoot or even kill anyone before he was knocked out and the scene shifts to Shadrack opening his eyes in a hospital bed. There is a huge disconnect between the sequences signified by a gap in the text, which suggests that a long period of time passed between the two events. But it isn't explained how he managed to get all the way from the combat zone to the town without waking up. As an authorial choice, Morrison leaves it ambiguous for a reason; the exact causes for his mental trauma are never completely explained. It seems that the story would be better off opening with Shadrack in the hospital, leaving the motivations for his insanity ambiguous entirely. Would Morrison lose the connection between the first scene and Shadrack's fear of mortality and his creation of the National Suicide Day in order to alleviate that fear? No. Morrison explains all she needs to by writing, "He knew the smell of death and was terrified of it, for he could not anticipate

it" (14). At the same time, the opening sequence contains some of the best writing and imagery within the whole piece. This made me realize that Morrison's key point is the only one that really needs to be explained.

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28 July 2008

Journal #9

Toni Cade Bambara, "The Lesson"

What is more important, the lesson being taught or the lesson that is learned?

Toni Cade Bambara's "The Lesson" operates on two distinct levels. On the surface, Bambara appears to be writing a story about the need for change in the fundamental economic structure of America. Wealth is unevenly distributed in a world where people can spend "\$1000 for toy sailboats" while others are starving (425). Beneath the message, is a more troubling revelation. The majority of "The Lesson" focuses on bringing knowledge of to the eyes of those who Bambara feels are being victimized by the American system of economic control. The problem is that despite her best efforts the "lesson" is not necessarily learned by anyone. That is the second part of Bambara's story, where there is a deep seated resistance to change that results from being raised in a society that wishes to keep the rich wealthy.

This creates the split in Bambara's text between the lesson taught and the lesson learned. The teacher, Miss Moore, comes from a relatively elevated position in society. This creates a disconnect between her and her students who, for the most part, are incredibly poor. Only one can even afford a desk, which makes it even harder for Miss Moore to create any lasting change for her students if they don't have the tools necessary to properly follow her example. Essentially, Miss Moore is able to teach some of the students that "Equal chance to pursue happiness means an equal

crack at the dough" by taking them to F.A.O. Schwartz and showing them what they do not have because others are taking their share of the "pie" (425). Miss Moore's point is that they need to do something about it.

The lesson learned by the narrator, Sylvia, is very different. Her last thoughts in the story, "she can run if she want to and even run faster. But ain't nobody gonna beat me at nuthin" reveal a more independent or individualistic desire for success (426). Miss Moore has opened Sylvia's eyes to a problem, but she was unable to convince her to take action against the system. It seems almost as if she is more interested in making things better for herself than making things better for others as a whole. She keeps leftover cab money she conned out of Miss Moore at the beginning of the story. Even though she gives some of that money to her friend Sugar, the money is ultimately spent and disappears and no problems are solved. This is precisely the resistance to revolutionary ideas that Bambara is trying to relate.

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29 July 2008

Journal #10

Ann Beattie, "Snow"

Ann Beattie uses her power as an author to mimic the human process of memory. By effectively using techniques of perspective and selective omission she is able to present a realistic view of the change between the passages of time into memory, a relationship into a single word. When Beattie writes, "Any life will seem dramatic if you omit mention of most of it" she is referring to a writing technique that she is using for the story as well as the way our minds tend to choose highlights and vivid recollections of specific moments that are unique to each individual. "People," she writes, "forget years and remember moments." The narrator does just this during the course of the story by recalling specific incidents that were in some way important to her. For example: The "night out under the lawn," the car ride with the headlights off, or the chipmunk that "ran to hide in the dark" (170). The last incident is told as if it were supposed to be from the perspective of her ex-lover, but in reality it is her own spin on what she *believes* that he was thinking. She could not know how he remembered it any more than she could jump into his mind and recall the memory for herself.

If our minds automatically omit the majority of events, then are our recollections of our lives inherently dramatic? If the process continues where all we can recall from a vast period of time is a single word that carries the entirety of the meaning (such as snow), can a single word be used to tell a story? That's stretching it a little bit, but

using the word "Snow" as the title was a brilliant choice by Beattie. All you need to do is think of the word "snow" after reading it and you recall the story. Over time as the memory of reading it fades, all you are left with is the word. Following that, it depends on whether or not your mind chooses to remember or forget the story. The action is very similar to the image of the snowplow she uses at the end. "No mention has been made of the snowplow that seemed always to be there, scraping snow," as if it were clearing out old memories without you even knowing you were doing it.

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4 August 2008

Journal #13

Adrienne Rich, "Diving into the Wreck"

It is not a coincidence that Adrienne Rich's "Diving into the Wreck" appears to be a poem about something that it is not. On the "surface," "Diving into the Wreck" seems to be a poem about a diver searching for a wreck on the ocean floor. However, the process of discovering the poem's "true" message as a reader mirrors that of the message of the poem itself. The first major clue comes when Rich writes, "there is no one / to tell me when the ocean / will begin" (163). This can be taken literally, that she is alone and she has no outside warning as to when she will pass the barrier of the ocean's surface. But it also means that she *is* alone, and nobody but her can decide when she chooses to cross that barrier, or even where it is. "Diving into the Wreck" is more about personal self-discovery, a journey towards finding buried individual reality than it is about the "real world" act of diving beneath the ocean. The wreck represents the individual truth that is waiting at the end of the passage. Rich chooses the image of the wreck to relate this idea because it is not pristine, not perfect, but there was "damage that was done" along with "treasures that prevail" (163). The wreck broken, non idealized, decidedly real, "something more permanent" than the "story" or the "myth" of the "thing itself" (163-164). Rich wants readers to believe that this is the most likely representation of the true face of reality when all the extraneous information has been removed and forgotten.

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5 August 2008

Journal #14

Joy Harjo, "A Map to the Next World"

Joy Harjo's "A Map to the Next World" bears a striking similarity to Adrienne Rich's "Diving Into the Wreck." Both poems deal with finding a form of personal truth. Specifically Harjo's "map" refers to the spiritual passage to the "fifth" world that is described in certain Native American religious beliefs. To an outsider, this "map" could just as easily lead to spiritual enlightenment, heaven, reincarnation, or even a "wreck." Both poems also deal with a force that is determined to distract people from reaching their destination. Rich used the symbol of the "book of myths" while Harjo uses images of industry, technology and commercialism. Harjo reinforces this by claiming that "the proliferation of supermarkets and malls, the altars of money ... best describe the detour from grace" (202). The negative association with technology is best described with the line, "Monsters are born there of nuclear anger" (202). This presents the idea that scientific progress (nuclear technology, paper diapers, and needles) is part of the reason why there is little reason to stay in this world.

The problem with this is that while Harjo speaks of these "detours" from the path as something that should be avoided, she also claims that "we were never perfect" (203). As if the creation of our own destruction was an inevitable act. That the process itself is as natural as the results of industry are *unnatural*. Harjo

states that "this earth who was once a star and made the same mistakes as humans" (203). The Earth followed a similar pattern. From something that was glorious to something that was tarnished. If our "mistakes" lead to the dimming of our own brightness, is that not as important as the natural imagery she uses to convey the way to find the true path. The natural beauty of the earth is something that is supposedly less than what it once was. So the products of industry, technology and commercialism are part of us that is less spiritually beautiful than we once were. Even though they are things to be avoided, they should also be embraced, because they are *part* of the "journey we make together" (203).

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Matt Deline

6 August 2008

Journal #15

Yusef Komunyakaa, "Please"

Yusef Komunyakaa's "Please" is a stark contrast to Denise Levertov's writings on the soldiers in the Vietnam War. Levertov seems to be making the assertion that choices during war time are very black and white. However, Levertov was never exposed to combat, while Komunyakaa was an active participant. Where she expresses disgust at the idea that one of the pilots understood "precisely / what they were doing, and did it anyway, and would do it again," Komunyakaa takes nearly the opposite approach, one of self-deceptive acceptance and a haunted understanding (102). "Please" deals with issues of guilt, acceptance and the mental scarring that Komunyakaa received as a result of his actions during the war. When he says "but I won't say / those infernal guns / blinded me on that hill," he is not saying that he approves of his actions but rather it would dishonor himself and the death of the soldier to deny the fault of his actions (220). Yet he is haunted by the possibility of changing the past. He says, "If I could make my mouth / unsay those orders, / I'd holler: Don't / move a muscle" (220). Yet even if he had, there is no guarantee that the outcome would have been any different. The soldier is described as a "greenhorn, so fearless, even foolish" (220). In this case he is unconsciously affirming his denial at fault for the outcome. An inexperienced soldier might have been just as likely to die in a combat situation even if he had told him to stop or to "hit the dirt" (220). In a way he was blameless for the death

of the soldier, but it is a testament to the power of his guilt that he refuses to accept the idea in any way.

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Matt Deline

7 August 2008

Journal #16

Ron Silliman, "Tjanting"

Ron Silliman's "Tjanting" appears at first to be a randomized collection of images, thought processes, actions and word plays. The written "chanting" of a madman. However it is the careful construction of subtly altered repetition that gives the work a unique approach to our use of language. The act of gripping the pen seems to be a central connection for the reader with the process the author is undergoing while writing. The image is often repeated both with the sensation of having hand cramps, but Silliman further extends the metaphor by including typographical errors in nearly every instance involving cramping or a pen. This will enforce the idea that it is difficult to write properly when your hand is in pain. Yet at the same time misspelling the words could and would as "cld" and "wld" could be meant to jar the reader from the standard process of reading.

Silliman claims, "You will never stop learning how to read" (141). Perhaps this claim is intended to reinforce the idea that he is constantly altering his mosaic in order to force the reader to reinterpret the way he is writing and how they perceive the words on the page. Misspellings and grammatical errors are part of this, but appear to be additional techniques of expressing the freedom of language in unconventional ways. This however fundamentally contradicts the formal structure of the text itself. While there is an interwoven pattern created by the specific process and layout of repeated

imagery, Silliman's use of the Fibonacci sequence as a means of structuring the layout of his sentences *confines* his writing. By forcing himself to follow a constantly expanding pattern his words begin to lose power. The strength of particularly chosen and repeated ideas is lost when the amount of information begins to exceed the limit of its effectiveness. As the paragraphs get longer, his "script is a scrawl" more than having "Each word [as] a meaning meant, minded" (140-141).

Silliman's "Tjanting" is a unique, clever collection of particularly interesting ideas, but ultimately its power is lost in its own conflicting bases. It is both an expression of the freedom of language, and its ability to be constricted by useless structural concerns.

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Matt Deline

11 August 2008

Journal #17

John Edgar Wideman, "newborn thrown in the trash and dies"

How can you tell a story if you don't know how to use words? If you don't even know what a story is? If your perspective is so limited that you haven't even had a chance to make any mental connections beyond the fact that you exist? John Edgar Wideman's "newborn thrown in trash and dies" is the story that would be told if this were possible. A newborn that has had no chance to establish itself in the world is a unique perspective. When the narrator says,

"then I didn't cry out as I plunged through the darkness, I didn't know any better ... accustoming myself to what it seemed life brings, what life is. Spinning, tumbling ... wondering is this it, am I doing it right. I didn't know any better,"

it is expressing the fleeting nature of its existence (1201). Is a scream a natural reaction to fear? Or does it only come with the knowledge of one's mortality?

The title itself seems to be plucked out of an obscure corner of the daily newspaper, a forgotten headline. The fact that there are no capital letters suggests that Wideman is attempting to relate the relative unimportance of the story in the grand scheme of things. What he is trying to tell is a story that would otherwise never be told. He makes a reference to "the billion billion monkeys at typewriters who sooner or later will bang out this story I think is uniquely mine" (1200). This is where the line

between author and speaker begins to blur within the confines of the text. He is referring to the theory that given infinite resources and time (monkeys are often used in the metaphor) every possible story in every possible language will eventually be written. But the point is that these stories will never be found without people like Wideman (there is no infinite room of monkeys).

The question ultimately becomes who really cares about this kind of story. In a way, nobody does. The baby states, "In my opinion my death will serve no purpose. The streetlamps will pop on" (1202). Life will go on, whether or not this story is ever told. This makes the answer to the question even more important. Nobody cares about stories like this, but everyone should.

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Matt Deline

12 August 2008

Journal #18

Don DeLillo, "Videotape"

Don DeLillo's "Videotape" is a commentary on the effect that mass media culture has had on the modern world. The ever present nature of mass media has created a perpetual cycle where art imitates life that imitates art that imitates life and so on. The connection that DeLillo makes is that there is a sinister nature to this sort of symbiotic relationship. The story focuses on the process of a recording of a murder and the resulting effect that it has on people who are exposed to the repeated viewings of the act. Both parts are significant because they mirror the production cycles of the television and motion picture industry (this includes televised news, and in this case, home videos as well). DeLillo describes the murder as a "crime designed for random taping and immediate playing" (257). The implication of this is that it is not a truly random act, nor is it a singular incident. DeLillo is trying to make the point that the only reason this sort of crime can exist is because of media exposure. In a way, the broadcast of similar crimes or ideas sets up the order of events to come together at that particular moment. It is predestined, although it appears to be random chance. With the widespread integration of video media into society, both the chance that someone could be "randomly" recording images simply because that is how they were brought up to act, and the chance that someone would commit a crime at precisely the same time and place is exponentially increased.

DeLillo's strongest argument is his choice to use the metaphor of the film tape as the only means to truly perceive the world. He writes, "There's something about the nature of the tape ... you think this is more real ... than anything else around you" (257). That the real world has a "rehearsed and layered and cosmetic look," which is just the sort of thing you would expect to see on television or in a film (257). He continues that by viewing the world through the tape you can see "what lies at the scraped bottom of all the layers you have added" (257). But what happens when you separate the layers from video camera film stock? If you remove all the top chemical layers from video film you are left with a transparent base. If you were to literally look at the world through the "tape" after you have removed all the top layers of the film, you would only see the world around you just as it is. Art imitates life that imitates art that imitates life

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Matt Deline

13 August 2008

Journal #19

Sandra Cisneros, "Woman Hollering Creek" / Rudolfo Anaya, "Iliana of the Pleasure Dreams"

Happy endings are a Hollywood staple. The sort of splenda sweet media conditioned idealization of what we are supposed to be interested in reaching during our lives. Because of their content and message, it is ironic then that both Sandra Cisneros' "Woman Hollering Creek" and Rudolfo Anaya's "Iliana of the Pleasure Dreams" conclude with a happy ending. Cisneros' protagonist, Cleofilas, bases her expectations on the lives she witnesses on her favorite *telanovela*, "*Tu o Nadie*," and aspires to mimic the life she envisions the star Lucia Mendez has. Keep in mind though, that unrealistic expectations are not derived from television influence alone, but rather socially accepted pressures that cause her to develop a specific set of values that are unrealistic. The problem is then that the ideas are perpetuated and widespread through the use of television. The name of the soap "You or No One" is an image that is repeated several times throughout the story as well. From Dolores who lives "continuously in memory of two sons who had died in the last war and one husband who had died shortly after," to La Llorona, "who drowned her own children," to the choice that Cleofilas' husband forces her to make, each character is forced to choose between their lover or no one else.

The point is that "Woman Hollering Creek" is a story about disillusionment. Where ideal images of love, family, and life taken from television programming leave Cleofilas completely unprepared for the hardships she encounters. Why end the story with a conventional ending? "Woman Hollering Creek" ends with laughter, which assures the reader that everything is going to be all right. Not that the story *should* end in disaster, it just seems interesting that the story focuses on breaking down the "lies" that television and media seem to portray, only to fall into the same trappings with her own ending.

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Journal #20

Ana Castillo, Selected Poems

Ana Castillo writes in "A Christmas Gift got the President of the United States, Chicano Poets, and a Marxist or Two I've Known in My Time," "Rape is not a poem. / Incest does not rhyme" (63). It is as if she is making the connection that issue-oriented expression has no place in poetry, or rather that it is not the proper term for it as an art form. "these are not poems, i readily admit," she writes, but rather "simple expressions" (62-63). A bold statement for a poet whose primary focus in many of her works is dealing with controversial issues to which she has a connection with.

Castillo's "In My Country" is practically a list of problems with which she feels the world could do without. By stanza she deals with gender control (of other genders), false religious justification, crime (or fear of being attacked), public decency, uneven distribution of wealth, job outsourcing, gun violence, war, pride, abuse, broken parental cycles, racism and murder (the list keeps going). When she states, "This is not my world" she is attempting to make the point that all these things exist in the *real* world, although she is not saying that they should *not* exist (90). Notice that in for every stanza that begins with "In my world" she is referring to a fictional place without the problems that she sees in "our" world. The stanza's that do not begin with "In my world" (with the exception of the stanza that begins with "This is not my world") are told from the perspective that she is within "our" world. If she would remove these "problems" in

her world, why would she be able to live with them in ours? She states "i do not watch television, entertain / myself at movie houses, / invest in visual art or purchase / literature at grocery stores" (89). Neither does she "bet on reincarnation or heaven" or "escape into [her] sleep" (90). Each one of these actions is a form of escapism that many people from the real world use in order to remove themselves from the problems that Castillo is addressing. Yet because she does not do these things, she is the only one who is "not made ashamed for being" (90). She realizes that these things do exist in the *real* world, and that they are a very *real* part of it, which is why *her* world exists only in her mind, and only as a place of contrast for herself.