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# The U.S. National Security State, Sixty Years of Wars, and English Departments

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residential lying seems inherent in the job, if not in all of the people who aspire to that high office. President Johnson's varied from the silly to the massively lethal. He declared that his grandfather died at the Alamo and, to justify the illegal invasion of the Dominican Republic, that "Some 1,500 innocent people were murdered and shot, and their heads cut off." But even the latter, triggering 20,000 marines, was negligible compared to the many lies he told about Vietnam. There's light at the end of the tunnel? But Johnson recognized some truths, acted upon them, and Jim Crow lost its separate drinking fountains.

President Eisenhower too. Ike's lies about the U2 flights smashed U.S.-Soviet negotiations. But about U.S. militarism he told truths so powerful they still batter against it.

President Eisenhower, perhaps foreseeing perpetual wars, in his Farewell Address of 1961 described our country as a military-industrial complex. In his original draft he wrote "military-industrial-congressional complex." Today he would write: "corporate-White House-Pentagon-Congress-mainstream television-education complex." Despite secrecy, censorship, and

other information control, Eisenhower knew, perpetual war was complex, but identifiable.

When he left office, Eisenhower warned against the “acquisition of unwarranted influence . . . by the military-industrial complex,” against the “disastrous rise of misplaced power,” against the dangerous centralization of power. As John Kenneth Galbraith wrote in *The Anatomy of Power*, “military power has become the major threat to civilian and democratic process.”

I lack time to discuss the fearful public or the grasping corporate origins of this catastrophe, or the complicity of Congress and the mainstream, especially television, media. I'll focus my few minutes on key aspects of the system of U.S. power, reactions by English professors, English departments, the National Council of Teachers of English, and the College English Association, and criticism of our profession. I'll leave it to you to decide how adequate were these responses. Perhaps one of you will write the much-needed history for which my comments here today are an enthusiastic invitation

### **The U.S. National Security Imperial State**

The Soviet Union, China, Italy, Greece, Korea, Albania, Iran, Guatemala . . . . What do these and many other countries have in common during the six decades since 1945? The official, nationalistic history identifies these countries as locations of former U.S. anti-communist containments essential to world peace.

But a second explanation has gained and is gaining acceptance. It goes like this: these countries reflect a desire by United States leaders for security through world domination, for forty years fueled by hatred of the Soviet Union. It's called the Cold War. William Blum in two books discusses seventy nations in which the U.S. intervened anti-democratically during the second half of the twentieth century. “From 1945 to

the end of the century, the United States attempted to overthrow more than 40 foreign governments, and to crush more than 30 populist-nationalist movements struggling against intolerable regimes. In the process, the U.S. caused the end of life for several million people, and condemned many millions more to a life of agony and despair.” All in the name of freedom and democracy!

Chalmers Johnson traces this alternative history in his trilogy on the CIA and Pentagon. In *Blowback* he explained our disasters like 9/11 as U.S. foreign policy consequences, especially of the CIA’s clandestine activities abroad. In *The Sorrows of Empire* he showed how the growth of American militarism and imperialism have actually jeopardized our safety. Now in *Nemesis* he show how imperial overstretch is undermining our republic itself, both economically and politically.

The crucial year is 1947. In just two years after World War II, so rapidly had the Soviet Union wartime ally become the Cold War enemy and paranoia amid Red Scare politics pervasive that President Truman created the National Security State by signing the National Security Act. The act unified the services. In the most deceptive, imperial linguistic coup in all history, the act renamed the War Department as the Department of Defense, henceforth justifying all U.S. aggressions as defensive. It created the National Security Council and the CIA; shifted the nation’s entire footing in relation to enemies and allies; guaranteed the militarization of the U.S. economy; and in other ways accelerated the militarization of the U.S. against evil Communism, and then against evils from terrorists to immigrants.

The Pentagon and CIA rapidly projected U.S. imperial ambition. Chalmers Johnson and many others have explained what the Pentagon/CIA was and is: a private military for the president, whose power grew

and grew, until we have this monstrous, dangerous deformation today. Truman intervened against Mao in 1945 and in Italian elections in 1947, and Eisenhower overthrew the Iranian and Guatemalan governments in 1953. Eisenhower intervened in Vietnam in 1950, followed by Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon. Nixon intervened in Cambodia and Laos. The list is long. Reagan invaded Grenada, Libya, and Nicaragua, Bush I Panama and Iraq. And Congress did not stop it, but often cheered.

At the heart of it all was and is the Pentagon-CIA-White House complex. As James Carroll writes in *House of War*: “So much money, so much power, so much cultural energy had been invested in the Pentagon” that it took on “a life of its own” to dominate or at least influence all aspects of U.S. society—“Congress in its thrall and presidents at its mercy.” Truman’s Pentagon budget leaped from \$13.5 billion in 1951 to more than \$50 billion in 1953, from funding 300 nuclear bombs in 1950 to over 1,300 by late 1953. Soon there would be 1,400 B-47s surrounding the Soviet Union, testing its radar, and 3,636,000 U.S. servicemen. It was fanatical Ahab relentlessly pursuing the evil Whale.

Anyone not blinded and deafened by the Sovietphobia understood what was happening. And many scholars were sounding the alarm. Soon after the 1947 establishment of the National Security system, *New Evidence of the Militarization of America* was published, and John Swomley’s *Press Agents of the Pentagon* and *Militarism in Education* appeared. By the 1960s, the protest had become widespread in books about U.S. militarism and imperialism—like Fred Cook’s *The Warfare State*; Tristram Coffin’s *The Passion of the Hawks: Militarism in Modern America; Kill and Overkill—The Strategy of Annihilation* by Ralph Lapp; *The Futile Crusade: Anti-Communism as American Credo* by Sidney Lens; John Swomley’s

*The Military Establishment*; former Senator J. William Fulbright's *The Arrogance of Power*; *Power at the Pentagon* by Jack Raymond; the Quaker publication *Anatomy of Anti-Communism*; Joseph Goulden's *Truth Is the First Casualty: The Gulf of Tonkin Affair—Illusion and Reality*; Michael Parenti's *The Anti-Communist Impulse*; *Scientists and War* by Solly Zuckerman; Clark Mollenhoff's *The Pentagon: Politics, Profit, and Plunder*; *Chemical and Biological Warfare: America's Hidden Arsenal* by Seymour Hersh; McGaffin and Knoll's *Scandal in the Pentagon: A Challenge to Democracy*; and Erwin Knoll and Judith McFadden's *American Militarism, 1970*.

By the 1970s scores of books were being published expressing varying degrees of repugnance over the abuses of power by the presidential-military-corporate-television complex and its danger to nations and peoples abroad and to our constitutional liberties at home.

### **English Departments Resist?**

But not so well documented, in fact hardly documented at all, was the resistance of English departments to U.S. militarism, even within their legitimate domain of language, literature, and criticism. Yet by the 1950s some scholars and teachers had concluded there was no sense in studying language and literature in such a violent and unjust world unless one related them not only to the contexts of the author's time—the traditional historical study so well-established from Harvard to Stanford—but to present contexts, the centers of power that mediate between literature and people, in which students and teachers lived and breathed. A corollary conclusion was that powerful interests wanted culture, language and literature (and history, sociology, political science) to serve and preserve the status quo, to deflect students and teachers from criticism of established power.

In the 1960s some teachers of language and literature began actively to respond to the great fear, the anti-communist repression and purges, the subversions of the Bill of Rights by the FBI, the lies by our leaders, the political prisoners, the enormous increase in Pentagon spending, interventions abroad, the horrendous bombings. They began to consider contemporary political implications of language and literature.

Linguists, composition teachers, representatives of professional organizations, and others began to point out that it was in the interest of corporate and political leaders, of nationalists and chauvinists, to control definitions, to make the established definitions seem natural, true, and right to the populace. It is no accident, for example, that the definition of terrorism as small-group or individual attacks on the U.S. is the official and widely accepted definition in the U.S., and not state terrorism as perceived by people outside the U.S., the immensely horrific attacks on nations and peoples by air, land, and sea by the U.S. government. Nor is it adventitious that the enormously expensive new generation of nuclear warheads, in violation of the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty, has taken place during the past fifteen years under the deceptively named "Stockpile Stewardship Program."

A related development in linguistics reached publication by the 1980s in such books as *Linguistic Criticism* by Roger Fowler. Fowler suggested ways for English studies to gain oppositional influence inside the power complex. He focuses on the concept of defamiliarization, of textually foregrounding the linguistic code. Whether it be myths, or vocabulary of a critical theory, or the type of a fictional character, language, literature, and criticism possess the potential counter-power to break historically fixed categories. One of the enthusiasts of this view, Robert Scholes, pointed to the textual power of the Gospel and the

writings of Karl Marx for examples of “power to change the world.”

### **The NCTE**

If 1947 witnessed the great leap into the maelstrom of U.S. world intervention, 1972 is the watershed year for opposition by English departments. Both post–World War II U.S. power and criticism of repressions at home and invasions abroad gathered strength during the 1960s, until in 1972 the National Council of Teachers of English called upon teachers of language, literature, and criticism, where appropriate, to engage in political action in the classroom.

Let’s recall events of the Vietnam Era of rising White House–Pentagon–CIA power preceding this momentous professional decision. The first U.S. soldiers/advisers were killed in 1959. In 1960, John Kennedy defeated Richard Nixon and the Vietcong was established. The CIA invaded Cuba at the Bay of Pigs in 1961. U.S. advisers in Vietnam increased from 700 to 12,000 in 1962. The same year the world shuddered during the Cuban Missile Crisis. In 1963, a Buddhist monk committed suicide by self-immolation; South Vietnam ruler Diem was overthrown and murdered in a CIA-planned coup; and President Kennedy was assassinated. The U.S. escalated troops in Vietnam to 15,000. Hanoi stepped up its forces. Another frightening year was 1964: a U.S. warship erroneously reported it was attacked by the North Vietnamese, and the U.S. air force bombed North Vietnam for first time. China exploded its first atomic bomb. Khrushchev was ousted as Soviet premier. Responding to false information from President Johnson, Congress passed the Tonkin Gulf Resolution giving Johnson a free hand in Vietnam. Johnson defeated Goldwater. In 1965 the Operation Rolling Thunder bombings of North Vietnam began. The first U.S. combat troops arrived, 200,000 by end of year, 400,000 by end of

1966. The war would last ten more years.

Other influences played a part (two decades of witch hunts, illegal FBI surveillance and infiltration, huge numbers of political prisoners). Partly in reaction to this expanding war, in 1972 the National Council of Teachers of English embraced a new political engagement for language, literature, and critical studies. The NCTE decided formally to oppose deception by powerful institutions—by governments and corporations. That year the NCTE passed resolutions opposing dishonest and inhumane uses of commercial propaganda and semantic distortion by public officials, candidates for office, political commentators, and all those who transmit through the mass media. Combining Orwell's terms "Newspeak" and "doublethink," the NCTE created a Committee on Public Doublespeak. Then in 1975 the NCTE passed resolutions urging attention to mass media literacy and cooperation with journalism, communications, and social science teachers specifically for the understanding and humane direction of political and commercial power. I should be more specific: the NCTE Doublespeak Committee resolved to concentrate on power and language in the U.S., the institutions (corporations, government, especially the president and the Pentagon) and the cultural structures (class, racism, sexism) that dominated society. Soon two books and a magazine emerged from the Doublespeak Committee—*Language and Public Policy* and *Teaching About Doublespeak*, and the *Quarterly Review of Doublespeak*.

For teachers who had become active resisters against the war and who had begun to add political contexts to their teaching already, these resolutions offered professional justification and coherence to political extensions of scholarship and teaching. For some English teachers, the NCTE resolutions provided a new impetus to the study of language and power.

## The CEA

Concurrently with the NCTE's turn to political contexts for language study and teaching, what was the College English Association doing? What was their response to the disastrous rise of military power President Eisenhower warned against? No dramatic nose to nose with entrenched power like the NCTE's. But its national conferences and *Forum* and even the *Critic* were open to sixties indignations and innovations.

What was happening in the *CEA Forum* at the time the NCTE was considering its revolutionary political commitment? Here are two examples: In 1970, the *Forum* reported on Richard Ohmann's criticism of "large corporations, the government, and the military" for "making the basic decisions of our lives . . ." In 1971, one of the regular "minireviews" praised James Aronson's *The Press and the Cold War* as "indispensable" to "journalism teachers or directors of writing programs; the planners of humanities and other interdisciplinary courses; the U.S. studies group; and all others" (!) because "with scrupulous documentation, he brings to light facts everyone needs on the Bay of Pigs, Vietnam, the freedom of the press" and what the *New York Times* did not report.

And the *CEA Critic*? In the March 1970 number Earle Labor reviewed *War: An Anthology*, edited by Edward and Elizabeth Huberman, a collection of diverse perspectives. For example, Earle discusses Edith Hamilton's essay "A Pacifist in Periclean Athens," which is about "the greatest piece of anti-war literature there is in the world"—Euripides's *The Trojan Women*—and at the end quotes a Vietnam soldier asking, "How then have we come to be killing so many in such a dubious cause?"

In a 1976 number of the *Critic*, in her opening sentence, Carol Pearson connected "the verbal crimes which characterized the government's communications

about Watergate and the war in Southeast Asia” and “our responsibilities as English professors to sensitize students to the uses and abuses of the English language.” Those responsibilities to expose the use of language by leaders for manipulation instead of communication—for example, the military and Nixonian euphemisms for invasions, bombing civilians, and other atrocities—she explores through a discussion of Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*.

Also in 1976, J. Mitchell Morse strongly connected politics and composition teaching. In the future, composition teachers must attend much more to training linguistic skepticism, to enable students to respond critically “to such flags in the buttonhole as ‘law and order,’ ‘strict construction,’ ‘confidentiality’ and ‘national security.’”

And here are some recent highlights from our annual conferences.

In 1996 in New Orleans, three panels wrestled with war and peace. Michael True was the special guest and single speaker on the subject of “The Tradition of Nonviolence in U.S. Literature.” In one panel, three speakers discussed the topic of “Peacemaking in Literature, Film, and the Classroom”: “Woman as Pacifist,” “War/Antiwar Films in the Classroom,” and “Studying Peace: A Seminar on Images of Peace in Literature.” And the panel “Peace and War” presented “Bao Ninh’s *The Sorrow of War*” (about a North Vietnamese writer), “Nihilism and Apocalyptic Violence in Late Twentieth-Century Culture,” and “Nuclear Literature: Children and the Bomb.” And a structural innovation to the conference occurred: the first CEA Peace Breakfast was held on Saturday morning.

In 2006 at San Antonio the spirit of the sixties was even more present in four events. At Friday’s Diversity Luncheon, R. Rolando Hinojosa-Smith read his poems about the Korean War. A panel entitled “Writing

Vietnam, Writing Iraq” presented students discussing a play about the Vietnam War, fiction about Desert Storm, and Iraq War poetry. Another panel entitled “Peace Zone” featured discussion of Jarhead, peace gardens, and reading peace literature. Yet another panel on “Personalizing War” included a paper on “Vietnam and the Vietnamese in Literature of the American War.” And the annual Peace Breakfast met, now as usual, early Saturday morning.

### **Liberal Humanism**

If my examples do reflect the whole, we can say our glass has been half empty in its response to the executive agents of arrogant power since 1947. But there is another aspect of English departments not yet mentioned but which operates against abusive power and fills our glass a little more—and that is the critical pluralism of liberal humanism. Increasingly since the 1960s, hundreds of surveys of diverse approaches to the study of literature have been published. The concept of truth and meaning as partly a matter of perspective, of ways of seeing and interpreting, partly a result of contestation of conflicting views, is a fundamental principle in literary criticism. A collection of criticism or an approach to an author or even a single text might contain a dozen or more interpretations. The potentially political in critical pluralism is found particularly in its profound support for critical thinking. Basically it rejects unity, uniformity, law and order, absolutism, bigotry, homeland; it affirms diversity and complexity as necessary and good, since it is grounded in human reality and needs; and it facilitates change by disturbing our accustomed and comforting perceptions and assumptions. More directly political, because it recognizes the state not as the foundation and origin of education but as a function of a militantly pluralist education, it therefore nourishes democracy and advances the public good.

In our country, a congeniality of First Amendment legal and literary/critical standards can be related to Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black's radical diversity ruling in the Associated Press case of 1945. To Black, the First Amendment to our Constitution not only provides for free speech and a free press but enjoins citizens and members of the press to exercise the greatest possible variety of antagonistic points of view, for the discovery of truth and justice in a democracy. Truth does not reside in the ruling president.

This valorization of dissent also exemplifies the spirit of John Stuart Mill's defense of a liberty strengthened and enlarged by vigorous and constant challenge of received opinions, for the avoidance of sovereignty by assumed infallibility (in our national case and time, the avoidance of rule by a power we have seen grow into the arrogant U.S. national security, anti-constitutional, militaristic, illegal, imperial, preventive invasion state during the last sixty years).

A militantly multifarious literary criticism, then—persistently critical of orthodoxy, envisioning alternative ways of perceiving and being and living—is potentially a bastion of resistance for a people burdened by militarism and empire. The German universities failed, while there was still time, to oppose with all their skills the destruction of their republic. They failed to project constantly in the classrooms the vision of a society vitalized not by obedience and patriotism but by multiplicity and toleration and direct, persistent, organized challenge to lies and autocracy. And so Hitler conquered.

But we, I trust, still have time to grow a participatory democracy by incorporating political decision-making into our personal and professional lives; democratizing the study of texts and writing through antagonistic critical alternatives—organicist, Marxist, psychoanalytic, feminist; promoting peacemaking, social and economic justice, human

rights, and environmental stewardship; and teaching people the skills for direct, persistent, organized challenge of lies and autocracy.

### **Critics of English Departments**

Of course, some of our colleagues believe such a project chimerical, given the slide into monopoly capitalism and militarism in our nation since World War II. I'll give a few of them the last word, in the spirit of Justice Black, John Stuart Mill, and critical pluralism. Let's listen to Richard Ohmann, Terry Eagleton, and Jim Merod.

They argue how the schools—and English teachers—of the U.S. serve to reinforce the disastrous rise of misplaced power: students trained for the corporate/national security state, universities in the service of captains of commerce and war.

According to Richard Ohmann, there is no “peace and justice” approach to the study of literature, no “countervailing power” approach, no “military-industrial complex” approach. In *English in America* (1976), he explains this absence as deriving from the acquiescence of teachers to the desire of “ruling classes” for a harmless culture that serves and preserves the status quo of the corporate-military-White House-Congressional-mainstream media-education complex. “Even intellectuals who can see what is happening,” because they “have themselves stakes in the system,” merely identify problems instead of criticizing the militarized system itself in ways that lead to action.

Writing about the 1960s and early 1970s, Ohmann starts with the conviction that “America is on the way to disintegration without radical change.” “Many people,” he writes, “stirred to awareness by Vietnam . . . , unimaginable weaponry, the excesses of capitalist technology, the energy crisis, and the creaking economy” (sound familiar?) “feel that this country is gravely afflicted.” But how might

a discredited civilization be changed? Not by the academic humanities. “Always our talk about literature and teaching seems inadequately grounded in political and economic awareness. We either look too narrowly at the givens of daily work or cast our eyes upward,” disinterested and disengaged, “to the transcendent realm of timeless human values and the healing force of literature culture.” Meanwhile, our leaders/rulers illegally invade nation after nation, spread military bases throughout the world, openly prepare for war and of course domination in the heavens, and repudiate the Bill of Rights. Ohmann’s conclusion: “we either teach politically with revolution as our end or we contribute to the mystification that so often in universities diverts and deadens the critical power of literature and encysts it in our safe corner of society.”

To Terry Eagleton, writing in the 1980s, English departments are sequestered from the world in their professionalism and timidity, mere custodians of discourses, socially marginal, narcissistic, largely ineffectual in effecting change. In *Literary Theory*, Eagleton indicts liberal humanism, English departments, and critical pluralism for collaborating with the military-industrial domination. How? Because they are deliberately ineffectual in resisting anti-human, destructive policies. English department liberal humanists may be unsympathetic to monopoly capitalism, consumerism, militarism, world domination, egregious presidential power, and subversion of the Constitution, but they lack the capacity and many the desire to combat them. This is because the great values of liberal humanism capable of challenging power—the autonomous individual, reasoned dialectic, independent thought, critical dissent—have become impotent, as practiced in universities today. Liberal humanist individualism has dwindled into preservation and elaboration of a canon, and certification of newcomers into the institutions. All

of which suits the ruling powers perfectly.

In *The Political Responsibility of the Critic* Jim Merod accuses “most critical writing” of being “politically blind” and says that it “will remain so as long as critics refuse to find room for the concept of ‘the state.’” The advantage of the concept of the state is that it reveals the otherwise buried class struggle. It points to domination by ruling ideology and allows us to investigate its dependence upon power, both economic and military, and how it legitimizes power. It also allows us to clarify contradictions that open up concrete possibilities for revolutionary change.

For example, recognition of the U.S. corporate-Pentagon-White House-Congressional-mainstream media-education state enables us to see how the work of higher education “funnels into a society . . . increasingly militarized,” in which “war itself . . . has become the moral equivalent for civilization.” To speak of the priority of preparing for war and war-making as the principal structuring force in society, maintaining that war itself is the basic social system within which other secondary modes of social organization conflict or conspire, is to confront the grisly truth of our institutional order, says Merod. No writer moves outside of it. All intellectual authority is compromised by it.

Awareness of state power is the first and most important radical move. Another, of many, “is to situate texts in the field of institutional forces in which they are historically conceived” and “in which they continue to operate,” giving attention to the past and the present and to the “imaginable future.” “This is a matter of radicalizing the liberal tradition so that the . . . notion of critical freedom and interpretive autonomy can be replaced by the far more difficult but necessary realization of the reader’s and writer’s immersion in a network of the social forces” of power.

**Author's Note:** For bibliographic information on the works cited in this address, go to [www.omnicenter.org](http://www.omnicenter.org).

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## Ethos and Ethics in Time of War

When a national leader decides to take the country to war, he or she must also decide how to gain the support of the populace for the war effort. Speeches by presidents of the United States on these occasions have employed a number of different rhetorical strategies. One such strategy is to point to a pre-existing condi-

tion of war requiring only official acknowledgment, as when Woodrow Wilson labeled German submarine aggression “a war against all nations” (Reid 692). Another is to cite the necessity for self-defense following massive attacks on American territory, as when Franklin Roosevelt called for war to defend “the very life and safety of our nation” (Reid 742). More recently, in a speech delivered on March 17, 2003, George W. Bush foretold dire future consequences if the United States did not launch a pre-emptive war against Iraq, asserting that Iraq had “aided, trained, and harbored terrorists” and predicting that Iraqi weapons of mass destruction would be used by those terrorists on a coming “day of horror” unless military action was taken. In each of these cases, the president’s speech and his war message were favorably received by an American public convinced, at least at the beginning of hostilities, that its own best interests were served by war.

A more difficult rhetorical task falls to the president who has decided to go to war under circumstances where he cannot cite a real or plausible direct threat to American interests, where he must, instead, convince the public that war is necessary to protect non-Americans—that fighting is the right thing to do, even though the benefits to our own country are anything but obvious. That going to war, in other words, is an ethically correct, if not expedient, choice.

I am writing here about the kind of ethical choice Aristotle refers to in the *Nicomachean Ethics* as a “thing done from fear of greater evils or for some noble object” (964), summarized in its ethical nuances as follows by Jonathan Barnes:

Even in cases where our range of choice is restricted by unfavourable circumstances, we remain responsible for what we choose to do, but any assessment of our behaviour must take into account the alternatives we faced . . . . (209)

Of course there is a strong tradition of pacifism

which claims that war can never be an ethically viable choice. While I do not seek in any way to make light of that tradition, I note only that this paper is about the ethical and rhetorical choices of American presidents, and so far at least, we have not had a strictly pacifist president—even Abraham Lincoln, who hated war and grieved over its staggering human cost, chose to fight rather than allow the dissolution of the Union.<sup>1</sup>

A contemporary American president may, like Lincoln, decide under certain “unfavourable circumstances” that war is an ethically virtuous choice of action. But he cannot simply make the decision and expect the people to go along with it because he says so. The rest of his job, if he is at all cognizant of political reality, is to convince the people that choosing war is both ethical and necessary. Having chosen war, he must now choose a rhetorical strategy.

Bill Clinton found himself in this kind of situation in the early spring of 1999. Serbian forces were on the move in Kosovo, and the NATO countries, fearing a repeat of the ethnic cleansing that had torn Bosnia not long before (to which NATO had responded effectively but belatedly) were engaged in last-minute diplomatic efforts with the Serbian government under Slobodan Milosevic. As it became clear that military action involving American air strikes was becoming more and more likely, Clinton began to prepare the nation for war. At a press conference on March 19, he pointed out the unified resolve of the NATO allies to prevent another Bosnia, and struck what would, in days to come, become a familiar chord:

We should remember the thousands of people facing cold and hunger in the hills of Kosovo last fall. We should remember what happened in the village of Racak back in January—innocent men, women, and children taken from their homes to a gully, forced to kneel in the dirt, sprayed with gunfire—not because of anything they had done, but because of who they were.

Citing humanitarian concerns, Clinton was using the occasion of a press conference to make an ethical case for military intervention in Kosovo. But his rhetorical situation was not as simple as that statement may make it seem. Since this was indeed a press conference, and since reporters in 1999 were still in the habit of asking presidents tough questions, Clinton had to come up with answers on matters other than Kosovo—including the leak of classified defense information to the Chinese; the probability of his wife's running for the Senate; and most disturbingly, accusations of rape by a woman named Juanita Broaddrick and his own feelings in response to the just-concluded impeachment proceedings. Rhetorically speaking, Clinton's own ethos was in question at the same time that he was attempting to use ethics as justification for war.

Now rhetorical ethos is not the same thing exactly as what we generally think of as ethics, or morals—a fact of which I'm constantly reminding my students when I deduct points for their wrong answers on that subject—but the two concepts are closely intertwined, as we might guess from the words themselves. Rhetorical ethos, as used by Aristotle and translated by George Kennedy as “character” (38), is the basis of persuasion which relies on the credibility of the speaker. This kind of persuasion says, in effect, “I am a person of character, and I know what I'm talking about, so you should believe me.” Aristotle considers the appeal to ethos the “controlling factor in persuasion,” thus assigning it more importance than the two other possible types of rhetorical appeal, to logic or to emotion.

The connection between ethos and ethics, put simply, is that people of good character make wise ethical choices, or as Aristotle puts it, “by choosing what is good or bad we are men of a certain character” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 968). Or as Barnes explains the

converse:

Decisions reveal the man, because his decisions indicate his values and the quality of his practical thinking. . . . It is right to praise and blame us for our decisions and for our voluntary actions, because they accurately reveal the sort of men we are. (210)

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca make the same point when they claim that “the person will . . . *coincide* with the . . . aggregate of his known acts” (296; emphasis mine).

We are recognized as people of good character, in other words, when we make good decisions and perform good actions, and we are more persuasive in our arguments when we are recognized as people of good character.

Now consider Clinton’s rhetorical situation less than a week after the aforementioned news conference, in his address to the nation on the evening of March 24, 1999, announcing the initial bombing of Serbian positions by American forces. Three possible scenarios present themselves:

1. Clinton wants to make the best possible ethical case for war, but realizes his own ethos—his character as perceived by the audience—is at a rather low ebb. Whatever he says under such circumstances had better be really good.

2. Clinton realizes that making a strong ethical case for military intervention will enhance his own ethos by showing him to be the kind of man who makes morally correct decisions even though they are painful and may be unpopular. Whatever he says under such circumstances had better be really good.

3. Both of the above, coming together in an amazing combination of coincidental or fated events. Whatever he says under such circumstances had better be really good.

It was. What follows is an analysis of the speech,

with special attention to ethical features of both kinds—rhetorical and moral. I have requested information from the Clinton Library regarding authorship and intent; in lieu of any response as of the time of this writing, I'm left with textual evidence only and will refer to Clinton as both speaker and author.

The speech is a specimen of deliberative rhetoric—the kind of discourse that argues for or against a particular course of action or, as in this case, defends an action that has already been taken.<sup>2</sup> It is organized along the lines of the form known as the classical oration, with Introduction, Narration, Confirmation, Refutation, and Conclusion.

The Introduction begins, as presidential speeches frequently do, with the salutation “My fellow Americans.” This commonplace emphasizes the bond of citizenship between speaker and audience—an obvious enhancement of ethos, since we are more likely to trust someone who is “one of us.” The introductory section then gives a capsule summary of the rest of the speech: it is clear from the beginning that it will be about ethically defensible military action (“We act to protect thousands of innocent people . . . , to prevent a wider war, to defuse a powder keg at the heart of Europe . . . , to uphold our values . . . [and] to advanc[e] the cause of peace.”) It also stresses three times in its six sentences that America is acting not alone but with our NATO allies. Such an emphasis serves to lend higher ethical status to the military action, since other reputable world leaders have signed on, and to place Clinton himself in the number of those reputable world leaders.

The next classically recognized section, the Narration, is, according to Aristotle, usually absent or at least minimized in deliberative discourse, but if it is present at all, its function is to recount “events in the past, in order that by being reminded of those things the audience will take better counsel about what is to come . . .” (*On Rhetoric* 272). Clinton departs from

tradition here: the Narration is by far the longest part of the Kosovo speech. Two reasons emerge for this apparent aberration. The first is a practical matter, and concerns one of the tasks that Clinton must perform in order to logically justify military action in a distant part of the world to his American audience. To accomplish this goal, Clinton presents a history lesson, not only about Kosovo and Serbia, but also about the entire Balkan region and the larger conflagrations that have been spawned there.

The second reason, and perhaps the more important given the scenarios I delineated above, is that the Narration gives Clinton his most favorable opportunity to make the ethical points he needs to make, both in favor of war and in support of his own character. Narrating the events of the past gives him his best chance to stress the ethical—read “humanitarian” here—need for military action, and also to force his audience to take sides—for the innocent Kosovars (and the world leaders of good character like Clinton who support them) and against the ruthless dictator Milosevic. By detailing the bad deeds of the Serbian leader, Clinton puts into play the same association I mentioned earlier from Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca: a person comes to be identified with his or her acts. Here Milosevic is shown to be a despicable enemy by personally identifying him with the evil acts committed by his government.

It is interesting to note here that Aristotle favors a long and detailed Narration in epideictic discourse, the kind of rhetoric devoted not to decision-making but rather to “praise and blame” (*On Rhetoric* 269n215). Clinton, as we have seen, has a large stake riding on his ability to make this speech be about praise and blame. And so he praises and he blames, setting up opposing pairs of descriptions of admirable, peace-loving actions by the Kosovars, and contemptible war-making actions by Milosevic and the Serbs. Additionally, he sets up

opposing lexical fields to describe these two parties, as the very words used to describe them form pairs of opposites: the Kosovars are always characterized as innocent victims, and the Serbs as ruthless aggressors.

Clinton claims that Milosevic, identified as “the same leader who started the wars in Bosnia and Croatia, and moved against Slovenia . . . stripped Kosovo of the constitutional autonomy its people enjoyed, thus denying them their right to speak their language, run their schools, [and] shape their daily lives,” while the Kosovars “struggled peacefully to get their rights back.” Although Milosevic “sent his troops and police to crush them,” Clinton refuses to directly attribute any retaliatory violence to the Kosovars, saying instead that “the struggle grew violent, ” which sounds remarkably like Ronald Reagan’s “mistakes were made.”

The Kosovars, identified as “tens of thousands of people [freezing and starving] in the hills, where they had fled to save their lives,” signed a peace agreement “even though their people were still being savaged.” The Serbian leaders on the other hand (and Clinton used this exact wording in an obvious attempt to set up the dichotomy) “refused even to discuss [peace].” Instead, they were “moving from village to village, shelling civilians and torching their houses.”

Then Clinton echoes and expands the wording from the March 19 press conference, again characterizing the Kosovars as innocent victims, and the Serbs as bloodthirsty killers: “We’ve seen innocent people taken from their homes, forced to kneel in the dirt and sprayed with bullets; Kosovar men dragged from their families, fathers and sons together, lined up and shot in cold blood. This is not war in the traditional sense. It is an attack by tanks and artillery on a largely defenseless people, whose leaders have already agreed to peace.”

In the Balkan history lesson that follows, Clinton uses every opportunity to provide conflicting

descriptions of victims of Serbian aggression and the Serbs themselves. Kosovo is one of several “struggling small democracies.” The “courageous Bosnians” were “innocent people herded into concentration camps, children gunned down by snipers on their way to school,” and again echoing his words of March 19, “not because of anything they have done, but because of who they were.” The Serbs are called brutal perpetrators of “genocide in the heart of Europe,” and “the aggressors,” and Milosevic himself is characterized as a recalcitrant dictator who “will not make peace” and who “has refused” to participate in a negotiated agreement.

In the Confirmation section of the speech, usually the longest part of a deliberative oration but here very brief, where Clinton finally argues directly in favor of military action by NATO, he continues the theme by presenting another opposing pair, again involving Milosevic: “In short,” he says, “if President Milosevic will not make peace, we will limit his ability to make war.”

In the Refutation section which follows, where Clinton attempts to head off objections to U.S. military involvement, he uses yet another opposing pair—action and inaction—and again reminds the audience of the innocent victims in Kosovo and the capacity for evil of Slobodan Milosevic: “I am convinced that the dangers of acting are far outweighed by the dangers of not acting—dangers to defenseless people and to our national interests. If we and our allies were to allow this war to continue with no response, President Milosevic would read our hesitation as a license to kill. There would be many more massacres, tens of thousands more refugees, more victims crying out for revenge.”

In the Conclusion of the speech, Clinton returns to the implied comparison between himself and Milosevic and between peace- and freedom-loving Americans and reckless aggressors, and adds a final enhancement to

his own ethical status by claiming the support of other responsible nations, including “democratic Russia.”

I have a responsibility to deal with problems like this. . . . I have supported the political and economic unification of Europe. . . . We have learned . . . that we need a Europe that is prosperous, secure, undivided, and free. We and our allies must assure that these bitter ethnic problems . . . are resolved by the force of argument, not the force of arms. We have acted now because we care about saving innocent lives; because we have an interest in avoiding an even crueler and costlier war; and because our children need and deserve a peaceful, stable, free Europe.

The speech ends with an appeal to the divinity: “May God bless [the men and women of our Armed Forces] and may God bless America.” A formulaic and not unexpected ending to be sure, but an appropriate one here, I think, calculated to put the finishing touch on a speech about good versus evil, about good people versus evil people, about the ethical choices—and the ethos—of an American president.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Aristotle, in fact, would no doubt have frowned upon radical pacifism as an extremist position, fond as he was of behavior that exemplified the mean between extremes, defining virtue as “a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean, . . . this being determined by a rational principle, and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 959). Continuing a chain of reasoning that might allow war as an ethically defensible choice, Aristotle defines justice as the greatest virtue. By extension, a choice which serves justice is virtuous. Aquinas, interpreting Aristotle, takes the next step and delineates the boundaries of just war.

<sup>2</sup>In this latter sense, the speech could also be construed as judicial rhetoric, but as Clinton is primarily trying to gain sup-

## Postmodern Transcendentalism: Sunsets in Don DeLillo's *White Noise*

**L**andscapes in Don DeLillo novels are ominous in a very refined and elusive kind of way. The environmental catastrophe at the center of *White Noise*, which comes to be referred to as the Airborne Toxic Event, flashes in and out of the middle of the book like a light that someone has turned on by accident and then quickly turns off. The Gladney family's routine is established in Part One, and their routine in Part Three seems uninterrupted by the surreal Dante-esque nightmare that consumed their town in Part Two. The real impact of the industrial accident on the environment is phenomenological and must be looked for in the subtleties of the incident's aftereffects. Specifically, there is a telling parallel between the only two changes directly associated with the Event: Jack's ambiguous medical condition following his exposure to the toxin Nyodene D, and the dazzling new sunsets.

As to the first, Jack, a fifty-two-year-old man, is told by his doctors that, as a result of his toxic exposure, he probably doesn't have more than thirty-five years or so to live. The humor here, of course, resides in the fact that the death that results from computers and industrial chemistry is indistinguishable from the natural-biblical-pastoral allotment of three score and ten. So in a sense, we breathe a sigh of relief for Jack Gladney, because his fate is essentially unchanged. But then, if we are sympathetic to DeLillo's sensibilities, we will freeze up with dread on Jack's

behalf, because his fate, his very existence, the meaning of “fate” itself, is changed utterly, infected on the genetic level with a synthetic reagent. His life itself—in an existential rather than a merely biological sense—has been contaminated. If Jack were told he would normally live until seventy-five, but this contamination will kill him by seventy, then there would still be nature over here, culture over there. Like Alex of *Clockwork Orange*, like Tyrone Slothrop of *Gravity’s Rainbow*, like Neo of *The Matrix*, Jack would be oppressed by technology in a reassuringly traditional sense; it would stand over and against him as a threat. Competition and contrast between antagonists enables mutual existential definition: I can tell what I am by what I am not and vice versa. But for Jack Gladney, the horror is that technology and its living death have infiltrated the structure of the natural self, so that there is nothing of mine to pit against it, no “it” to aim at, because I am “it.” There is no differentiating authentic from sincere, self from not-self, nature from culture.

The second, parallel change in the wake of the Airborne Toxic Event is the newly brilliant sunsets. These sunsets constitute an ecological correlative of Jack’s synthetic infection.

Ever since the airborne toxic event, the sunsets had become almost unbearably beautiful. Not that there was a measurable connection. If the special character of Nyodene Derivative (added to the everyday drift of effluents, pollutants, contaminants and delirians) had caused this aesthetic leap from already brilliant sunsets to broad towering ruddled visionary skylscapes, tinged with dread, no one had been able to prove it. (170)

As with Jack’s plasticized mortality, the indeterminacy of the causal connection between the Event and the new sunsets diffuses into a hazy ubiquity of association. Nyodene-D has infiltrated Jack’s physical world as slinkily and as sidewise as it has entered his life.

This relation between Jack's condition and his physical habitat is not merely a metaphorical or symbolic relation; it is a real correspondence between subject and object. Jack and the sky are both transformed in their being by the same industrial contamination. When this depth of fusion has been achieved, it becomes pointless to talk about nature over here and civilization over there. Human beings have not only, or even primarily, destroyed nature as we thought they would—with coarse materiality, in the nineteenth-century way, by paving paradise and putting up a parking lot. The trees still stand, the sun still shines; but these things have become artificialized in their phenomenological being; their perceptual structure has been plasticized, acculturated, domesticated. We have made nature over according to our own tacky and apocalyptic dreams and fears. The garden *is* the machine.

In employing the image of the sunset, DeLillo is alluding to more than just actual environmental reportage about the effect of atmospheric pollutants on the quality of sunsets. DeLillo's westward gazing suburbanites are participating in an American tradition of mythic sunset-worship. In the sunsets of the Hudson River School painters—Thomas Cole's *The Old Mill at Sunset* (1844), Josiah Wolcott's *Brook Farm* (1844), George Inness's *Hackensack Meadows, Sunset* (1859), Albert Bierstadt's *Toward the Setting Sun* (1862)—the landscapes articulate a call to the viewer's spirit. The theme is not the light itself, but the provocation of a sublime response in the sunset gazer, which response indicates the oceanic unity of nature and soul, and consequently of geography and political destiny, of the American landscape and the American future.

Among the most memorable descriptions of sunset in the literature of transcendentalism is that of "the charm, last evening, of a January sunset" in Emerson's *Nature*:

The western clouds divided and subdivided themselves into pink flakes modulated with tints of unspeakable softness, and the air had so much life and sweetness that it was a pain to come within doors. What was it that nature would say? Was there no meaning in the live repose of the valley behind the mill, and which Homer or Shakespeare could not re-form for me in words? (27-28)

Emerson's belief is that there is such a meaning, that the harmony of man and nature occurs in the form of language. We can read the sunset the way we can read the Great Writers, the way the Great Writers read the sunset. Homer and Shakespeare don't "form" the sunset language, they "re-form" it; they return it to the more direct source of pure language. The world soul is a scholarly old gent, rich in sentimental benevolence.

Of course, this conception goes out of literary vogue in the bitter wake of Darwin and Freud. Nature is a bleak wasteland, a Beckett stage, a Conradian ocean, a vector of Sartrean nausea. The capacity for transcendental message-sending of the natural world under such conditions is best epitomized in the figure of Moby-Dick. Nature signifies ambiguously nothing and everything. The pursuit of human meanings in brute nature is a dangerous hunt, and a pointless one.

Flash forward to DeLillo's sunset. Jack and his wife, Babette, pull the car over to wonder at the sunset and repeat the question "Why is that? . . . Why is that?"—not to each other exactly, but to the atmosphere, to the winds, in dread and dismay. It is as if Emerson's dream of a discursive relationship between man and Nature has come true in a nightmarish kind of way. This cloudscape *does* murmur a dimly discernible soul-message for Jack touching on the nature of his existence. The same anonymous Rappaccinis have rendered the same kind of change in the sunset that they have rendered in Jack's self-understanding. The circle between subject and object has been redrawn, but in a coarse material-historical

way rather than a religious-literary way. DeLillo's description of the landscape suggests a kind of postmodern transcendentalism. The age-old American dream of a legible world—Bradford's dream, Cotton Mather's, Thoreau's and Emerson's—becomes true, but rather than elevating the being of man to the mystic proportions of nature, the effect has been more to drag nature down into the thanatoid Hitlerism rampant in mankind.

But to be more precise, the effect in *White Noise* and throughout DeLillo is an intrication of these two effects. Jack's dread is characterized by that apprehension of the uncanny which Freud describes as the superimposition of the familiar and the unfamiliar. This historically unprecedented spectacle of a haze of synthetic chemicals—something that comes into my life from nowhere and that is completely beyond anything I understand—has something eerily intimate to whisper to me about some chilling secret that I have been keeping from myself. I have both found myself and lost myself in the world. Found myself because the womb-like fantasy of the pathetic fallacy has come true. My being is continuous with that of "Nature." I am demonstrably right where I belong. But lost myself too because I myself am on the outside of this entire circuit of referentiality. I can't live in my home. It falls apart too easily into categories of materiality and contingency, into the tawdry details of corporate applications for industrial chemistry.

Given the personal nature of his mortal bond to Nyodene-D, it makes sense that Jack would take a particularly keen interest in anything associated with the fallout from the chemical spill. But the corresponding awe which the new sunsets evoke in the other townsfolk suggests that Jack's condition is not unique. They have all been exposed to and hence infected by their brush with a plastic apocalypse. And so the people of Blacksmith all drive out to the overpass

and take in the sunset. If it were a natural sunset, it would be a lovely moment, nature soothing existential dread the way it is supposed to do in nineteenth-century America. The townsfolk discover temporary transcendence from the griefs of human mortality in the all-being of the Natural Order of Things. But this is not Huck Finn's sunscape, or Emerson's.

The sky takes on content, feeling, an exalted narrative life. The bands of color reach so high, seem at times to separate into their constituent parts. There are turreted skies, light storms, softly falling streamers. It is hard to know how we should feel about this. Some people are scared by the sunsets, some determined to be elated, but most of us don't know how to feel, are ready to go either way. (324)

One of the most global effects of the new sunsets is that they are no longer *just* sunsets. Like the Most Photographed Barn in America, the sunsets have lost their innocence; they have become semantic signifiers rather than meteorological events. When a sunset is just a sunset, you don't have to feel one way or another about it. But the "sunset" in quotation marks abducts us into a relation with it, a complicated responsibility and even culpability.

The crowds that turn out for these sunsets in fact recall the crowds of Nazis in Jack's Hitler lectures. Whitman's "Song at Sunset" describes "superb vistas of death" (504). In the twentieth century, the vistas that Whitman considered privately have become mass spectacles and have been given odd new form by unprecedented new technologies. The Airborne Toxic Event itself—a billowing cloud illuminated from shifting angles by siren lights, helicopter lights, and floodlights—is one such form. Another is the dramatic light display designed by Albert Speer for the 1934 Nazi party rally. The crowd of American sunset-watchers is conflated with that of the similarly skyward-aspiring Nazis described elsewhere in the

novel: "Ranks of thousands of flagbearers arrayed before columns of frozen light, a hundred and thirty anti-aircraft searchlights aimed straight up—a scene that resembled a geometric longing, the formal notation of some powerful mass desire" (26). Speer's "Cathedral of Light," as he called it, constitutes a kind of artificial sunset itself. As a work of art with a semantic structure, it abstracts the deathliness, the sublimity, and the awe of sunsets out of nature and reinscribes them into political life. The techno-state becomes the site of awe. For DeLillo's American death-fetishists, the artificial cloud is resituated back into nature, but as an artificial display. The individual artist Speer has faded into an anonymous and invisible priesthood of biochemists, just as the artificiality they release into the world has become indistinguishable from nature and from selfhood; and now there is no way of knowing who are the Nazis and who are the Whitmans.

All of this uncertainty is implicit in the awe of the sunset-gazers.

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, soon to pass. (324-25)

The spectacle of the sunset has become for DeLillo's moderns what it was for Emerson: a problem, a riddle, an inscrutable revelation. But whereas Emerson was soothed with the sense of continuity that bound such geographically and historically diverse figures as himself, Shakespeare and Homer into a common language of natural images and human values, Jack and his neighbors are troubled by a sense of incongruity with the rest of history. The sunset signifies the American future rather than the human past; it refers to a world

of history and change rather than to a transcendental non-world of ideal poetry. It refers to a world the human meaning of which has been fundamentally altered by global warming, mutually assured destruction, and genetic modification; our planet is a man-made one, infected with a human-like mortality. In this sense, it captures us; it compels us. Whatever beauty there is in such a sunset is the beauty of a toxic, poisonous world of manmade death; and whatever there is in me that responds so intensely to such beauty implicates me as an idolater of such sinister values. As such, I am seduced by a strain of suicidalism and apocalypticism, almost against my will. Or it is as if my will itself has been appropriated by incomprehensible impulses. The feeling of the sublime itself, the most definitive religious ecstasy, is co-opted into the circuit of a culture that is always looking for new places to affix advertisements for its death-loving self—in classrooms, on mountain tops, across the sky.

The futurity of the image of the sunset is nothing new. According to Thoreau's transcendental heliology, as presented in his essay "Walking,"

We go eastward to realize history and study the works of art and literature, retracing the steps of the race; we go westward as into the future, with a spirit of enterprise and adventure ... Every sunset which I witness inspires me with the desire to go to a West as distant and as fair as that into which the sun goes down. (604-05)

Of course, the fairness to which the sun goes down was always just in Thoreau's mind. DeLillo's characters accept what every schoolchild knows, that sun and earth alike both plummet with eternal futility down into circular vacuums of cold and empty silence. And yet the new sunsets articulate an appeal to a collective futurity. The townsfolk congregate in respectful silence, with ritualistic deference. It is the only instance in the novel in which strangers are brought together

by anything aside from disaster or consumerism. They bring the sick and handicapped. The transcendental values still persist despite the extremely materialist-civilizational referentiality of the sunsets. For all the toxicity, Nazism, and death, or perhaps on account of these significations, people are still mesmerized by the beauty of the spectacle. Speaking about the sun, Jack's son Heinrich reminds his family: "The thing you have to understand about giant stars is that they have actual nuclear explosions deep inside the core. Totally forget these Russian I[C]BMs that are supposed to be so awesome. We're talking about a hundred million times bigger explosions" (233). The sunset is an image of the nuclear apocalypse that constitutes a certain vision of the future for the Cold War America. To see the sublime in such a spectacle is simultaneously an affront to humanity and a very human response. It is as if the dream of the end of the world that has appalled and seduced human consciousness for millennia has finally been realized in the material world, as if technology has finally caught up with the most primordial and most irrational fantasies of human consciousness. For Thoreau, the sunset signified the future in a purely metaphorical sense. For DeLillo's sunset-gazers, however, imagining the chemical-nuclear sunset as a metaphor for the future of America is complicated by the sense in which it is not "just" a metaphor. Artificial incursion has invested the sky with a real semiotic referentiality. As a result of the atomic reconfiguration of the landscape, American destiny is writ large in sunlight and cloudshape in a way that is disturbingly literal. American ingenuity has managed to inscribe the ecological apocalypse of its own soul into the very sky. And we are aghast to discover that Emerson's hermeneutic naturalism according to which Nature is the symbol of Spirit has been made true. Nature has been rewritten as the symbol of the same world-historical spirit that brought you Nazis and nuclear war.

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## Jack Kerouac: Misconceived Misogynist

**R**eaders of Jack Kerouac's novels usually find that his narratives deal with travel and the search for one's self, with the majority of the characters being young men who are out to have a good time. Because of this subject matter, some critics have claimed that Kerouac does not create any meaningful female characters. One such critic is Eliot D. Allen. In his essay "That Was No Lady—That Was Jack Kerouac's Girl," Allen contends that Kerouac views women as either sex objects or scenery. I disagree. Everyone he came in contact with was fodder for his imagination. He wrote as a way to understand himself and his role in the world around him. As he used his life as his subject matter, he was not just simply recording, but attempting to find his place in the world. At times, Kerouac held romantic notions of the roles of both men and women which today might seem antiquated. However, at worst, Kerouac treats his female characters in the same way he treats his male ones, as people to be studied to further the understanding of himself through his character-narrator, Jack Duluoz.

While Kerouac's best-known subject is Neal Cassady, the force behind *On the Road* and *Visions of Cody*, Kerouac also focused his energies on novels dealing with female figures central to both the story and the character-narrator's development. *Maggie Cassidy*, *Tristessa*, and *The Subterraneans* are three such novels. Through an examination of these novels

I intend to demonstrate that, far from being a misogynist, Kerouac both needed and respected the women in his life.

Though few in number, Kerouac's female characters are highly significant. They help Kerouac to develop parts of himself that his friends or his art cannot; and through them he experiences joy, pain, love, and loss. In order to grasp fully the complexity of their importance to Kerouac, the reader needs to be aware of certain facts about the writer's life.

The death of his brother Gerard when Kerouac was only four left a void which he tried to fill throughout his life. He felt compelled to live up to what he believed his brother would have expected from him. He also made a death-bed promise to his dying father to always take care of his mother, without whose backing he might never have attained his goal of becoming a writer. It was through her emotional and financial support that Kerouac was able to devote himself to his vocation, especially during the six-year period from 1951 to 1956 when he was an unpublished writer. His desire to be a published writer and his neglect of certain responsibilities while he pursued that goal contributed to his relationships with the women in his life whom he discussed and interacted with in his *Duluoz Legend*.

In her essay "A White Man in Love," Nancy McCampbell Grace states that for Kerouac there were three types of women: "the white goddess, the fellaheen, and the grotesque" (41). She goes on to say that Kerouac saw every woman as having some aspect of these three types. We see the three types embodied in Maggie Cassidy, Mardou Fox, and Tristessa. At times each woman takes on all three aspects. *Maggie Cassidy* recounts Kerouac's first love and heartbreak during his senior year of high school. The object of Jacky Duluoz's desire is Maggie Cassidy, an Irish Catholic high school dropout, who is one year his senior. From the beginning, the two seem as if they are worlds apart.

Jacky is a standout in football and track; he has dreams of making it in New York. Maggie, on the other hand, has divorced herself from the world of high school and is hoping to settle down, be married, and have a family. For Kerouac she represents a quiet life in Lowell, away from the demands of the larger world. Maggie's father works on the railroad, and she looks for a similar type of man in her boyfriend. She explains this desire in a fantasy to Jacky: "—be a brakeman on the railroad, we'll live in a little house by the tracks, play the 920 Club, have babies—I'll paint my kitchen chairs red—I'll paint the walls of our bedroom deep dark green or sumpin—I'll kiss you to wake up in the morning—" (75). Jacky tries to convince himself that this is what he wants. Kerouac contemplates the life that Duluoz and Maggie could have if he decided to succumb to Maggie's wishes: ". . . going up dark steps along rosy wallpaper to the dim velvet darkness of the room upstairs where we take off our coats of winter and put on pajamas and in between in the middle of both garments the nudities of bouncing bed" (143).

Since Maggie is from a traditional Catholic family, premarital sex is viewed as a mortal sin. Therefore, if Maggie and Duluoz wish to have sex with one another they must be married. Maggie is longing for a sexual encounter, as is Jacky, but she wants to remain a good girl, and so she sees being married as the answer. This is Maggie's only way to experience sex and remain pure in the eyes of her society. Duluoz wants to have sex with her as well, but he cannot convince himself that he should marry Maggie in order to experience sex, and he also does not want to do something to besmirch her reputation. As a man, he is able to move a little more easily through the conservative and conventional forces of his time.

Desiring sex, Duluoz visits a prostitute:

I'd already been to the redbrick hotels of midtown New

York in 1939 and had my first sex with a red-headed older girl a professional whore . . . had gulped in the bed waiting, she came down the hall on sharp heelclacks, I waited with a pounding heart, the door opened, this perfectly built Hollywood beauty piled in with her wealth of heavy breasts—I was terrified . . . (172)

As Jacky has his first carnal experience, Kerouac further extends the idea that a woman is either a virgin or a whore. When Jacky hints in letters to Maggie at what he has done, she wants him “to do to her what I did to ‘them girls in New York’” (172). This would seem to be exactly what he would want to hear, but instead he responds by telling her, “Aw Maggie I cant do that to you!” He thinks it is “too sinful bigcity to do it to her” (172). Maggie, therefore, represents not only first love, but purity. She is the virgin, and he must protect her honor. She remains in the Duluoz Legend, sheltered, honored, and fixed in purity, a female counterpart to brother Gerard and friend Sebastian.

Gerard and Sebastian are dead when Kerouac writes about them, thus keeping them alive and demonstrating to his readers the path that they have set him on. Maggie does not die after her relationship with Kerouac ends. Rather she goes on living her life, but without him in it. Though she does lose her virginity, Kerouac is not privy to this fact; thus Maggie is still a virgin to him and remains in a fixed state of purity, one that he can return to time and time again. We can see her in the role of the white goddess. Yet she is more than that. Maggie is a character whom Kerouac revisits in his writings to celebrate his acquaintance with her and to demonstrate to his audience the power of love in its purest form. In creating her, Kerouac demonstrates the necessity of her character and shows how she helps to shape both Duluoz and himself. Therefore, she is more than just a pretty face, but a force to be remembered, cherished, and respected.

*Maggie Cassidy* is not the only novel written for a past love. Mardou Fox serves as the inspiration for Kerouac's Leo Percepied in *The Subterraneans*. The novel recounts a brief two-month love affair between Leo and Mardou, a young African-American woman who is part of the Subterraneans, a group of hep cats and cool chicks. The relationship is doomed, in part because of Leo's hang-ups about Mardou's ethnicity and age. She is eventually unfaithful to Leo, but only after his erratic behavior pushes her toward having sex with Yuri Gilgoric, a young poet. While much of the novel deals with Leo's frustration at losing Mardou, she serves as a catalyst not only for his frustration but for his art as well.

*The Subterraneans* is perhaps Kerouac's most confessional novel—in part because the novel was written so close to the end of the relationship that underlies it. The problems which Leo and Mardou face are created by Leo. Leo, a thirty-something writer, finds himself inadequate at times as he runs around with a group of younger people. His insecurity is revealed in the reflection that “you always go for the ones who don't really want you” (6). This defeatist attitude seems to permeate the novel as Leo is always ready for Mardou to leave him. Mardou allows Leo to fantasize about the fellaheen. Several times in the novel the couple discuss running off to Mexico. The idea appeals to Leo. He imagines

a dobe hut say outside Texcoco at five dollars a month and we go to the market in the early dewy morning she in her sweet brown feet on sandals padding wifelike Ruthlike to follow me, we come, buy oranges, load up on bread, even wine, local wine, we go home and cook it up cleanly on our little cooker, we sit together over coffee writing down our dreams, analyzing them, we make love on our little bed. (40)

Yet when Mardou interprets this as an invitation, Leo balks. Their plans don't materialize because the comple-

tion of the plan would cause Leo to be responsible. Also, for a writer who exists inside himself, the fantasy is better than the reality. Kerouac and his character-narrators' views of women are not misogynistic, but a reflection of the time in which he lived. A man is to be responsible, i.e., the bread winner, and neither Kerouac nor his character-narrators want to sacrifice their writing for love. Therefore, they see commitment as a trap, one to avoid in order to pursue the art of writing. Yet Leo and Kerouac need the fantasy. Kerouac, as demonstrated in his novels, looked to women not for some great intellectual understanding, but for love. Yet all he seems to want is maternal love. His primary goal was to become a published writer. Having to work to support a wife or family any other way but by his pen would seem as if he were shortchanging his dream. Therefore, he avoided the responsibility of a wife and family to pursue his goal as an artist. What he demonstrates in the *Duluoz Legend* is the importance for him of becoming a successful writer.

Kerouac would go to Mexico several times in the 1950s to write, but he would opt for an inexpensive room in Mexico City, not an adobe hut in the Mexican countryside. Kerouac biographer Ann Charters has emphasized the writer's need to construct fantasies, or "vanities as he called them" (21). She sees it as a way for him to deal with his perceived failure as a published writer. Leo's refusal to take Mardou with him illustrates a conflict which permeates the novel. Staying with Mardou keeps Leo from writing, yet when he returns to his mother's house to write he wants to be with Mardou. Eventually he chooses writing over Mardou. This should not be surprising, given Kerouac's dedication to writing. In the end, Mardou, like many other characters of Kerouac, serves a purpose in helping the character-narrator, in this case Leo Percepied. While this may seem like the function of any literary character, Kerouac takes it to another level in his

fiction. He needed to do so as a way to figure out who he was. This is a main reason behind his creation of his Duluoz Legend. In writing it, he hoped to establish a sense of order in his life.

*Tristessa* is a short novel which focuses on Jack Duluoz's time in Mexico City. Here Duluoz meets Tristessa, a morphine addict. Written during the height of Kerouac's belief in Buddhism, the novel is laced with Buddhist and Catholic imagery. Both Kerouac and Duluoz look beyond Tristessa's illness/addiction and focus on her beauty, both inner and outer. "Tristessa is a junkie and she goes about it skinny and carefree . . ." (29). Like Mardou Fox before her, Tristessa appeals to Kerouac's character-narrator for what she is not—in Tristessa's case, safe and ordinary. She has "the strangeness of her love-cheek, Azteca, Indian girl with mysterious lidded Billy Holiday eyes" (8). Yet Duluoz has sworn off love (at least in Part One), and so the love he presents to Tristessa is more brotherly than anything else. "She knows I admire and love her with all my heart and that I'm holding myself back" (22). By removing the aspect of lust from love, Kerouac is able to present his audience with a fuller picture of Tristessa. She is not objectified, but studied to be revered. He goes so far as to compare her to the Virgin Mary with "her lidded eyes and clasped hands" (22). Still, part of her appeal is the fellaheen.

Only Tristessa hasnt got that expression of sex-smile, it has the expression of mawkfaced down-mouthed Indian disregard for what you think about its own pluperfect beauty. Not that it's perfect beauty . . . it's got faults, errors, but all men and women have them and so all women forgive men and men forgive women and go their own holy ways to death. (23)

Yet Kerouac moves beyond the fellaheen and introduces universality. Death serves as a minor theme in the novel—perhaps because, as a junkie, Tristessa

courts death. Furthermore, focusing on the Buddhist principle that “All Life is Sorrowful” (*Some of the Dharma* 3), Kerouac can be seen putting this belief into practice. Still, in the first section of the novel there seems to be hope.

The second section takes place a year later after Tristessa has become ravaged by junk. Still Duluo tries to love her. Yet she is beyond all saving. Kerouac presents Tristessa as part goddess, part fellaheen, and part grotesque. Like Mardou Fox, Kerouac’s character-narrators desire the exotic creatures; but an inability to commit to them, until it is too late, brings the relationships to a halt. The role women play in Kerouac’s fiction illustrates the frustration he encountered as a writer living in obscurity. There is more than a bit of self-pity in Kerouac’s character-narrators, reflecting the writer’s belief that he has been misunderstood.

Both Nancy McCampbell Grace and Jon Panish misread Kerouac. They both believe that his female and African-American characters are used to heighten his marginality (Grace 40; Panish 107-08). They are wrong in that Kerouac himself was marginalized as both an obscure writer and the son of immigrant working-class parents. In reading Kerouac it is important to remember the time in which he lived and wrote, not just when he published his novels. Once Kerouac earned notoriety for *On the Road*, he was able to publish *Maggie Cassidy*, *The Subterraneans*, and *Tristessa*, but they were written years earlier. Both *Maggie Cassidy* and *The Subterraneans* were written in 1953, and *Tristessa* between 1955 and 1956.

Initially Kerouac wrote from the margin. Economically and socially he was marginalized by the power structure of his day, a fact that contemporary critics ignore when they place him in the majority because he is a white man. This serves as an injustice not only to Kerouac but also to the numerous men

who found themselves in similar situations. Therefore, readers of Kerouac should resist the temptation to classify his writing as either hedonistic because of the partying or misogynistic because of the small number of female characters, but instead look deeper into the writing to see how he was attempting to gain self-knowledge and communicate with his audience.

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## “I” Matters: Why English 101 Students Benefit from Writing in First Person

**T**he first time I taught composition at the college level—in fact, the first time I taught in a classroom—was at a small college in the city of Baltimore. My class, scheduled at night, consisted mostly of women in their forties who, like me, were employed full time during the day.

I spent much of the first two months covering basic grammar and paragraph-writing skills. Despite how often we reviewed the same composition skills, their writing was riddled with potholes of missing words and sentences that ran headlong at such great length and speed that my eyes panted long before the sentences ended. As much as I appreciated and enjoyed this group of students, I agonized over their lack of progress.

During this period the class had been working on writing well-developed paragraphs. This had been a challenge for many of them, especially one particular student, a woman named Epps who wore her nurse's aide uniform and an expression of contempt to class. I remember thinking what a paradox it was that this woman who sometimes wore smocks smothered in brightly colored cartoon animals looked as if she wanted to gut the first person who looked at her the wrong way. Epps's writing was so muddled, so obscured by confusing sentence constructions, that I usually didn't grade her papers; instead, I recommended that she take her paragraphs to the school's writing lab for

tutoring.

For their first essay I asked the students to write about a life-defining moment. Epps wrote about a teenage memory. The narrative took place when she was sixteen or so, a time when she had already lost her father to drugs. She came home from school one afternoon and found her mother lying on her bed, unconscious, a hypodermic needle sticking upright from her arm. After telephoning for an ambulance, Epps tried shaking her mother. By the time the paramedics arrived, they had to tear Epps away from her mother, whose limp, lifeless face she couldn't stop slapping.

After reading over this powerful narrative a few times, I winced at the thought of the dilemma ahead of me, one most of us dread: having to grade or at least critique the way a student writes about a painful, traumatic memory. What stopped me dead in my tracks before I got to that point, though, was the realization that I had even gotten to this point: her personal essay was so easy to follow and understand that it could be graded on the spot without any trips to the writing lab. What's more, it was so well written—her paragraphs were well developed and well organized, her sentences clear and lucid—that it deserved an "A."

Worried that I might be shirking my responsibility and handing out such a high grade out of sympathy, I re-read Epps's essay over and over, searching for errors or undercooked ideas, but everything was there. Then another concern arose in my mind. What if Epps had someone else write it? How would I know if she had? When I handed back the class's essays, Epps looked at the grade and an anxious pall shrouded her face. "Did you give me this grade because you felt sorry for me?" she asked. "No," I said, relieved that I had already thought the whole dilemma through. "You earned it." The pall was replaced with a blush of pride, and as she gazed at the essay I thought I recognized in her eyes the

victim's relief at some degree of closure. I felt my own relief with the knowledge that the essay was, in fact, hers.

Later that semester the same question kept shadowing me. How was it that Epps had written such a flawless personal essay when so much that flowed from her pen was practically incomprehensible? Was it just her, or was there something about the act of writing a personal narrative that accessed some place deep within where an implicit knowledge of writing lay?

Of course, it wasn't just Epps. What I have discovered through years of teaching composition is that most college students have the ability to write clear, concise prose that elucidates at least some degree of critical insight. So, what then gets in the way?

Many of our students fear that writing will lay bare parts of themselves that may be horribly embarrassing to them—their own thoughts and ideas. Any writing or English teacher who has ever asked students to jot down their thoughts and feelings about writing has read the same old responses; regardless of age, our students blanch at the thought of writing because no other way of communicating so clearly exposes what they consider to be their inferior thoughts.

It's true, as all writing teachers know, that good writing is the product of good thinking. But what we sometimes forget is how demanding, how complex the process of expressing clear thoughts in writing is for most people, regardless of the quality of thought. One of the best educators I have ever met—a man whose Ph.D. was devoted to studying the pros and cons of standardized testing and how to best evaluate school-age children—once told me, “Nothing we do in school is more difficult than the process of writing, of trying to transfer ideas from our brains to our fingers and onto a page or screen.”

Many of us who have devoted so much of our

lives to reading and practicing the craft of writing sometimes take for granted just how complex the writing process is. It's the reason why, more than out of laziness, so many people, even well-published writers, procrastinate when it comes to facing a blank page. Writing is a damned daunting task. What makes it even more difficult for our students, particularly the up-and-coming Millennial Generation who have been weaned on Gameboys and I-Ming, is that their brains are increasingly becoming hard-wired in a way that makes focusing and thinking on a deep, critical level for extended periods more and more of a challenge. It's no wonder, then, that when we ask our students to jot down their thoughts and feelings about the word "writing," so many of them slip into a catatonic stupor.

When we add to this mix the task of learning to express ideas in an academic tone, one that is foreign to many of them, we add yet another layer of complexity. I'm not suggesting that we should stop challenging students to express themselves in a more analytically expansive way. Of course we should continue to maintain high standards. But why is it so important that our students, few of whom will go on to pursue careers in academia, try to emulate the lofty, erudite tone so common to scholarly journals? After all, that is a style of writing that, ironically enough, often obscures meaning instead of clarifying it.

I believe that we need to rethink the paradigm of academic writing in the composition classroom. We need to consider changing the vehicle of expression. I'm not suggesting that we scrap the engine; I'm suggesting that we modify the chassis. The most efficient way to do this, I feel, is to begin by encouraging students to write analytical essays and papers in the first-person point of view.

Unlike the third-person point of view, writing in first person grounds the nascent writer. It closes the chasm between the text and the writer's insights

about it. First person breeds intimacy with an idea—it encourages a writer not only to embrace his or her own thoughts and observations but to wrestle with them in the muck of a developing mind—whereas the ubiquitous third-person point of view creates more of a distance by keeping the text at arm’s length, so to speak, like a cousin who hates to get dirty.

While all of this occurs at an unconscious level, the effect is no less profound. It’s the reason why Epps, my student from long ago, was able to execute a 180-degree turn and write about the death of her mother so clearly and eloquently. What at first seemed a daunting process that only reminded her of how insignificant and invalid her own thoughts were became a way that she could feel some control and confidence. By writing in a voice that invites more intimacy with the topic at hand, she was able to view the assignment as a partner and not as an adversary.

Now, I’m well aware of the fear that many of us have about allowing students to write from this point of view. It is a Pandora’s Box, we worry, which will only encourage writing that is too opinionated, too mentally lazy, too intellectually flabby, and not rooted enough in critical analysis which is supported by textual evidence. We know from experience that if we give them an inch, they’ll take a mile. Many of our students are the living, breathing reasons that this adage is a cliché.

But writing in first person doesn’t have to go to such extremes. It doesn’t have to mean letting student writers off the hook, intellectually speaking; it doesn’t have to give them a carte blanche that entitles their egos to run amok all over the paper to the point that their views and personal experiences hold the paper hostage. The “I” voice can co-exist, quietly and effectively, within the bounds of well-supported, well-argued ideas. It takes practice, but it can be done.

One of my past students, Ben, maintains this tenuous balance fairly well in an excerpt from a reading

response to Annie Dillard's essay "Lenses":

[Dillard] writes about the acquired skill of looking through a microscope and binoculars. . . . [The essay] made me think back to eighth grade labs, when I was first learning how to use a microscope. Looking through a microscope really takes practice, being able to turn the focus knobs and adjusting your vision simultaneously. Dillard then moves on [to discuss] the importance of also adjusting your vision to look through binoculars. . . She moves from looking through a microscope at pond dwelling cells to looking at swans through binoculars. . . . she transitions by the way we see things through lenses.

Daniel analyzes the same Dillard essay, focusing on similar points, but he maintains a third-person perspective:

[Dillard] further went on to explain her curiosity of nature when she compared the perspective of nature that we could see with our naked eye to man-made instruments such as a microscope and a binocular. She knows that with the aid of the microscope our eyes could see the intensity of what is inside certain organisms. To perceive her curiosity, she viewed a sample of water that has the presence of micro-organisms under a microscope. She knows that a binocular is used to view very far objects when she views a swan . . . .

The differences between these two analyses aren't earth-shattering. Ben's is not vastly superior to Daniel's simply because he briefly incorporates a first-person point of view. What this temporary shift does do, however, is draw the reader in with the writer's middle-school anecdote that makes a personal connection with the topic. But this effect goes further; it analyzes through application: Ben finds greater meaning and understanding by identifying with what turns out to be a highly detailed, some might even say gratuitous, passage in which Dillard describes the workings of a microscope.

Ben again tries to identify with the topic through phrases such as “adjusting your vision” and “by the way we see things through lenses.” While I dissuade my students from falling into the habit of addressing the reader directly or familiarly, I tell them that if they are discussing a topic that most readers can identify with, then it’s okay to engage us. True, few of us want writers assuming that they can speak on our behalf, but sometimes there are moments when most of us really can identify with a writer’s experience or insight. If anything, including us in the analysis further engages us with the writing and further enhances its universal appeal.

Even though he isn’t aware of it, Ben’s writing has an implicit flow that Daniel’s lacks. It’s obvious that Daniel had a difficult time fully comprehending the essay and understanding why Dillard makes the connections that she does. This probably explains his verbosity and clunky unity. I don’t think that Ben understood these things any better, but the difference is that he tries to bring a more personal connection to the analysis, and, as a result, his writing at least feels more engaging. Any time that a writer, be it a student writer or a well-published one, goes out of his or her way to make the analysis feel more personal, I, at least, feel that the writer is more invested in making sure that the reader clearly understands the ideas; and clarity after all, is a cornerstone of good writing.

I believe that this is why William Zinsser, in his chapter on “Style,” urges writers to embrace first person (21). This point of view brings out their humanity. Without even knowing it, students writing in this point of view develop an authority over the material, an ownership, which yields not just clarity, but something we all want more of in our students—accountability: a willingness to take personal responsibility for what they say and for what they stand for.

Try as I do to get my students to take these

kinds of risks in their writing, the reality is that few ever do. Once or twice during a semester, though, an Epps comes along who bites her lip and puts as much of herself onto the page as she is able. Even if she doesn't want to tell her story, she reels me in with her willingness to attach her "I" to the sometimes farfetched analysis she comes up with. Even something as daunting as composition can benefit from the human touch.

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Jack Kerouac:  
Misconceived Misogynist

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"I" Matters:  
Why English 101 Students Benefit  
from Writing in First Person

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