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TOM ROBBINS - A PLAYFUL PROPHET

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Honors Thesis
Dartmouth College
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June 1, 1982

DEDICATED TO SANDRA - THE AMANDA OF MY HEART

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While strolling through her cactus gardens one warmish June morning, Amanda came upon an old Navajo man painting pictures in the sand. "What is the function of the artist?" Amanda demanded of the talented trespasser. "The function of the artist," the Navajo answered, "is to provide what life does not."

CHAPTER ONE: - Introduction

Tom Robbins is a recent phenomenon. Although only eleven years have passed since his first novel was published, he has captivated a surprisingly large audience. In certain circles, he has become a cult figure. However, Robbins has yet to achieve academic acclaim commensurate with his popularity; strikingly little scholarship has been devoted to his work. The time is right to begin.

Though most of his readers believe him to be considerably younger, Thomas Eugene Robbins was born in Blowing Rock, North Carolina on July 22, 1936.¹ Robbins was reared in South Richmond, Virginia, a spot for which the narrator of Even Cowgirls Get The Blues has a distinct distaste: "South Richmond was a neighborhood of mouse holes, lace curtains, Sears catalogs, measles epidemics, baloney sandwiches - and men who knew more about the carburetor than they knew about the clitoris."² A sensitive child who read voraciously and fantasized fiercely, young Robbins became somewhat of a social misfit. After attending Washington and Lee University for two years he was kicked out of his fraternity for flipping a pea and hurling a biscuit at his housemother. Such prankishness might have been excused,

had not the pea landed in the housemother's blouse."³ Robbins dropped out, hitched around the country and at age twenty, arrived in Greenwich Village intending to write poetry. To avoid starvation and the draft, he joined the Air Force and was sent to Korea as a meteorologist for the South Korean Air Force. Climate control aside, Robbins spent most of his time running a black market in cigarettes, soap and toothpaste. In 1960, Robbins returned to the United States, graduated from Art School, and took a job as a copy editor for a Richmond newspaper. Fired for printing a picture of Sammy Davis Jr and his Scandinavian wife, May Britt, Robbins decided to calculate which point in the continental U.S. was farthest from Richmond. Seattle it was and to Seattle he went. He enrolled in Oriental philosophy courses at the University of Washington in 1962 and later became an art critic for the Seattle Times.

Then an event occurred whose significance in Robbins' life cannot be underestimated. "July 16, 1963," Robbins says, "was the most rewarding day of my life, because that was the day I took acid."⁴ He met a pharmacology professor at the University of Washington who gave him three tablets of what was then perfectly legal Sandoz LSD. What followed was, according to Robbins, "an odyssey."⁵ This one experience was so powerful that it radically altered Robbins' perspective on life. Robbins began traveling to Haight-Asbury to write openly about taking acid. According to his then editor, Lou Guzzo, "these were extraordinary accounts. He was a prophet."⁶ Though he

continued for six months to work for the Times, Robbins became increasingly dissatisfied. Then one day when Robbins was walking down the street, a mysterious red bearded man stared at him and began laughing hysterically. The next day, Robbins called in "well" and told his editor "I've been sick for two years and coming to work, but this morning I'm well, so I won't be in."⁷ That day changed the direction of Robbins life. Perceiving that he alone could will his dreams into reality, Robbins turned towards the realization of a new dream - living a life of enchantment

Robbins next spent a year in New York's East Village researching a book on the modern artist, Jackson Pollack - a book he would never write. He returned to Seattle, began to write an art column for the Seattle Magazine, and hosted the first local rock music program. His column attracted the attention of Doubleday's Berkley editor, Luther Nichols, who approached Robbins in 1968 about writing a book of creative criticism. Robbins replied that he was toying with the idea of writing a novel and proceeded to improvise the plot of Another Roadside Attraction. Nichols was interested, Robbins quit his job and after twice rejecting the manuscript, Doubleday published Another Roadside Attraction in 1971. At the age of 35, Robbins' literary career was born.

Literary success, however, was far from won. By 1975, the hardcover version had sold only 2200 of 5000 copies. Yet, when the

book came out in paperback, it slowly began to sell, especially amongst youth in campuses and cities across the country. With nothing but word of mouth advertising, the paperback had sold over one half a million copies by 1977. Even Cowgirls Get The Blues, which came out in 1976, and Robbins latest effort, Still Life With Woodpecker, were and continue to be extremely popular

Most scholars and critics have not been willing to grant Robbins literary approval equivalent to his popular success. A few, however, have been enthusiastic. John Calvin Batchelor suggests Robbins is a cult writer who has successfully caught the attention of "one enormous like minded family group which has learned to cool the media hype and assume no profile - namely the Counterculture."⁸ In an article entitled "Taking Tom Robbins Seriously," Michael Rogers takes this idea one step further asserting that Another Roadside Attraction is the quintessential counterculture novel," and that Robbins himself is "the consummate counterculture novelist."⁹ Rogers believes that the key to Robbins' success was his realization that the essence of the counterculture was not manners, but fantasy. Considering the fantastical nature of Robbins' characters and the bizarreness of their goings-on, such an appraisal may not be far off. John Calvin Bachelor further asserts that it is Robbins' romantic style that made him a counterculture favorite: "Tom Robbins, you see, writes fairy tales. That's all he writes...he is superficial, undisciplined, without any genuine affection for his characters, and most damning of all, cute."¹⁰

Robbins himself seems to agree, at least in spirit with these assessments: “I’m a romantic, and I don’t apologize for that. I think it’s as valid a way of looking at life as any. And a hell of a lot more fun.”¹¹

While Robbins' fans delight in his frolic and fancy, the literary establishment seems to think Robbins has too much fun to be considered with gravity. One critic refused to review Even Cowgirls Get The Blues because he could not take it seriously as literature.¹² Others complain that Robbins avoids such subjects as alienation, despair, sexual frustration etc. Yet, Robbins insists that he is not avoiding them:

The liberal humanists think that Goya was a great painter - which he was - because he depicted the horrors of war. Therefore he's a great humanist painter. But Renoir's nudes, in their rosy opulence, are as much of an anti-war statement as Goya's dismembered bodies. To say 'yes' to life is to say 'no' to war, evil, atrocity, and it amazes me that intelligent people are unable to figure that out. It is as if joy, happiness, is frivolous.¹³

In response to such criticism, Robbins claims he has come to regard himself as an “outlaw novelist,” a role in which he is quite comfortable: “If I’m not writing literature, then I don’t have the burden of a literary past on my shoulders. I’m free to do whatever I want.”¹⁴

Both as a writer and a man, Robbins embraces a highly unusual blend of personae: optimist, iconoclast, humanist, rebel and prophet. Because Robbins' novels have influenced a good number of people,

many have projected upon him yet another persona - that of a charismatic figure. Yet those who cherish such an image would be shaken to learn that Robbins is actually an introvert. According to Rogers, Robbins "continues to apologize for the fact that he is not articulate - that's why, he says, he writes - but it seems more the case that he only articulates when he feels like it - and when he's certain about what's going to come out."¹⁵ Robbins does, however, possess a peculiar mystique. While some might call his unabashed style joi de vivre, Robbins prefers a word of his own - playfulness: "My attitude towards life is playful. I'm a playful person, a playful writer, although my playfulness is deadly serious. I write playfully but I write to change people's lives. I can come to no other conclusion but that playfulness is a form of wisdom and not frivolity."¹⁶ Along with his playful style, Robbins possesses philosophical perspectives consistent with his goal of living a life of enchantment. He has a quest: "I'm searching for the American tantra - the erotic and poetical, magical, exhilarating,"¹⁷ a vision: "I believe in one man, one woman, together, taking risks, living on the edge,"¹⁸ and a motto: "joy in spite of everything."¹⁹

Although Robbins might like to think that he is free from the literary past, his work is inextricably linked with American literary tradition. By incorporating the ideals of the American myth into his work, Robbins implicitly evokes and responds to the ongoing critical dialogue of the American novel. In order to better understand what Robbins is doing,

it is necessary to place him within the tradition out of which he is writing

According to Richard Lewis in The American Adam, the American myth introduced a new kind of hero: “an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources...with an air of adventurousness and a sense of promise and possibility.”²⁰ One of the most seminal works which embodies the American myth is Henry David Thoreau's Walden. So influential has Walden been that the history of the American novel can be seen as an ongoing response to Thoreau's ideal. Thoreau creates a vision of the archetypal American - totally independent and self-sufficient, heroically innocent, escaping from society and beginning anew, confronting life on its own terms through a primary relationship with the land. This vision sets forth one of the fundamental paradoxes of the American myth - one embodies the myth of American society by withdrawing from it. Whereas Thoreau asserts his own individualism by isolating himself at Walden Pond, Robbins creates archetypal American characters who withdraw from mainstream American society. Amanda and John Paul withdraw through their unconventional lifestyles, while an extremely resourceful and self-reliant Sissy Hankshaw hitchhikes unceasingly to avoid civilization. The Walden-like Chink lives alone in a cave, philosophically communing with nature; Leigh-Cheri isolates herself in

an attic to commune with her imprisoned lover. Thoreau was also a transcendentalist, believing that the world is a veil or illusion put over our senses and which we, with sufficient meditation, can transcend. In Another Roadside Attraction, Amanda transcends the physical world through her mysticism. Sissy's thumb and Leigh-Cheri's pack of Camels may be thought of as transcendental objects.

Whereas Thoreau establishes the myth of the American literary tradition, Leslie Fiedler criticizes it. In Love And Death In The American Novel, Fiedler claims that American fictionists who perpetuate this myth have failed to deal with adult heterosexual love, have avoided the facts of wooing, marriage and child-bearing and have tried to convince us of the innocence of violence. While creating a macho image for the traditional male protagonist, "American novelists shy away from permitting in their fictions the presence of any full-fledged, mature women, giving us instead monsters of virtue or bitchery."²¹ Though Fiedler objects to the shortcomings of the American tradition, he does so by criticizing it, and thus isolating himself from it. By this very act, he also unintentionally embraces it.

Like Fiedler, Robbins might also be viewed as a critic of the American tradition who nevertheless in some sense embodies it. Amanda, Sissy and Leigh-Cheri are free-thinking, mature and each in her own way, extremely attractive. Robbins is equally as eclectic in his choice of subjects; he deals not only with wooing, marriage and

childbearing, but also with love - both hetero and homosexual. Robbins' treatment of violence lacks the innocent touch - the tragic deaths of Bonanza Jellybean and Plucky Purcell are cases in point. Despite his rejection of some aspects of the American myth, however, Robbins' books are intensely American, full of contemporary expressions and cliches from American advertising. So intensely local are Robbins' references, in fact, that it is doubtful a non-American could fully understand them without a thesaurus of American slang and a dictionary of Consumer Jargon.

Robbins thus has affinities with both Thoreau and Fiedler, embracing some aspects of both their positions. Whereas his characters reenact a Waldenesque withdrawal from society, Robbins remolds the classic mythic conception of the American quest in ways that Fiedler would approve.

In addition to his association with the American myth, Robbins also has a special relationship with the other writers of contemporary American fiction. In order to better understand how Robbins' work fits into the tradition of the contemporary American novel, it is useful to examine how his work has been influenced by the work of other writers of the modern era

One writer who profoundly influenced Robbins is Richard Brautigan. According to Robbins:

Shaw said fifty years ago that the future of the novel depended on how well it transcended the tyranny of plot. Since then lots of people have written long, plotless novels that only the friends of the author have read. But then Brautigan came along and wrote Trout Fishing In America which had no plot, no character development, none of the things that are taught as necessary to the novel - and yet for many people it was as hard to put down as a suspense thriller. I think that was a real milestone in Western Literature.”²²

Because the process of writing is more important than catching fish, Brautigan affirms the value of process over product and implies that transcendent answers are imminent in the way we live. In a like manner, Sissy does not generally hitchhike to arrive at a particular destination. Rather, she finds her answers in the process of thumbing rides: "when I am really moving, stopping car after car, moving so freely, so clearly, so delicately that even the sex maniacs and the cops can only blink and let me pass, then I embody the rhythms of the universe. I feel what it is like to be the universe, I am in a state of grace”(54). Throughout his text, Brautigan uses the title Trout Fishing In America as if it were a separate entity in itself. Robbins found this to be a promising technique and uses it extensively. Though only one such case is found in Robbins’ first novel when he pronounces in a horoscope that Another Roadside Attraction is also ‘Sagittarian,’”²³ Robbins’ second work is rife with examples: "This sentence is proud to be part of the team here at Even Cowgirls Get The Blues”(25); “To Richard Condon, a dozen purple asters and a pound of goat cheese from Even Cowgirls Get The Blues”(243); "in the public interest, Even

Cowgirls Gets The Blues offers the Big Red flavor device to any inventor who can make it a reality”(169). However, unlike Brautigan, Robbins uses this technique as an unusual means for the narrator to establish a playful rapport with the reader.

Another author to whom Robbins is indebted is Kurt Vonnegut. Like Vonnegut, Robbins constructs narratives that make frequent shifts of scene and story line. A more explicit link can be found in Robbins' use of Vonnegut's repeated-phrase technique. In Another Roadside Attraction, whenever Robbins refers to Zillers' foreign travels, he asks, "Africa or was it India?" Throughout Even Cowgirls Get The Blues, Robbins not only repeatedly states that the "International Situation" was "desperate as usual," but also whenever Dr Dreyfus mentions to someone one of his pieces of esoteric art history trivia, he concludes "I don't suppose that means much to you."(25) In Still Life With Woodpecker, one of the only comments that Queen Tilli pronounces throughout the entire narrative is her favorite Americanism "Oh-Oh, spaghetti-o!" In addition to their technical similarities, in Another Roadside Attraction, Robbins makes explicit his debt to Vonnegut by referring to Cat's Cradle: "In Bokonon, it is written that 'peculiar travel arrangements are dancing lessons from God.'"(230) One critic suggests that Vonnegut's extreme popularity on college campuses in the 60's and early 70's and his cult-like following is analogous to Robbins recent situation. In an article entitled "...And 'Cowgirls'

Jumped over The Moon," Greg Mitchel states that Robbins is "precisely at that age of whimsical experience that Vonnegut, the last youth culture hero, reached when he rose to campus infamy in the late 60's. Another Roadside Attraction is Robbins' Cat's Cradle, Cowgirls, his Slaughterhouse Five."²⁴

The similarities, however, stop with technique and style. Thematically and philosophically, the two are very different. Whereas Vonnegut is deeply cynical and cosmically ironic, Robbins is a playful prophet of joy.

Robbins also has a number of connections to Thomas Pynchon. According to Raymond J. Wilson III in his article, "A Synthesis of Modernism," not only is Sissy's hand operation described in the same grotesque detail as Esther's nose job in Pynchon's V, but also the discussion between the thumb and the brain in Even Cowgirls Get The Blues recalls the digressions in to mythical discussions between parts of the body which enliven Gravity's Rainbow.²⁵ Furthermore, Robbins is conceptually aligned with Pynchon's cosmological outlook - "We might conclude that Even Cowgirls Get The Blues has reached maximum entropy..."(359) and with Pynchon's holistic world view - "Everything is connected." But again, Robbins is more optimistic than his contemporary. Whereas Pynchon projects a bleak and hopelessly pessimistic world view, Robbins remains upbeat, believing in a cheery, savable world. Both, however, share the belief that mankind's

only hope is to break the cycle of control to live a more natural existence

At end, hopefulness and playfulness are Robbins' most distinguishing characteristics. Indeed, the efficacy of his work may be judged in these very terms. Robbins' novels reach the greatest heights when he is at his playful best. But when his play becomes forced, his writing loses its vitality. That which is his greatest strength is also his greatest weakness.

FOOTNOTE

Robbins is also indebted to both John Barth and Tom Wolfe though they do not connect explicitly to his work. Barth, one of the fathers of self conscious writing, seems to have influenced Robbins, for in his frequent narratorial interludes, Robbins is often quite self aware. While Robbins himself has been likened to Wolfe's portrayal of Ken Kesey in The Electric Koolaid Acid Test, (recall his "prophetic" writings in the Haight) Robbins is most indebted to Wolfe for his vividly fantastical portrayal of the 60's counterculture

I believe in everything; nothing is sacred.
I believe in nothing; everything is sacred.

The Chink (Even Cowgirls Get The Blues)

The cultural shift that twentieth century consciousness is undergoing is thus a shift from the map to the garden from the separation of opposites and fragmentation of experience to the unity of opposites and wholeness of experience

Vernon (The Garden And The Map)

We're all the same as clouds and butterflies.
We just pretend to be something different.

Amanda (Another Roadside Attraction)

CHAPTER TWO: The New Physics And Cosmology

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the Western world has been confronted by an increasingly large body of scientific knowledge which threatens the assumptions on which our cosmology is based. Many of the discoveries of contemporary physics are so at odds with the primary dicta on which the West functions, that they suggest our basic cultural suppositions are false. Tom Robbins is one of the few contemporary fictionists who effectively uses the "new physics" to illuminate his texts. In both of his first two novels, Robbins examines in a variety of ways the profound implications of contemporary physics for the moral and intellectual foundations of the Western world ²⁶

In order to bring more clearly into focus precisely what Robbins is doing, a brief overview of what "new physics" is and how it differs from the older established model is apropos. In simplest terms, classical physics is characterized by a deterministic model in which atomism, causality and dualism are the primary components. All matter consists of fixed primary particles, Lucretius' "atoms," which exist within the distinct and independent realms of space and time in accordance to the absolute and immutable laws of nature. A

unidirectional and absolute causality is the universal link between events, and with the help of the equations of classical mechanics, it was thought that the exact prediction of all physical interactions was an eventuality within man's grasp.²⁷ The observer is absolutely separated from that which is observed, subject is utterly distinct from object, the res cognita and the res extensa, the Cartesian terms for the thinking mind and the physical object, are categorically polarized.²⁸ In short, classical physics projects a zeitgeist in which the world is the strict sum of its parts, in which opposites are rigidly bifurcated and in which all events are causally linked.

This old model has been superseded and in effect replaced by what is commonly couched the "new physics." With the publication in 1905 of Albert Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity and another paper dealing with quantum of light, the basic assumptions of Newtonian physics came under increasingly critical scrutiny. Einstein postulated that time, mass and length are not, as thought before, quantities of an absolute nature. Rather, he determined that measurement of these quantities will vary in accordance to the particular frame of reference from which they are observed. This, coupled with Einstein's General Theory of Relativity, proposed a view of the physical world which was strikingly different than the older view. Rather than quantifying time as a series of uniform and omnipresent moments, Einstein believed time varied according to the frame of

reference from which it is measured; rather than conceiving space to be a rigid, rectilinear and yet empty container, Einstein envisioned it as a curved quality which took its structure from matter. Mass and space were no longer distinct and incontrovertible entities; mass became energy in another form. In effect, Einstein's theories transformed the classical physics' isolated and discrete parts into complementary aspects of an interconnected whole.²⁹ Robbins makes frequent reference to Einstein's relativity theory in Even Cowgirls Get The Blues.

While Einstein is the father of Relativity, Werner Heisenberg may be thought of as the progenitor of quantum mechanics. At the core of quantum mechanics is Heisenberg's Indeterminacy Principle, to which Robbins frequently refers. The principle states that the position and momentum of subatomic particles cannot be precisely predicted - the more clearly one value is quantified, the more nebulous the other becomes. Heisenberg believed that it was impossible to measure a system without interacting in and thus disturbing that system. Because the very process of measurement ipso facto alters what is measured, a certain indeterminacy or randomness results. Thus the observer and that which is observed are conceived as an indissoluble whole which cannot be separated without Heisenberg's principle coming into play.

The Indeterminacy Principle suggests an element of chance in

nature which is utterly at odds with Newtonian determinism, for it implies that the world is not an object separate from reality which we, from our vantage point, may observe with detachment. Rather, as Heisenberg explains, when we try to quantify the natural world "what we observe is not nature in itself but nature exposed to our method of questioning."³⁰

However compelling this evidence may seem, the Western world has remained essentially unaffected by contemporary physics. We continue to perceive space and time in linear Cartesian terms, we stay faithful to the vision of a predetermined and strictly causal universe, we stand firm in our belief that we are somehow separate and distinct from the world we inhabit. While the West intellectually accepts the validity of the "new physics," it functions as if Einstein never existed.

Tom Robbins is one of the few writers of contemporary American fiction to have made a serious attempt to examine the role of the new physics in the Western world. Robbins recognizes how little the West has taken the new physics to heart and suggests that the holistic world view of Eastern mysticism is more compatible with contemporary physics. In pursuit of holistic approaches, Robbins uses both mysticism and physics as means of illustrating those aspects of Western cosmology, thought and outlook which he feels are not only based on faulty assumptions, but also are detrimental to the Western psyche

In Another Roadside Attraction, Robbins isolates the rational and the intuitive perspectives - Marx Marvelous is empirical; Amanda is mystical. In so doing, Robbins not only implies the fundamental Cartesian separation between subject and object, but also employs a traditional novelistic technique in which an outsider, in this case Marvelous, criticizes and satirizes what he sees as Amanda's utopian visions. Whereas Robbins' use of the new physics is relatively rigorous in Another Roadside Attraction, he moves towards a more liberal interpretation in Even Cowgirls Get The Blues for here Robbins attempts to create a more cohesive holistic vision by conflating both the new physics and mysticism into a single character, the Chink. Though the Chink has a decidedly Taoist orientation, he embodies enough of Marvelous's outside skepticism to become, in effect, his own satirist, his own deconstructor.

In Another Roadside Attraction, we learn that the narrator Marx Marvelous once "dreamed of becoming a great theoretical scientist on the order of Werner Heisenberg or Einstein"(142). Marvelous is described as an "exceptional young man" who had "loads of talent loads of brains, and loads of class" yet was "tainted by whimsical ambivalence"(142). Having turned away from Baptist fundamentalism to embrace science, he was greatly influenced by Heisenberg, and as a result of his understanding of the Indeterminacy Principle, Marvelous claims that he

began to realize that every system that science proposed was a product of human imagination and had to be accepted with a faith nearly as blind as the religious beliefs which he had jettisoned. Much scientific truth proved to be as hypothetical as poetic allegory. The relationship of those rod-connected blue and red balls to an actual atomic structure was about the same as the relationship of Christianity to the Fish or the Lamb(215).

When Marvelous's investigations into pure science, abstract mathematics and theoretical physics "frequently led him into areas of thought he could only describe as ... metaphysical," he not only recognized a similarity between the mental processes of religion and pure science but also concluded that "the purpose of science is to make a man feel whole, to produce a kind of exalted happiness"(31). This feeling of wholeness, this ineffable euphoria eludes Marvelous. Yet, when Nearly Normal Jimmy tells him of the unconventional lifestyle of Amanda and John Paul Ziller, Marvelous decides that they may hold the answers to that which he seeks. As an outsider with an empirical bent, Marvelous is, however, skeptical of their approach: "I am here no more to praise the Zillers than to bury them"(140). With satirical wit, he insists their philosophy "is gummy with romanticism, littered with mystical claptrap"(140). Nonetheless, Marvelous finds them to be of great interest: "if I did not believe them to be seminal figures, if I did not sense that today they practice a poetics that anticipates tomorrow's science, I scarcely would have set with them towards ... that which claims them for its own"(140-41). While Marvelous maintains his skepticism throughout the narrative, he

refrains from explicitly contradicting them whenever he can somehow reconcile their beliefs with his scientific sensibility. When John Paul asks during the job interview whether he thinks that anything exists between space and the wall, Marvelous replies with a prepared answer which he knows will be pleasing to them: Albert Einstein once defined space as 'love.' If that is an accurate definition, then we may conclude that if something could fit between love and its object, then something could fit between space and the wall”(144).

While Marvelous is essentially an empiricist who recognizes the similarities between physics and mysticism, Amanda and John Paul are essentially mystics who understand that contemporary physics is scientifically validating those insights that they have implicitly known all along. Thus, both Amanda and John Paul often use concepts of the new physics as means of illustrating their mystical realizations. As if fully cognizant of Einstein's principle of the conservation of energy, Amanda replies:

I was unenlightened enough at one time to believe in the finality of death I'm not naive enough now to believe in the finality of extinction. Except on a purely formal level. You've been close enough to the source to have learned that beings never really go extinct. Their forms may become obsolete but their essential energies are eternal. The only thing that ever disappears is the shape of energy(84).

Marvelous, with his empirical mind, here agrees with Amanda's pronouncement because of its compatibility with scientific fact: “As the German biologist Ernst Haeckel established, no particle of living

energy is ever extinguished, no particle is ever created anew”(84). Also, Amanda's statements concerning the interrelatedness of all life processes are consistent with the holistic approach of Relativity Theory: "At higher levels of consciousness all things are one anyway, There is no difference between animal, vegetable and mineral. Everything just blends together in energy and light”(189).

Einstein, in his Special Theory of Relativity, established that both the laws of physics and the speed of light would be invariably constant while other quantities would be relative.³¹ As if tuned in with this idea of light's primacy, John Paul felt that "since energy was the only 'permanent thing' in the universe, it was the most (if not only) 'significant thing,' and although he had great respect for sound, he believed that the highest form of energy is light”(239). Having theorized that "man is nothing but slowed down light (334), John Paul puts his speculations to test in a final attempt to return to the ultimate source. When the Icarus XC ventures outside the atmosphere's protective cover, John Paul's body is utterly dissipated by the sun's intense radiation. As Marvelous explains, "he returned - literally - to energy, dissolving in the pure essence that spawned all life”(326).

The Ziller's outlook includes a view of moral law which is compatible with what we have already learned about the nature of certain physical laws. Amanda proclaims that the FBI agents who are imprisoning she and Marvelous in the zoo, are "symbol junkies,"

those who "prefer abstract symbols to the concrete things which symbols represent"(253). While real, concrete things "are usually in a state of flux" and require a certain amount of personal attention(253), abstract symbols may be safely filed and stored in the brain's memory banks without the necessity of direct involvement. Symbol junkies tout their unmitigated respect for the law, yet fail to understand that "laws have no moral content, they merely symbolize conduct that does"(253). Thus, just as the equations of natural laws are representations which have no power to control or determine the world they describe, the concepts of moral laws are symbols which have no power to control or determine the behavior of men.

If we recall that Heisenberg's Indeterminacy Principle strongly implies that no formula can predict with absolute precision the results of interactions on a micro level, we realize that a certain mystery exists in natural processes which will always thwart our desire to discover an absolute meaning.³² Amanda seems to possess a like awareness of the place of mystery in nature's workings. When Marvelous suggest that she is coping out, Amanda replies:

Maybe. But it seems to me that the real cop out is to say that the universe has meaning but that we 'mere mortals' are incapable of knowing that meaning. Mystery is part of nature's style, that's all. It's the Infinite Goof. It's the meaning that is of no meaning. That paradox is the key to the meaning of meaning. To look for meaning or the lack of it - in things is a game played by beings of limited consciousness. Behind everything in life is a process that is beyond meaning. Not beyond understanding, mind you, but beyond meaning(335).

Amanda believes that it is this very mystery, the inability to absolutely know the outcome of events, that is the essential ingredients of our freedom. In "Physics and Cosmology in the fiction of Tom Robbins," Robert Nadeau claims that "if we are simply one the expressions of the energy that is all life, then that element of hazard in nature which makes all the happenings in the cosmos ultimately open-ended (and hence free) is also present in our experience."³³ Amanda believes that the only way we can realize freedom in our lives is to use style - the characteristic mode of one's actions, to alter content - arbitrary conceptions of reality:

If our style is masterful, if it is fluid and at the same time complete, then we can recreate ourselves, or rather, we can recreate the Infinite Goof within us. We can live on top of content, float above the predictable responses, social programming and hereditary circuitry, letting bits of color and electricity and light filter up to us, where we can incorporate them at will into our actions(208).

By embodying the Infinite Goof within us, we may truly realize our freedom.

Recalling the distinction earlier made between the different means which Western scientists and Eastern mystics each use to realize a holistic world view, Marvelous and Amanda are a case in point. Marvelous wishes to discover in science a wholeness, an exalted happiness and he believes that Amanda and John Paul may hold the clues to the answer he seeks. When Amanda asks him to reveal just one idea he has so far gleaned about their activities, Marvelous

replies:

Okay, I'll tell you one: freedom. I believe that you people, among other things, are obsessed with recovering a lost model of existence, a total life-style in which there are no boundaries between object and subject, between natural and supernatural, between waking and dreaming. Its involved somehow in a return to a consanguinity of life and art, life and religion - a ritualistic, mythic level of living which whole societies once experienced in common. The object of your rituals, I believe, is to break free of the conventions that have chained man to certain cliché images and predictable responses, that have narrowed pitifully - in your opinion, at least - the range of his experience(191).

What Marvelous here proclaims is indeed a perceptive, intellectually fluent comprehension of the essential components of the Ziller's mystical approach. However, it is pure intellectual conceptualization. Carefully reminding himself in his diary that "only if I remain faithful to a reasonably scientific procedure of investigation can I hope to arrive at a lasting interpretation of reality" (139), Marvelous distances himself from his subjects so that he might maintain the facade of detached objectivity. He can only view "wholeness" through Cartesian tinted glasses. Amanda, on the other hand, enacts the vision which Marvelous can only think. Through the totality of her being and with each moment she exists, Amanda embodies the ultimate mystical fusion of world and self, and in so doing, lives the wholeness of her vision.

Throughout Another Roadside Attraction, Robbins uses the Catholic Church to illustrate those aspects of Western cosmology which can

seriously restrict our chosen mode of existence. Such western beliefs as the existence of a transcendental realm of being in which immutable truths are found, hierarchical organizations and power structures, rigid dogmatists, power hungry authoritarians, and dualistic infrastructures are all mentioned as notorious symptoms of the West's cosmological quagmire. Whereas Nadeau posits that Robbins is simply using the Church as a vehicle to vent his wrath, Robbins seems genuinely to harbor a great deal of animosity towards the Church. However, what seems clear is that Robbins believes that the new physics has demonstrated that many of the assumptions upon which western cosmology is based are false.

Robbins sets up a dialogue between Jesus Christ and Tarazan, the old and new world views, to illustrate just how different those views are. While Jesus' performance reminds us of how basic either/or categorical thinking and a belief in the existence of transcendent absolutes are to Judeo-Christian cosmology, Tarazan proclaims that Western man was once rooted in a tradition which espoused the union between nature and culture the fusions between spirit and flesh, and suggests that mankind's only hope lies his ability to successfully "resuscitate that early sense of the essential unity of life which our science has now proven to be demonstrably true."³⁴ Robbins dreams that a new holistic cosmology which has already been empirically verified, will eventually work within Western culture to supplant the

reigning dualistic order.

In his second novel, Even Cowgirls Get The Blues, Robbins continues to make frequent reference to the principles of contemporary physics. However, here he adopts a less rigorous approach to the subject. Robbins reworks many of the themes of Another Roadside Attraction using new characters and situations to emphasize different particulars. In his primary philosophical character, the Chink, Robbins combines both mystical and empirical perspectives in an attempt to unify the disparate elements of his holistic view. Robbins forsakes the Cartesian separation of intuition and rationality by embodying both Taoism and the new physics in the Chink. However, the Chink retains Marvelous' skepticism by embodying the outsider within.

Robbins' references to the Indeterminacy Principle illustrate various ways to better understand our earthly existence. When Julian Gliche, the parochial, bourgeois New Yorker, criticizes Sissy for wasting her life aimlessly hitchhiking without "destination," Sissy challenges his linear concept of travel with a Heisenbergesque maxim: "What is the 'direction' of the earth in its journey; where are the atoms 'going' when they spin"(92).

Robbins also claims that Western man's favorite braingame, rational thought, will never be able to answer the "Ultimate Questions" which plague the Western mind. In an attempt to explain the limitations of

rational thought, Robbin sets up an imaginary dialogue between the thumb and the brain in which the brain suggests that its internal workings are indeterminate as subatomic particles: “the truth is, my neurons occasionally fire spontaneously in the absence of a stimulating signal. I’m subjected to a fair amount of randomly generated currents. It isn't as orderly here as you might imagine”(360).

The narrative also conveys a heightened awareness of how the West perceives time. In the Newtonian model, not only is time a separate dimension, but our experience in time is a linear, rational progression which has a beginning, middle and end. Robbins explores the implications of this accepted view of time in his extensive discussion of the Clock People.

Robbins parodies our conventional pre-measured time set in the Clock People's seven by thirteen foot acorn filled hourglass which define the twenty-six hour day of the Clock People. While this pre-set time package is, like our own, an arbitrary structure imposed upon nature, the Clock People employ another clock which strikes only at those undetermined moments when the movements of special catfish in a pool connected to the San Andreas fault indicate the coming of an earthquake. Robbins suggests that this clock is more in touch with the indeterminate nature of the world. However, the narrator considers the Clock People's overall perception of time to be flawed

because they continue to sustain an apocalyptic vision which reeks of the traditional idea that time progresses from a beginning to an end. What the Clock People call the "Eternity of Joy," was "virtually identical to the Christians waiting for the Second Coming. Or the Communists waiting for the worldwide revolution. Or the Debbies waiting for the flying saucers. All the same. Just more suckers betting their share of the present on the future, banking every misery on a happy ending of history" (230). In short, the Clock People are, as all the others, "victims of the disease of time" (231).

Whereas in Another Roadside Attraction, Robbins is relatively precise in his use of the new physics, he becomes increasingly liberal in his interpretations in Even Cowgirls Get The Blues. Robbins' reference to Einstein's redefinition of the traditional perception of time and space serves as a case in point. In his Relativity Theory, Einstein proved that time and space are inseparable, coexisting qualities of a time-space continuum, and that perception of events in time depends on the position of the observer in relation to the observed event.³⁵ Recognizing the profound shift in perspective which Einstein's theory establishes, Robbins attempts to give Sissy an outlook on hitchhiking that could be compatible with Relativity: "Einstein had observed motion and learned that time and space are relative. Sissy had committed herself to motion and learned that one could alter reality by one's perception of it - - and it was this discovery, perhaps no less a

one than Einstein's, that finally allowed her to smile away humiliation just as a short while earlier she had smiled away fatigue”(82). However, in this instance, Robbins' attempt to make connections between Relativity theory and Sissy's "real" situation is impeded by his unscientific articulation. Sissy's discovery seems to suggest that the particular time-space coordinate in which the observer exists determines not our perception of reality, but reality itself. This, however, is quite far from what Einstein had in mind when he formulated his theory. Indeed, as Katherine Hayles points out in The Cosmic Web, “before he settled on 'relativity,' Einstein had considered calling his hypothesis the 'Theory of Invariance.’”³⁶ The idea that one can alter reality by one's perception of it is a concept completely foreign to Relativity Theory. While our perceptions of "reality" may change depending on our particular vantage point, "reality" itself is absolutely constant in accordance to the laws of physics.

Robbins is not a scientist and he is not writing a technical manual. It is essential to recognize that what Robbins presents to the reader as the new physics is not necessarily accurate in strict empirical terms. Robbin's scientific terms may, at times, best be regarded as metaphors which conveniently validate those ideas which he wishes to support. However, while he occasionally uses his poetic license, Robbins' description of the new physics is faithful to the spirit of the laws if not to the letter.

As the narrative of Even Cowgirls Get The Blues unfolds and we begin to see what visions Robbins repeatedly endorses, we find that in the Chink, Robbins conjoins two disparate perspectives - that of the new physics and that of mysticism. According to Sissy,

the Chink sees life as a dynamic network of interchanges and exchanges, spreading in all directions at once. And it is all held together by the tensions between opposites. He says there is an order in nature, but there is also disorder. And it is the balance of tensions between order and the disorder, the natural laws and the natural randomness that keeps it from completely collapsing. It's a beautiful paradox (234-35).

While the Chink's dynamic network is completely in agreement with the principles of both Relativity Theory and Quantum Mechanics, the Chink's balance of opposite tensions is a fundamental tenet of Tao. While both approaches have a holistic view, each is based on vastly different assumptions. Robbins seems, however, to be increasingly attracted to the idea that physics and mysticism can be reconciled. A book by Fritjof Capra which was published soon after Another Roadside Attraction may have influenced Robbins. In The Tao of Physics, Capra persuasively argues that both physics and mysticism are converging on a similar view of "reality" through their respective approaches. In the creation of the Chink, Robbins seems to be suggesting the same idea, for the Chink's philosophy embraces both Tao and physics with an indiscriminate fluidity. However, Capra and Robbins do not seem to fully appreciate just how profoundly different mysticism and science actually are. While the mystic perceives truth

through the totality of his being, the scientist verifies truth exclusively through the intellect. Whereas mystics may realize a holistic cosmos through a fusion of being with the wholeness of the world, scientists strive for an intellectual conceptualization of a holistic model. What both Capra and Robbins do not adequately consider is the extent to which Western science presupposes the strict division between the psyche and the external world, the observer and that being observed.

As Hayles argues in The Cosmic Web:

The Cartesian tradition makes it likely that the realization of fundamental harmony in modern science will remain a model for the intellect rather than an epiphany of the spirit. The congruence between East and West does explain, however, why so many writers interested in a holistic view pay homage to yin and yang as well as Heisenberg and Einstein.³⁷

By joining both the dynamic network and the balance of opposite tensions in the Chink's philosophical outlook, Robbins avoids making distinctions between them. He creates a more holistically unified tour de force, but only at the expense of conceptual clarity.

In the Chink's enthusiastic embrace of the Taoist ideal of the balance of opposites, he reveals that part of his character which, like Marvelous, is able to criticize and satirize a given point of view. When the Chink attempts to explain to Sissy the paradoxical unity of opposite dualities, Sissy accuses him of contradicting himself. The Chink replies, "Of course I've contradicted myself. I always do. Only cretins and logicians don't contradict themselves. And in their

consistency, they contradict life.”(256) Implicit in the balance of opposites is the idea that within everything ordered is a seed of disorder, within any construction is the seed of its destruction. In his mottoes, in his hairy lustiness and in his philosophical pronouncements, the Chink is simultaneously ridiculous and sublime, subject and object, credulous and skeptical. With wholehearted zeal, the Chink constructs and destructs his own myth.

Throughout the narrative, the Chink seems to relish applying the Taoist ideal of balance of opposites to a number of phenomenon: order/disorder; stability/instability; natural/unnatural etc. One might think that Robbins is advocating Western acceptance of such Eastern patterns of thought. However, the Chink himself makes it clear that this is neither possible nor desirable:

Eastern spiritual currency is simply not negotiable in your Western culture...Throughout the Western world I see people huddled around little fires, warming themselves with Buddhism and Taoism and Hinduism and Zen. And that's the most they can ever do with those philosophies. They can't make full use of Hinduism because they are not Hindu; they can't really take advantage of Tao because they are not Chinese; Zen will abandon them after a while - its fire will go out - because they aren't Japs like me. To turn to Oriental religious philosophies may temporarily illuminate experience for them, but ultimately its futile because they're denying their own history, they're

lying about their heritage(263).

What he does advocate is that Western civilization rediscover its pre-Christian cultural heritage. According to the Chink, before the invasion of the "Eastern alien Jehovah," the supreme deity of the West was considerably more down to earth. The old God was a

bawdy goat man who provided rich harvests and bouncy babies; a hairy, merry deity who loved music and dancing and good food; a god of fields and woodlands and flesh; a fecund provider who could be evoked through fornication as well as meditation, who listened to songs as well as prayers; a god much loved because he loved, because he put pleasure ahead of asceticism, because jealousy and vengeance were not in his character (265).

The Chink claims that Western man's only hope is to actively embrace this more natural, organic and unified vision found in its pagan past

The Chink also possesses some keen insights into the nature of western thought and cosmology and how we might better function within this milieu. The Chink understands that the West is infatuated with order and is strongly inclined to view reality as a fixed and definable quantity. He suggests that our propensity to live by the laws of classical physics can greatly narrow our conception of reality and preclude our living with imagination and finesse. Believing that "freedom - for humans - is largely an internal condition" (210), the Chink constructs his own clockworks which keeps him cognizant of the indeterminate nature of the world that makes freedom a human

possibility. Constructed of "garbage can lids and old saucepans and lard tins and car fenders" (246), the Chink's Clockworks strikes at completely random intervals, thus reminding him of his own essential freedom.

In Another Roadside Attraction, Robbins sets up a distinct conceptual conflict between Amanda the mystic and Marvelous the scientist. In Even Cowgirls Get The Blues, Robbins seems to reduce or conceal this conflict by conflating both characters in the Chink. When the mystical and empirical viewpoints coalesce in Amanda and Marvelous respectively, Robbins is employing a standard novelistic technique which conveniently place his thematic concerns in separate characters. However, in his attempt to combine both perspectives in a single character, Robbins adapts a more complicated narrative scheme in which the Chink possesses the major thematic role, leaving the protagonist, Sissy, without a great deal of direction.

In Even Cowgirls Get The Blues, Robbins seems to be confronted by a sort of Heisenberg Principle in literature which prevents him from realizing in a single character both a holistic vision and a precise accounting of the approaches which make up that vision. Whether or not he recognizes this impasse, Robbins turns away from the new physics and mysticism in his third novel, Still Life With Woodpecker. However, throughout all three of his novels Robbins maintains his

holistic vision within that gnomic Pynchonesque phrase he so often repeats - "Everything is connected."

Logic only gives man what he needs...
Magic gives him what he wants.

Another Road side Attraction

The trick is not to transcend
things but to transform them.

Even Cowgirls Get Blues

It's never too late to have a happy childhood.

Still Life With Woodpecker

CHAPTER THREE: Contemporary America

It is difficult to find coherent lines of inquiry which run through all three of Robbins' novels. Yet one concern to which Robbins unquestionably responds throughout his work is that of America. Not only do each of his books respond to and intimately reflect a specific period, but when taken as a whole, Robbins' novels also form a progression that runs parallel to contemporary American history. Indeed, Robbins is so keyed into the American consciousness that he can be regarded as a cultural historian.

The focus for Robbins' historical responsiveness is his examination of the changing American dream. In Another Roadside Attraction, Robbins explores the tumultuous re-awakening and re examination of the American dream commonly referred to as the 1960's counterculture. Then the social activism which was spawned from the 60's vision of reform is examined in Even Cowgirls Get The Blues. Finally, Still Life With Woodpecker reflects America's turning within, as the hopeful vision of renewal and activist aspirations for change are cast away to be replaced by more individualistic concerns

What occurred in the 60's was an unprecedented re-examination of

conventional American mores, values, tradition and world view. The youth of the 60's so violently rejected the conventions and lifestyles of their parents' generation that they in effect created their own alternative lifestyles, the much discussed "counterculture." Though Robbins was far from a child of the 60's, the counterculture had a tremendous effect on his life. If we recall that the most significant day of Robbins' life (according to him) was the day he partook in the consummate counterculture drug, LSD, it is not difficult to realize Robbins' connection to this cultural phenomenon. The fact that at least one critic believes Robbins to be a counterculture novelist and Another Roadside Attraction the quintessential counterculture novel lend credence to this supposition.

Robbins' first novel seems to have grown out of his personal perspective. He clearly reacts to the 60's in the milieu he depicts in Another Roadside Attraction. Yet he is not portraying literal characterizations. As was earlier suggested, Robbins realized that the essence of the counterculture was not manners but fantasy. Thus in Another Roadside Attraction, Robbins does not attempt to paint a tableau vivant of the 60's youth as does Tom Wolfe in The Electric Koolaid Acid Test. Instead, Robbins creates a world of fantasy which captures the counterculture's essential flavour.

Paul and Amanda are, of course, the focus of Robbins' counterculture fantasy. Marvelous's descriptions of "the magician,"

John Paul Ziller clearly illustrate just how fantastical a character he is. Born in the Congo but raised in Olympia, Washington, Ziller was obsessed from an early age with his African connection. Marvelous relates that as a child, John Paul's "only peculiarity seemed to be a kind of exaggerated romanticism in which he sat as deity in an aura"(14). After spending several years in Paris studying art, Ziller returned to New York, gaining instant notoriety in the avant-gard art world exhibiting at the Whitney his masterpiece sculpture, "The Non Vibrating Astrological Dodo Dome Spectacular." Ziller's artistic repertoire also includes such oddities as Cosmos Mystic Apparati, Ready Made Fossils, post lunar illuminated Buddha turds and magnetic jade divining rods (helpful in locating the lost city of Mu) (19). After a short stint as the wild drummer and leader of a band called the Hoodoo Meat Bucket, Ziller joined the Indo-Tibetan Circus and Giant Panda Gypsy Blues Band where he met Amanda. He is described, at that time, in the following manner:

The man was Caucasian but the color of a good cigar. He was quite tall, maybe six four or five, and slender. Two pounds of Fiji hair sat upon his head like the barded-wire net of a mechanical bird. His face was long and gaunt and wild; his eyes piercing, his mouth fierce, his mustache mockingly extravagant. He wore a sorcerer's cape - yellowed celestial secrets on a field of sidereal blue - over a vest shirt of some reddish leather which Amanda could not identify; trousers, he wore none but rather a parrot-green loincloth; his feet were sandaled; about his forehead was tied a narrow band of giraffe skin; in one bejeweled hand he held a primitive clay flute. Towering above the trio on the river log, he was an imposing figure - a bit like an ancient Egyptian ruler, especially Egyptian because of his strange tomb-wall eyes: his pupils seemed to remain in the

center even when his face was in profile (123).

When Marvelous first makes Ziller's acquaintance, he claims that Ziller conveys an intensity of being which was "so exotic in dress and demeanor that even if one were favorably disposed to him one still could not help regard him as a poseur, an actor, a walking artifice"(139).

While Ziller is indubitably sui generis, it is the girl, Amanda, on whom most of the narrative is focused. Amanda is Robbins' vision of the ultimate earth mother - a Boticelli Venus molded to counterculture proportions:

In the midst of this assemblage of flora and fauna...Amanda had sat daily - meditating, chanting, caressing, performing rituals and otherwise laying hold on the primitive values that had allowed man to view the world and his experience in it as a sacred whole. Here her green eyes looked into the heart of the wild. And saw her Self looking back(333).

So thoroughly convincing is Robbins' depiction of Amanda that she is, I believe, his most successful character. Half Irish and half Puerto Rican, gypsy in style, mystical in temperament and strangely alluring in her knowingness, Amanda might best be described in the words of Nearly Normal Jimmy as "a religion-unto-herself"(140). When Marvelous first meets her he is helplessly enchanted:

She was instantly likable, instantly lovable, instantly seductive, instantly the mistress of my marrow, the speeder in my pulse... there is something beatific about her gentleness, her poise, her

radiant face, the way she seems to float several inches above the ground. However if she is a saint it was a pope of the gypsies who canonized her. My God what colors she wears, Bangles and bracelets and beads. Rings on each finger, on every toe. Her dark hair appears singed by campfires and she moves as if to music; her manner mixes action and dream (140).

Though she has buck teeth, protruding lips, a lisp and tattoos in unmentionable places, Marvelous believes her peculiarities only add to her ineffable attractiveness.

Marvelous is clearly infatuated with Amanda. As it is through Marvelous's eyes that the reader views Amanda, it is not surprising that Amanda is made to seem so appealing. In addition to Marvelous's enthusiasm, what sets Amanda apart are her mystically knowing responses to the questions of life. When asked by the parish priest what she believes in, Amanda states, "I believe in birth, copulation and death. Although copulation embodies the other two, and death is only a form of birthing. At any rate, I was born nineteen years ago. Someday I shall die. Today I think I'll copulate"(8). Awakening from a trance in which she had attempted to determine how to prolong the lives of butterflies, Amanda smiles mysteriously and proclaims, "the life span of the butterfly is precisely the right length"(6). When the family lawyer warns her that she has been increasingly seen in the company of extremely weird individuals, Amanda states "there is no such thing as a weird human being. Its just that some people more understanding than others"(10).

Complaining that she had been dubbed 'the Betty Crocker of the underground' for the quality of her marijuana breads, Amanda's father asks, "What am I to tell our relatives and friends?" Gesturing benevolently, Amanda replies, "Let them eat cake"(11). Epitomizing her ineffable style is her statement that "There are three mental states that interest me. These are: one, amnesia; two, euphoria; three, ecstasy. Amnesia is not knowing who one is and wanting desperately to find out. Euphoria is not knowing who one is and not caring. Ecstasy is knowing exactly who one is - not still not caring"(167). Considering her responses, it would seem that Amanda is a faithful devotee of the third.

Amanda and John Paul, romantically exotic and fantastically unreal as they are, are far from the only rarities to be found in Another Roadside Attraction. There are the strange yet likable members of the Indo-Titetan Circus and Gypsy Blues Band: Nearly Normal Jimmy, Nuclear Phyllis, Takamichi and Smokestack Lightening. There is Mon Cul, prince of baboons, and the only creature on earth, man or beast, who knows an English word that rhymes with orange(36). Then there are the mad adventures of Plucky Purcell, alias Brother Dallas the Texas chopper, recent initiate in the Society of the Felicitator - the blackest band of friars to kill for Christ since the Holy Office of the Middle Ages(103). Aside from characters, there is the zany plot of Another Roadside Attraction which takes the reader from the Captain Kendrick Memorial Hot Dog Wildlife Preserve to The Second Coming

of Christ. The vision Robbins creates is fantastical indeed.

Underscoring Robbins' counterculture fantasy are Marvelous' objective findings. When employed by a prestigious New York think tank the East River Institute of Brain Power Unlimited, Marvelous did extensive field research among the youth to answer the question, "What's wrong with American?" He found that

among the young people who are supposed to be so wicked, I found a surprising moral strength. Sure they were somewhat loose in their sexual habits and surely they injected a lot of drugs - a risky and foolish business - but they were very careful about not hurting other human beings; they practiced - not believed in but practiced - a live-and-let-live philosophy of tenderness; they adhered to a strict code of ethics...they were agitating for a more honest, healthy and democratic society (157-58).

When he finally realizes that Christianity is dead, Marvelous posits a strikingly hopeful vision which implies that the counterculture is an intrinsic part of an overall spiritual evolution which will replace Christianity with a more modern religion.

After closing his counterculture fantasy with an unusual suggestion: "Let Amanda be your pine cone"(337), Robbins exploration of the American dream progresses from the spiritual era of vision to the pragmatic era of social transformation. Whereas the counterculture was Robbins' thematic mis en scene in Another Roadside Attraction, Robbins focuses on the social activism which grew out of the 60's revolutionary vision in Even Cowgirls Get The Blues. The

counterculture had recognized that American society was in need of a major overhaul. However, the social activists attempted to institute change by means of political action. Working out of this new social milieu, Robbins creates characters who reflect the ideological flavour of the activist scene.

Though a number of revisionist ideologies and activist movements are dealt with, the most persistent focus is on feminism, a fact which Robbins himself readily admits: "I see the book as a celebration of the feminine principle."³⁸ The protagonist of the story is Sissy Hankshaw. Having been endowed with enormous thumbs and having a strikingly independent spirit, Sissy leaves home at age 17 and embarks upon a distinctly American quest - hitchhiking. According to the narrator, "From Whitman to Steinbeck to Kerouac, and beyond to the restless broods of the seventies, the American road has represented choice, escape, opportunity, a way to somewhere else. However illusory, the road was freedom, and the freest way to ride the road was hitchhiking"(52). Hitchhiking is an avocation for which Sissy is particularly well suited and a talent at which she admits she excels: "Please don't think me immodest, but I'm really the best. When my hands are in shape and my timing is right, I'm the best there is, ever was or ever will be"(53).

Sissy's adventures are one focal point of the of the feminine; another is the Rubber Rose Ranch, largest all-girl spread in the West.

Not only do the cowgirls perform all the chores and outdoor work that men usually do, they also engage a number of feminist issues in their frequent discussions. The ranch's most outspoken cowgirl advocate, Bonanza Jellybean, complains that "if you've got a girl who persists in fantasizing a more exciting future for herself than housewifery, desk-jobbing or motherhood, better bustle her off to a child psychologist. Force her to face reality"(149). Having run away from home to become a cowgirl, Bonanza Jellybean sets for herself a goal for social change and acts as a role model for any who might follow her example: "I want every little girl - and every boy, for that matter - to be free to realize their fantasies"(152).

The focus of the feminist dialogue occurs in the ongoing debate between the forewoman, Delores Del Ruby and one of the cowgirls, Debbie. Robbins seems to caricature certain aspects of feminist theory in the character of Delores. Inspired by the peyote vision of the Mother Goddess Niwetukame, Delores believes that women must actively rebel against their natural enemy, men. Delores has a less than flattering view of the opposite sex, believing that men are responsible for our "aggressive brutal paternalistic system intent on subduing the Earth and establishing its dominion over all things - in the name of God the father, law, order and, economic progress"(352). However, Debbie actively opposes Delores' abrasive outlook. According to Bonanza Jellybean, "Debbie feels that people have a

tendency to become what they hate. She says that women that hate men turn into men. Debbie says that if women are to take charge again, they must do it in the feminine way; they mustn't resort to aggressive and violent masculine methods. She says it is up to women to show themselves better than men, to love men, set good examples for them and guide them tenderly towards the New Age”(173).

Continuing the debate, the radical feminist Delores maintains that the only way women can avoid being enslaved by men is by controlling and escaping their biological roles. In order to free themselves from the vulnerable state of motherhood, women must have their babies made in laboratory test tubes and cared for by professional nurses. Again, Delores has a more gentle response:

the capacity for motherhood is the source of women's strength. Only women stand between technology and the destruction of nature...then we got to put technology (an aggressive masculine system) in its proper place, which is that of a tool to be used sparingly, joyfully, gently and only in fullest co-operation with nature. Nature must govern technology, not the other way around. Only then will oppression end (202-3).

Not only do the women of the Rubber Rose share the chores and discuss the place of women in American society, they also share each other. According to Bonanza Jellybean, "at least half of the girls on the ranch have been in each other's pants by now. There's not a queer among 'em either. It's just a nice, natural thing to do”(181). Sissy

herself has an affair with Bonanza Jellybean. When Sissy confides this episode to Dr Robbins, he responds with surprising sympathy:

Lesbianism is definitely on the rise. I can't believe that the many who practice it all suffering from preadolescent fixations. No, I'm more inclined to believe that it's a cultural phenomenon, a healthy rejection of the paternalistic power structure that has dominated the civilized world for more than two thousand years. Maybe women have got to love women in order to remind men what love is. Maybe women have got to love women before they can start loving men again (279).

The Chink is also found to possess the "feminine spirit" (308). In one of his many philosophical asides, he informs Sissy that Western man had a highly developed pre-Christian religious heritage in which women played a primary role:

Women were not only the principle servants of the Old God, women were his mistresses, the power behind the pumpkin throne. Women controlled the Old Religion. It had a few priests, many priestesses. There was no dogma; each priestess interpreted the religion in her own fashion. The Great Mother - creator and destroyer - instructed the Old God, was his mama, his wife, his daughter, his sister, his equal and ecstatic partner in the ongoing fuck (267).

In conjunction with the feminist theme of Even Cowgirls Get the Blues, is another activist motif dealing with American exploitation of women. The Countess, for whom Sissy occasionally models, epitomizes Capitalism's exploitive tendencies. As the inventor of the world's most popular feminine hygienic products, Dew spray mist and Yoni Yum spray powder, the Countess made a fortune eliminating what he often refers to as the female's "pagan stench." When the

Food and Drug Administration proclaims that "female deodorant sprays are medically and hygienically worthless, and may cause such harmful reactions as blisters, burns and rashes," (108) the Countess proclaims in a fit of rage that even though Ralph Nader and his kiddie corps of Ivy League law students were probably behind the FDA, he expects the President to do something quick: "They accepted my donation, so they're they'd better serve my interests or I'll buy some leadership that will"(109). As if the exploitation of female odors were not enough, the Countess also takes advantage of the disadvantaged position of American women by maintaining a female ranch at the Rubber Rose "where unhappy women - divorcees and widows, mainly - can go to lose weight, remove wrinkles, change their hair styles and pretty themselves up for the next disappointment"(109).

In addition to the Countess' capitalization of women, the subplot of the whooping crane kidnapping deals with American exploitation of the natural environment. Having been once as numerous as the buffalo, the whooping cranes were so maltreated by "civilization," that by 1941 there were only fifteen left alive in the entire world. The understood significance of this scenario is that Western civilization in general and America in particular seem to assume that man exists on a higher plane of being from which he has some to right to dominate all of nature.³⁹ The whooping cranes serve to remind us of the consequences of our American way of life. As the Chink relates: "there are countless ways to live upon this sphere in mirth and good

health, and probably only one way - the industrialized, urbanized, herding way - to live here stupidly, and man has hit upon that one wrong way”(220).

When Even Cowgirls Get The Blues was published in 1976, Robbins seems relatively enamored with feminism. In subsequent years, however, Robbins becomes increasingly disenchanted with the idea of feminism as a movement. In the summer of 1978, Robbins wrote an article for the *Seattle Weekly* entitled, "Is Feminisimo Destroying Feminism?" in which he states:

The re-emergence in the modern world of the feminine archetype - the recognition in our time of the Goddess, the Great Mother - was such a benevolent and auspicious moonrise that it illuminated in a special way the working philosophies of thousands of happy people. Alas, mother consciousness, as a movement, degenerated even quicker than drug consciousness, as a movement. The lesson, of course, is that movements are for Beethoven and the bowels; that the stuff of higher consciousness is pretty much confined to the individual spirit, and that the individual spirit is murdered by organization.⁴⁰

Yet Robbins claims we must not throw out the feminism with the feminisimo: "I don't mean to imply that feminism is a universal solution. There are no group solutions. There are only individual solutions, individual liberations. Within its limitation, however, feminism can assist individuals in their growth towards a richer, freer, more tender reality."⁴¹

Robbins' anti-movement and pro-individual sentiments are a harbinger for things to come, for in his next novel, these are the very

subjects which Robbins addresses. Underscoring Robbins' change of heart is his understanding of America's changing position in the international scene. Robbins recognizes that in the last quarter of the twentieth century, America is no longer the world's supreme power and unquestionable leader. Having lost a good deal of prestige through the Vietnam trauma and a sizable amount of power to the OPEC states, America has been forced to reassess its relationship with the outside world. That so many of the characters in Still Life With Woodpecker are outsiders accentuates this fact. Max and Tilli, the last monarchs of the Furstenberg-Barcalonas line, reside in Seattle, Washington, having been exiled from their Eastern European homeland. Bernard Mickey Wrangle, alias the Woodpecker, is a self-proclaimed metaphysical outlaw in the best tradition of the glorified American folk hero who lives not only outside the letter of the law but even outside the spirit of the law. Leigh-Cheri's suitor, A'ben Fazel, is the heir to one of the wealthiest oil sheikdoms in the Middle East. Guilletta, Max and Tilli's only remaining servant from their reign, never learns a word of English and communicates exclusively in her Serbo-Croatian dialect. The only insider in the story is the protagonist, Princess Leigh-Cheri, who was raised in the United States. Yet even she becomes an outsider, or at least an expatriate, during her engagement to A'ben Fazel

Sensing that the limitless possibility for expansion that had for so long characterized the American dream is no longer viable, Robbins

suggests that Americans have turned within. Robbins seems to echo the sentiments of Christopher Lasch, author of The Narcissistic Culture, as Lasch maintains that America's turning within is reflected in the widespread narcissism of the "me generation" of the late seventies and early eighties.

In Still Life With Woodpecker, Robbins writes out of the belief that the social alternatives and cultural transformation which were the primary goals of the 60's and 70's simply will not occur. Visions of social alternatives such as feminism are regarded as untenable. Instead, the pursuits of the individual spirit become Robbins' predominant concern.

Throughout the novel, the idea that American society could somehow be transformed by the vision or the activism of years past is regarded as an unfortunate case of wishful thinking. Leigh-Cheri is, at first, the quintessential activist. She actively supports a variety of causes and worships Ralph Nader, the patron saint of concerned consumers. After her unfortunate cheerleading accident, Max and Tilli attempt to cheer her by giving her permission to attend the "what-to-do-for-the-planet-until-the-end-of-the-twenty-first-century-conference," the Geo-Therapy Care Fest. Yet after meeting the Woodpecker and witnessing the Care fest turn into a circus of over-zealous promotions for disenfranchised special-interest groups, Leigh Cheri comes to realize (with the Woodpecker's help), that her own romantic

individualism can never be reconciled with the group ethic:

no matter how fervently a romantic might support a movement, he or she must withdraw from active participation in that movement because of the group ethic -- the supremacy of organization over the individual - is an affront to Intimacy...the aim of any social activist is power over others...every case, no matter how worthy, eventually falls prey to the tyranny of the dull mind. In the movement, as in the bee house or white ant's hill of clay, there is no place for idiosyncrasy, let alone mischief.⁴²

Robbins continues to satirize and parody the idea of social activism throughout the narrative. When the reader learns of the demise of the Woodpecker Gang and the paths that its members had chosen to follow it becomes painfully apparent that the youth generation who had once been so moved by the ideals of revolution and activism are all being co-opted into the very system they had yearned to change:

The Woodpecker Gang had disbanded. Four former members were in jail. One had been clubbed to death with folding chairs. Three had embraced conventional politics and were working within the system to alter the system. One was selling real estate and had contracted Jesus Christ as his personal savior. Willie the Wetback was studying pre-law at Stanford. He was in a fraternity. Starving his nose, although he still smoked grass occasionally, he wanted to work for Nader one day. The world had changed (62).

As all movements are deemed to be humanistically intolerable, the concerns of individuals become the focus of the narrative. It is appropriate that the most pressing question of the narrative is "how do you make love stay in a world which has the last quarter of the twentieth century blues," for the question is narcissistic. In his

numerous philosophical digressions, the Woodpecker is the most articulate advocate of individualism. It is he who inspires Leigh-Cheri's assessment of the essential dilemma of American culture: "In a society that is essentially designed to organize, direct, and gratify mass impulses, what is there to minister to the silent zones of man as an individual"(221)? According to the Woodpecker, each person must embrace his or her own freedom by realizing the key ingredient of the human predicament - choice. What keeps people attached to ideas and institutions is their unwillingness to take charge of their lives in an active and creative way: "What limits people is lack of character... We're our own dragons as well as our own heroes, and we have to rescue ourselves from ourselves"(99). In order to be a free individual one must be self motivating, self activating and self-aware. In the Epilogue Robbins summarizes these feelings in a statement concerning the evolution of individual:

evolving is not accomplished for a person by nature or society but is the central dimension of a personal drama to which nature and society are but spectators...civilization is not an end in itself but a theatre or gymnasium in which the evolving individual finds facilities for practice (271).

Having accepted a good deal of the Woodpecker's ideas, LeighCheri learns to synthesize her own raison d'être. Turning within to seek her own answers, Leigh-Cheri reflects both the "me generation" narcissism and that distinctly American impulse to turn inward for the American dream. Whereas in Even Cowgirls Get The

Blues, the protagonist, Sissy, pursues a career of mobility, in Still Life With Woodpecker, Leigh-Cheri concentrates on stillness. Locking herself in an attic with only bare necessities as company, Leigh-Cheri engages her inanimate environment in an educative dialogue. The romantic fantasies which are inspired by her transcendental communion with a pack of Camel cigarettes teach Leigh-Cheri to respect the inanimate objects which surround her: "She had become sensitized to objecthood. Thanks to the Camel pack, she had been cured of animate chauvinism...Leigh-Cheri had to consider the smallest, dearest thing as if it had some life of its own"(221). Leigh-Cheri also develops her own theory on the purpose and meaning of those mysterious and colossal repositories of mystical power - the pyramids:

A pyramid is primacy. It is form, not function. It is presence, not effect. We can see it in an instant, yet we continue to read it. It nourishes us over and over. A pyramid is inscrutable and mysterious not in spite of being

so elemental but because it is elemental. Free from the hypnotic hysteria of the mechanical, the mental torpor of the electronic, and the mortal decay of the biological, it rests in vapid splendor between time and space, detached from both, representing neither, and helps to devalue the myth of progress(229).

It is not insignificant that the sincere concern and understanding of the impact of contemporary physics on Western society in Robbins' first two books degenerates in Still Life With Woodpecker to the pseudo-science of pyramidology.

At the end of the narrative, both Leigh-Cheri and the Woodpecker are imprisoned in Leigh-Cheri's newly finished pyramid. Epitomizing isolation, the pyramid is a fitting symbol for the narcissistic lovers within. In an attempt to break out of isolation Leigh-Cheri tries to dynamite the door. At that moment, both she and the Woodpecker attempt to make the ultimate individual sacrifice by choosing to save the other's life over their own. Miraculously surviving the blast, they live happily ever after, albeit deaf, in the Furstenberg-Barcelona house in Seattle: "Leigh-Cheri took up easel painting. Still Lives. She wasn't bad. Bernard carried around wooden matches. 'Everybody needs a hobby'" (269). Dedicated to their separate habits of solitude, they maintain their romance through mutual respect for their own individual identities and needs.

Robbins has an uncanny ability to reflect in his novels the changing American moods from counterculture to activism to narcissism. However, his depictions are not all of equal quality. Robbins succeeds when he creates a fluid exchange of views. In the ongoing dialogue between Amanda and Marvelous in Another Roadside Attraction and between Delores and Debbie in Even Cowgirls Get The Blues, Robbins creates viable discourse. The Chink embodies both sides of a dialogue with himself. Yet Still Life With Woodpecker is lacking in meaningful exchanges. Leigh-Cheri and the Woodpecker are isolated in their own intellectual space. They are unwilling to share; their views become crystalized and ultimately ennuyeux.

The poetic possibilities of the English language are endless.

Even Cowgirls Get The Blues

Real courage is risking something that might force you to rethink your thoughts and suffer change and stretch consciousness. Real courage is risking one's cliches.

Another Roadside Attraction

He {Robbins} writes with the greatest difficulty of any writer I've ever seen.

Lou Guzzo

CHAPTER FOUR: Word Play

Verbal precision is one of Robbins' fortes. Perhaps the most striking feature of Robbins' work is the sheer novelty of his language and the consistent quality of his word play. Sarn Vaughnan, a former head of Doubleday publishing concurs. "I've read lots of loose-limbed manuscripts full of all the freedom and license and nonsense of the moment. But the difference between Robbins' stuff and the others, published and unpublished, is how well he writes, how right he often is and the precision of his language."⁴³ Though Robbins employs a number of verbal strategies throughout his work, three distinct categories emerge: word play as characterization, word play as an investigation into the nature of culture and word play as an investigation into the nature of language.

Word play as characterization is most fully developed in Another Roadside Attraction. Robbins directs his verbal wit towards providing the reader with insights into the depth and humor of his characters. By reworking familiar words and expressions, Robbins adds to his characters a comic dimension. The essence of Robbins' verbal verve is his ability to place familiar objects and ideas in unconventional and comic positions. In the midst of his oration on Jesus Christ, Marvelous offers the following scenario:

Jesus: Hey, Dad

God: Yes, son?

Jesus: Western civilization followed me home this morning. Can I keep it?

God: Certainly not, boy. And put it down this minute. You don't know where it's been (298).

This stereotypical comic scenario placed within a religious context makes for a strikingly funny irreverence. The particular blasphemous character of this irreverence, its violation of the conventionally sacred, is typical of Marvelous' deconstructing wit. Marvelous is in the process of tearing down the old. Thus he is in a transitional state and the complexity of his character is deepened by spiritual position. Marvelous cannot construct without destruction, and even as he chooses a new name, there is a victim in his victory.

Being in a defiant frame of mind, I asked myself what it is that my fellows at the Institute - that, indeed, the average American males of my age and economic stratum - hate most. What do they most loathe? The answer I arrived at was Communism and homosexuality. Communists and homosexuals are the targets of the majority of the normal male's fear honed barbs. Thus you can see how I in my rebellion selected the given name of 'Marx.' The surname was more difficult. Obviously, I couldn't call myself Marx Homosexual or Marx Queer or even Marx Fag. But I remembered having read in a syndicated newspaper column that the one word no red blooded he-man would ever ever utter was 'marvelous.' 'Marvelous' is an expression reserved for interior decorators and choreographers and is as taboo in the bleachers, the sales meeting or the pool hall as a rose behind the ear or a velvet snood. So, I embraced that maligned term as: if it were a victimized ancestor. And here I am: Marx Marvelous(149-50)

Marvelous' is a defiant nature - a nature struggling against. This: potent vignette, portrays Marvelous' analytical mind, as here we see determination through process. Characterization is thus admirably achieved through Robbins' verbal acuity

Amanda though, is already comfortably situated within the holistic bounds of her wholesome mysticism.

There are three mental states that interest me. These are: one amnesia; two, euphoria; three, ecstasy. Amnesia is not knowing who one is, and wanting desperately to find out. Euphoria is not knowing who one is and not caring. Ecstasy is knowing exactly who one is - and still not caring(167).

There is no such thing as a weird human being. It's just that some people require more understanding than others(10).

Because Amanda "knows" herself to a depth that would make Polonius proud, she has no need to assert herself over the interests of others. Amanda's rhetoric is victimless. In general, the clarity and brevity of Amanda's statements betray the contentment of her self-knowledge and the benevolence of her holistic view. Amanda's holistic view is an earth bound mysticism. Rather than transcendence, she offers us a mystical conception of this earth expressed through its own concrete and solid images: "I believe in birth, copulation and death"(8).

The potent humor of word play is granted to Amanda as well as Marvelous but whereas Marvelous' comic genius entails laughter at the expense of others, Amanda's wit is pointed but non accusatory.

Amanda is adept at constructing pithy negations of our conventional anthropocentric view: “human beings were invented by water as a means of transporting itself from one place to another”(11). But Amandas verbal humor is not always the word play of inversion. She often eschews conceits, preferring to inform seemingly simplistic pronouncements with comic significance and comic effect: “The life-span of the butterfly is precisely the right length”(6).

When Ziller steps back to examine the third foot long psychedelic hot dog he has created for the billboard of the roadside zoo, this normally phlegmatic creature becomes verbally ecstatic. Ziller’s speech shares here in the pungent self-revelatory quality of Amanda’s and Marvelous rhetoric. He, too, speaks with a verbal precision that provides depth and humor to his characterization. Expounding on his creation, the artist’s descriptive intelligence tellingly reveals his artistic sensibility.

Magnificent! ... Truly wondrous ... Note how the wrinkles in the bun - it's a steamed-soft bun, of course - fold dynamically, intuiting hidden movement as if they were folds in silks draped about a Renaissance Madonna. The texture of the bun is soft but not rubbery; it has the luster of a prairie moon. The sausage itself possesses a kind of peasant-folk serenity: it lounges in that bun as plump with confidence as a Polack bowling champion snoozing in a backyard hammock on the afternoon before the Great Lakes regional finals. A simple fellow, the sausage, but the way his gentle contours catch the light and hold it gleaming, one senses something glorious in his spirit. I have folded his bulk - can you sense the physical participation of the artist in the formal objectification of the weenie's presence? - into a continuous volume that consumes vast quantities of space; it is three-dimensional, tactile, larger than life, as rotund and good-natured as Falstaff but not entirely

devoid of Hamlet's rank. And what glamour is lent to the scene by the golden cloak of mustard, by the jazzy, jumpy play of flat patterns in the relish. Ahem(71-72)

With the abrupt interjection of that anachronistic "weenie," the humor of this passage inescapably affronts the reader. And yet, Ziller's speech mocks gently and not only the reader but himself. This pretentious of artistic bombast is disarmed by comic incongruity. Within the telling mixture of Ziller's verbage, artifice turns artless and honesty is revealed.

Whereas much of Robbins' verbal precision in Another Roadside Attraction was directed towards the characters, in Even Cowgirls Get The Blues, Robbins' word play investigates the nature of culture and the nature, of language. In Even Cowgirls Get The Blues, Robbins becomes obsessed with all things distinctly American, particularly items of contemporary American consumer culture. Robbins seems to be underscoring the consumable nature of American culture by emphasizing the extent to which the lives of many Americans become defined by consumer jargon. The text is an endless parade of Americanisms: "Velveta Cheese" ••• "Wonder Bread"(50) ••• "Pontiac" ••• "Pinto" ••• "Three Musketeers bars"(65) ••• "Bugs Bunny Wristwatch"(104) •••"whooper" ••• "Fig Newton" {224) ••• "Marlboro Country" ••• "butterscotch Life Saver" (228). Consumer society denies the cyclical rhythms of nature by creating throw-away products which necessitate an inverted cycle of perpetual acquisition and perpetual

disposal. Robbins seems to understand that in attaching labels and brand names to material goods, we consume and throw away words as well as products. Language becomes a disposable commodity. Robbins poignantly satirizes our complicity in this commoditization of language.

Ready on your call Romance. Please deposit sixty-five micrograms of estrogen for the first three minutes (46-47).

She unzipped her jumpsuit at the crotch, and as if looking up Eros in the Yellow Pages, she let her fingers do the walking(134).

Throughout the text, Robbins isolates culturally ingrained cliché phrases and expressions and places them into unfamiliar verbal constructs. By thus inverting our most platitudinous slogans, Robbins wittily exposes the consumability of our clichés.

Throughout the narrative, Robbins maintains a comic self-consciousness over the act of being verbally aware. One of the most memorable moments of such self-conscious literary play and possibly one of the most ingenious moments in all of Robbins' work occurs after "the author" insists upon the non-mimetic nature of literature:

If he has confused you, the author apologizes. He swears to keep events in proper historical sequence from now on. He does not, however, disavow the impulses that led to his presentation of cowgirl scenes out of chronological order, nor does he, in repentance, embrace the notion that literature should mirror reality... A book no more contains reality than a clock contains time. A book measure so-called reality as a clock measures so-called time; a book may create an illusion of reality

as a clock creates an illusion of time; a book may be real, just as a clock is real (both more real, perhaps, than those ideas to which they allude); but let's not kid ourselves - all a clock contains is wheels and springs and all a book contains is sentences.

Happily, your author is not under contract to any of the muses who supply the reputable writers, and thus he has access to a considerable variety of sentences to spread and stretch from margin to margin as he relates the stories of our Thumbelina, of the ranch a douche bag built and - O my children, cock your ears to this! - of the clockworks and its Chink For example:

This sentence is made of lead (and sentence of lead gives the reader an entirely different sensation from one made of magnesium). This sentence is made of yak wool. This sentence is made of sunlight and plums. This sentence is made of ice. This sentence is made from the blood of the poet. This sentence was made in Japan. This sentence was born with a caul. This sentence has a crush on Norman Mailer. This sentence is a wino and doesn't care who knows it. Like many italic sentences, this one has Mafia connections. This sentence is a double Cancer with Pisces rising. This sentence lost its mind searching for the perfect paragraph. This sentence refuses to be diagramed. This sentence ran off with an adverb clause. This sentence is 100% organic: it will not retain facsimile of freshness like those sentences of Homer, Shakespeare, Goethe et al. which are loaded with preservatives. This sentence leaks. This sentence doesn't look Jewish. This sentence has accepted Jesus Christ as its personal savior. This sentence once spit in a book reviewers eye. This sentence can do the funky chicken. This sentence has seen too much and forgotten too little. This sentence is called "Speedoo" but its real name is Mr. Earl. The sentence may be pregnant, it missed its period. This sentence suffered a split infinitive - and survived. If this sentence had been a snake you'd have bitten it. This sentence went to jail with Clifford Irving. This sentence went to Woodstock. And this sentence went wee wee wee all the way home. This sentence is proud to be a part of the team here at Even Cowgirls Get The Blues. This sentence is rather confounded by the whole damn thing(124-25).

In all of the sentences, Robbins parodies the mimetic fallacy. When

reading, one normally assumes that words logically correspond to real objects. As words are usually combined in ways which seem consistent with reality, such assumptions are rarely questioned. For example, the sentence, "My brother is a wino" seems perfectly reasonable as in reality, my brother may well be a wino. However the proposition that "This sentence is a wino" is utterly absurd. A sentence cannot be a wino because a sentence is simply a grammatical construction. Yes, but that is precisely Robbins' point. A sentence is simply a grammatical construction that has no connection to reality. Sentences seem real only because we accept the illusion that words represent real things. By divorcing themselves from the referential objects that their words are thought to represent, all the sentences parody the idea that literature mirrors reality.

Furthermore, the entire passage progresses with a finely tuned rhythm. At first the sentences are objectified - lead, magnesium, yak wool, sunlight and plums and ice - but the sentence which is made from the blood of the poet begins a sporadic but progressive tendency towards animism. While the next two sentences illustrate properties - one is made in Japan, another glows in the dark - the following sentences take on human attributes. Finally the sentence who is a wino attains personhood.

The subsequent sentences are a melange of the previous categories. All of the sentences which contain parts of speech further

underscore literature's non-mimetic nature. In keeping with the rest of the text, Robbins makes delightful puns on many of our favorite American cliches. While the "italic" sentence has mafia connections, another is 100 percent organic. One of the funniest cliché sequences when while one doesn't look Jewish, the next has accepted Jesus Christ as its personal savior. A variety of sentences cover the spectrum of contemporary American life from Woodstock to the funky chicken. Yet beyond the categories and cliches, what makes this passage so exemplary is that it illustrates how fast paced word wit can be successfully sustained. Even though by the end of the passage the last sentence is rather confounded, the reader is left feeling he has just witnessed a playful genius.

Whereas Robbins' word play in Even Cowgirls Get The Blues is one of the most consistent attributes of a novel which succeeds overall, Robbins' phraseology in Still Life With Woodpecker might be seen as a sporadic attribute of a novel which is, as a whole, disappointing. Although he abandons his investigation into the nature of language, Robbins continues to use his wit to investigate various aspects of American culture. Robbins again inverts familiar American cliches to humorously satirize the omnipresent verbal rhythm of contemporary American consumer culture.

Exactly what might be meant by the "performance" of the Cheerios? Could the Cheerios be in bad voice? Might not they handle well on curves? Do they ejaculate too quickly? Has age

affected their timing or are they merely in a mid-season slump? Afflicted with nervous exhaustion or broken hearts, are the Cheerios smiling bravely, insisting that the show must go on(162)?

Somewhere between champagne and tequilla is the secret history of Mexico, Just as somewhere between beef jerky and Hostess Twinkies is the secret history of America(251)

Robbins' best witticisms are still genuinely amusing. However, if Still Life With Woodpecker were successful overall, his word play would look considerably better. Because Still Life With Woodpecker has so many deficiencies, especially in comparison to its more effective predecessors, the verbal wit seems to be some sort of last-minute effort to redeem a narrative which needs much more than puns to come to its rescue. Unlike the previous narrators, the narrator of Still Life With Woodpecker has little to do with the main body of the text. It is not involved with, related to or biased towards any of the story's characters. It comments only infrequently on the major themes or the narrative. It neither makes friendly advances towards the reader, nor does it cleverly entice the reader to read on. Much of the word play is indeed clever. Yet one gets the feeling that there is still some ineffable "umph" that is missing. At end, that missing "umph" is not so much witty words but an effective overall structure in which the humor might be placed. Whereas in Even Cowgirls Get The Blues the humor reinforces the narrative, in Still Life With Woodpecker the humor stands alone.

It is unfortunate that Robbins is unable to sustain that feeling of awe he achieves in Even Cowgirls Get The Blues with the “this sentence” routine. He fails in Still Life With Woodpecker to create any memorable verbal profundities. An appropriate illustration can be found in Bernard’s description of the prison guards search for missing knives:

they lined us up in the hallway, watched over by a squad of guards armed with riot guns and Mace. One by one, we were marched into a small room, where in front of several more guards and a captain with a flashlight, we were made to strip. They made me turn around, grab the cheeks of my ass and bend over, so they could look up my rectum to make sure I wasn’t hiding three kitchen knives and a seventeen-inch in diameter meat-slicing blade. Of course they did not find the missing cutlery in any of us. But they did find four bars of soap, a Playboy centerfold, three ice cubes, five feathers, Atlantis, the Greek delegate to Boys’ Nation, a cake with a file in it, a white Christmas, a blue Christmas, Pablo Picasso and his brother Elmer, one baloney sandwich with mustard, two Japanese infantrymen who didn’t realize that World War II was over, Prince Buster of Cleveland, a glass-bottomed boat, Howard Hughes’s will, a set of false teeth, Amelia Earhart, the first four measures of ‘The Impossible Dream’ sung by the Black Mountain College Choir, Howard Hughes’s will (another version), the widow of the Unknown soldier, six passenger pigeons, middle-class morality, the Great American Novel and a banana(83).

While there are several items which are normally associated with prisoners (albeit not in their rectums), most of the items seem utterly unrelated and ultimately random. One does not get the feeling that the progression contains any underlying rhythm. Certain cliché inversions are to be found (a blue Christmas, widow of the Unknown soldier) and there are some unmistakable contemporary Americanisms

(Boys' Nation, Howard Hughes's will, middle class morality). However, the passage does not go anywhere. It never arrives. Whereas with the sentences, Robbins cleverly articulates a significant thematic issue, the collection of anal rarities seems more like a listing than a finely tuned verbal ploy. Although there is a considerable qualitative gap between this passage and its previous counterpart, it is still amusing. Yet in a text which is itself lacking in quality, being funny is hardly enough.

Robbins is a talented verbal wit. His use of word play in his characterization bespeaks an uncommon verbal acuity. He has an uncanny ability to vitalize the culturally ingrained catch phrases and consumer expressions typical of American's speech. His exploration into the nature of language seems to be the effort of a lexical genius. However, unless Robbins is able to create narratives in which his humor can be effectively placed, how long will his word play continue to delight us?

If I ever started to think about writing being my career,
it would probably stop being fun.

Tom Robbins

My only asset is my imagination. I keep as much as
possible submerged in my unconscious; I let it marinate,
and when its soaked real well, I try to squeeze it out. The
third book is more conventional but the doesn't mean I'm
going straight. I've still got a lot of surprises up my sleeve.

Tom Robbins

CHAPTER FIVE: Conclusion

In light of the substantive discrepancy in the overall quality of Robbins' most recent novel when compared with the previous two, it is necessary to question the extent of Robbins' artistic commitment. Even such an apparent trivial matter as print size reflects the course of Robbins' career as a novelist. Another Roadside Attraction is by far Robbins' densest work. The plot is convoluted and complex, the characters are richly realized - and the print size is quite small. Robbins evidently has a lot to say. Even Cowgirls Get The Blues is decidedly less compact. The plot is more static, the characters becomes less life-like and the print size becomes larger. The biggest leap occurs in Still Life With Woodpecker. As the plot and the characters become increasingly dull, the print size becomes correspondingly large, and the entire text is invaded by space filling black dots ••• see the bottom of every page, the chapter curly cues, the pictures of the moon, ad infinitum. It is as if Robbins were increasingly running out of things to say and is forced to adapt strategies to extend and inflate his diminishing output

Robbins claims that maintaining a sense of playfulness is one of the most important aspects of his life and work. Yet as critics, we must

consider whether playfulness can be reconciled with the serious commitment that is necessary to create novels of acceptable quality. Playfulness, by its very nature, is whimsical, arbitrary and random. A playful child will play a particular game so long as it continues to amuse him. When the game loses its magical spark, the child will stop playing and move on to whatever at that moment catches his attention. One must ask whether Robbins's can continue write when the game of writing loses its playful character. In 1977, just one year after Even Cowgirls Get The Blues was published, Robbins was quoted saying, "If I ever start to think about writing being my career, it would probably stop being fun."⁴⁴ The clear implication of this statement is that in order for playfulness to remain amusing it can never be tied down, as the very nature of playfulness necessitates a certain lack of absolute commitment. And yet, has not writing now become Robbins's career. Even Cowgirls Get The Blues succeeded beyond anyone's dreams, Robbins included. After receiving such widespread popular acclaim, it would be difficult for Robbins to have said, "This writing game is no fun, let's play something else ." Although Robbins would like to think that as adults we can still function with childlike spontaneity, the fact remains that as we progress in age we tend to become increasingly and consciously calculated. It seems that sometime between 1977 and the appearance of Still Life With Woodpecker in 1980, Robbins made some sort of conscious decision or commitment to make writing novels his primary avocation. Having

accepted the popular mandate, Robbins set out to write a pleasing sequel to his previous works. But what of playfulness and what of fun? Will Robbins' writing cease to be fun? Will it lose its playful character? To answer these questions, let us look back at Still Life With Woodpecker. Many of the ideas which were so intimately connected in his first two novels lead nowhere toward the third. What happened to the new physics? Why is the narrator so completely divorced from the characters of the narrative? What became of literary self consciousness? Where is there a character who is realized and developed as was Amanda? We, the readers, patiently wait "with various combinations of dread, hope, and ennui - for something momentous to occur,"(3) and to our disappointment, nothing ever does. Yet beyond the significant problems which plague Still Life With Woodpecker, what it really lacks is that exuberant playfulness which was before so omnipresent. Still Life With Woodpecker seems forced. Robbins claims that when writing, he keeps "as much as possible submerged in my unconscious; I let it marinate, and when it's soaked real well, I try to squeeze it out."⁴⁵ Still Life With Woodpecker might thus be a case of planned but still premature ejaculation. If indeed Robbins has sacrificed the most important aspect of his life and his work just to churn out another novel for an enthusiastic public, has he not then sold out to success? Yes and no. It is true that Robbins' vastest effort is both disappointing and disturbing. However, this critic would be the last to posit that Robbins is all but used up. Robbins'

himself admits that “the third book is more conventional but the doesn’t mean I’m going straight. I’ve still got a lot of surprises up my sleeves.”⁴⁶ As both of Robbins’ first two novels were so deliciously refreshing, let us think of the third as an unfortunate anomaly. Indeed, let us patiently hope that the fourth novel marinates in Robbin’ unconscious as long as it needs. We may be pleasantly surprised.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Mark Segal, Tom Robbins (Boise: Boise State University Western Writers Series, 1980), p 7.
- 2 Tom Robbins, Even Cowgirls Get The Blues (New York: Ballantine Books, 1971), p. 19 All further references to this work appear in the text.
- 3 Greg Mitchel, "...And 'Cowgirls' Jumped Over The Moon," Crawdaddy, August 1977, p. 33.
- 4 Michael, Rogers, "Taking Tom Robbins Seriously," Rolling Stone, 17 November, 1977, p. 68.
- 5 Rogers, p. 68.
- 6 Mitchel p. 30.
- 7 Mitchel. p. 30.
- 8 John Calvin Batchelor, "Packing Of The Artist As a Young Seer," Soho Weekly News, 13 January, 1977, p.18.
- 9 Rogers, p. 66-67.
- 10 Batchelor, p. 21.
- 11 Rogers, p. 68.
- 12 Rogers, p. 68.
- 13 Mitchell S. Ross, "Prince Of The Paperback Literati," New York Times Magazine, 12 February, 1978, p. 76.
- 14 Rogers, p. 68.

- 15 Rogers, p. 67.
- 16 Ross, p. 76-77.
- 17 Ross, p. 76.
- 18 Ross, p. 76.
- 19 Ross, p. 77.
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