

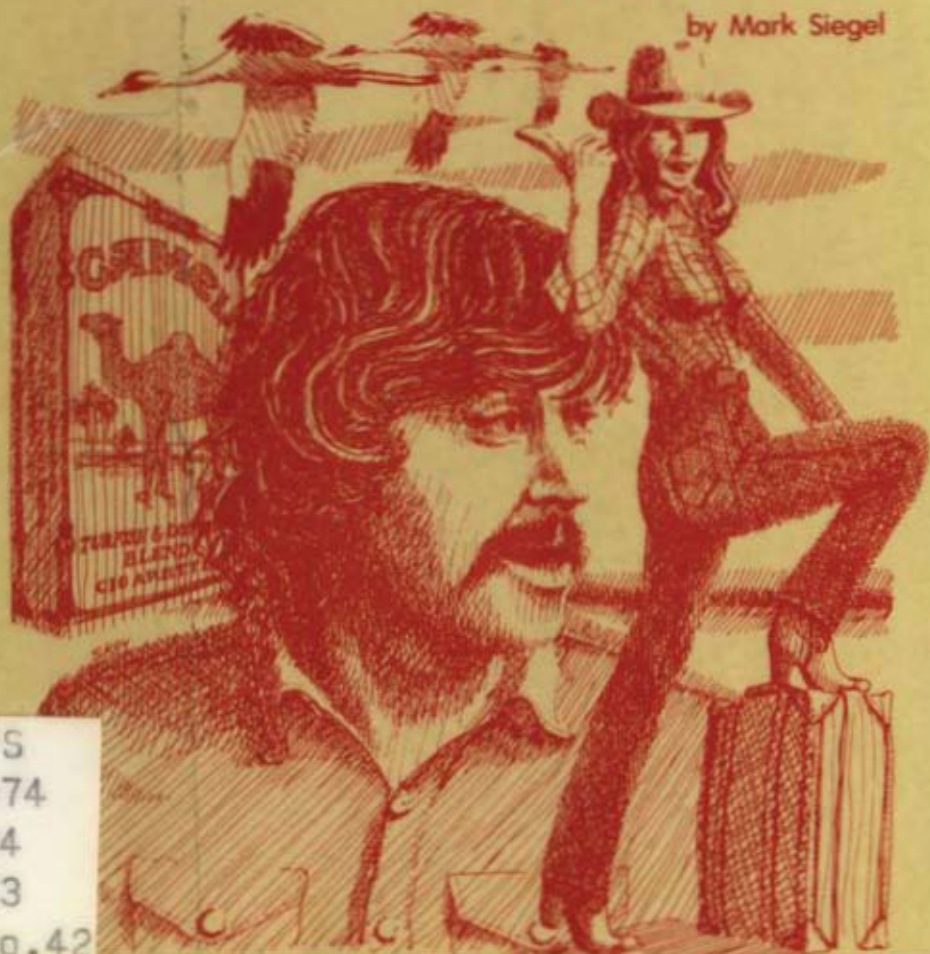
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# WESTERN WRITERS SERIES

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## TOM ROBBINS

by Mark Siegel



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# *Tom Robbins*

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*Tom Robbins*



## Tom Robbins

### I—Introduction

Works of literature are always affected by the times and places in which they are written. Western American literature has often chronicled conflicts that occurred on our frontier between the free-spirited, nature-oriented individual and the restrictions and requirements of advancing civilization.

In his seminal study of the popular Western, *The Six-Gun Mystique*, John Cawelti pointed out that today the formula Western still has the important psychological function for many readers of working out this typically American conflict between freedom and social responsibility.

Before World War II, it was common for Westerns to depict the incorporation of the violent, heroic individual into the social system, often by his marrying the schoolmarm, mistress of civilization. After the war, Cawelti notes, classic Westerns such as *Shane* more commonly suggested that the hero's special qualities must cause him to remain outside of, or to be rejected by, society. Often the hero was merely exiled. Often he was killed.

The Western novels and films produced in the late 1960s and the 1970s seem to indicate our increasing sense of hopelessness about retaining any of these violent, rugged, individualistic, heroic qualities in our industrial nation. *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*, *The Wild Bunch*, and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* are just three well known examples of the extermination of the Western hero by the advancing social system. The writing of Tom McGuane, E. L. Doc-

torow's *Welcome to Hard Times*, and Thomas Berger's *Little Big Man* are "anti-westerns" in the sense that they suggest that the traditional values of fictional Western heroes and their societies have always been, in some ways, a fraudulent representation of Western reality.

The formula Western, at least in terms of the archetypal development of the genre, seems to have reached a stage where the individualistic Western hero must be sacrificed for the good of society as a whole.

The novels of Tom Robbins, *Another Roadside Attraction* (1971), *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1976), and *Still Life with Woodpecker* (1980), are set mostly in Washington state and the Dakotas, yet at first glance seem to have little in common with the formula Western or with Western writing in general. However, a more than cursory reading of Robbins's novels shows that climactic showdowns and shootouts are present, conflicts between unambiguously good and bad guys are, at least temporarily, resolved, and heroes do ride off into the sunset. When the construction and themes of his work are examined, it becomes clear that Robbins has reworked in an unusual style many of the conflicts familiar to the genre.

By redefining and reorganizing the confrontation of the individual and society, he has been able to go beyond the dead-end of the formula Western to suggest new resolutions to these conflicts that traditionally have been embodied in most Western fiction. As is the case with many other Western writers, Robbins's romantic vision enhances and idealizes the American pioneering spirit. However, while Robbins clearly believes in the value of individualism and diversity, he also seems to recognize the need for some kind of social structure, even if it may be radically different from anything we have now. Through this vision his characters work out the conflicts between their love of free, primitive, pantheistic lifestyles and the complex

restrictions of a sophisticated, bureaucratic society. Robbins's characters often seek a physical frontier environment along out-of-the-way roads or in unpeopled mountains, but more importantly, they carry a new American frontier of the culture and spirit with them wherever they go. Robbins's "romantic" novels are some of the few sources we have today of positive, concrete suggestions for living in the modern world.

## II—Biography

Thomas Eugene Robbins became a novelist at the relatively late age of 35. The story of how he came to this profession reflects the concerns and the attitudes that distinguish him as a writer.

Born in North Carolina on July 22, 1936, Robbins was a sensitive child, given to reading and fantasizing. He recalls that he was something of a social misfit. After attending public high school in Warsaw, Virginia, and then Hargrave Military Academy, he enrolled in Washington and Lee University. Reputedly, he was drummed out of his college fraternity for throwing food at an officious housemother, and he soon dropped out of Washington and Lee to hitch around the country doing part-time construction work. At the age of twenty he arrived in Greenwich Village and was saved from starving to death as a poet by the timely resurgence of hostilities in Korea. About to be drafted, Robbins enlisted in the Air Force. He was trained to work as a meteorologist for the South Korean Air Force, but claims to have spent most of his time and energy operating a black market in cigarettes, soap, and toothpaste.

Returning to the United States, Robbins graduated from art school in 1960 and then took a part-time job as a copy-editor for a Richmond, Virginia, newspaper. The reactionary social consciousness of the paper brought out the rebel in this particular Southern gentleman. After being warned for running pictures of Louis Armstrong and Nat King Cole in Earl Wilson's column, Rob-



bins was fired for publishing a photograph of Sammy Davis, Jr., and his Scandinavian wife May Britt.

Seattle, Washington, seemed to be the point in the continental United States farthest from Richmond, so Robbins set out for it. Later, he gave Richmond a verbal beating in *Cowgirls*. He claims also to have been attracted to the Seattle area because it had produced the "mystic" painters Mark Tobey and Morris Graves. Robbins's interest in the various visions of "mysticism" permeates all his work and led him to enroll in courses in Oriental philosophy at the University of Washington. Late in 1962, he became arts critic for the *Seattle Times*, reviewing everything from painting and sculpture to operas and rodeos.

In 1963, while still writing for the *Seattle Times*, Tom Robbins heard about the Sandoz LSD experiments being conducted by a pharmacology professor at the University of Washington. Robbins claims that his first "trip," on July 16, was the most "rewarding" day of his life. In many ways, his experiences seem to be similar to those of Ken Kesey, as discussed by Tom Wolfe in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*.

His perspective on life in general and on his own life in particular appears to have been radically altered by the experience. He kept on at the *Times* for another six months in clean-shirted disguise until one day, like Dr. Robbins in *Cowgirls*, he called in "well"; he told the managing editor that he'd been sick for two and a half years while he'd been coming to work, but that day he was well and wouldn't be in.

Robbins went back to New York and began work on a book about the modern American artist Jackson Pollack. A year later he returned to Seattle, where he wrote an art column for *Seattle Magazine* and hosted the first local FM rock music program. His art column attracted the attention of Doubleday's Berkeley editor, Luther Nichols,

who approached Robbins in 1968 about writing a book of creative criticism. But, according to Robbins, after a few drinks he suddenly discovered that he was more interested in writing a novel, and he began improvising the plot of *Another Roadside Attraction* for Nichols. Nichols was interested, and Robbins quit his job.

Doubleday rejected the manuscript of *Another Roadside Attraction* twice before publishing it in 1971. The book seemed to be a financial failure, but then refused to die and by January 1977 was in its ninth paperback printing, having sold over half a million copies.

### III—Robbins's Popularity

Robbins's history reflects the multiplicity of his interests and perspectives and his voracious appetite for travel and firsthand experience. His early flight from Baptism and the strictures of traditional Southern mores developed over the years into a general skepticism toward the Judeo-Christian tradition and toward social strictures whose values are not readily applicable to gratifying human needs. Consequently, in his fiction Robbins organizes facts and concepts from a variety of apparently disparate fields in an attempt to discover new patterns of meaning and new values around which to structure life. Robbins told me that he tries "to employ both ideas and language itself in the service of the heart at liberty."

Perhaps because his interests revolve around the quest for a fulfilling style of life, his success largely has been with young people and others on the social fringes of America who are disenchanting with accepted majority lifestyles. That is, Robbins's readers are not the traditional readers of formula westerns, who seek a psychological or emotional release from tensions generated by American society. Rather, his readers are those people who, in an earlier time, would have been the Westerners themselves. Criticism of the established social and cultural orders is not difficult to find in contemporary American literature—in fact, it is difficult to avoid. What Robbins

has to offer are encouragement and advice on how to improve the quality of our lives.

His third novel, *Still Life with Woodpecker*, is concerned with "metaphysical outlawism" and like his other works "is also about the primacy of the individual." This concern is a reflection, Robbins feels, of his relationship to the literary establishment as well as to other establishments.

It ought to be made clear that Robbins's fiction is not the dry, programmatic, literature-as-philosophical-proof that this discussion might seem to imply. His work incorporates the playfulness that marks his own life. However, this is playfulness used as a strategy against the morbid defeatism and pessimism of our time, perhaps because defeatism and pessimism are so conducive to the submergence of the individual in totalitarian institutions. We invite defeat with the rhetorical question "What can I do about it, anyway?" If cynicism prevents us from taking chances with new ideas, our future will be bleak indeed. Robbins views "playfulness as both a form of wisdom and a means of survival," views it, in fact, as "essential to the evolution of that most precious of all things, the individual soul."

Robbins has remarked from his current home near Burlington, Washington, that he takes his play very seriously. He "plays near the edge" of the unacceptable and the unknown, and discovers the possibility of a more joyous existence. His writing seems to exhibit faith in a kind of literary and intellectual Darwinism. Let potentialities be expanded by mutant forms and thoughts different from their generations, he seems to say. The dysfunctional and the superfluous will die off by themselves, but each new idea offers the slim possibility of adding to man's understanding and to his joy.

#### IV—*Another Roadside Attraction*

Robbins has said that he never consciously viewed his writing as

“pioneering” effort, although he has always been interested in using his writing to free the human heart. Mostly, he has simply written the kinds of books that he wanted to read. These would seem to be novels with broad, picaresque plots and humor that comment constructively on the contemporary world, not despite, but through exaggerated characters and situations.

In a prefatory note to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Mark Twain warned that “persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot.” This warning is obviously double-edged. The serious “meaning” of *Huckleberry Finn* is obvious to any careful reader, yet any reader who reads the words of the novel for “meaning” without appreciating the great joy in life that is responsible for the book’s tone and vitality misunderstands the vision that is being presented.

In a similar fashion, Robbins signals the proximity of *Another Roadside Attraction*, for which his first novel is named:

NEARLY EXTINCT REPTILES!

AFRICA’S WINGED KILLER!

FLEA CIRCUS

The Meaning of Meaning

FREE                      100 YARDS

This sign is a come-on for a hot dog stand—a come-on but not a hype, since the roadside stand and the novel which is named after it live up to their billing.

The San Francisco garter snakes, the amber tse-tse fly paperweight, and a flea circus worthy of Ed Sullivan may often seem to obscure “the meaning of meaning” in Tom Robbins’s novel, largely because the author seems too concerned with having fun, is overtly self-conscious about his task of explaining his story, and is concerned

with the process of knowledge rather than with defining some ultimate, universal "meaning." Robbins is a "serious" novelist in the sense that his work is an extensive analysis of contemporary lifestyles that not only scrutinizes our shortcomings but suggests particular patterns of behavior as solutions to these shortcomings.

In fact, Robbins's anomalous, optimistic suggestion that there *are* solutions in this age of dread and resignation makes his "seriousness" even more suspect. Robbins's optimism is an outgrowth of his emphasis on the courageous individual's ability to lead a full and happy life. In large part, individual fulfillment is attained through self-knowledge, but Robbins also believes that the institutions of our times will change when we change. His characters win victories by carving out private pockets of freedom from which to resist civilization's control. When attacked by society's minions, they apply jujitsu-like tactics to turn these powers against their owners. They do not confront social authority, but outwit it, as do the heroes of traditional tall tales. Moreover, after a period of psychic growth, his protagonists often re-enter society with the hope of seeing it changed by their examples.

Robbins begins *Another Roadside Attraction* with a series of bizarre paragraphs that he says will *not* begin his tale: "The magician's underwear has just been found in a cardboard suitcase floating in a stagnant pond on the outskirts of Miami. However significant that discovery may be—and there is the possibility that it could alter the destiny of each and every one of us—it is not the incident with which to begin this report" (*Attraction*, p. 3).

Instead of beginning with or organizing his "report" on the basis of the social, religious, and political events that he feels may alter human destiny, the narrator begins by describing Amanda, the woman with whom he has fallen in love during his adventures.

During the course of the novel, which is written as his narrative

report-in-progress, Marx Marvelous begins to mature and to understand more about himself. He takes this personal approach, he says, because he is no scholar or journalist and "is not likely to allow objectivity to nudge him off the pillar of his own perspective," which has Amanda as its central focus (*Attraction*, p. 4). However, a more convincing reason for this particular focus is that Robbins is telling two stories at once, and the story of broad, socio-political importance is really secondary to the story of Marx's personal growth through his contact with Amanda.

The two stories are tied together through Amanda and her gypsy-like friends who inhabit the fringe of American Society.

The socio-political story does not really begin until a quarter of the way into the novel. Plucky Purcell, its prime mover, begins to send Amanda and her husband, John Paul Ziller, a series of letters describing his picaresque escapades in the woodlands of Washington State, not far from their Roadside Attraction. Plucky is mistaken for a Karate-teaching member of a strong-arm, secret sect of the Catholic Church called the Society of the Felicitator. Assuming the role of Brother Dallas, first at the Wildcat Creek Monastery and then on a mission to the Vatican itself, Plucky tries to discover the goals of this particular Papist conspiracy. Instead, during an earthquake in the underground tombs of the Vatican, he discovers the forgotten body of Jesus Christ, apparently secreted there for the past 1,939 years. Motivated partly by a mania for adventure and partly by his half-realized notion that he has tangible proof of the greatest fraud in religious history, Plucky disguises the body and smuggles it back to the Roadside Attraction on the west coast of the United States.

While Plucky, Amanda, John Paul, and the narrator, Marx Marvelous, ponder their latest exhibit, the FBI is hot on the trail of the Corpse. As the FBI moves in, Plucky and John Paul escape with the Corpse in Plucky's van. They make their way across country to a

naval air station in Tampa, Florida. Breaking into the facility, John Paul and Christ board an immense solar balloon designed to test the effects of solar radiation on baboon tissue.

Apparently having decided that exposing the fraud of Christ's resurrection would have no real impact on society, because "our society gives its economy priority over health, love, truth, beauty, sex, and salvation; over life itself" (*Attraction*, p. 323), John Paul decides to melt himself and the body of Christ with solar radiation. Plucky is shot to death by security guards, while John Paul realizes his dream to return "—literally—to energy, dissolving in the pure essence that spawned all life" (*Attraction*, p. 326).

Christ's "re-death" may be intended to exorcize him from our culture for good. Like the narrator's "personal" beginning of the tale, John Paul Ziller's death reaffirms the primacy of the individual, personal adventure over the public mission. And, as we shall see, Robbins suggests that the only true source of social or cultural change lies in the liberation of the individual.

This adventure is tied thematically to the more "personal" plot of the novel through a series of didactic arguments, conducted by Marx Marvelous, about politics, economics, religion, and culture. Marx comes to the Roadside Attraction to meet John Paul and Amanda because he has heard enough about them through mutual friends who are new American gypsies to guess that they are pioneering some new lifestyle to replace the outmoded and unfulfilling offerings of mainstream, Judeo-Christian capitalism.

Marx Marvelous, as his name suggests, is by education and upbringing a particularly American male, over-educated and under-sensitized. Although he believes his nom de plume to be a reaction against and a rejection of the mainstream of American culture, it clearly expresses his ambivalence, which consists of his completely materialistic, scientific, purely physical conception of the world

(Marx) and his need for a spiritual and metaphysical vision (the Marvelous).

When Marx first arrives at the Roadside Attraction, he delivers long, cynical outbursts about the inhumanness of our society, which he sees as run by and for a cartel of economic interests revolving around church and big government. Marx has been researching religion in America for a brain trust and has concluded that Christianity is a dead religion, a corpse with no true spirit or spark of life. Judeo-Christian tradition comes under attack for a variety of reasons in Robbins's work, but here his indictment is purely functional: Judeo-Christian philosophy and practice do not serve the needs of the individuals comprising our society.

Marx, like most scientifically oriented Americans, is suspicious of the "marvelous" in life even as he hankers after it. He is constantly trying to rebut his spiritual teacher, Amanda, by quoting statistics and the tired, lop-sided logic of his science. What Marx needs to learn the most is that science can measure the quantity but not the quality of experience, and that this quality of experience is as much a function of the individual perceiver as of the perceived experience itself. When Amanda refuses the wine that he is consuming in quantity, Marx quotes Bertrand Russell, a modern philosopher who reduced philosophy to mathematics, to the effect that "There is no difference between those men who eat too little and see heaven and those who drink too much and see snakes." "The difference," says Amanda, "is that one of them sees heaven and the other sees snakes" (*Attraction*, pp. 177-78).

Amanda's lessons are typically Zen. She knows from their first meeting that Marx must break through his resistance to the world in which he lives, a world to which he can only relate by manipulating its objects. He must become an equal part of things, rather than an obsessive person who sees himself as the center of the universe. Her



first lesson, "You must learn to walk in the rain without flinching," is easily understandable to those familiar with Zen doctrine. The relationships between Amanda and Marx and between Robbins and his reader both have many Zen qualities. Robbins's style reveals his message, because like Zen (Dhyana Buddhism), his philosophy seeks validation not in abstract speculation but in immediate experience.

The German philosopher, Eugen Herrigel, after struggling for years with his study of Zen, could describe its doctrines only by describing their application to Zen archery. In *Zen in the Art of Archery*, Herrigel says that his Zen Master often berated him as a typical Westerner who could not find fulfillment because he did not wait for fulfillment, but braced himself for failure. "What stands in your way is that you have a much too willful will. You think that what you do not do yourself does not happen" (*Zen*, p. 34). In *Another Roadside Attraction*, Amanda plays the equivalent role of Marx's Zen Master. Herrigel notes that "The Japanese pupil brings with him three things: good education, passionate love for his chosen art, and uncritical veneration of his teacher" (*Zen*, p. 45). Only through love, which he grudgingly regards as mystical, can Marx be uncritical. Like Herrigel's Zen teacher, Amanda lets her pupil "voyage onward through himself. But the pupil, with growing receptivity, lets the teacher bring to view something of which he has often heard but whose reality is only now beginning to become tangible on the basis of his own experience" (*Zen*, p. 50).

This emotional and physical awareness of experience can only be achieved when the individual transcends the limitations of awareness placed on him by his ego and sees the world as it really is, rather than as merely a facet of himself. As Robbins puts it at the end of *Another Roadside Attraction*, "It's a cold, clear morning; the sun has come over the canyon wall, but you're still dozing around, when something hits the tent. Open the flap and the sun's in your face; the world is

ready. Let Amanda be your pine cone" (*Attraction*, p. 337).

Ostensibly about the discovery of the physical fraud of Christ's resurrection, the story-line of *Another Roadside Attraction* actually shows the irrelevance of Christ's Second Coming compared to Marx's involvement with Amanda and the white magic of her love.

When Marx Marvelous first comes to the Roadside Attraction, he behaves somewhat like the FBI agents who later invade the place, "knowing" that something subversive is afoot.

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. It's involved somehow in a return to a consanguinity of life and art, life and nature, 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. (*Attraction*, pp. 190-91)

Marx's analysis is basically wrong only in that he assumes that Amanda and her husband are consciously involved in trying to bring this about. *Trying* either to learn or to teach this lifestyle directly amounts to a reassertion of the ego that causes immediate failure. Marx's education throughout the novel follows an unconscious, experiential pattern similar to that followed by Zen pupils on the way of liberation.

In fact, the content of Robbins's philosophy is inextricable from his style and Amanda's, and the same is true of the style and content of Christianity. The problems with Christianity based upon its

egocentricism are numerous. It is didactic, absolute, and hierarchical—all anti-individualistic characteristics. In Christianity, the individual presumably has a mission in life to which he must subordinate all his personal needs and desires. Absolute missions and meanings are completely antithetical to Amanda and company, because (1) they are groundless and gratuitous and (2) they prevent the individual from simply experiencing the joy of his existence. Robbins pairs Tarzan with Eastern philosophers against Christ and our present technocracy because the latter are so afraid of extinction that they lose out on the natural, animal joy of this life, which seems to be the only joy that Robbins believes in. Tarzan, Amanda, and the rest of the good guys, like heroes in typical Western novels, are close to nature and enjoy its sensuality. Christ and the technocrats are only interested in manipulating nature for some higher, abstract goal that somehow never seems to gratify or fulfill basic human needs.

As I have assumed from Marx's choice of an appropriate name for the wrong reasons, his subconscious—long dissatisfied with the limitations of his religious and later his scientific training—is at odds with his conscious mind. However, as in most unliberated minds, Marx's consciousness is largely represented by his ego, which refuses to recognize his subconsciousness in any but the most reductive and repressive fashion. Like all good empiricists, Marx is hunting for quantitative, clearly defined and abstracted "answers" to the problems of modern man's spiritual misery. The lesson he must learn, however, is that there are no "answers" as such. One may not learn an ultimate "meaning," but only the meaning of meaning, that "meaning" is a function of time, place, and perspective—that we invent our meanings from one moment to the next while trying to remain true to a "style."

Therefore, Marx's education assumes an experiential and a religious context, complete with Baptism when he is pulled from the

river by John Paul and with his own literal “second coming” with Amanda, sexually paralleling the Second Coming of Christ. At the end of the novel he abandons his symbolic nom de plume and is ready to return to the identity he had fled earlier. Liberation is not from the world, but of it.

Both *Another Roadside Attraction* and *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* are filled with didactic set-pieces about politics, biology, religion, and art. Taken at face value, some are amusing, some are informative, and some are sophomoric and annoying. The set-pieces are, however, more instructional when not taken at face value. Amanda notes that Marx has come to the roadside attraction because he has “misplaced something and wants to make sure that we have not found it” (*Attraction*, p. 169). This “something,” his faith in both science and religion, is not really important, she says. “Marx Marvelous is in the process of shedding values, . . . and as the old values are discarded his mind moves closer and closer to questions of absolute meaning” (*Attraction*, p. 206).

However, Marx eventually learns that “meaning is of no meaning” (*Attraction*, p. 335), and that only the quality of experience counts. Such a lesson cannot be taught didactically, but must be experienced. In Eastern ways of liberation, the guru accomplishes this instruction by showing the pupil that he is asking the wrong questions of himself. So Marx’s didactic propositions—his arguments with his environment—are continually undercut and transformed by Amanda, until he stops resisting the natural order and learns to accept it—to walk in the rain without flinching.

The “message” of *Another Roadside Attraction* might be summed up in this way. The individual American finds himself in a collapsing culture. America’s enormously powerful, dying institutions and their zombie minions use legal and so-called moral sanctions to prevent the individual from breaking away and experimenting with new

lifestyles. It is more than coincidence that Plucky Purcell deals mind-expanding drugs "to those that can handle them." With "pluck" and "luck" the extraordinary individual may succeed against the traditional powers for a time before being overwhelmed. However, real change and advancement leading to a new social order will not occur simply from the dramatic, violent destruction of the old, but must evolve from a growth in each individual's self-knowledge. As Marx claims, we seem to be in a transitional period between philosophical systems; and new social systems can only evolve from a new, emerging system of values and beliefs.

Robbins suggests that this new philosophy will involve our recognition that man is but one small part of a universe that can never be dominated by his puny efforts. Thus, religions like Judaism and Christianity that place man at the center of creation increasingly are seen to be false and self-destructive, while more ecological, less self-obsessed points of view are gradually becoming popular with the fringe (or advanced guard) of American Society.

By the end of *Another Roadside Attraction*, Marx Marvelous has not, by any means, achieved total liberation from the self-centeredness that binds him to the dying culture he is trying to escape. In his work so far, Robbins's narrators reflect a chronological progress toward this goal. As I shall explain in my discussion of *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, Robbins's second narrator has made important advances beyond Marx Marvelous in his self-knowledge, though he, too, is very much involved in a learning process that is far from finished by the end of the novel.

Like Western fiction in general, *Another Roadside Attraction* takes place on the physical border of America, but the "frontiers" with which it is most concerned are social and psychological. Plucky and John Paul fulfill the traditional roles of rugged, individualistic societal outsiders. John Paul's African birth and his obsession with

native mysticism might even be seen as parallels to the traditional Good Indian figure. John Paul, Plucky, and Amanda function in the novel to bring Marx into contact with nature, or more precisely with the nature of nature, and to teach him how to live with it. Like Western heroes in general, they know the awesome immensity of nature, and so they attempt to live with it harmoniously rather than try to dominate it as modern, technological Americans so often do. Thanks to the intercession of John Paul and Amanda, Marx's westward drive toward a new lifestyle is given clearer direction and form. At the end of the novel, Marx stands poised to assume his role among the first settlers of the new frontier.

#### V—*Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*

As in *Another Roadside Attraction*, Robbins employs several interrelated plots to create the thematic effects of *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*. His concerns in his second novel do not repeat those of the first, but they clearly develop out of them. The central characters in *Cowgirls* are somewhat closer to the mainstream of American culture, though not of it. For the most part, they are survivors cast upon the shores of our time.

The plot in *Cowgirls* that is most obviously applicable to contemporary social change involves a group of women who take over a cosmetic health farm and try to turn it into a working ranch. Although these women come from many walks of life, they share a need to invent or reinvent viable self-images and satisfying roles for themselves. The all-woman ranch provides that opportunity, because it is relatively free from male-oppression, particularly from role-restrictions that are implied by the mere presence of males.

Bonanza Jellybean, the prime mover in the takeover of the Rubber Rose Ranch, comes from a fairly common, middle-class background. As a child she was addicted to westerns and, for a time, was indulged by her parents. However, when she reached puberty, she was denied

her dream of living out the heroic lifestyle of the American West by a society that had carefully circumscribed the legitimate roles of its individual members.

In her early twenties, Bonanza revolts and heads up to South Dakota to work on a health farm sponsored by a feminine hygiene concern. She can see that the women clients of the Rubber Rose essentially are being trained to blindly fulfill the absurdly tailored, often degrading role of American-Woman-as-Decorative-Object, and she is able to identify this brain-and-body-washing with her own predicament. After first conducting minor raids on the ranch's hygiene seminars, encouraging the women to see how the sterility of these feminine hygiene products is depriving them of their natural selves—their smells, looks, and personal styles are being covered over, sterilized, and standardized—Bonanza leads a fullscale, militant takeover. Her cohorts, particularly the man-hating Delores del Ruby, agree to establish the Rubber Rose as the first all-woman ranch, a free-form experiment in self-actualization.

The takeover occasions only minor resistance from the owner of the Rubber Rose, a good-natured male eunuch named the Countess. However, Siwash Lake, located on the ranch, is a major migratory home for rare whooping cranes, wards of the United States Government. When the whoopers fail to take their seasonal leave of the ranch, the FBI (as usual) steps in.

Robbins's use of the FBI in all his fiction is highly figurative, to the point of being unrealistically one-dimensional. The FBI represents not only authoritarian, sadistic, life-denying repressiveness, but its minions are the real enemy in all of Robbins's fiction: dull, closed minds. We are also told that the enemy is every expert who practices technocratic manipulation, every proponent of standardization, and every victim who is dull, lazy, and weak enough to allow himself to be manipulated and standardized (*Cowgirls*, p. 390). In *Cowgirls*, the

FBI manages to bungle the whooper showdown with the ranch women so badly that it ends in a shootout that kills several people, including Bonanza Jellybean. Many of the agents themselves are killed by a jolly fat man named Billy West who sells goats. He is apparently a Dionysian figure who aids the Cowgirls because they, too, are in the business of affirming life. However, in the meantime Delores learns to accept men as an enhancement to her life, and nearly all the surviving Cowgirls seem to have grown psychologically and emotionally from the experience of managing to live so-called "male" lives on their own. Some stay on at the ranch, while others take the lesson in self-fulfillment back to cities and into other walks of life.

A second major plot centers upon the education and maturation of Sissy Hankshaw. Sissy was born beautiful, but with thumbs the size of bolognas. Sissy doesn't mind her thumbs, but everyone else in stifling, repressive South Richmond seems to. Her early life is a battle to retain her healthy self-image in the face of a society, including her own parents, that ridicules any divergence from normal appearance or behavior. Sissy herself understands that individuals are best off when they make the best use of their differences, and she becomes the greatest hitchhiker in the country. Like the women at the Rubber Rose, Sissy is determined to fulfill her own needs and to find joy in her personal abilities by expanding, or ignoring, existing social standards.

Between hitching trips across the country, Sissy, with her thumbs carefully hidden, models for the Countess's hygiene advertisements. She has the same penchant for experimenting and for nature that all Robbins's heroes and heroines have, and eventually the Countess succeeds in tying her down for modeling in New York by introducing her to a Real American Indian. His name is Julian Gitche. Unfortunately, this Indian, like the Countess himself, is fairly sterile, eviscerated, and effete, a big city watercolor artist who suffers from chronic



asthma. Sissy marries him anyway because he is also kind, but she soon tires of being caged in his New York apartment and takes up the Countess's offer to do an advertising layout with the cranes at Siwash Lake.

While Sissy is at the Rubber Rose, she has a brief love affair with Bonanza Jellybean—another one of those role options Society deems perverse—and she meets a Japanese hermit named the Chink. The Chink provides much of the guidance in *Cowgirls*, and like Amanda in *Another Roadside Attraction*, he functions as lover and friend as well as teacher.

The Chink's adventures, particularly his time among the Clock-people, are actually a third plot strand. Basically, he has learned kindness and humility and how to take joy in living. His time with the Clockpeople illustrates that nothing man-made, such as clock or calendar time, has any absolute value, but that some of these things can make life more pleasant. On the one hand, the Clockpeople's time is a measurement of the apparently unpredictable tremors along the San Andreas fault. Their time measures significant action, but cannot be related to our "normal," artificial clocktime. The Chink notes that all values are basically artificial, yet he concludes that some values are worth fighting for, a few are worth dying for, but none is worth killing for. On the other hand, as he dances to the polkas coming over his transistor radio, he castigates the "organic fascists" who refuse to accept the products of their own technology.

Much of *Cowgirls* might be misconstrued as calling for some kind of pastoral regression—the Chink lives in a cave, cities don't seem to have much to offer, and the book is peppered with dialogues between the thumb and the brain accusing each other of removing man from nature and turning him into a neurotic. However, the Chink despises this simple-minded longing for a vanished past.

The Chink has a great deal to teach Sissy and Dr. Robbins, her

self-appointed analyst. When Sissy returns from her first visit to the Rubber Rose, she is despondent about living in the asphalt lock-up of New York City and longs to hit the hitching trail. Julian, the perfectly brainwashed middle-American, declares that her revelling in her affliction, instead of accepting it as a disgraceful deviation from normal thumb-size, is a sign of severe neurosis, and so he sends her to a psychiatrist, Dr. Goldman, who shares his views. Goldman thinks that people who are not normal are crazy either by circumstance or by choice, and he finds Sissy to be crazy by both. He is confronted, however, by young Dr. Robbins, who believes that the compulsion toward "normalcy" is the source of most of the neuroses in our civilization.

When Robbins first asks Sissy why she turned Julian's pet birds loose in New York, where they were not adapted to live, she replies that freedom is the only thing more important than happiness. This point hits home with Dr. Robbins, who, like Tom Robbins and Western pioneers before him, has always placed freedom above every other facet of self-fulfillment. Tom Robbins, in fact, features the whooping cranes in *Cowgirls* as a major symbol of freedom because they seem to have chosen fidelity to their true natures over survival. This suicidal integrity is like that of the Western heroes who became extinct because they couldn't or wouldn't give up their wild individualism, and it is unlike the egotism of most Americans, worshippers of material success.

Paradoxically, Robbins sees material success as self-destructive: "Success must not be considered absolute. It is questionable, for that matter, whether success is an adequate response to life. Success can eliminate as many options as failure" (*Cowgirls*, p. 12). The cranes remind the narrator that "to live fully, one must be free, but to be free one must give up security. Therefore, to live one must be ready to die" (*Cowgirls*, p. 236). Such sentiments are also part of the code of

the Western hero.

Dr. Robbins is so impressed by the Chink's teachings that he takes off the rest of the day, and then quits his job entirely, calling in "well." Dr. Robbins is opinionated and intellectually aggressive, but most of all he is desperately interested in finding out the truth about human life. It comes as no surprise when, at the end of the novel, we learn that the young doctor has been our narrator all along. He seems to be an extension of Marx Marvelous, several leagues further along the way to liberation. However, unlike the truly liberated individual, the Chink, Robbins has severe anxiety attacks about the future of the human race:

It was entirely possible that everything in the universe was perfect; that all that happened, from global warfare to a single case of athlete's foot, happened because it ought to happen; and while from our perspective it would seem that something horrendous had gone wrong in the development of the human species, vis-a-vis its happy potentialities on the blue green sphere, that that was an illusion attributable to myopia, and that, in fact, development was proceeding beautifully, running right as a Tokyo train, and needing only a more cosmic overview in order for its grand perfection to obscure its momentary fits and faults.

. . . On the other hand, if such an approach was, like religion, merely a camouflage system created to modify experience in order to make life more tolerable — another exercise in escapism festooned with mystic crepe — then one had no choice but to conclude that mankind was a royal fuck-up. Despite our awesome potential; despite the presence among us of the most extraordinarily enlightened individuals operating with intelligence, gentleness and style; despite a plethora of achievements that no other living

creatures have come within a billion light-years of equaling, we were on the verge of destroying ourselves, internally and externally, and of taking the entire planet with us, crumpled in our tight little fists, as we shoot down the shit-chute to oblivion. (*Cowgirls*, p. 232)

So Dr. Robbins's concerns as well as his function in *Cowgirls* parallel those of Marx in *Another Roadside Attraction*. What he longs to learn through Sissy and eventually through the Chink is an ultimate form of self-therapy, and this search for self-healing leads us back, through Zen liberation, to religion. The Chink's message is that neither Eastern nor Western religion is natural to Americans, neither Oriental mysticism nor Judeo-Christian theology—which, he points out, is also of Eastern origin, due to the hegemony of Greek thought in classical culture and its own origins in Asia Minor. Western man must return to his natural, Pantheistic roots, long persecuted by invading doctrines. Westerners are “spiritually impoverished” because they have denied the “bawdy goat-man who proved rich harvests and bouncy babies,” who really would best serve our natures.

Pantheism, the Chink points out, is also a religion that would return women to their rightful role in spirituality. “If you scratch back past the Christian conquest into your true heritage, you will find women doing wondrous things. Women were not only the principal servants of the Old God, women were his mistresses, the power behind his pumpkin throne. Women controlled the Old Religion. It had 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” (*Cowgirls*, p. 267). Robbins has probably drawn these theses at least in part from Robert Graves' *The White*

*Goddess*, a lengthy study of Western Pantheism. Other anthropological sources dispute the matriarchal theory, as Robbins himself points out.

This emphasis on restoring women to their rightful place in the spiritual community is, of course, another tie-in with the Rubber Rose plot.

Dr. Robbins is hooked and wants to rush off to the Chink's cave as soon as possible. Unfortunately, while he is scheming to run off with her, Sissy's melancholy and her anxiety about the safety of Bonanza Jellybean are growing. When the Countess attempts to cow her into betraying the cowgirls, Sissy beats him severely with her thumbs and runs away. She is nearly raped while trying to hitchhike to freedom, again responding with her thumping thumbs, but she eventually cracks. Condemning herself to normalcy in order to escape her violence and horror, she flees back to Richmond to a recently de-smocked plastic surgeon, Dr. Dreyfus.

Robbins has apparently chosen this name for his doctor because the surgeon knows that Sissy's thumbs are a wonder and not a crime, but the doctor is willing to betray this knowledge for the sake of his art. Dreyfus has had his license suspended for turning poor Bernie Schwartz's nosejob into an experiment in cubism, "a nose in *totality*" that "manages to suggest motion even when it is static" (*Cowgirls*, p. 322). Like many Westerners confused by Judeo-Christianity, Dreyfus fails to make the distinction between the artificial illusion of motion—as in our clock time—and the actual process and flux of life.

Dreyfus completes the "normalization" of one of Sissy's thumbs, but before he has time to finish the massacre, Bonanza calls Sissy back to the Rubber Rose to take part in the showdown with the FBI. Confused by her affections for the Chink and for Bonanza and by her own position vis-a-vis mainstream society, Sissy gets her first clue about her new situation from the Chink, who claims he likes the

"balance" of her large and small thumbs. "Don't confuse symmetry and balance," he says (*Cowgirls*, p. 375). As in the Oriental art of flower arranging (the Chink was once a gardener), balance or harmony with nature has little to do with the artificial symmetries of contemporary society, which are often merely uniform, "normative," and restrictive.

The different-sized thumbs may also signify that Sissy will find the "balanced" road for which she's searching somewhere between contemporary American civilization and the complete withdrawal from society that Dr. Robbins envisions for her. For, as the novel ends and the characters disperse, we find the good doctor contemplating his procreative future with Sissy, raising a tribe of big-thumbed babies in a rustic pantheistic environment.

Robbins hypothesizes, or at least Dr. Robbins does, that big-thumbed people would not be able to manipulate tools the way that normal humans do, and so would be forced into a less domineering, more communal and participatory relationship with nature. *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* is spotted with a running debate between the brain and the thumb, each blaming the other for the distortions and dislocations of human beings from the natural universe. Basically, however, the situation is familiar, as is Robbins's advice: humans must gain a new, healthier perspective on their limited role in the cosmos and must learn to live with, rather than against nature.

To summarize, *Cowgirls* posits the abandonment of outworn mainstream social roles that are destructive in their rigidity. American men and women must seek new roles based more clearly on the true Western spiritual tradition, Pantheism, which embraces a feminine receptivity rather than the more masculine will to dominate.

To the extent that it resembles a mere pastoral regression, Dr. Robbins's dream of living in a cave is probably just mental foreplay

for Tom Robbins's other ideas, but not just because it doesn't seem sensible or probable. Man is differentiated from the rest of nature by his brain and by his opposable thumbs, and he owes much of his success as a species to them. While success isn't everything to Robbins, he chooses the amoeba, rather than the whooping crane, as the official mascot of *Cowgirls* (p. 2) because the amoeba is a survivor par excellence. For Robbins, revolutionary or pastoral romanticism is just partial vision; at the same time, he rejects the conventional notion of technological progress.

The Chink's rebuttal of "Organic Fascism" (*Cowgirls*, p. 257) embraces the products of technology and suggests that Robbins is essentially trying to fertilize a marriage of compromise. Death, too, eliminates options, and Robbins seems to overstate his case on purpose. The cranes do leave the ranch in order to survive; Sissy's amputated thumb, like her forshortened "normal" life with her husband, Julian, does give her a kind of balance, as the Chink points out. Extremes may be beautiful, they may be art, and, while they may also prevent the individual from achieving harmony, extremes may yet become each other. As Robbins's epigraph from Blake says, "Excess of sorrow laughs. Excess of joy weeps." Delores del Ruby's Third Vision, brought on by a peyote overdose and an epileptic hatred of men, returns her to heterosexuality, or bi-sexuality.

Robbins has in fact *chosen to accept* a good many goals in his game of life, and survival, freedom, and fulfillment seem to be among them. What you choose to value may still be of great significance. Dr. Dreyfus, the brilliant plastic surgeon who is willing to amputate Sissy's thumbs despite his awareness of their significance, is a fairly kind man who has isolated himself morally from the world. He tries to make art from life, but the result is a horrible parody of the real life-in-motion of Sissy's hitching. His willingness to destroy her "real" art and replace it with his "plastic" is the

mark of a man who has lost the ability to differentiate between life and art, or perhaps of one who has chosen to “conquer” the brief chaos of life with the permanence of a life-denying art.

Survival, or rather fear of *not* surviving, is the onus of the human species; it produces the insecurities that produce the fear that causes the greed that forecloses on the house that Jack built—or blows it to smithereens. The fear of not surviving paradoxically reduces our chances for survival. Robbins is, at the same time, concerned about the extinction of various endangered species, because he believes that the world is enriched by its diversity. When polymorphous perversity rears its horny heads in these novels, it usually relates back to the demand for an ever-greater range of perspectives and possibilities. The paradox of the fear of not surviving parallels the paradox of the meaning of meaning; by concentrating our narrow, ego-blinded attention on survival, we may eventually make survival impossible.

Robbins's novels teach that man must step out of ego-bound time to gain a broader perspective on his relatedness to the universe—and then he must take what he learns about the universe and make it personal. By recognizing the demands of the ego as arbitrary and by recognizing life as play, man may be able to rediscover some sense of his oneness with the universe—to learn that, in fact, there can be little difference between the universal and the personal in a liberated consciousness.

The settings and themes of *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* are more obviously Western than those of *Another Roadside Attraction*. Robbins's narrative consciousness has moved even further down the road to liberation, and it would seem that the spiritual frontier is nearly in sight.

VI—Theme and Style: “Feminismo” and “The Purpose of the Moon”

The true value of a human being is determined primarily



by the measure and the sense in which he has attained to liberation from the self.

—Albert Einstein,  
*The World As I See It*

Playfulness . . . is essential to the evolution of that most precious of all things, the individual soul.

—Tom Robbins,  
Letter, Aug. 28, 1979

Two major paradoxes in Robbins's ideas ought to be apparent. One is the emphasis he places on individual fulfillment while he simultaneously castigates egotism. The second is his apparent devotion to Eastern philosophies in *Another Roadside Attraction*, although he warns against adopting Eastern religions in *Cowgirls*. Actually, the two issues are closely related, both stemming from Robbins's notion that any truly fulfilling way of life must evolve from the individual's recognition of his true, personal relationship to the world. Thus, although Americans can learn from Oriental philosophies much about liberation from the ego, Western man must nevertheless find a way of liberation that is natural to him in his own world. As the Chink screams, "No more Oriental therapists!" (*Cowgirls*, p. 258). Furthermore, that "way" must be a total style of existence. Man must live for living, not for some abstract political goal that uses unhealthy means for a presumably Utopian end.

The Chink is just one of Robbins's spokesmen against political movements in general. "Politics is for people who have a passion for changing life but lack a passion for living it" (*Cowgirls*, p. 152). He also states, "I believe in political solutions to political problems. But man's primary problems aren't political; they're philosophical" (*Cowgirls*, p. 378).

In a widely syndicated essay called "Feminismo," Robbins stated: "There are no group solutions. There are only individual solutions,

individual liberations." When criticized for his failure to adopt appropriately pious attitudes towards issues that, as a liberal-romantic, he is supposed to favor, Robbins called his critics "confused . . . confused about what is the sweet heat of existence and what is dull and rigid dogma" ("Feminismo"). All the solutions he offers are "individual liberations" not group or institutional reorganizations. "Movements are for Beethoven and the bowels . . . . The stuff of higher consciousness is pretty much confined to the individual spirit, and . . . the individual spirit is murdered by organization" ("Feminismo").

The American novel has taken a long time to adjust itself to the concepts of relativity in both physics and metaphysics, essentially stumbling against the idea that if nothing is absolute, nothing is sacred or even valuable. Nihilism and existentialism are the two best known responses to this situation. The 1970s saw the rise of a new wave of novelists who decree with Tom Robbins: "I believe in everything; nothing is sacred/I believe in nothing; everything is sacred" (*Cowgirls*, p. 415). Here the "problem" of the relativity of values is circumvented by the adoption of a multiplicity of successive perspectives, some of which may be contradictory. Robbins seems to say that to believe in something is not to canonize it and remove it from the relative, changeable human realm. To "believe" in the value of something is to make it part of oneself, to embrace its contradictions, and thereby to know the value of the thing on a personal, relative level. The Chink remarks about the Oriental philosophers with whom he is often confused, "they take the personal and try to make it universal. I hate that. I'm the opposite. I take the universal and make it personal. The only truly magical and poetic exchanges that occur in this life occur between two people" (*Cowgirls*, p. 407).

Everything is both sacred and important, representing man's connectedness to the center of the Universe, to God, or to Ultimate

Meaning—and, at the same time, everything is merely individual, petty, and expendable. The value of a thing depends upon the way the individual envisions it. Robbins observes the universal from a variety of perspectives and self-consciously alerts the reader to the game-playing in his fiction and in life. But, like Einstein, he is often completely unequivocal and quite vociferous on certain moral platforms because of the individual perspective he has adopted.

All things have value, but only because we invest them with sacredness in our otherwise profane world. The goal of Robbins's art is to alert us to the sacred, to get us to see things in a new, intense way—to get us to let go of our own limited perspectives by exciting us into a new awareness of the world.

The mysterious, hip, comic, and apparently discontinuous narrative voice that Robbins employs seems to mislead many readers who don't perceive the ultimate seriousness of his playfulness or the sense in magic. Robbins repeatedly insists on the urgency of restoring magic and poetry to our lives. Magic, he says, is "the seemingly unrealistic or supernatural" that "occurs through the *acting of one thing upon another through a secret link*" (*Cowgirls*, p. 345). A causal explanation exists, but once it is explained the relationship is no longer "magical," no longer "marvelous" and capable of exciting us to a new awareness. The link of magic to poetry here becomes clear: "Poetry is nothing more than an intensification or illumination of common objects and everyday events until they shine with their singular nature, until we can experience their power, until we can follow their steps in the dance, until we can discern what parts they play in the Great Order of Love. How is this done? By fucking around with syntax" (*Cowgirls*, p. 379).

Style is more important than content to Robbins, since the "contents" or events of our lives are most easily improved through alterations in our styles of life, which in turn are basically functions of our

perspectives toward emotional or physical events. The “best” perspectives are those that allow us to enjoy our lives the most while allowing others to enjoy theirs. The generally accepted, sophisticated perspective that everything of value must be fully understood and categorized can cause a good deal of damage in certain areas: “When sophistication is allowed to overpower innocence, the list of losses grows long. Vulnerability is lost, imagination, spontaneity, and naturalness are lost; lost, too, is the sense of wonder” (“Feminismo”).

Robbins is not abdicating responsibility for struggling to alter the facts of our existence—he is merely alert to the possibility that we are often decreasing the quality of our lives by demanding unnatural things of nature. As quantum physics has shown us, nature promises only the probability of certain outcomes, never the predictability of the course of specific events. Contemporary science implies a universe that is not solvable by any single equation, but that reveals itself in onion-skin layers of pattern, applicable in a variety of ways to a variety of situations and perspectives. We waste our time and limit our potentials by refusing to admit the existence of anything over which we do not have logical dominion.

The first step toward improving your life, according to Robbins, is to “loosen up,” to live for the enjoyment of living. As Amanda in *Another Roadside Attraction* remarks, life has no meaning but may yet have value: “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 ever knowing that meaning. Mystery is part of nature’s style, that’s all. It’s the Infinite Goof. It’s 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” (*Attraction*, p. 335).

Robert Nadeau has shown that Robbins's fiction is in part an evaluation of the impact of contemporary physics upon "the moral and intellectual foundations of western values." In his article, "Physics and Cosmology in the Fiction of Tom Robbins," Nadeau points out that "the Western belief in the real existence of a transcendent realm of being in which immutable truths reside provides the rationale for the view of authority (or all social organization) as hierarchical" (p. 64). In other words, we used to believe that the universe was governed by a set of absolute, never-changing laws, and that, if we discovered those laws that governed the universe, we would know how to govern ourselves. However, contemporary physics shows us that the laws of physics are not simply mechanical and rigidly fixed, but given to sudden change ("quantum jumps") and constant uncertainty.

Robbins says that "civilized man doesn't understand stability. He's confused it with rigidity" (*Cowgirls*, p. 238). What the Clockpeople illustrate about the shortcoming of our out-dated approach to life in general and time in particular is that "Life is both cyclic and arbitrary, but pendulum time relates only to the part that's cyclic" (*Cowgirls*, p. 240). Therefore, our "bias for order leads to instability" and misunderstanding about our relationship to the universe (*Cowgirls*, p. 237).

Robbins shows that the outdated vision of such mechanistic physics is responsible for our dysfunctional, reactionary metaphysics. Our new morality ought to be based on the realization that individual behavior cannot be absolutely defined and contained by rigid social rules. What is "right" for human beings is polymorphous and changes from one situation to the next. Morality, then, is a matter of style, not merely events. That a rigid logic often lies about experience can be seen from many of Marx's exchanges with Amanda.

Abstracted from the concrete examples provided by the novels

themselves, the advice may sound inscrutably Oriental, and to an extent it is. However, the extent is important, for in Robbins's novels, as in the work of Alan Watts, "East meets West," and the perspective gained from this meeting is a catalyst for broadening the reader's consciousness. Robbins does not recommend that we actually adopt an oriental world view, but he does suggest that we look to this alien philosophy to gain a better perspective on our own.

In *Psychotherapy East and West*, Watts shows that both Western psychotherapy and Eastern ways of life such as Taoism, Buddhism, Vedanta, and Yoga are concerned with altering consciousness, with changing "our ways of feeling our own existence and our relation to human society and the natural world" (p. 16). Watts says that Eastern "ways of liberation" involve a massive growth in the individual's perspective through a refutation of the integrity of the ego and the problems the ego creates for itself because it is so "egocentric" and sees everything in terms of its own needs. The world simply is as it is, and while human beings may find it desirable to create structures such as clock-time and values such as comfort or racial survival, we must recognize that we have created these concepts arbitrarily. Robbins provides an example of such recognition. Amanda is at first distressed by the relatively short life-span of the moth; however, after a meditative trance she declares the life-span "just right," apparently because of her faith in even the unexplainable aspects of nature's functioning.

Like these Eastern ways of liberation, Robbins's novels do not deny the physical world nor suggest that we live outside of it. Rather they remind us of both the urgency with which we sometimes live life and the truth that art and life are both games to which we make up many of the rules. He does this by undercutting the traditional narrative "ego" of the novel with its own self-consciousness, by mixing and overlapping his metaphors to suggest their interchangeability, by

personifying the earth, organic and inorganic objects, the novel itself, and the sentences within the novel. "This sentence is made of ice. This sentence is made from the blood of the poet. This sentence was made in Japan. This sentence glows in the dark. This sentence was born with a caul" (*Cowgirls*, p. 124). In other words, the writer implies that each of these sentences could have been anything, but for his own personal reasons he decided to make each one the way you see it now. Each sentence is both real and completely, arbitrarily "made-up." His narrators frequently talk about the shortcomings of various narrative forms, but Robbins himself employs narrative formats that are standard except for his expressed self-consciousness of them.

In *Another Roadside Attraction*, Marx Marvelous starts a chapter with one particular image that he thinks may be the best possible beginning for the chapter. Proud of his work, he boyishly tries to solicit Amanda's praise, when she deflates him by suggesting, off the top of her head, numerous other images which he could have used instead. Marx is wrong in assuming that ultimately there must be one approach to a situation.

A good demonstration of Robbins's belief that many different approaches can be equally valid is "The Purpose of the Moon." His only published short story to date, it is an exercise in stylistic liberation that indicates how his form and thematic content are inextricably linked. "The Purpose of the Moon" is constructed from multiple considerations of the same imaginary situation: "Vincent Van Gogh cut off his ear and sent it to Marilyn Monroe." While this conjunction of essentially symbolic personalities initially may have occurred to Robbins simply because of the sounds of their names, the story is an examination of a basic human situation, indicated in the story's subtitle, "if love is a matter of giving, momma, why is it so hard?" Each of the nine permutations of this situation examines a possible reaction

of Marilyn Monroe's to receiving Van Gogh's ear, each suggesting a different perspective on romantic action.

While each episode is very funny, the sublime emotional quality of Van Gogh's sacrifice somehow permeates all of them. Just as in Wallace Stevens's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird," no way is better than another, so no one vision of Van Gogh-Monroe is more "correct" or "real" than another. Each vision is an enrichment of our appreciation of the situation. Some of the situations are highly improbable; in one of the episodes, after sharing a package of Twinkies, Monroe sews the ear back on her "silly boy." These anomalies clearly indicate Robbins's addiction to diversity and his taste for flaunting unusual possibilities in our often close-minded society.

Robbins's novels suggest several Zen lessons: that objectivity is impossible, that we are all connected to all events; but that self-conscious perspective is the key to improving the depth of our perceptions. Far from eschewing the personal, egocentric narrator for a sham objectivity, Robbins insists on the subjectivity of every narrator, since every narrator takes part in the history he is recreating. In *Another Roadside Attraction*, the narrator declaims at great length about the impurity of history (p. 114) and insists on telling his historically important tale as a fragment in the life of Amanda, not because she is central to the history, but because he is in love with her. The narrator of *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, who calls himself Dr. Robbins, also falls in love with one of his heroines and builds his tale around her. However, Robbins has not cut himself loose from narrative form, but is telling stories of personal growth and enlightenment under the guise of symbolically related adventure stories. These narrators discover the meaning of meaning—that is, in the end, that they must create their own values based on personal fulfillment.



While it is commonly assumed “that content places limitations on style, in fact *determines* style” (*Attraction*, p. 207), the narrator of *Another Roadside Attraction* eventually learns that style may be used to alter content, and that through style we may recreate ourselves (*Attraction*, p. 208). Marx in *Another Roadside Attraction* and Sissy in *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* are deeply involved with questions of personal style—that is, with the way they do the things they do. The questions of style eventually confront them with questions of value, of *why* they do what they do, and of their relations with human society and the natural world. A happy, healthy life (or content) is the result of a happy, healthy perspective: “it all depends on how you look at it . . . *everything, always* depends on how it is perceived, and . . . the perceiver has the ability to adjust his perceptions” (*Cowgirls*, p. 303).

Probably the most noticeable aspects of Robbins’s writing style are his play with language (his abundant, often comic figures of speech, for instance) and the comic, self-conscious tone that pervades even the most dramatically serious moments of his work. For instance, the amputation of Sissy’s thumb in *Cowgirls* is essentially ironic in tone. Robbins concentrates on conveying the symbolic importance of the scene rather than on manipulating the reader’s emotion. By contrast, Thomas Pynchon’s description of Esther’s nose-job in *V.* is grotesque and frightening, as well as comic.

The difference between Robbins’s brand of comedy and the styles of apparently similar contemporary novelists such as Pynchon and Joseph Heller is that the latter are writers of “black comedy.” That is, their comedy tends to emphasize rather than alleviate the reader’s horror at the terrible things that they describe. Robbins’s vision is not “black.” Unlike Pynchon and Heller, he is not concerned so much with making us re-experience the terrible condition of humanity and man’s ultimate inability to do much about it. Rather, he is concerned with what we can do to make things better.

Robbins's style of comedy, although uncommon for a serious contemporary novelist, harkens back to the mainstream of comic tradition. Mainstream comedies, such as many of the great plays of Aristophanes and Shakespeare, most often begin with situations in which society is in chaos and the characters are in trouble. In the end, these comedies redress all wrongs, reintegrate any misfits into society, and suggest solutions to social problems.

Northrop Frye has suggested that black comedy is essentially one phase in a comic cycle which reflects a time when a culture's vision of itself is so bleak that no solutions seem probable. If this is true, Robbins may be signalling the upswing in the comic cycle to a more positive vision in which social changes must be fought for, but in which success is possible. While *Another Roadside Attraction* ends in tragedy and the dissolution of the bonds between the characters (some are dead, some go their separate ways), its final note is one of limited optimism; the narrator says that your reading this manuscript is a sign of hope and possibility. While the end of *Cowgirls* also sees the death of two characters and the dissolving of a number of other relationships created during the course of the novel, these relationships were described all along as being transitional steps toward fulfillment. Furthermore, the main character and the narrator are apparently joined in marriage, the classic comic affirmation that promises the unification and survival of society.

Robbins deals straightforwardly with the deaths in his novels because he believes that "the fear of death is the beginning of slavery." Black comedy often titillates us with the fear of death, often increasing our horror even as we laugh. Robbins wants to eliminate some of that fear at the same time that he wishes the reader to be conscious of his own mortality.

Robbins's basic themes might be summarized in this way: Our current society does not seem to be fulfilling many of our emotional and

psychological needs. Part of this problem arises from the fact that our culture and our social institutions in particular were developed to meet needs occasioned by conditions that have changed radically over the last thousand years. Christianity compounded our problems, because (1) it was a subversion of the Pantheism that is more natural to Western man and induced Western man to cut himself off from nature, and (2) it made the personal joy and mystery of existence subservient to rules and institutions. Because our social structures are no longer responsive to our environment, those structure ought to be changed.

On the individual, psychological level, our egos are also structures which do not always correspond to our entire selves as we really exist in relationship to the universe as a whole. If we are more self-conscious but less self-centered, we may find more fulfilling lifestyles by being better aware of why we really value what we value.

In short, we must break out of our old patterns and learn from experience what we really want. We must blaze new trails of experience fighting off the Indians of chaos and defying the over-rigid schoolmarms of traditional society, until we have cleared ourselves a new territory in the realm of human experience. Most of all, we must remember that attaining fulfillment is the work of life that is continuous and always, at some level, play.

In his third novel, *Still Life with Woodpecker*, Robbins departs from analyzing our particular American situation to emphasize that "civilization is not an end in itself but a theater or gymnasium in which the evolving individual finds facilities for practice" (p. 271).

#### VII—*Still Life with Woodpecker*

*Still Life with Woodpecker: A Sort of a Love Story* is Robbins's shortest, most polemical, and most urgent novel to date. In it, the social and personal themes of his earlier novels confront each other, and the "resolution," as far as it occurs, suggests that social goals

must be subservient to individual fulfillment. Romantic love becomes an all-encompassing preoccupation because it illuminates every other aspect of the self, and personal happiness becomes the primary duty of the individual.

This story of love between an outlaw and a princess during “the last quarter of the twentieth century”—“a severe period for lovers” when “Western civilization was declining too rapidly for comfort and too slowly to be very exciting”— suggests the major social themes of Robbins’s earlier works. However, as in those works, the real magic and power for change operate primarily on the personal, individual levels of the two main characters. In fact, much of *Still Life with Woodpecker* is clearly an outgrowth of factors that led Robbins to write “Feminismo” and “The Purpose of the Moon,” and the main themes of the novel are primarily anarchy and love.

The daughter of deposed nobility living in Seattle, Princess Leigh-Cheri Furstenberg-Barcelona initially appears to desire a normal, middle-class American lifestyle, and that desire is thwarted less by the impending revolution in her ancestral land than by an untimely miscarriage while cheerleading for the University of Washington football team. Jilted by her lover and spurned by the cheerleading squad, she withdraws from both love and school. Only her interest in the hip cause of environmentalism gives her any direction, and that direction is west, to Hawaii to attend a Care-Fest. There she encounters Bernard Mickey Wrangle, alias the Woodpecker, an anarchical bomber and self-styled metaphysical outlaw who has come to demolish the Care-Fest. His reasons—to shake things up, to prevent the various movements represented there from stagnation due to the increasing rigidity of their self-righteous dogmas—parallel many of Robbins’s concerns in “Feminismo.” Robbins’s description of the Care-Fest is remarkably similar to his description in “Feminismo” of the Crabshell Alliance rally. While the novel is ostensibly an ex-

amination of the conflict between social activism and romantic individualism, Robbins's sympathies are clearly on the side of the latter, and Wrangle proceeds to educate Leigh-Cheri much in the manner of the Chink educating Sissy. While Wrangle presumably learns something from his love relationships, his philosophy of life does not change much during the novel, nor does he seem to experience much personal growth. His relationship with Leigh-Cheri seems more of a confirmation of his having been right all along, although it marks his movement from a life which has had at least occasional social impact to one which is completely private.

The inevitable love affair between the princess and the outlaw overcomes Bernard's imprisonment and Leigh-Cheri's betrothal and near-marriage to a wealthy Arab suitor, A'ben Fazel. In the end, the lovers apparently withdraw from public life to pursue their more important private one in the Seattle house that serves as a bramble-encrusted castle. All that's missing are the signs "Princes Keep Out" and "Beware of the Dragon."

The differences between this and earlier Robbins plots are obvious and suggestive. Unlike the complicated and somewhat unusual plot structures of *Another Roadside Attraction* and *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, the fable-parody of *Still Life with Woodpecker* is a rather transparent metaphor, rescued from didacticism largely by the ambiguity of its frosty edges. Both the writer-narrator and his reader are more distanced from this novel and learn not so much by the "Eastern" method of experiencing the truth of the fiction as by an action-illustrated logical disputation. In his fairy-tale-for-our-time, Robbins suggests that the princess, defined as a lightning rod for the romantic impulse (or "dragon bait," as fire-breathing Bernard says), can best be appreciated in mysterious privacy, rather than in fulfillment of some appointed public or social function; that the prince, whatever his charms, is to be avoided because of his position in socie-

ty; and that the dragon-outlaw who stands for “uncertainty, insecurity, surprise, disorder, unlawfulness, bad taste, fun, and things that go boom in the night” (*Still Life*, p. 98) is likely to need rescue by the princess from the dull minds of our time who would isolate him entirely from other human beings.

Robbins’s carefully defined “outlaw” is characterized by the spirit of the old West, neither simply a criminal nor a member of society. However, despite the references to Pioneer Inn and Pioneer Square in this story, the outlaw does not mediate between nature and society, unless perhaps society is seen simply as people. The role of the outlaw here is to restore balance, but he is fighting on the side of nature, both human and cosmic, that is taking a beating from a dull, short-sighted, and dogmatic society. This is a complete reversal of the role of the outlaw in the formula Western, but a logical development of that role. “We can never alter the ratio of good to evil,” claims the Woodpecker. “All we can do is keep things stirred up so neither good or evil ever solidifies. That’s when things get scary. Life is like a stew, you have to stir it frequently, or all the scum rises to the top” (*Still Life*, p. 98). His values, which might at first glance seem ambiguous to anyone who doesn’t recognize them as Robbins’s own, have made him one of many metaphysical outlaws native to America. His basic enemy is the banality rife in all movements and dogmas. Robbins’s ideas seem in danger of being dogmatized by his own writing (not to mention the commentary of critics), but he indicates that he’s aware of the danger, as when Woodpecker notes that “People who sacrifice beauty for efficiency get what they deserve. . . . We’re our own dragons as well as our own heroes, and we have to rescue ourselves from ourselves” (*Still Life*, p. 99).

Wrangle is Robbins’s spokesman for the primacy of style over doctrine. Environmentalists, feminists, and socialists, while perhaps representing admirable causes, all pervert human life whenever they

act in the belief that the ends (their causes) justify the means. Wrangle knows that love of life is the only justification for any action. Yet his phallic energy and destructiveness—"the most famous redhead of them all"—Robbins suggests, must be joined in personal communion with the receptive creativity of Leigh-Cheri's femininity. Robbins has always championed the personal over the social, but *Still Life* goes a step further in that the Woodpecker's marriage to the princess seems to involve an almost total withdrawal from society. The novel's conclusion underscores the assertion in "Feminismo" that "there are no group solutions. There are only individual solutions, individual liberations."

In Robbins's view, the individual human spirit has become the most important arena of human activity. In fact, he contends that the importance of all physical objects to the individual depends upon their ability to sustain the emotional values one attributes to them. Objects make our illusions—including our values—real to us. The Camel cigarette package and the Moon are thereby monumental objects of man's meditation in this novel, and thus are keys to his understanding of himself, his world, and their relatedness.

Several things prevent *Still Life* from losing itself in romantic solipsism, not the least of which are the author's great wit and his sense of irony. Robbins recognizes that there are political as well as spiritual forces relevant to man's condition, though he feels the former get too much press at the expense of the latter. Furthermore, Robbins connects his romantic discussions with more general human concerns. The novel echoes throughout with a repeated question—"How can you make love stay?"—which Robbins answers in his conclusion:

When the mystery of the connection goes, love goes. . . . It isn't love that is so important to us but the mystery itself. The love connection may be merely a device to put us in

contact with the mystery, and we long for love to last so that the ecstasy of being near the mystery will last. It is contrary to the nature of mystery to stand still. Yet it's always there, somewhere, a world on the other side of the mirror (or the Camel pack), a promise in the next pair of eyes that smile at us. We glimpse it when *we* stand still.

The romance of new love, the romance of solitude, the romance of objecthood, the romance of ancient pyramids and distant stars are means of making contact with the mystery. When it comes to perpetuating it, however, I got no advice. But I can and will remind you of two of the most important facts I know:

- (1) *Everything* is part of it.
- (2) It's never too late to have a happy childhood. (*Still Life*, pp. 274-77).

For the first time, Robbins clearly dissociates himself as narrator from the narrative action, and the result is more of a fable-with-commentary than a novel of ideas, as he himself seems aware. At one point he chides himself for the lack of plot-movement in his story about the princess who's rescued by the dragon, noting the way "intelligent people ought to glare when what they need is a smoke, a bite, a cup of coffee, a piece of ass, or a good fast-paced story, and all they're getting is philosophy" (p. 167). Ironically, this dissociation suggests that Robbins's personal involvement in his work is actually greater than it was in the past. Sometimes he seems to be explaining himself rather than the plot developments. He is clearly a writer banging out "the novel of my dreams" on his Remington SL3, struggling with a machine—with a technology, or perhaps a cultural vocabulary—that shapes his ideas in ways he doesn't always like. He is able to finish the novel only in longhand. As usual, he wants some



answers and expects that his story will reveal them. When it doesn't, he is reduced to philosophy-cum-fable.

This more personal novel is probably only a stop-over for Robbins. On the one hand, he says "Don't let yourself be victimized by the age you live in. It's not the times that will bring us down, any more than it's society. . . . There's a tendency today to absolve individuals of moral responsibility and treat them as victims of social circumstance. You buy that, you pay with your soul. . . . What limits people is lack of character," of nerve and imagination (*Still Life*, pp. 116-17). On the other hand, his very commitment to people is likely to lead him back again and again to exploring a society that he sees as being in the throes of death, but that he also thinks could perhaps be resurrected.

#### VIII—Tom Robbins as a Western Writer

In his famous essay, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," Frederick Jackson Turner noted that "The wilderness masters the colonist" and forces him to be reborn continually. To Tom Robbins, the wilderness seems to be all around us in the confusion of our culture, in the chaos of the events of our days—and in the virgin land of each individual's capacity for new experiences.

Western American literature has been defined in a great many ways. We noted that Cawelti defines it as a genre that depicts the classic confrontation of the desires of the free individual and the necessity of social restrictions as symbolized in the frontier town. The confrontation seems inevitable, because the individual needs the town as much as the town needs the individual.

Sissy's constant movement is perfectly in keeping with Western literary tradition—and with American literature from Whitman to Steinbeck to Kerouac, as Robbins himself notes. However, Sissy's hitching goes beyond our national restlessness for which "the American road has represented choice, escape, opportunity, a way to

somewhere else" (*Cowgirls*, p. 52). As in the case of Huck Finn, who it literally running from the confines of civilization, Sissy learns that running is futile for two reasons. First, the physical confines of civilization have caught up with Huck—and everyone else. There is no place left to run. Second, human beings need human companionship. Sissy's melancholy hitching back and forth past her own high school picnic reiterates Huck's leaving the safety of his raft to fulfill his emotional needs for human companionship.

Sissy is first alienated from real emotional relationships by her parents and her norm-obsessed peers, but she realizes when she meets Julian and Jelly that she still needs this fulfillment. Imperfect though these unions are, they prepare her for her new commitment with Dr. Robbins at the end of *Cowgirls*. What is needed is not a new hiding place, but a new society that allows room for freedom and individuality within it. Robbins maintains that we must first become the free individuals who can establish it.

Other critics note that Western American writing is characterized by grandiose or sublime experiences, chaotic structure, a distrust of pure intellect, and a penchant for change. All of these characteristics are prominent in Robbins's fiction. For instance, Sissy's thumbs are so enormous that they are beyond the realm of human experience, but they stand as an exaggerated, a romanticized, symbol of human diversity as well as of the human ability to manipulate tools. In the same novel, the peyote visions of Delores del Ruby epitomize the sublime experiences that change people's lives. The deaths of Ziller and Bonanza Jellybean are more traditional if less literal sublime experiences. Robbins's novels exhibit purposely chaotic plot structures that are organized around thematic interests rather than unified lines of action. His insistence on the value of magic and mysticism is one solid indication of his distrust of pure intellect. Robbins is similar to Mark Twain in that nothing delights him more than

refuting the theories of pure intellect with the concrete results of experience. Finally, as our discussion of his general themes has shown, the necessity of change, not to mention the simple joy in the diversity that usually accompanies change, is at the core of Robbins's message to his readers.

Lawrence Ferlinghetti suggests that we are waiting for a new symbolic West. In *The American Western Novel*, James Folsom notes that "The Last Frontier is finally something more than an aspect of the American West; its topography comes to resemble the landscape of the human soul" (p. 32). Leslie Fiedler and Edwin Fussell also find the Western novel to be consistently metaphysical. In *The Frontier in American Literature*, Lucy Hazard defines American "Frontier Literature" as dealing with the physical pioneering for control of nature, with industrial pioneering for control of the labor of other men, and with spiritual pioneering for control of man's self.

Robbins focuses primarily on the psychological or spiritual pioneering of man as he seeks to control himself. However, his wariness of the concept of "control" puts him much closer to the original Westerners, in their flight from control and in their appreciation of the need to live with rather than against nature, than it does to Lucy Hazard, whose thesis reflects the compulsiveness of American thinking in general. However, she points out that "The coming age in American literature is an age of spiritual pioneering, of contempt for material success, of sublimation of failure, of a new idealism, based on the acceptance, not on the denial of limitations. The energies of the American people, long extroverted to the conquest of the continent, are now introverted to the perfecting of human relationships" (p. 3). It is not difficult to see Robbins's fiction in her description.

Ever since James Fenimore Cooper first sent Natty Bumppo pondering and revelling through the woods, Western writers have attempted

through their fiction to discover how Americans could relate best to their environment.

The work of Tom Robbins is preoccupied with this theme and, through it, with discovering new psychological and social bases for American culture. Near the end of *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, Robbins has the Chink offer this advice:

I set an example. That's all anyone *can* do. . . . I've lived most of my entire adult life outside the law, and never have I compromised with authority. But neither have I gone out and picked fights with authority. That's stupid. They're waiting for that; they invite it; it helps keep them powerful. Authority is to be ridiculed, outwitted and avoided. And it's fairly easy to do all three. If you believe in peace, act peacefully; if you believe in love, act lovingly; if you believe every which way, then act every which way, that's perfectly valid—but don't go out trying to sell your beliefs to the System. You end up contradicting what you profess to believe in, and you set a bum example. If you want to change the world, change yourself. (p. 400)

The individualistic Western American hero remains outside of society by definition of his position, riding the border between social man and nature. In the recent past he has appeared to face extinction because Americans have thought they were replacing nature with a purely man-made environment. But no matter what our egos tell us, we never will be able to abolish the connections between the individual and the cosmos. Now Tom Robbins seems to say: Let's all move out there, to the borders of our conscious minds, to the frontiers where our selves meet creation. Let us all live the spiritual lives of pioneers.

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