Self-transformation through (Dis)illusion in Tom Robbins's *Skinny Legs and All*

Andrea Hurst

Summary

The self-transformation necessary for reconfiguring a new humanity involves developing a complex relative autonomy, engendered by a thoroughgoing critique of the existing "veils of illusion" that have brought us to the brink of global disaster. While there is ample philosophical resource material to support this argument, purely philosophical texts are notoriously difficult to read and tend to circulate within a limited field of initiates. Good literary works, by contrast, have the engaging power of narrative that philosophical texts lack, and for this reason, when approached critically, provide a better vehicle for the wider dissemination of philosophical ideas. My overt aim in this article is to show, through analysis and amplification, that the underlying philosophical purpose of Tom Robbins's novel *Skinny Legs and All* (1990) is to present precisely the above-mentioned argument concerning selftransformation. My ulterior motive here is obedience to the philosopher's imperative to antagonise (sting) humans into critical self-knowledge.

Opsomming

Die self-herskepping wat nodig is om 'n nuwe soort menswees tot stand te bring, behels die ontwikkeling van 'n komplekse relatiewe outonomie wat voortkom uit 'n deurtastende kritiek op die bestaande "sluiers van illusie" wat ons tot op die rand van globale rampspoed gevoer het. Terwyl daar voldoende filosofiese bronnemateriaal bestaan om hierdie argument te ondersteun, is suiwer filosofiese tekste bekend vir hul moeilikheidsgraad en sirkuleer hulle gewoonlik binne 'n beperkte kring van ingewydes. Goeie literêre werke, daarenteen, boei vanweë die verhalende element wat in filosofiese tekste ontbreek. Gevolglik stel die kritiese benadering van literêre tekste dus 'n meer toepaslike kanaal vir die verspreiding van filosofiese idees beskikbaar. In hierdie artikel wil ek met behulp van analise en uitbreiding aantoon dat Tom Robbins deur die onderliggende filosofiese doelstelling van sy roman *Skinny Legs and All* (1990) die genoemde argument oor die self-herskepping na vore bring. Die bedoeling is om op hierdie wyse gehoor te gee aan die filosoof se taak om mense te antagoniseer ("steek") sodat hulle tot kritiese selfkennis kan kom.

JLS/TLW 26(4), Dec./Des. 2010
ISSN 0256-4718/Online 1753-5387
© *JLS/TLW*
UNISA

Facing socio-political, economic, and environmental crises that threaten or promise to change life as we know it, humanity is called upon to avoid the threats and actualise the promise through revolutionary lifestyle transformaions. Contemporary analysts share the conviction that top-down strategies for change remain impotent unless there is also upward pressure from "grassroots" practices. But alternative practices do not take hold without a concomitant shift in philosophical spirit. The perpetual call for this shift among philosophers harks back to Plato's (1892a: 434) famous injunction to strive for self-knowledge through the personal ordeal of self-transformation.

Tom Robbins (1990: 406), a "philosophical novelist", interprets Plato's injunction as a threefold task: lighting up your mind (achieving intellectual freedom), enlarging your soul (learning to give, rather than desire, love), and, beyond Plato, finding a personal path to salvation (writing your own script). This interpretation is, of course, by no means new. Its value lies not in its novelty – the demand for which belongs to modernism's outdated avant-gardism – but in its power to reiterate in an engagingly original manner, philosophical ideas and metaphors that have not lost their profundity for having been in circulation since history began.

Philosophical self-transformation demands relative autonomy, sustained through perpetual resistance to the lethargic inertia that Heidegger (1962: 182-184) calls "falling". Under its spell individuals meekly hand over personal scripting rights – rights to interpret and legitimate existing "texts", broadly speaking, and to write one's own "scriptures" – to tradition-bound ideologues or self-serving charismatics and gurus who compete for commodification in the postmodern "ideals" market. But willing followers, who flatter or manipulate exceptional others into the advice game, become mere actors mindlessly echoing ready-made scripts and clichéd thoughts in second-hand lives (Robbins 1990: 267). More ominously, we calmly hand over our philosophical task, not to overt authorities, but to a covert, impersonal beast: Heidegger's (1962: 319) "they", or Lacan's (1991: 236) "Big Other". The "Big Other" is the communal archive, the storehouse of "scriptures" (conventions, precedents, and stereotypes) posturing as primary sources of cultural wisdom, which teach us how to understand, act, and feel. The "Big Other" certainly makes life more comfortable and efficient. But the global crises we face indicate the danger of following scripts worn into habit by force of repetition rather than the weight of their truth value.

Relative autonomy, however, does not imply the outright rejection of existing scripts. Obliged always to take a stand in response to these, individuals must selectively combine discursive elements to form a singular perspective, whose demand for validation in another's eyes (truth begins with two) does not ease personal responsibility for its creation. Robbins suggests that we approach existing scripts with a mockingbird's versatility:

> Mocking birds aren't content to merely play the hand that is dealt them. Like all artists, they are out to *rearrange* reality. Innovative, wilful, daring, not

> bound by the rules to which others may blindly adhere, the mocking bird collects snatches of birdsong from this tree and that field, appropriates them, places them in new and unexpected contexts, recreates the world from the world.
>
> (Robbins 1990: 6)

When treated with an insistently critical attitude, all scripts – ludicrous or lucid, by professional philosophers or pop-culture idols – can inspire a personal formulation of meaning and purpose. Many, however, shy away from autonomous scriptwriting, and, in blankly repeating inappropriate scripts, entangle themselves in debilitating veils of illusion. Consequently, to avoid intellectual and spiritual paralysis and engender the relative autonomy required for emotional, social, and environmental sustainability, one must drop certain veils.

Robbins's novel, *Skinny Legs and All* (1990), presents a complex interpretation of contemporary life via an ancient pagan myth of the sun god's decline and the moon goddess's rescue mission. Journeying through the underworld, she drops an item of clothing at each of seven gates. In shedding these false coverings, illusions are revealed and surmounted, until she stands naked before the mystery of life. Only then can she rescue the sun god (pp. 354-355). Implicitly, a dominant masculine world view has brought humanity to the point of symbolic death, and hope for rescue lies with the feminine spirit. But to embrace it involves an ordeal of self-transformation, because its naked beauty (not Plato's sun, but a female body) is dulled by seven false coverings.

Salome's dance of the seven veils, described towards the novel's end as its hermeneutic key, re-enacts the myth. Each veil represents a fundamental, incapacitating illusion – concerning sexuality, ontology, politics, religion, economics, temporality, and authority (p. 215). Describing Salome's dance Robbins addresses each veil philosophically, projecting what emancipation from its spell might mean (pp. 401-414). The novel's broader narrative repeats this theoretical adventure more concretely, through the character development of Ellen Cherry Charles and Boomer Petway. Although their first move is to marry, they soon separate, and can only anticipate living together joyfully having undergone mutual (dis)illusionment and the ordeal of self-transformation. Robbins, confirming Derrida's "negative theology", resists offering a utopian vision of joyful living: we can at best shift away from evident suffering without trying to picture a new idyll (Caputo 1997: 92).

Robbins's (1990: 1) prelude adumbrates the novel's central argument. Its enigmatic first line – "This is the room of the wolfmother wallpaper" – generates an expectation that the ensuing descriptions – "This is the room where ..." – are ciphers we can decode to unravel its mystery. When these hallucinogenic descriptions only deepen the enigma, one turns to the narrative for retrospective illumination, and the clue is finally found in his description of Salome's dance: this is "the room in which Salome dropped

the seventh veil" (p. 2). This veil represents our illusion of authority; the belief in an external author of the universe. Without say in its origin and *telos*, we simply hope that this fabricator has a plan, and is competent and benevolent. Dropping the veil, Robbins argues (p. 413), echoing Nietzsche (1968: 9-12), involves recognising that our world was never a ready-made object and existence has no pre-given sense. Rather, we all fabricate as we go along. Similarly, Robbins's prelude has no pre-given sense. The incomprehensible yet pregnant "descriptions" indicate that "the room of the wolfmother wallpaper" is a dream-space of potential, before we necessarily reduce things to the possible. They warn readers against converting Robbins's novel into a scripture; a set of guidelines for self-transformation. While readers can learn from it, just as anybody can learn from "philosophers, spiritual masters, gurus, shamans, gypsy circus girls, and wild-talking tramps in the street" (p. 412), the hermeneutic task is the mockingbird's eclectic play.

Below, I examine Robbins's treatment of seven illusions that thwart self-transformation, and augment this with idiosyncratically chosen snatches from various philosophers. Robbins treats these illusions concurrently throughout, interweaving a complex intellectual tapestry. However, he emphasises each in turn, indicated by his chapter division. To reduce an otherwise unmanageable complexity, I have sacrificed details to distil a theme associated with each veil. I explore its appearance in the narrative of certain characters and what emancipation from its constraints might mean.

Jezebel and the Patriarchs

Robbins (1990: 218, 295) sees human sexuality cramped by illusions generated after humanity destroyed the great goddesses, repressed their history, and turned to patriarchal religions instead (cf. Shlain 1998: 1-7). Patriarchy reproduces "erotic terror": anxious men face feminine sexuality with desire and dread. The result is both manipulative masculine denial and control through "laws and institutions and elaborate weaponry" (pp. 45-46, 98), and the patriarchal wife's quintessential lament: "I gave up my dancing 'cause a man loved me so much he didn't want me to dance" (p. 298). Alternatively, guilt awaits those who resist such sacrifices. For choosing painting rather than Boomer's sexual wants one honeymoon evening, Ellen Cherry felt "compelled to do penance for having allowed the most important thing in her life to momentarily interfere with the trifles of tending" (p. 97). As a self-styled contemporary sophisticate, I might have dismissed this tale of erotic terror, sacrifice, and guilt as a passé remnant of the patriarchy that limited our grandmothers had I not recently seen its precise lineaments quietly insinuated in my own life.

One might still object that Robbins toys with a gender divide that contentiously associates certain values (conscious intellect, linear logic,

emotional distance, spirituality) with masculinity, and their opposites (unconscious intuition, associative thinking, emotional immediacy, materiality) with femininity. Serving the pragmatics of manageable human interaction, this simplistic division is a blunt ideological construct that ignores the complex variety of the material continuum. Ideological constructs, however, are also formative discourses, making it impossible to establish an order of derivation. Are they modelled on human nature, or do they configure it? The answer matters little. The "femininity/masculinity" construct is ingrained in the multiple media that constitute the human archive; the technological extension of humanity's long-term memory (Derrida 1996: 91-92). It therefore has contemporary actuality and powerful effects, regardless of its real basis. It is best challenged not by denying the distribution of oppositional values, but through a Nietzschean (1966: 31) revaluation of value. Feminine "softness" is both weak decadence and robust flexibility. Masculine "hardness" is both dependability and paranoiac rigidity. The patriarchal crime lies in co-opting the ingrained masculine/feminine divide to insalubrious ends. Patriarchy highlights feminine weaknesses and eliminates strengths, while overemphasising masculine strengths and ignoring weaknesses.

Robbins (1990: 20-29) concretises patriarchy's lunacy in a pivotal incident involving the Reverend Buddy Winkler (exemplar of masculine erotic terror). Buddy encouraged Verlin Charles, increasingly paranoid concerning his daughter's budding sexuality, to "raid" Ellen Cherry's life-drawing class at college, drag her from the room, scrub her face raw to remove all traces of make-up, and withdraw her from college. These two good Christian patriarchs accompanied this abuse with the repeated epithet: "Jezebel" (p. 22). Who was Jezebel? Commonly, we imagine a debauched, painted whore. Surprisingly, the Bible tells that Queen Jezebel, faithful wife of crooked king Ahab, faced death for supporting his "suspect land deal" (p. 29). Anticipating her murder, she fixed her hair, painted her face, and waited at the window to meet her fate. What was the crime that earned her the reputation of "all-time treacherous slut" (p. 29)? Simply, it seems, Jezebel worshipped Astarte, a diversely named, ancient, female deity. Astarte's popularity threatened the acolytes of a newcomer, a faceless abstraction called Yahweh. They "led a coup against her some four thousand years ago – and most of what we know as Western civilization is the result" (p. 44).

But what has masculine "civilization" wrought? Dominant sages inveigh against bodily decadence, attributing crude, pathological and imprisoning desires to weak flesh, particularly female flesh. They pretend that actualised humans transcend physicality and sexuality. Tellingly, although nonsexual life is a contradiction, sexual abstinence is demanded from our sages. Seeking to control human physicality and sexuality by force of will, we impose stringent prescriptions concerning bonds of love, sex, friendship, partnership, and mentorship. Also, the plasto-techno-nano interventions serving pop-culture's narcissistic "body beautiful" reflect our disgust for imperfect and aging bodies. On a global scale, our drive for "possession,

profit, and conquest" asserts its rapacious power over the earthly body that sustains us (p. 401).

Initially responding to patriarchal abuse with confusion, Ellen Cherry subsequently took flight, to the extreme of becoming "husbandless, loverless, and ... fatherless" (p. 340). Admirably, she instinctively recoils from the body hatreds generated by the patriarchal illusion and retains a joyful physical and sexual exuberance. By contrast, Buddy Winkler's increasing absurdities suggest that sexually inactive organisms are hardly higher, wiser beings. Instead they are "aberrations, freakish or pathological misfits out of tune with the harmony of life" (p. 402). Dropping the veil, Robbins claims, reveals that Earth is a thoroughly "sexual globe". Eros is the life-force, whether "plant, animal, molecular, human", and the earthly "scenery, props, and costumes" (colours, perfumes, symphonies) are sexual attractants designed to facilitate and enhance erotic union. Unlike patriarchy's erotic terror, based on fear, guilt, and denial, Robbins portrays feminine sexuality as "changeable and playful", chaotic and ordered, warm, intuitive, magical, ancient, natural, mysterious, lunar, and renewing (pp. 44, 401, 403).

The veil drops for Ellen Cherry when she embraces Jezebel as her doppelgänger: "If Georgia O'Keeffe had been her temporary heroine, Jezebel was her eternal double" (p. 22). Aptly in the depths of an ancient cave/womb, she led Boomer, initially reluctant, to embrace the Jezebel in her too (p. 41), causing stirrings, the "sensation of something *coming to life*" (p. 42). Implicitly, feminine sexuality is quickened; represented by the awakening, after lengthy dormancy, of two ancient artefacts (Conch Shell and Painted Stick). While Robbins's call for revaluation embraces feminine strengths and warns against masculine weaknesses, the feminine sexuality he envisages rejects one-sided domination for dynamic interplay, symbolised by the eternally sympathetic-tensional bond between the two awakened artefacts. This restoration of earth's "carnal play" (p. 402) is represented ultimately by the hybrid sexuality of another ancient, pagan deity, Jerusalem's Pales (pp. 363, 372), towards whom both humans and artefacts journey.

Five Objects

From agriculture to atom-splitting, humanity's immense technological prowess, which affects even global weather patterns, produces a stupidly arrogant illusion: we can survive independently of nature. This "self-sufficiency" supposedly legitimates a claim, traced through ancient myths, speculative metaphysics, and the Newtonian spell, to dominion and control (p. 404). Even Einstein – "God does not play dice" – saw uncertainty as a provisional glitch in our search for underlying determinism (Hawking 2009). Granted, a paradigmatic shift to complexity, which acknowledges unruly anomalies, fundamentally alters our understanding of nature. Few scientists still talk of "command and control" engineering, and many

embrace a new vocabulary of disorder, instability, and unpredictability (Malone & Tanner 2008). But even complexity thinking, when tied to the end-goal of human mastery, does little to dispel the potentially catastrophic illusion that we can live separately from nature, even in opposition to it, or remain indifferent to its nonreplicable wonders (Robbins 1990: 404).

An older illusion underpins these mistakes. Despite our Kantian insight to the contrary, we think human reality is all there is. According to Kant (1933: 65-67) we cannot assume that three-dimensional space and temporal succession (past gives way to present, which anticipates future) wait "out there" to be perceived. Rather, the spatio-temporal form of human objective reality is produced when our perceptual and organisational powers operate on the sensory data generated by our contact with otherwise unknowable material "stuff". This stuff remains unknowable in itself, precisely because we only become aware of it after it has been mentally processed. We probably share some perceptual faculties with some creatures, but others may be privy to spatial and temporal dimensions unimaginable to humans. In fact, even for us, objective being includes dimensions beyond what we produce in organic perception, but available to us through instruments. Find a magnifying glass, Robbins suggests, and look closely at the label of, say, a bean can:

> [I]t is a rough, tangled bog of wood chips, fragments of hemp, linen fibres, asbestos fibres, wool fibres, and clots of ink, oil, and glue. Each of these substances has its own formal characteristics, and if you look more closely (you must switch to an electronic microscope), if you examine the molecular structure of each, the variety in form – pyramids and rings, spirals and stacks and zigzag chains – is dazzling. And that's the opening act. For the main show, you must look deeper still. On the atomic and subatomic levels, weird electrical forces are crackling and flaring, and amorphous particles (directly related, remember, to the composition of the bean-can label) are spinning simultaneously forward, backward, sideways, and forever at speeds so uncalculable that expressions such as "arrival", "departure", "duration" and "have a nice day" become meaningless.
>
> (Robbins 1990: 61-62)

Despite such humbling observations, most people still think the limited perspective produced by ordinary perception is the only possible reality. Further, we maintain the conviction that objective stasis and coherence is the norm. Yet, when normalcy returns after a disruption (e.g. to a tavern after a brawl), Robbins notes, it reflects a shifting dynamism: "on a beer glass, a flyspeck was disintegrating; on the ceiling, a Marlboro cumulus was gathering; on wire racks, beef jerky was mouldering" (p. 51). Our rigidity is expressed in the disorientation, fear, and aggression experienced by ordinary people upon seeing anything outlandish: a giant, all-silver "turkey-mobile" cruising through "a loop of the Bible Belt" (pp. 27-28); Turn Around Norman, whose daily street-corner body art is to execute an almost

imperceptible 360-degree revolution (pp. 160-164); or five objects with autonomous locomotive powers (p. 53). We attribute anomalies to drunkenness or psychosis rather than face the possibility that the real might exceed our human perspective (pp. 51-53).

For Robbins, dropping the veil means accepting the possibility of parallel realities. He nonchalantly introduces five objects as allegorical co-protagonists: Conch Shell and Painted Stick (already mentioned), along with Bean Can, Dirty Sock, and Spoon (p. 43). Their communicative powers pass without comment as naturally shared by all inanimate objects. These five, however, are given special locomotive powers (a narrative expedient). They have their own agenda, and their narrative runs parallel to Ellen Cherry's and Boomer's, touching it occasionally without really intersecting. At most, Robbins brings Ellen Cherry close to an awareness of parallel realities. As a child, she develops her singular "eye-game" – a controlled squint through which she reconfigures visual reality (p. 15). This visual play serves her art. Significantly, however, while she remains in control of the game and dictates its terms, she struggles to paint an exceptional painting. Her encounter with Spoon, briefly back in her "possession" (a long story), takes her eye-game to another level. Contemplating Spoon, she felt for a dizzying instant "that she had oriented herself at the surface of the visible and invisible worlds" (p. 273). She became aware of "another level of reality ... a layer that consensual reality veiled", where separation, selectivity, and favouritism dissolved (p. 292).

Here, Robbins offers her a fleeting taste of material sublimity – a sensation impossible to analyse, accompanied by intense, if fleeting, joy – where the partnership terms between humans and objects are reversed: "the spoon pierced, as if it were a fork, the rigidity of her ego" (p. 385). Despite the fleeting nature of this encounter, something changes in Ellen Cherry, and she is freed to paint a significant painting. Implicitly, recognising nature's transcendence (the universe will continue beyond the disappearance of human cyber civilisation) means reconfiguring our self-understanding away from the egotistical claim to dominion with its comet's tail of illusions, and promoting a respectful exchange with our sustaining material environment. Robbins leaves open this possibility in the novel's last line where Spoon is poised to disrupt Ellen Cherry's feather-pillow peace (p. 422).

Leaders and Followers

Justified by human tendencies to group together ("birds of a feather"), politics predominantly separates out supposedly natural types, and maps geopolitical subdivisions "as if they were natural facts, ancient and inviolable" (p. 83). They are not: think of how arbitrarily colonial powers divided Africa! Ironically, the groundlessness of arbitrary divisions drives us to generate their justification, and rivalries escalate towards brutal war.

Equally dangerous is a deeply ingrained conviction that internal subdivisions reflect a natural separation of leaders and followers. Confucius, for example, sketched an elaborate hierarchy from the worthiest *sheng jen* (gentlemen/sages), fit to rule, to the lowliest *hsiao jen* (small men) and *min* (common people), who should be ruled (Lau 1979: 14). This conviction also underpins Plato's (1892b: 104) "noble lie": that some are born with the gold-infused blood of rulers, and others the silver infusion of auxiliaries, or the bronze of craftsmen. Because such hierarchies have existed for so long and feel so natural, the word "egalitarian" resounds emptily in our discourses, and many assume that communities would collapse without authoritative leaders and willing followers.

For Robbins, the price is too high for dominant alphas. They might minimally have uses in acute crises, but otherwise demand controlling power only for self-serving ends (pp. 99, 405). Unsurprisingly, official leaders (King Solomon, America's Vice-President, and Buddy Winkler) are portrayed as vain and arrogant (p. 65). Simultaneously, ignorant of socio-political complexities, ordinary citizens delude themselves that there are political solutions to human problems, which authoritative leaders understand and are equipped to address (pp. 118-119). Ignorant and dependent followers, therefore, err through obedience. Countless soldiers, without questioning motives, believing implicitly that struggles are about sacred values (freedom, human rights), allow politicians to make decisions that destroy them.

Many are easily seduced into promoting ideologies that protect personal security, or legitimise selfish claims to the good life (p. 405). However, the faint-hearted pseudo-activists who work for spells in Isaac's and Ishmael's – the persistently fire-bombed Jew/Arab restaurant started by Spike and Abu in a counter-political gesture of reconciliation – represent, for Robbins, the more subtle political vice of those too easily seduced into "selfless" ideological activism just to avoid the ordeal of self-transformation. But shirking the philosophical task by selling your soul to an external cause ultimately undermines the cause. Think of those who prefer fighting bitterly for Jesus over peaceful, loving living; of violent "freedom fighters" who compromise ethics for the sake of the ethical, thereby losing it. It is worth repeating Gandhi's injunction to "be the change we wish to see in the world" (Gore 1992: 14).

Dropping the political veil reveals that humanity's troubles may stem from the complexities and entanglements of arbitrary political divisions, but they cannot be resolved politically (Robbins 1990: 405). Politics at its best involves organising societies on the basis of rationally justifiable claims and legitimate grounds; precisely the elements congenitally missing from socio-political life. This insight is represented by Ellen Cherry's reaction to the irrational entanglements that constitute Middle Eastern political madness. To sort out the mess, she thinks, one should turn from the political, towards beauty and magic: "Give her an Oriental carpet, opulent and jazzy, com-

forting yet intense .... Give her pattern and colour, give her a map of the higher mind, a map woven from dreams and hair and dyed with spices and wine. Give her beauty, in other words. Give her humanity's best shot. Give her art" (p. 57).

Implicitly, Robbins places hope for social change in a turn to shared activities and pleasures (in for example art, sport, food), rather than changes, even radical, in political dispensation. He elaborates such a strategy of reconciliation and egalitarianism through the friendship and partnership of Spike (p. 129) and Abu (p. 133). Refusing to be co-opted by traditional political enmity, "an Arab and a Jew opened a restaurant together across the street from the United Nations" (p. 126). "It was to be a gesture of unusual cooperation, a symbolic reconciliation, an exemplary statement on behalf of peace" (p. 127). Both recognised irresolvable differences and unlikable peculiarities in each other, but through mutual respect, refused them the power to become destructive sources of conflict (p. 145). Notably, it is because both (as their narrative histories indicate) have worked through the ordeal of self-transformation that they can avoid ideological impasses and find workable compromises to seemingly insurmountable conflicts: such as those that flare up among restaurant patrons when faced with competition for the same space between Salome's dance and the Super Bowl (pp. 383-388).

In short, to drop the political veil is to see that authoritarian leaders are unnecessary. Their "chest-banging and fang display" masks largely useless and puny beings, who should be kept in check by healthy doses of "disrespect and laughter" (p. 405). Also, genuinely philosophical souls resist requests for leadership from willing followers, who thereby block their own paths to self-transformation. If our task is "a personal quest to enlarge the soul, liberate the spirit, and light up the brain", politics is, Robbins rightly remarks, "simply a roadblock of stentorian baboons" (p. 406).

Fish Tanks, Fjords, and Fights

Any organised religion, for Robbins (p. 168), is under the illusion that it alone "is on speaking terms with the Deity". This hotline supposedly offers the right and means to reduce the Divine to a knowable quantity, secure from critical re-evaluation. If early religions were "like muddy ponds with lots of foliage", those supposedly in the know convert them into "aquariums," and then "hatcheries" (p. 167). "But", Robbins remarks, "the Deity does not dawdle in the comfort zone! If one yearns to see the face of the Divine, one must break out of the aquarium, escape the fish farm, to go swim up wild cataracts, dive in deep fjords". The presumptuous illusion that we can "nail to our stationary altars the migratory light of the world", he adds, is only attractive to witlessly arrogant characters like the Reverend Buddy Winkler, who remain inexplicably discontented with ineffability.

The Lord has spoken to him, Buddy (p. 84) insists, and he knows God's plans intimately: "'It's not God's plan for there to be peace in the Middle East. Not yet, it ain't'" (p. 165). Instead, on Buddy's inside information "'[t]he Holy Land, your so-called Middle East, is prophesised to be the scene of the ultimate world war ... Zechariah, fourteen, two'". Buddy's narrative follows a trajectory of escalating fanaticism. He finally teams up with Jewish zealots, who are equally invested in precipitating the long-awaited Armageddon. This unholy Christian-Jewish alliance, which directly contrasts with the Spike-Abu partnership, involves a clandestine plot to destroy the mosques on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem (p. 252); an act likely to produce another world war (p. 265). When Ellen Cherry, incredulous, asks Buddy to justify gambling with earth's innocent life, his response is telling: "'It ain't a gamble. The word of God is not no lottery ticket. It *shall* come to pass. Shall!'" (p. 266).

Buddy's fanaticism, chilling because its rhetoric is clichéd (p. 267), makes religion a primary source of human misery: "It is not merely the opium of the masses, it is the cyanide" (p. 167). The self-proclaimed righteous construct a worthy "we" who possess insider information, to be shielded from a wicked "they" who have the scriptures all wrong, and whose lives consequently have no worth. Humans are inexplicably willing to massacre millions due to this preposterous division between worthy and wicked, based on the lunatic myth of a hotline to the Divine. Robbins cites tellingly from the Old Testament:

> Joshua "carried off all the livestock of these cities", meaning the cities of Canaan, "but all of the people he put to the sword, not sparing anyone who breathed". Joshua "plundered", Joshua "burned", Joshua "massacred", Joshua "wiped them out", Joshua "put to death", Joshua "turned his forces", "all were taken by storm ... annihilated without mercy and utterly destroyed", Joshua "subdued", Joshua "slew", Joshua "left no survivors".
>
> (Robbins 1990: 222-223)

Not to be outshone, in the sweet name of Jesus, the Holy Crusaders destroyed "the masters of astronomy, modern mathematics, map-making, shipbuilding, perfumery", burned "the largest, most complete library in the world", and massacred "men, women and children – Jew as well as Arab" (pp. 146-147). Religiously inspired killing sprees are not only ancient history. Today we face "Moslems fighting Jews, as usual, but also Moslems fighting Christians. And Moslems fighting Moslems. Everybody fighting everybody, including themselves. It's crazy. Murderous and crazy" (p. 75).

Ironically, religious ideologies block precisely what they all proclaim as their *telos* (a taste of Divinity and universal peace). As Robbins remarks: "It has been observed that the logical extension of all politics is war. Once religion became political, the exercise of it, too, could be said to lead sooner

or later to war. 'War is hell'. Thus, religious belief propels us straight to hell" (p. 168).

This irony is also signified by the concept "Jerusalem", which Robbins (pp. 115-116, 125) portrays as the earthly birthplace of unearthly attractiveness and horror. "Jerusalem. Jeru Salaam. 'City of Peace.' The only humorous thing about it was its name" (p. 204). A large flat rock on a hill in Jerusalem, originally a threshing floor, was consecrated by the Hebrews as the very Mount Moriah where Abraham and God played out their sado-masochistic mind game (p. 98), and became the site of the notorious twice-ruined Temple. But this site was consecrated by another religious myth and now hosts The Dome of the Rock: a mosque built on the site because, in Buddy's (p. 252) words, "'ol' Mohammed swore up and down that God took him for a horseback ride to heaven from the Temple Mount. Rode him around for a spell, introduced him to Moses and Jesus, then dropped him off again right where he started'". Fanatical Christians also claim a mythological stake in Jerusalem: Armageddon and redemption can only occur when the Jews return to Israel, Jerusalem becomes a Jewish city, and the Temple gets rebuilt. Buddy's plot to destroy the Dome of the Rock aims to make way for this Third Temple whose rebuilding is the key to Armageddon: "'the last war, darlin'. The wicked will be destroyed once and for all, whereupon the righteous will dwell with Christ in the New Jerusalem'" (pp. 165, 254). Ellen Cherry's response represents reason's small voice against the mythological madness. "'Demolishing a mosque somewhere to make Jesus come back. What a fairy tale! They ought to lock you away before you hurt somebody'" (p. 255).

Dropping the religious veil does not mean doing away with Jerusalem as the spiritual *telos* of humankind. Salome, Robbins (p. 354) notes, like *shalom* or *salem* means "peace". "'Thus, our beloved city, Jerusalem, is both the House of Peace and the House of the Dancing Girl.'" Robbins's characters all journey towards Jerusalem; it is just that those without veils are headed for the House of the Dancing Girl.

Fame and Fortune

The potent illusion that money underwrites worth is undermined by the myriad phobias and the emotional toil it generates, not to speak of bewildering absurdities and inconsistencies (p. 230). By paying extraordinary sums for useless goods and frivolous talents we accord them a value they do not deserve; conversely we tend to devalue deservedly valuable activities like pure theoretical science. In the context of the New York art scene, the skewing of value that occurs when money dictates the worth of creative activities is exemplified in Ellen Cherry's fruitless struggle to crack it, and Boomer's unexpected success here. Boomer, a welder by trade, inherited a large, expensive, silver, Airstream motor-home. In a mood of whimsical

nuttiness, and in sublime indifference to its monetary value, he converted the vehicle into an "outlandish turkeymobile", packed up his few belongings, and set off in pursuit of Ellen Cherry, whose flight from patriarchy had taken her northwest (pp. 23-27). Her "glow of amused admiration" lasted long enough for marriage and a honeymoon trip whose final destination, on the wings of her desire for fame and fortune, was New York (pp. 27, 230).

Ellen Cherry knows intellectually that art cannot be prostituted (p. 359). Artists, she explains, don't set out to make something significant or valuable. Rather, if there is something they want to see really badly, but it doesn't exist, then they create it (pp. 179-180). She is nevertheless a slave to the economic illusion and in danger of prostituting her profound vision. Tellingly, her first Jerusalem is New York, "a city about money" (pp. 156, 159) and her measure for success is whether her paintings sell in the prestigious New York art market. Since her ego is entirely constructed around her art (p. 265), selling her paintings there would be absolute affirmation of her identity and worth. For Ellen Cherry, then, fame and fortune, ego and money, belong together: "currency served as the paper representation of a big rigid ego" (pp. 230, 409).

Robbins, however, does not grant her financial success in New York. By contrast, Boomer's turkeymobile tickles the fancy of a scene internally bored and seeking novel entertainments. The Museum of Modern Art snatches it up, and Boomer becomes "a welcome shot of gamma globulin in its jaundiced system" (p. 177). Having cracked the market once, he can make absolutely anything in the certainty that connoisseurs and collectors would give his "artwork" value by paying outlandish sums for it. For Ellen Cherry, Boomer's wild success is bitterly humiliating; in poisonous, outraged envy, she incinerates her brushes and paints (p. 143). Unable to bear Boomer's second big success, she precipitates their parting. Boomer begins a new life: "a life that was supposed to have been *hers*" (p. 183), and under financial strain, she begins working part-time as a waitress at the I & I.

Ellen Cherry's brush with the New York art scene after Boomer's success opens her eyes to its superficiality and the economic veil begins to loosen (p. 177). Her rehabilitating journey beyond competitive, ambitious egotism really begins, however, when one of many unwitting teachers, Abu (p. 186), asks what precisely Boomer's success has to do with Ellen Cherry's art. Clearly, the only fair answer is "nothing". Abu (p. 186) refuses her the right to be stifled by Boomer's success: "'Rejoice that someone about whom you care has done well. If his work is inferior and undeserving, then let that inspire you to do even better'". The veil is further loosened by another such teacher, Turn Around Norman (pp. 160-164, 194). Feeling "a responsibility to encourage him" Ellen Cherry slips an extravagant twenty-dollar bill into his donation box, only to sense "immediate disapproval" (pp. 167, 193-194). While this donation box suggests that cash could be offered "as an expression of appreciation", her gesture of "financial incentive" is insulting

to the purity of his will to perform (p. 229). In fact, on the testimony of the five objects (who admire him daily from the basement window of the Fifth Avenue church to which their journey has brought them), his performance is most delicate and intense on Christmas morning and Super Bowl Sunday, when the street is deserted (pp. 251, 260). Ellen Cherry realises that Norman's power to enchant her derives less from his art form than his attitude. His work cannot be motivated by ambition: "Certainly there was no demand for what he did, less demand than for her paintings" (p. 195). She begins to understand that his act, his "*lonely, uncompromising, obsessive tug-of-war with presumed reality*", which brings an ancient magic back into life, "*is what art is all about*" (pp. 195, 323).

Buoyed by this insight she resolves to stop hurting and start painting. But she finds herself unready. By implication, dropping a veil is hard work; it is neither instantaneous, nor entirely a matter of conscious willing. In confirmation, Ellen Cherry is "gelatinous with shock" at the success of Boomer's one-man show and his plans to accompany one of his works to Jerusalem (p. 203). Interestingly, once there he cannot leave. At the cost of "sabotaging his own success" (p. 287), he joins forces with an Israeli sculptor, working on a commission for a war-torn neighbourhood undergoing restoration (p. 356). The sculpture takes shape as the figure of Pales, the long-eared "trickster, fertility spirit, and sacred clown", and, importantly, an ancient deity beloved to both Arabs and Jews (pp. 363-364). This work will not be unconditionally accepted as entertainment for the frivolous and bored. Instead, becoming a source of contention, open to attack, and in need of protection, it does what art is supposed to do: engender critique and initiate perspective changes. Uncovered as the patrons of this work, Spike and Abu represent the ideal audience; their initial reaction is mystified incomprehension, but it sets them on a path of investigation and self-education (pp. 371-372).

Boomer's departure initiates a night of introspection in Ellen Cherry (p. 219). She discovers that she has lost her soul to her egotistical identity-construction as an artist. If she previously withdrew from the art scene due to disillusionment and envy, now, identifying herself as a full-time food service employee, she undertakes a positive withdrawal from the egoism that underpinned her fervour of narcissistic suffering since Boomer's success (p. 200). With this, she withdraws from the arrogance that cast Boomer as an inferior because he supposedly couldn't understand and talk about art (p. 201), allowing herself the space to develop genuine respect for him (pp. 297-298, 358). Finally, she withdraws from her dream of fortune: "She found herself repulsed by the realization that her lifelong eye-game (her private amusement and personal salvation) could be reduced to a commodity, like soda pop, jeans, TV Christianity, or Preparation H" (p. 230).

Facing the New York art scene, then, she concedes defeat. But Robbins is careful to show that this concession is nothing like the defeat she reads in the blatant imitations covering the walls of Ultima's downtown gallery (pp.

319, 322-324). As Ultima explains, under the injunction to innovate, contemporary artists must inevitably concede defeat: they "'haven't a chance against the masterpieces of the past, against the marketplace of the present, against the annihilations of the future'" (p. 322). Rejecting the defeating demand for mere novelty as the logical outcome of a drive for fame and fortune, Ellen Cherry takes another step towards embracing in practice what she already knows about art and money. To her surprise, however, two paintings (placed in Ultima's gallery when she first arrived in New York) are finally sold and, still tempted to evaluate her worth in financial terms, this modest success leaves her stewing over whether to resume her identity as an artist (pp. 264-265). In the end, she does not betray her newfound insight and never takes another painting to the gallery. It is at this point that playing her eye-game with Spoon reminds her that art is art because it has the kind of impact on ordinary perception that brings the magic of being back to life (pp. 273, 292).

Learning to drop the veil is continuous hard work for Ellen Cherry (p. 349). Having made the dismissive remark concerning Salome's skinny legs that inspired the book's title, she is also obliged to overcome her envy of this dancing girl, who (like Boomer) succeeds in her art unmoved by financial gain and without apparent effort (pp. 216, 353). Ellen Cherry is finally liberated from the economic veil when she has the opportunity to evaluate a model of Boomer's Pales, and objectively pronounces it a worthy work of art (p. 365). This gesture finally liberates her for her own painting (pp. 369-370). With sublime indifference to anything but the need to see a particular vision realised, Ellen Cherry spends a long weekend alone in the I & I, painting a mural on one of its walls. She paints with joy, exuberance, and passion, until she drops. When it is done "she could have kicked the moon" (p. 370). Tellingly, this is the painting that inspires Salome, her ultimate teacher, to relent on her previously steadfast refusal to dance the dance of the seven veils.

Judgment Day

Daily concerns are an escape into finite comforts. But what are we escaping from? According to Heidegger (1962: 220; 223-224), we seek finite comforts to avoid acknowledging the discomforting groundlessness of our existence: our inability to establish its ultimate meaning. The universe, Robbins (p. 305) remarks, is just "order expanding into disorder contracting into order at a rate so incredibly slow that it bores and bewilders us", and sense-giving limits, origins and ends, remain obscure. We tend to recoil, nauseated and anxious, from this abyssal thought, and call upon ourselves to reconfigure a more comforting world, to invent psychological beginnings and endings for it.

From the Platonic fall described in the *Phaedrus* (Plato 1892a: 454), through certain strands of Buddhism, to the many mythical and biblical falls from Paradise, we repeat the story of our fall from a past state of grace and the present injunction to promote the conditions for our future return to heaven. To sidestep our intellectual awareness that a blissful end-state remains impossible to actualise, we place it beyond the confines of earthly experience. Our fictions of purpose predominantly have the structure of a nonmaterial paradise lost in our descent into materiality, only to be refound in the heavenly paradise of a higher spiritual plane. In short, while both past and future are empty notions, to accommodate a psychological need for finitude we dangerously invest in the illusion that time is essentially a "bullet-train history" with a mythical origin that sets a supposedly legitimate precedent for present claims, and an "apocalyptic destination" (Robbins 1990: 304).

Beyond the present moment, saturated with sensation, the past quickly fades into the domain of memory. Past memories, however, do not lie intact in our archives, ready simply to be retrieved when necessary. Rather, in re-membering, in putting the past together again, memories are constantly re-created as narrative myths of origin, screened by a hermeneutic grid of present emotions, new insights, and self-serving interests. The story of a re-membered past is precisely created to justify present claims. Recall the competing fictions that pretend to legitimate conflicting claims to one sacred place in Jerusalem (pp. 252-253). The conflicts are irresolvable because adjudication is impossible between claims whose "foundations of authority" are, in Derrida's (1992) words, "mystical".

On the other end of the timeline, the notion that we should patiently sacrifice the present for a future paradise, especially in a nonmaterial afterlife, is the biggest hoax ever pulled on the poor. It is a way to subdue without consequence the legitimate complaints of the disadvantaged. Assured that "they'll eventually escape to some resort in the sky", people "put up with all sorts of tyranny, poverty, and painful treatment" (Robbins 1990: 305). Also, world leaders who believe that "life is merely a trial for the more valuable and authentic afterlife" would be "less hesitant to risk starting a nuclear holocaust" and less likely to care about polluting oceans and burning forests (pp. 304-305). Pushing the ideological promise to its extreme, the End Days projection is "the most dangerous cliché of all" (p. 267). "Despite all absence of evidence," Robbins (p. 304) remarks, "there thrives a popular and stern faith in the end of time and in the orchids or onions to be distributed at the finale". This faith, wishful or fearful, engenders insensitivity to "the living present, the living planet" to the extent of a willingness to "risk the lives of everybody on earth, animals, trees, little children, have them roast in fire storms, have them covered with sores and burns, dying of radiation sickness" (p. 266). The more we focus on heaven, the easier it becomes to create a living hell (p. 305).

Buddy Winkler's dream of Armageddon, his "death wish on a very grand scale" matched by a fatal trajectory at a personal level (pp. 304-305), represents this dangerous conception of time as a "bullet-train history" with an "apocalyptic destination". Buddy begins as a parochial, small-town preacher with a fondness for End Days rhetoric: "the deluge of boiling guts that many claimed would wash away all sin and sinners and leave the universe squeaky clean forever" (p. 106). However, seeing signs everywhere – "the prophecies don't fib" (p. 390) – and quietly disregarding their similarity to signs seen by ancestors millennia before him (p. 305), his rhetoric escalates into a full-blown dream of Armageddon. Since time is not running out soon enough, he fabricates a God-given responsibility to "run it out" personally (p. 305). Although his aspiration towards TV evangelism is not realised, he gains notorious credibility among Christian fanatics through guest appearances, which enables him to team up with Jewish zealots to formulate the plan to provoke Armageddon by destroying the Dome of the Rock.

He lets this slip to Ellen Cherry when she confronts him after a firebomb incident at the I & I, and finally shocked into taking him seriously, she calls the FBI. As a result, Buddy is reduced to street-corner evangelism. His frustrations are exacerbated when he is hamstrung by the Vice-President, who insists on the inexpediency of his plan under "current leadership" and politely orders Buddy to shelve it until leadership becomes more "enlightened" (p. 392). Notably on Super Bowl Sunday, the day of Salome's dance, Buddy grinds with deflated frustration. By late afternoon, he resolves to "vent ... a little spleen on the I & I". Pushing his way through the post-game, post-dance throng, he spots the still naked Salome. In a fatal act of revenge, he charges up to her and grabs her by the throat. Robbins informs us laconically that "Detective Shaftoe shot him dead" (p. 414).

When the veil drops, Robbins argues, we will see that "the thermodynamic and cosmological forces that form the basis for 'time' spiral merrily along without going anywhere very much. Just around. And around again" (p. 305). Interestingly, Buddy's fatally linear trajectory is contrasted with the timelessness evoked by the circular "dances" of two earthly, embodied performers: Salome and Turn Around Norman (p. 301). A sense of timeless circularity suggests that both pessimism and optimism, tied to a desire to predict and control the future, to master, rather than enjoy infinity, are functions of an outdated paradigm of linear progression. Time, Robbins remarks is "a meadow, not a highway", and the human psyche is an "all-night restaurant [present], not a museum [past] or a church [future]" (p. 409). Since nobody knows anything about an afterlife – "only the dead can say for sure, and they aren't talking" (p. 304) – we are free for the present, where, Robbins insists: "*Every* day is Judgment Day" (p. 410).

Who Authors the Script?

Although I emphasised Ellen Cherry's struggle to drop the economic veil, her story may be read as a struggle to drop each of the seven veils, and she is more broadly portrayed as a contemporary moon goddess, tasked with saving humanity from its fatal masculine bias. She drops the sexuality veil by echoing Jezebel, and the ontological veil through her eye-game with Spoon. Her relentless scepticism concerning Buddy's notions and antics and her refusal to allow politics to overwhelm beauty suggest that she is not blinded by the religious and political veils. The economic veil is finally dropped when she can paint in a way that confirms her inner convictions concerning art and money and also reflects a style of being that is focused on the intensity of the present moment. Her mural may be read as a metaphorical representation of her accumulated, albeit mostly implicit, insight. It inspires Salome to dance the dance that will bring it all into explicit consciousness. The dance represents the dropping of the seventh veil, whereupon, according to myth, we face ultimate wisdom. This wisdom, to recall the novel's prelude, is the deceptively simple acknowledgment that there is no external force that has authored the universal script according to its own special plan. Rather we individuals, alone and together, are making it all up. Ultimate wisdom, for Robbins, involves the power to accept the responsibility of authorship. When Salome's final veil dropped, Ellen Cherry (humanity's saving grace) realised that "each and every single individual had to establish his or her own special, personal, particular, unique, direct, one-on-one, hands-on relationship with reality, with the universe, with the Divine. It might be complicated, it might be a pain in the ass, it might be, most of all, lonely – but it was the bottom line" (1990: 412-413).

Where, then, does responsibility for reconfiguring a new humanity lie? The holographic metaphor proposed by complexity theorists like Morin (2008: 20), and environmental activists like Al Gore (1992: 11, 265) suggests that the character of the complex system we call "humanity" is an epiphenomenon of the character of its individual members. If my character alone is only minutely constitutive of the whole, the shared character of more of us together strengthens and vivifies it. A responsible humanity is really a large number of responsible individuals. Social change is not an abstractly collective phenomenon. Rather, change first occurs concretely in the souls of individuals, and then translates into alternative practices. When enough self-transformed individuals reach a critical mass, it creates a tipping point, which, in turn, provokes a viral response, an exponential acceleration of influence, which produces a wholesale change in collective spirit almost overnight. If each of us, then, could muster the personal power to resist the destructive pull of the seven illusions Robbins outlines, which act as barriers to critical self-knowledge, how could we not develop into a better kind of creature, even if we cannot specify generally what that future creature must be like?

References

Caputo, John D. (ed. & commentary)

1997 *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida.* New York: Fordham.

Derrida, Jacques

1992 Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundation of Authority". In: *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, edited by Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld, & David Gray Carlson. New York: Routledge, pp. 3-67.

1996 *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, translated by Eric Prenowitz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Gore, Al

1992 *Earth in the Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit.* New York: Houghton Mifflin.

Hawking, Steven

2009 Does God Play Dice? Online: <http://www.hawking.org.uk/index.-php?option=com_content&view=article&id=64&Itemid=69>. 13 December 2009.

Heidegger, Martin

1962 *Being and Time*, translated by J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Kant, Immanuel

1933 *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Norman Kemp Smith. London: Macmillan.

Lacan, Jacques

1991 *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis: 1954-1955, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Sylvana Tomaselli, notes by John Forrester. New York: W.W. Norton.

Lau, D.C.

1979 Introduction. In: *The Analects*, by Confucius, translated by D. C. Lau. London: Penguin, pp. 9-55.

Malone, David & Tanner, Mark

2008 *High Anxieties – The Mathematics of Chaos*. BBC 4 Documentary, Tuesday 14 Oct, 20:00–21:00 60 mins.

Morin, Edgar

2008 *On Complexity,* translated by Robin Postel. New Jersey: Hampton.

Nietzsche, Friedrich

1966 *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage.

1968 *The Will to Power*, translated by Walter Kaufmann & R.J. Hollingdale, edited by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage.

Plato

1892a *Phaedrus*. In: *The Dialogues of Plato: Translated into English*. Vol. 1, 3rd edition, translations, analyses, & introductions, Benjamin Jowett. Oxford: Clarendon, pp. 431-489.

1892b *Republic*. In: *The Dialogues of Plato: Translated into English*. Vol. 3, 3rd edition, translations, analyses, & introductions, Benjamin Jowett. Oxford: Clarendon, pp. 1-338.

Robbins, Tom
1990 *Skinny Legs and All*. New York: Bantam Dell.

Shlain, Leonard
1998 *The Alphabet versus the Goddess: The Conflict between Word and Image*. New York: Penguin Arkana.

Andrea Hurst
Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University
andrea.hurst@axxess.co.za