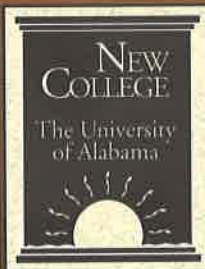


New College Review



ESSAYS ON THE FORCES THAT SHAPE

Volume 10
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New College Review

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This publication is the result of the initiative and perseverance of undergraduate students in New College, College of Arts and Sciences, The University of Alabama.

Students do the work from conception to distribution, proving again that education is experience in the imaginative application of theory.

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Table of Contents

Volume 10 • Spring 1999

Essays

- 4 **Soul Responsibility**
Nature, Nurture, or Neither?
Coming to Terms with The World
Kelly Wolfe
- 10 **Journey into the Center of PEZ**
Residual Effects of Childhood Fantasia
Yert Nedor
- 16 **What's Wrong with Gun Control?**
Gun control, taken in its historic totality, is ultimately more dangerous than the guns it purports to restrict.
Justin James McCorkle
- 20 **Living the Sweet Life**
To comprehend a Nectar
Requires a sorest need. – Emily Dickinson
Eliot Kahlil Wilson & Ariana-Sophia Kartsonis
- 26 **Rattling the Cage**
An Objective Look at Cynicism in American Humor
Matthew Supko
- 34 **with (in) visible distance**
in which minutiae triumph over the universe-at-large
Wesley Cheek
- 38 **In Our Own Image**
Historically, men have created the feminine image. Now it's time for women to define their own.
Sylvia Elliott
- 44 **Living in the OCD Loop—Again, Again, and Again**
Where five-alarm watches and three bottles of juice are more than casual oddities.
Will Hooper
- 52 **Democracy in Alabama**
In the Heart of Dixie, it's easy to believe in democracy. It's much harder, however, to truly practice it.
The Democracy Seminar

Editor's Note

CRAFTSMANSHIP, Nikkolai Ushakov

While your hands mold a form,
While your experience
Has not yet dribbled away,
Dig your fingers into the universe
And fling it on a raging potter's wheel.
The world is yet unfinished,

imperfect,
So place it gently on a pedestal
And slap it hard
That from clay

it might become a thought.

Translated by John Glad

The image of the artisan's hands molding a lifeless medium into meaningful expression is the central idea behind this year's *Review*. It is the task of both potter and writer alike. One at the wheel; the other at the desk. Each is creating Ushakov's thought.

Our contributors were asked to examine those forces which shape—from those which make the soul to those which govern democracies. In looking at these forces, from the smallest minutiae to the grandest piece of *Death by Chocolate*, what the writers seem to have found is that not only do we have the ability to influence, but those things which we would seek to conquer have a way of asserting their influence as well.

This leaves the potter to wonder, "What part has the clay played in its own formation?" Like the sculptor's marble, the medium has its own essence.

So, when you finish the magazine, be sure to ask yourself Omar Al-Khayyam's riddle "Who is the Potter, pray, and who the pot?" Hopefully, the answer will not be so straightforward as before.

Josh Moore
New College, 1999

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Soul Responsibility

Nature, Nurture, or Neither? Coming to Terms with the World

I have never before thought of myself as helplessly impressionable—a piece of clay waiting to be pressed and stretched upon—until I came upon the notion that humans were what the world made of us, products of our environment. What about autonomy and free will, individual thought and self-determination?

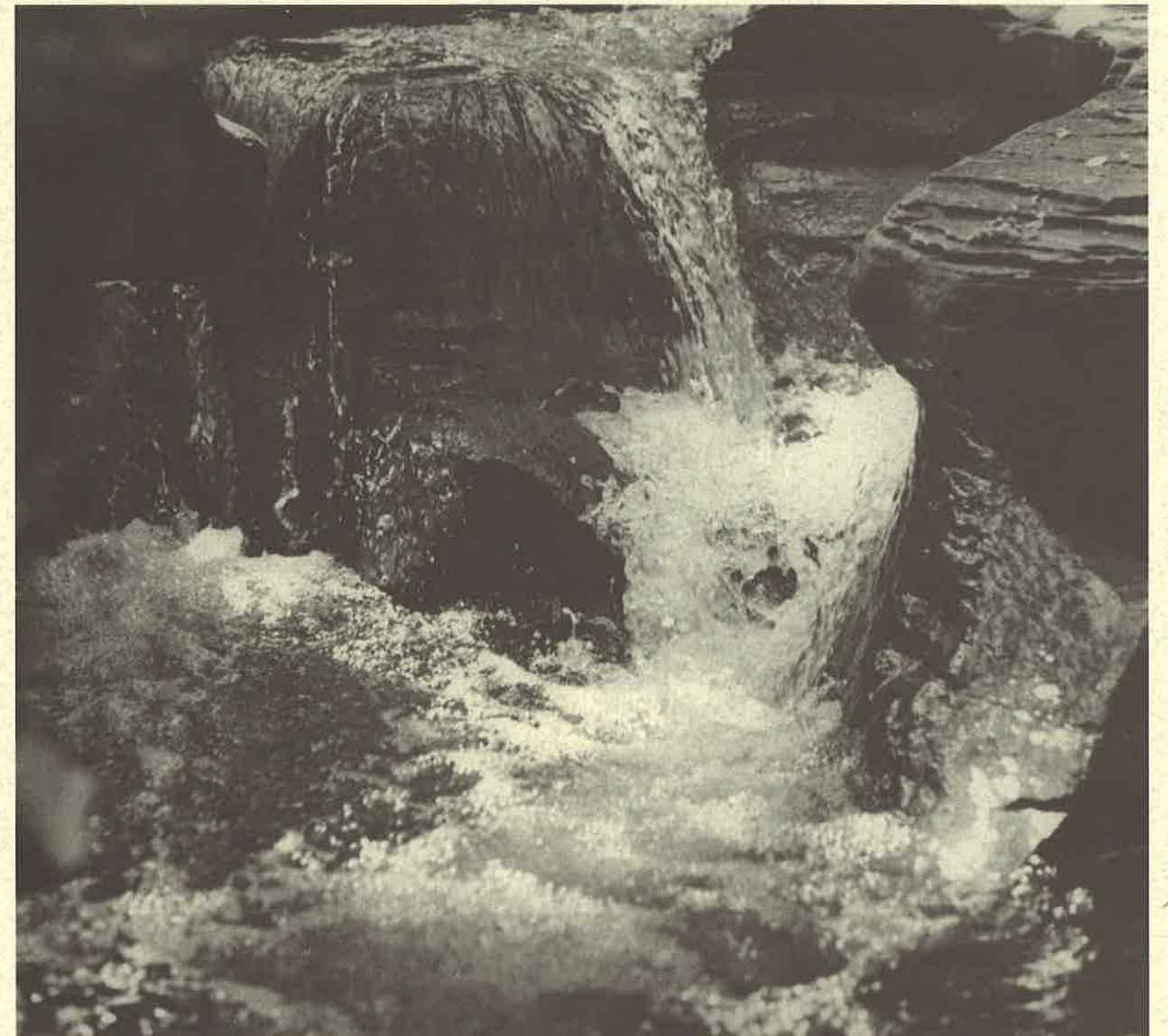
It happened in my college English class, when my teacher proposed the idea that we are in large measure shaped by forces beyond our control, external forces. These external forces make us what we are, sculpting us out of a whirlwind of circumstances and conditions.

Perhaps we have a core inside us, the theory goes, a sense of soul or self, but it exerts no

influence on how we are formed as individuals.

This was rather unsettling news. If every decision I ever made was the result of external forces, where did that leave me as an individual? Am I just a machine going through the assembly line of life? If I accepted this proposition, did that leave me powerless, left in the hands of the world around me? Or was there something else, something that helped mold me, that made me unique and autonomous?

On the other hand, a recent issue of the *Birmingham News* told the story of an ex-gang member who is now one of the top Columbia University Law students. (Gardiner A29) Lawrence Wu was raised by his single mother, an immigrant from Taiwan. At fourteen he joined the Chinatown gang Tung On. He dropped out of school and became the gang's enforcement leader. Surrounded by constant violence, he was nearly convicted of a



External forces may give us life-long experiences and shape our view of reality, but they are not what creates the individual.

drive-by shooting and attempted murder during the same time he watched seven of his friends die in gang violence. At sixteen and never brought up around religion, Wu felt increasingly frustrated and helpless. He wanted to turn his life into something positive. As he watched enviously as his friends prepared for college, he realized the

only way to get out of his situation was to do just that, to get out. He took the high school equivalency exam, graduated from college, and was accepted to Columbia University School of Law. He is now the editor-in-chief of the *Columbia Law* journal. "It was really a gradual realization," he said. He felt his life "was really going nowhere. If

The letter carrying bottle tossed
into the sea may be scarred from
the chaos of the waves, but there
is still that essential core,
waiting to be opened and read,
waiting to be revealed.

I stayed involved in gangs, I was going to either die or go to jail or become some grocery worker."

So what made Wu so different from other gang members? How was he able to transcend the forces of his circumstances to better his life and situation? How was he able to walk out, seemingly unscathed, to live successfully and happily in a broader, vaster world? I wonder if he felt powerless to shape his circumstances. Somehow I don't think so. An Indonesian student, pictured in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, gives flowers to a heavily armed and shielded police officer in the midst of Indonesian political strife and protests. (Wray D2) How was he able to look past the recent events of brutality and hatred and make amends with the enemy? In the midst of violence, what "made him" seek peace? What about the Holocaust survivor who found the will to live, to bear witness and revenge the Nazi regime? Martin Luther King Jr. led the African-American fight for equality and justice with a philosophy of non-violence. What "made" him do this when violence was all that was used against him? There are countless stories of people who overcame their surroundings, who fought for a greater good and resisted the forces around them.

If we truly are products, mechanically crafted through our environment, then how do we explain these stories of will and determination? How do we account for the many that overcame the odds? My English professor may argue that external forces gave these individuals their strength. There are a number of reasons why each one may have persevered. But I see a common thread interwoven through each that gave them a fierce determination and will to fight—an internal force no less influential than the external one. External forces may give us life-long experiences and shape our view of reality, but they are not what creates the individual. Let's give the human race a little more credit than just being a mountain of clay, created only by the impressions left upon it. The letter carrying bottle tossed into the sea may be scarred from the chaos of the waves, but there is still that essential core, waiting to be opened and read, waiting to be revealed. This is to say: there is a direct correlation between the development of the soul and external forces, or environment, but the soul is not created solely by this.

Many of the "nature" writers, like Robert Frost, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau, contended that the environment was an

integral part in shaping the soul, yet there remained a force beyond our surroundings. "The soul is involved in the perception of an intimacy between human personality and the world's communing body" (Moore 173). There is no doubt we are influenced by our surroundings and external forces, but there is, nevertheless, an inherent essence that is the core of our being. The shaping of the soul is dependent upon the way one reconciles with the external forces to which one is subjected. The individual is inevitably constructed through cultural and societal forces. When we acknowledge and recognize this, we use that knowledge as a means through which the "self" emerges. The nature writers saw that the soul and the self are created when the individual manipulates external forces and internalizes them, thus establishing a cohesive relationship between the external forces and the internal self.

I use "soul" to describe the unseen, the being within, that which makes and shapes the self. Thomas Moore, author of the book *Care of the Soul*, defines the soul as ". . . not a thing, but a quality or dimension of experiencing life and ourselves. It has to do with depth, value, relatedness, heart, and personal substance" (Moore 5).

We might look at the self as the physicality of the soul, what is externally seen, or the soul as the "essence" of the self. But you cannot have one without the other, and each acts on the other simultaneously. In this way, the self "houses" the soul, much in the way that a cocoon houses a butterfly larva. The soul contains nothing physical or concrete, rather the emotions and experiences gained and collected through life. If this soul is nurtured, it is transformed and at the same time, transforms our being.

It is the inward search and care of the soul



Kelly Wolfe

that allows us to transcend external forces. As Rice and Waugh said, "The combinations of unique individuality and common human essence cohere around the idea of a sovereign self, whose essential core of being transcends the outward signs of the environment and social conditioning" (118).

Before we can change externally, we must first change internally.

And we must begin with the understanding of where we stand with the world around us, which is that we won't always have our way. Once we accept that we are not completely free and autonomous, that we have, no matter how hard we try to deny it, indeed, been shaped and molded by

the external world—parental opinion, the media and society, prejudices—we can reconcile with that subjectivity in a way that shapes the self. In turn, if we recognize the soul's need for nurture and reconciliation, we can begin the construction of the self. This is what Moore calls "the care of the soul." Learning to care for the soul, Moore says, leads to a deeper understanding of the self and a level of spirituality, not religion, needed to survive. Whether it is through nature, the arts, or the need to be surrounded by people we love, there is something within us all that embraces the heart and gives us a moment of peace. It is that feeling of embracing and peace that cares for the soul. Moore said, "Care of the soul begins with observation of how the soul manifests itself and how it operates" (5). When we come to a basic understanding of the complexities surrounding the soul, we can then find solutions and escapes from the influence of external forces.

In this regard, we can learn from Eastern medical practices that treat the patient as a whole being, not just a physical one. If we can learn to treat ourselves as whole beings, with the soul being the key ingredient, we can then recover and nurture the soul. "When the soul is neglected, it doesn't just go away; it appears symptomatically in obsessions, addictions, violence, and loss of meaning" (Moore xi). We have become an obsessive society, always on the time clock. We watch as our lives tick away in fast-paced jobs and fast-paced lives. We have forgotten that deep within us lies this core, this seed, that needs to be nur-

tured. We wrongly accept that we are totally determined societal constructions. We ought to reconsider that notion and attend to the minute things in life as well as the grander ones. A well-cultivated, well-nurtured soul enables the individual to reconcile and manipulate the societal subjections, thereby creating and shaping the self.

In this connection, Benjamin Hoff makes an excellent philosophical attempt at explaining Taoist fundamentals in his lighthearted and humorous book *The Tao of Pooh*. He discusses the traditional Chinese painting *The Vinegar Tasters* which depicts three men looming over a vat of vinegar to sample it. In Chinese tradition, the men have come to symbolize the "Three Teachings" of China, and the vinegar represents the "Essence of Life" (Hoff 2). Three men and three philosophies are all subjected to the vat of vinegar, and all three react differently.

The first man, Confucius, has a look of disgust. His sour expression reveals Confucian beliefs that "the government of man on earth was out of harmony with the Way of Heaven, the government of the universe" (Hoff 3). He spends most of his time in reverence for his ancestors, living in the past and not appreciating the present. He is preoccupied with habitual measure taken from tradition and not from the soul. He is living on the eternal time clock.

The second man, Buddha, has a look of bitterness, disappointment, and disgust. He has an acrimonious view of life, preoccupied with human suffering and the constant Buddhist quest to reach the

If this soul is nurtured, it is transformed and at the same time, transforms our being.



Philosophical Research Society

Nirvana. Again, another perspective spent mostly dwelling on things not achieved rather than those that have been achieved.

The last man, Lao-tse, the founder of Taoism, has a face of contentment and peace. "To Lao-tse, the world was not a setter of traps, but a teacher of valuable lessons. . . Rather than turn away from the 'world of dust,' Lao-tse advised others to 'join the dust of the world'" (Hoff 5). Acknowledging and accepting the vinegar of life allows us to understand, reconcile, and use the forces that shape us.

Perhaps my English professor needs to dip his finger into the vat once more and retaste the vinegar. We can learn from the Taoist who accepts what he is given and uses it to appreciate and understand the vagaries of life. By caring for our soul, we can reconcile ourselves with the world and perhaps become something greater than the sum of the forces around us. Who knows? Maybe life might seem a little easier, a little more fulfilling. The third man in *The Vinegar Tasters* is smiling not from an insurmountable pleasure gained from the taste but the happiness found in the ability to appreciate life for what it is.

Three men and three philosophies are all subjected to the vat of vinegar, and all three react differently.

Kelly Wolfe, a New College senior, is graduating in May with a depth study in English and Environmental Studies. When not debating about vegetarianism or critiquing literature, she spends most of her time pulling off white Persian cat hair and overfeeding her enormous black cat. Kelly plans to obtain master's and doctorate degrees in Interdisciplinary Studies.

Journey into the Center of PEZ

Residual Effects of Childhood Fantasia

Schwinn bicycles with glittering banana seats cruised the American neighborhoods; Captain Kangaroo and Scooby Doo appeared to have their own network long before the diversified

cable television of today. The Super Friends resided at the Hall of Justice, the force was with Luke Skywalker, and a cute, though vertically-challenged Extra Terrestrial phoned home on the silver screen. Primitive digital technology surfaced in Pac Man and Frogger; all respectable middle class chil-

dren in the country had to have the new Atari. A weekly-fix-for-toys addiction could be found on one particular grocery store aisle. There, strategically shelved, sugar-laden cereals with promotional cartoon character prizes were just in the reach of small hands; and they were G-r-r-r-e-e-a-t. The

cereal treasures were a young child's reward for having convinced their parents to purchase the ingeniously marketed boxes of malnutrition. Entombed deep in the package was a cheap plastic

prize promoted with the admonition to "collect them all." Customers came back for trivial objects, such as R2-D2 stickers and bicycle license plates. Along with each new blockbuster movie or television show, like the A-Team with Mr. T, came promotional "gifts," plastic miniature replicas of star characters; catalysts of a daydream stuffed into every kid's Happy Meal. These trinkets captured the imagination of children and in so doing created a market for useless junk.

Fantasy fueled the fever for toys. In a gro-



Roden family photo

cery store aisle, a child could become something else, somewhere else; part of an elite crime-fighting duo to combat the forces of evil, recruiting help from the animal kingdom, possessing superpowers to defeat the laws of Earthly physics. Mass production and intensive marketing guaranteed a steady diet of trinkets for the imagination.

This creation of desire, where there was no need, brought me to love Atari, long for the next Transformer, and attempt, with little luck, to convince my mother to buy Apple Jacks. Ours was and is a nation of excessive consumerism where functionless "stuff" is sold by the millions. Products became popular for their disposability, and they were everywhere. I was a child of the age. How was it, then, that in this oversaturated culture of stuff, so directed at children, that I missed out on PEZ?

I recently discovered PEZ for the first time during a trip to a local video rental store where a three-foot-deep vat of PEZ dispensers caught my attention. Standing at the height of about four inches, they resemble an oversized cigarette lighter, though the distinguishing quality of PEZ is that each is topped off with the head of a classical pop icon. The heads depict such heroes as Superman, Wonder Woman, Kermit the Frog, Charlie Brown, and the Flintstones. The candy dispensers cost about 99 cents and can be purchased with or without the

artificially fruit flavored sugar. PEZ isn't just a candy dispenser, it's a "collectable." Millions, children and adults, consume the candy, collect the dispensers, and display them with pride. For some, it's a way of life. Why? It's an odd object—a plastic head with a square barrel for a body full of candies. What's the purpose? Even more strange, who thought it up in the first place? And how did I make it through childhood without having my mind toyed with in this way?



Trey Roden

I bought a couple of PEZ; Spiderman has always been my favorite: he was an ordinary guy who was transformed by a mishap lab experiment and consequently attained special powers. I put them in my pockets, feeling like a kid on the cereal aisle, and decided to find out what made PEZ such a captivating phenomenon.

This mission would take me to Europe, and it was definitely a sortie for Covert International Special Agent T. And, of course, all good crime fighters require an honest sidekick. I remembered a mission, some years ago, in which The Flash and I foiled a sinister mastermind's attempt to seize the combined assets of the Cold War nations. The assignment was executed with precision. You may be asking why I was considering to work again with The Flash. Well, his credentials speak for themselves. The Flash is a globally celebrated superhero who wears spandex without fear of public ridicule. The Flash has worked with the likes of Superman, The Green Lantern, Batman and Robin, and Wonder Woman. (Actually he was a part-time mechanic on her Invisible Jet.) Furthermore the guy has the ability to travel through time, like Michael Johnson in that Mountain Dew commercial. Yes, The Flash has the expertise and credentials needed to affirm my theory that PEZ, indeed, is a planetary effort to control the psyches of millions.

After blowing the dust off the third volume, second edition, of my little black book, I contacted The Flash. In order for this dynamic duo to be assembled, certain channels of communication must be employed. The Flash has a specially designated encrypted Gordon Industries satellite that routes my message through the Internet via 50 different countries, so as to lose anyone who might be on my trail. Then the message is translated into pig Latin, routed through highly secured govern-

mental phone lines, where it is then intercepted and deciphered by his in-house pig Latin scholar. After a long conversation, complete with mistranslation, the dyad for discovering the origin of the PEZ phenomenon had been assimilated.

I debriefed my associate and explained the liability of the assignment. He graciously accepted, as all good superheroes do. We rendezvoused in the streets of Paris to plan our mission at a local coffeehouse, where they played horrible techno music and wore only black. We concluded that, at best, PEZ was a harmless and whimsical way to ingest concentrated high fructose corn sugar. At



Trey Roden

worst PEZ was a global conspiracy to manipulate young minds. We had to act fast, while we knew some minds had yet to be tampered with.

The investigation reached a critical stage when Flash and I contacted an elite network of undercover, inter-galactic spies who (headed by the Wonder Twins) had pledged their allegiance to the pursuit of Truth. Actually the spies had been working on the PEZ conspiracy for some years and now needed our help to solve the mystery. My cohorts and I concluded, due to the number of generations effected by the PEZ conspiracy, that the answers to our questions lay in the past.

In an instant, The Flash, as his name implies, vanished almost 70 years into the past. I sipped on my skinny mocha latte with double shots of espresso topped with whipped cream and chocolate shavings, and read the latest copy of the *Superhero Insider*, a scholarly journal only available to agents of my caliber.

Meanwhile...The Flash was uncovering the ancestry of PEZ. Flash found himself in 1927 Vienna, Austria, where, with cunning prowess, he tracked down Sir Edward Haas III, who had recently developed a concentrated mint he distributed in decorative tins. Sir Haas was the creator of an empire of pfefferminz, the over staccatoed German name for peppermint (*Pez.org*). Flash discovered that PEZ was an acronym derived from the first, middle and last letters in the word pfefferminz. Ingenious.

Meanwhile...The skinny mocha latte with double shots of espresso topped with whipped cream and chocolate shavings had spilled in my lap.

Back in the past...The Flash, superhero extraordinaire, had sped into the future, with the celerity of a million beams of light, to the 1949

Vienna Trade Fair. There Haas and his brigade were marketing their new dispensers, blatantly intended to look like cigarette lighters that housed the pfefferminz. The Flash determined that the mint was being marketed to adult smokers, perhaps to curb their addictions, perhaps to divert it to Haas's more sinister purposes (*Pez.org*). I feared for the human race.

Meanwhile...Back in the present, I changed clothes, putting on a black turtleneck and black slacks in order to fit in with the crowd at the small Paris coffee bar (thereby reducing my suspicious appearance). I wasn't sure how to solve my inability to speak the French language or to disguise my thick Alabama accent. So, using an international sign language I ordered another skinny mocha latte with double shots of espresso topped with whipped cream and chocolate shavings. The waitress thought I was practicing Tai Chi; nonetheless I got my order.

The Flash continued to communicate with me uninterrupted about the PEZ mystery. Superhero Insider's mad scientist, G, had developed a bionic encryptable intra-time telepathic transponder that was surgically incorporated into

Standing at the height of about four inches, they resemble an oversized cigarette lighter, though the distinguishing quality of PEZ is that each is topped off with the head of a classical pop icon.

our brains to keep us continuously in contact. The Flash sped through time to 1952, when test marketing on children proved to be a viable consumer outlet for the emerging PEZ dispensers

ejected from the neck region. Once the children were hooked on the whimsical dispensers, they had little opportunity to break the habit during adulthood.

The cereal treasures were a young child's reward for having convinced their parents to purchase the ingeniously marketed boxes of malnutrition.

(Pez.org). By 1960, the sales of the fruit candy were geared directly towards the youth of the world (Pezland). Children became the target, and I! Covert International Special Agent T could not let the possibilities go unreported.

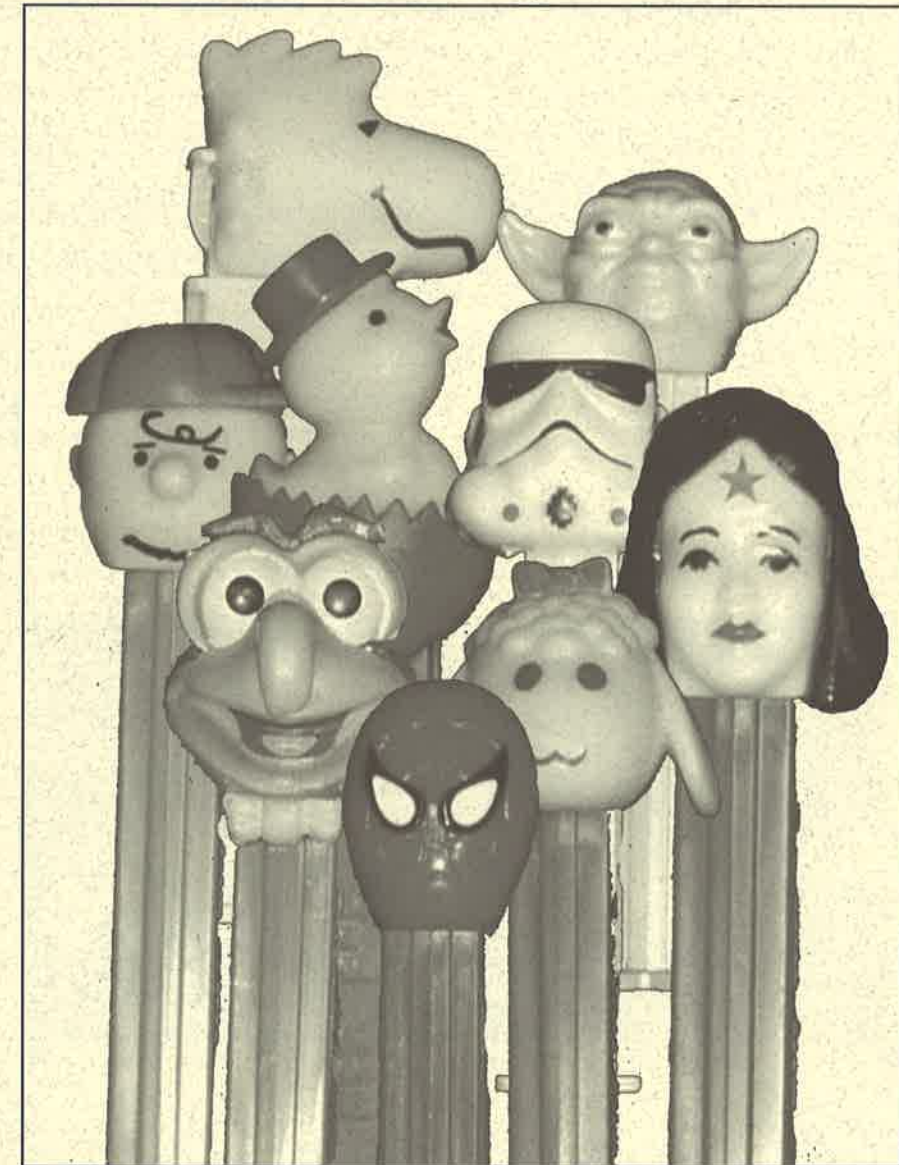


The company cleverly placed the heads of pop culture's figurines atop their dispensers, and this was successful in attracting the mindless masses. Flash said he noticed that with an anterior rotation of the figurine's head candy could be steered off the course of fixation that the fruit flavored candy induced. Flash discovered a North American operation in 1983 in Orange, Connecticut. Over the next decade, Flash saw the plant expand, producing the bright colored candy dispensers 24 hours a day (Pezland). Thousands of people, children and adults, began to collect PEZ, paying large sums of money for rare ones.

The Flash saw busts of his colleagues from the Hall of Justice selling at specialty stores for exorbitant sums of money. A soft-headed Batgirl sold for \$295; she surpassed her mentor Blue Batman who only fetched \$165. They were all overshadowed by The Green Hornet's \$300 price tag (Pez Store). Needless to say, The Flash was disappointed that he had apparently missed the opportunity to profit from his image in the world of mass marketing.

I finished reading my *Superhero's Insider* journal, and this black turtleneck was choking me. It was time to conclude the mission. The Flash, having become disgusted with the treatment of his colleague's heads, returned to the Paris coffeehouse where our mission began. We recorded our findings on a mini-disc, and handed it off to the Wonder Twins and the elite network of undercover, inter-galactic spies who had pledged their allegiance to the pursuit of Truth. They would know what to do with our discovery.

It was time for me to return to the rat-race life at the university. The Flash and I walked down the wet cobblestone streets of Paris mulling over what we had learned. The mission was arduous, but it had been many years since I had had so much fun. We stopped at *Le Drug Store*. Flash got a Tweety Bird. I got a Psychedelic Eye. The fact that childhood inevitably comes to an end does not mean that the residual effects, coupled with the occasional engagement in the world of phantasm, cannot last a lifetime.

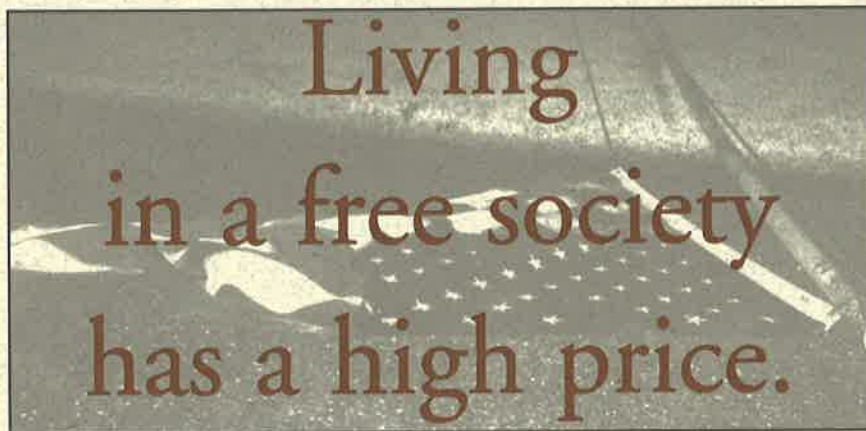


Yert Nedor is currently living the life of a subterranean hermit below a comic book store in Boston. There he secretly advises professors at Harvard and Boston University on the finer points of modern comic book analysis. Rumor has it that the underground miser of the comics, and his colleague, Covert International Special Agent T, have recently slipped away on yet another mission. An intercepted message suggested they were attempting to save the planet's environment, not from a diabolical villain, but from the hands of the human race itself.

What's Wrong with Gun Control?

Gun control, taken in its historic totality, is ultimately more dangerous than the guns it purports to restrict.

In 1998 President Clinton banned the importation of several weapons by executive action. The President's ban was aimed at firearms altered to meet the standards for importation laid out in the 1994 Anti-crime Act and The Brady Bill. The manufacturers altered the weapons by removing the features, which classified them as assault weapons according to the new legislation. The manufacturers removed flash suppressors, bayonet lugs, and pistol grips.



Justin James McCorkle

totality is ultimately much more dangerous than the guns it purports to control. First of all, it threatens one of our basic freedoms, the Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, and along with it the other nine amendments in the Bill of Rights. Secondly, the fact that gun control legislation has been allowed to pass at all is a sign that the people of the United States have forgotten their history. Finally, gun control simply does not work.

The average citizen might see this as the heroic efforts of a popular president to keep dangerous guns off the streets and out of the hands of our children. But the order had other more sweeping repercussions. This action was just the most recent in a 30-year-long stint of legislative and executive actions aimed at taking away our freedom to defend ourselves, aimed at undermining the Bill of Rights.

The Bill of Rights, all of the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution, apply to individual and/or personal rights. For example; under the First Amendment we have the individual right to free exercise of our religion, freedom of speech, and the right to peaceably assemble. Under the Third Amendment, no soldier shall be quartered in any individual or family dwelling. Under the Fourth Amendment, we have the individual rights to defend our person and our home from unreasonable search and seizure.

Gun control legislation taken in its historic

Under the Fifth Amendment, we have the individual right not to incriminate ourselves and the right to an individual trial by jury. We also have the individual right not to be tried for the same offense twice under the Sixth Amendment as well as the individual right to a speedy and public

trial, the right to call witnesses, and to be appointed counsel. The Seventh Amendment states that in cases of common law where the amounts in question exceed twenty dollars, the individual right to trial by jury shall be preserved. The Eighth Amendment states that excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel or unusual punishment inflicted. Clearly this pertains to individual, personal rights. The Ninth Amendment states that the writing in the Constitution shall not be construed to deny or disparage other rights retained by the people. The final amendment in the Bill of Rights clearly states that any powers not granted the federal government should be reserved for the states or the people as individuals (Brown 299). Clearly, the founding fathers of our country did not disregard the rest of the Bill of Rights when they wrote the Second Amendment, which states, "A well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed" (Brown 298).

The average citizen might see this as the heroic efforts of a popular president to keep dangerous guns off the streets and out of the hands of our children.

other nine rights set out in the Bill of Rights. The Second Amendment clearly states that the "right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed." Therefore, gun control is illegal. Most of us do not seem to understand the role that guns have played in the shaping of our nation. Our forefathers valued highly the right to defend themselves. They saw the right to bear arms as basic and important not only for the sake of physical safety, but for the sake of mental safety and as a practical means of recreation. Thomas Jefferson stated, "A strong body makes the mind strong. As to the species of exercises I advise the gun. While this gives a moderate exercise to the body, it gives boldness, enterprise, and independence to the mind. Games played with the ball and others of that nature are too violent for the body and stamp no character on the mind. Let your gun therefor [sic], be the constant companion of your walks" (Polsby 33). Gun control as we know it began with the Gun Control Act of 1968. Prior to 1968, only machine guns and destructive devices such as hand grenades were regulated by the federal government. The Gun Control Act of 1968 was

The Second Amendment, like the other nine amendments in the Bill of Rights, must not

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passed in the wake of the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr.. The Act banned the mail-order sale of guns to persons who were not federally licensed, banned the manufacture of several guns, so called Saturday night specials, and restricted the distribution of ammunition. While this may seem innocent and well-intentioned, it was only the first step in a 30-year-long series of executive actions and federal and state legislation. This is more than enough time for the people to be conditioned into believing that guns are somehow innately evil. With each successive piece of legislation, the message has been sent that guns are intrinsically evil, that we should not only not have guns, but also that we should not want to have them. This was simply not the case only a few generations ago. In the 1960s few American boys were considered normal without a gun. Most had guns by the age of twelve, and no one thought it was dangerous or wrong. Today we have been conditioned by years of media frenzy and over-hype aimed at gun related violence.

Struggles, and movements in general, face series of boundaries set up to protect society from calamity. Once the first barrier is crossed, the movement gains strength and the next barrier is even easier to breach, and so to the next barrier, and then the next, etc.

Adolph Hitler took only a few years to convince the people of Germany, a very modern and civilized nation, that it was morally right to take guns out of private hands. His philosophy of disarmament and destruction was simple, and he made it sound very appealing and in the interest of the people and the state. In a speech in 1935, Hitler stated, "This year will go down in history. For the first time a civilized nation has full gun registration! Our streets will be safer, our police

more efficient, and the world will follow our lead into the future!" (Georgia 12)

Our freedom as a nation exists because of a willingness and a right to bear arms. If the people of the original colonies had not been armed, then there never could have been a United States in the first place. In the Revolutionary War, men with guns stood up for what they believed in and won our freedom. We must not squander what our ancestors gained. We must stand up and fight affronts to the freedom of our nation and other free peoples of the world.

Because we are a stable, prosperous democracy, we may be less vulnerable to internal conflict than other nations, but the possibility is still there. It is interesting to note that the city with the highest murder rate in the United States, Washington D.C., also has the strictest gun control laws



(Ayoob 60). In our nation's capital it is illegal to carry firearms and concealed carry permits are not available. Permits from neighboring states are not recognized in Washington D.C. This did not stop gunmen from firing on The White House in 1996 or 1997. In 1996 a lone gunman fired several unanswered shots into the outer compound of The White House before being subdued by passers by. In 1997 a gunman shot and killed two security officers on a public tour of The White House. Another chilling fact is the rate at which civilians are shot and killed by police officers in the Capital. Last year more than 50 people died from police inflicted gunshot wounds. This is 150 percent higher than the national average. According to Handgun Control Inc. (H.C.I.), the states with the strongest anti-gun laws, those rating A's, are Illinois, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, Ohio, and Wisconsin. The crime rates in these States are relatively high. At the opposite end of the spectrum, those states which rate F's according to H.C.I. are Georgia, Indiana, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, and Washington State. Vermont is the only State that still allows its citizens true freedom to bear arms. In Vermont a permit is not required; H.C.I. gave Vermont a special F-minus. The nine states rated F by H.C.I. have the lowest crime rates in the nation, a fact that H.C.I. failed to mention. (Ayoob 60).

These statistics show that gun control measures do not work. They are ineffective and impossible to enforce. Mexico and Columbia are perfect examples. Mexican law does not allow citizens to

lawfully possess any type of weapon, yet more than 1,000 Mexican police have been gunned down in the last year alone. Columbia's gun control laws are similar and in that country the situation is just short of anarchy. More than 3000 Columbian police officers have been murdered and 10 of Columbia's 55 helicopters have been shot down in the last two years alone!(Nightwine 40). Obviously,

strict gun control laws do nothing to reduce the number of crimes being committed.

Living in a free society has a high price. If you put ten people in a room, only one may be a criminal and unfit to live with the others. If you put 100 into that room, 10 may be criminals. In the United States, there are nearly 270 million people. Less than 10% may be criminal, the other 90% are responsible citizens. Would a sane person honestly suggest taking away our entire population's only means of self defense and security in order to protect criminals? Gun control, as we have seen, does not work and is in essence both legally and morally wrong. It is our responsibility as Americans to ensure that the rights of the people are not forgotten in the struggle to make a better society. We are as one, but we are many, and we must not forget one another.

The Second Amendment placed no conditions on this or any of the other nine rights set out in the Bill of Rights.

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Living the Sweet Life

*To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.*

— Emily Dickinson

This is how they will find me. First, one brown shoe will float to the surface, and, later that day, workers will find my other brown shoe. This will start a storm of recrimination. Memos will appear in the employee dressing rooms: "Product contamination is grounds for immediate dismissal." A day, maybe two days, will pass.

A pair of chocolate socks will rise to the surface. Management will be furious. There will be serious talk of installing cameras and television monitors. It won't be until my boxer shorts, steaming and covered in a rich dark chocolate, float up to the surface that the full extent of my particular crime, in all of its delicious horror, comes to light. Kevorkian be damned. I've given it a great deal of thought. When the time comes, I'm ending my life by leaping into one of the giant copper cauldrons of liquid chocolate at Hershey Park in Hershey, Pennsylvania. What better way

to die? A serotonin ecstasy. A warm, sweet sleep in a fattening, brown Jesus.

I can see my body spread out on the cooling board like a giant, ill-starred Keebler Elf.

*Jack Sprat could eat no fat
His wife could eat no lean
So betwixt them both, you see
They licked the platter clean*

*

There is a table in heaven, a long table filled with dish after dish of full-fat; lipid-laden, anything-but-diet foods; and women of every shape and size with full plates. None of them hate their bodies. None of heaven's girls assault themselves in a full-length mirror. No punching at saddlebags—real or imagined. No turning sideways

Heaven is calorie-free. There is no vocabulary for low-fat, sugarless, cholesterol-free.



order. "How is this prepared? Dressing on the side. Just vinegar, no oil. Hold the butter. Hold the mayo. Hold the whole entrée and begin again."

At that table in heaven we order cravings first. The ten-story stack of pancakes please. The banana split. The delicious freedom.

*

A Slice of Heaven
"It's called *Death by Chocolate*," she says as she pushes toward me a

and smacking hard at a curved abdomen.

Heaven is calorie-free. There is no vocabulary for low-fat, sugarless, cholesterol-free.

"Can you imagine," says one woman. "Back there, we looked at a menu and ruled out those foods that we really wanted but couldn't have. Then we chose from the one or two items left while all around us luscious foods arrived and sat themselves down in front of somebody else."

Yes, we told our friends, our husbands, ourselves, I actually prefer this plate of boiled dinner (hold the dressing) to fettuccine alfredo. I'd really rather eat Brer Rabbit's Delight while you eat thick-crust, double-cheese, extra sausage, double pepperoni pizza. Just that melted mozzarella and garlic smell of pizza is plenty for me. I eat vicariously.

Yes, I love taking ten minutes to place an

gooey divot of cake that is so huge it looks as if they cut it with a post hole digger. We're at a local café drinking overpriced coffee and trying to breathe through a wool blanket of smoke. This piece of cake beckons me. Although I'm a diabetic, I take a fork-full from the heel of the cake and raise it up to the light. This is a magic moment for most people. There should be celestial music

So I order a slice of *Death by Chocolate*, a dark and fudgy wedge of sin, and settle down with my coffee and this slice of cake the size of a small building.



When I finally tire of blandly wholesome fare, I binge like a jack monk in Vegas.

playing, but in the glimmer of icing on that cake I see kidney failure and the ensuing years of dialyses, I see distal neuropathy and nonhealing foot ulcers, I see heart disease. I see myself dying slowly like a stump. I also see not seeing. I'm already losing my vision. Tiny capillaries in one eye have already burst and stained sections of my visual field. Think of a windshield that never gets clean. Knowing this is something heavy every day. That pain in my lower back isn't my back either. It's my kidneys talking: they're not happy, but the cake, the cake is delicious.

*

Let them Eat Cake

It's Saturday afternoon and we decide to go out for coffee and a treat. It's taken 10 years for me to learn that I can eat the occasional slice of cake and with the right proportion of motion to consumption, I won't balloon into my former shape. So I order a slice of *Death by Chocolate*, a dark and fudgy wedge of sin, and settle down with my coffee and this slice of cake the size of a small building. Then, as my fork is poised to take down a full wing of that structure, the frosting glistens and in that glistening I see the cover of this month's *Mademoiselle*—a woman with bony wings for shoulder blades and a lyre for a breast bone. I see me as I once saw myself—shapeless and blob-

like, floating on the margins of my life. Though I've yet to taste it, I know it won't be nearly as sweet now. It's an ambiguous indulgence, at best, a bittersweet bit of contraband.

*

I'm eight and I cannot see out of my left eye. I'm sporting a sweaty eye patch; a red bandanna covers my shaved head. My left hand is a hard plastic hook. My right hand grips a heavy plastic pumpkin. Though the strap is cutting into my hand, I will not put down my pumpkin for any reason. I cling to my pumpkin the way some pine trees clutch to the sides of cliffs. I'm rooted to it; it's an appendage now. There will be no putting it down for pictures or costume adjustments. When I have to scratch under my eye patch, I use the hook.

That pain in my lower back isn't my back either.
It's my kidneys talking:
they're not happy, but the cake, the cake is delicious.

*

I'm eight and I've fallen in love with a swimsuit so rainbowed and vivid that it comes with its own tiny, plastic, banana-yellow sunglasses. My best friend, Marissa, and I have emerged from the dressing room.

"Suck it in or name it," says my mother.

I want this swimsuit like a last wish but something in me deflates and when I look in the

mirror again, I feel the first sharp stab of humiliation. The swimsuit is perfect. Two perfect oval windows cut out of the sides. But if you look through those windows there is a pinch of baby fat at my waist. The suit is ruined for me. Marissa bought one and wore it everyday, it seemed to me—clear into that Utah December—even to church. I bought a dreadful black maillot with a flouncy ruffled skirt thing to hide my little belly. The few times I went swimming were enough for me to learn how to shed layers—towel, and cover-up—so that, as I was jumping into the pool, my body was hitting the water's surface just as the airborne towel was suspended over the concrete edge and was close enough to be within reach as I pulled my body out of the water and into the towel upon finishing my self-conscious swim—so self-conscious, the pool might as well have been an aquarium. There was just one moment of pleasure: buoyed by water and suspended there, light at last and full of grace.

*

Here where the Puritan traditions still work to squelch pleasure both in the erotic and the gustatory, I give food a fond lover's attention. Even before I developed diabetes, I would dream not of Farrah Fawcett, chilly in a burnt orange swimsuit and smiling from her altar above my dresser, but of my mattress transformed into a huge rectangle

of cheesecake. So when I consider my abiding love of food in relation to this affliction, I think of Beethoven without his hearing and Milton without his sight. The irony harkens back to fifth century Athens. This diabetes inspired my belief in Fate, a spiteful Fate. Still, I know full well that there are worse ailments to have. With this, at least, I won't be gaining any weight since weight gain is, technically, a healthy cellular response. The more I eat, the more my blood sugar fluctuates, the more weight I actually lose. The style of living that diabetes imposes is the difficulty. It requires balance, moderation, and control—three traits I do not possess in excess. It's a difficult balance to maintain but balance, by definition, always is. It seems axiomatic that the more human nature is restrained, the worse it will be when it finally frees itself. When I finally tire of blandly wholesome fare, I binge like a jack monk in Vegas.

*

By nine I was drinking Fresca and Slim-Fast powdered lunch with skim milk, in the days before Nestle's Success Shake. I was nine years old and starting the first in a string of over 60 diets, all of which would fail. Instead they backfired with their quick-fix mentality. It would take me years

to learn what now seems like common sense: motion and moderation. Dieting would take years and a toll on my physical health. But for all the time it took to get the fat off the girl, it would take twice as long to get the fat girl off my back. I used to make my own fat jokes. I may be fat, I reasoned, but at least I know I am. So I'd beat everyone to the punchline. Paunch line.

Sometimes, even now, when he says "you're beautiful," she's there again—the fat girl on my shoulder whispering cruel little contradictions. "Beautiful?" she says, "Surely, he means plentiful...."

*

There is a Success shake in the refrigerator right now. Chocolate. It almost went unnoticed there behind the fish sauce and jalapeno mustard. I know it is there, though; it's a food trophy, it's my mind's sore tooth.

*

Driving down the highway and I see the familiar bumper sticker. NO FAT CHICKS. Though she is over a decade behind me, she is there at these times—the fat girl I carry even now, sometimes, hot faced and shameful, then enraged at that trucker. The three words mean to sting every

SURGEON GENERAL'S WARNING:

**I scream;
you scream;
we all scream
for ice cream!**

woman who struggles on a daily basis to meet a harsh world's idea of thin enough, every woman who is unlucky enough to be caught behind the offensive vehicle, chrome, naked silhouetted chick on the mudflaps and all. It always makes me angry. Funny thing how so many of those bumper-stickered drivers have backsides as wide as their trucks. Funny how many of these truckers sport thunder thighs and Buddha bellies.

And then there are the others. The men secure enough in themselves, in their idea of beauty, to have a deep and varied appreciation of form. The ones who like flesh and women with an appetite, a generosity of spirit, the passionate nature that generosity implies. "Who wants to hold a bag of coat hangers, after all," these men declare.

The subtext at every meal:
Her trying not to gain weight.
Him trying not to lose.

*

There must be a perfect amount of olive oil to use when I cook a meal—enough to keep my platelets slippery, but just under her daily amount of fat intake.

The way the word pancreas now holds a small world of meaning—the frail organza of it, the tissuey fear.

Maybe it makes things twice as complicated, this love-hate triangle with food. Or maybe it breeds a level of understanding, a middle ground

between the feast and the fast you battle alone, together. The great meals that go double appreciated. The small courtesies we afford one another. The small blue packets of artificial sweetener we carry for each other's coffee.

"Such necessary sugar,
such goings on."

—Anne Sexton

*

This is us. Midnight—the check-floating hour—in the supermarket reveling in a full grocery cart. The sweet serenade of the floor polishing machine and a food orgy on wheels. This is lust.

Abliguration:
adj., 1.) Excessive
or prodigal
spending on
food and drink.

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Ariana-Sophia Kartsonis is completing a master of fine arts degree in creative writing in the Department of English. Her work has appeared in International Quarterly, Thema, and Walking the Twilight: Southwest Women Writers.

Rattling the Cage

An Objective Look At Cynicism in American Humor

1) ON THE DOG PHILOSOPHY.

Like many English words related to intellectual abstracts, the term cynicism derives from the vast Greek tradition. It means, literally, "the dog philosophy," after the philosopher Diogenes, who, living as a homeless pauper, first applied irony to the excesses of the upper class. This is exactly what cynicism is at its core: an application of ironic and/or sarcastic methods to satirize the excesses and evils of society. The Athenians, disgusted with Diogenes' minimalist lifestyle, referred to him as a dog. The term that arose from this, "dog philosophy," roughly translated into English, reads as "cynicism."

Cynicism has been practiced on and off throughout history, but, unlike many philosophies, it tends to spring up in quite unusual ways. First, cynics rarely cite or even know much about their own predecessors. Cynicism is one of the only philosophies whose practitioners rarely even know they're embodying a philosophy. It is rare indeed that cynics or ironists will acknowledge another cynic, let alone trace their tradition back to Diogenes. Second, cynicism tends to appear in

successful, culturally literate societies that promote free speech and open debate such as Classical Greece and post-Renaissance Britain. It is only natural, therefore, that cynicism should creep into American culture. And nowhere is it more prominent in American culture than in its humor.

2) CYNICISM IN THE MEDIA.

The newly diversified cable industry has given rise to a number of highly specialized television channels; one of the most popular is the network Comedy Central. Given its dominance in its market, the network (an American channel in origin) should prove an excellent example of mainstream American humor. Comedy Central's two most popular shows, the mock-news send-up *The Daily Show* and the irritatingly ubiquitous *South Park* are both dripping with pure toxic sarcasm. *South Park* (the show that, incidentally, accounts for a dangerously large portion of the network's budget) features the misadventures of four obscenity-spewing school children. Each episode typically centers around a satirical theme chosen for shock value; for example, a recent episode

It is close to impossible to prove a skilled cynic wrong.

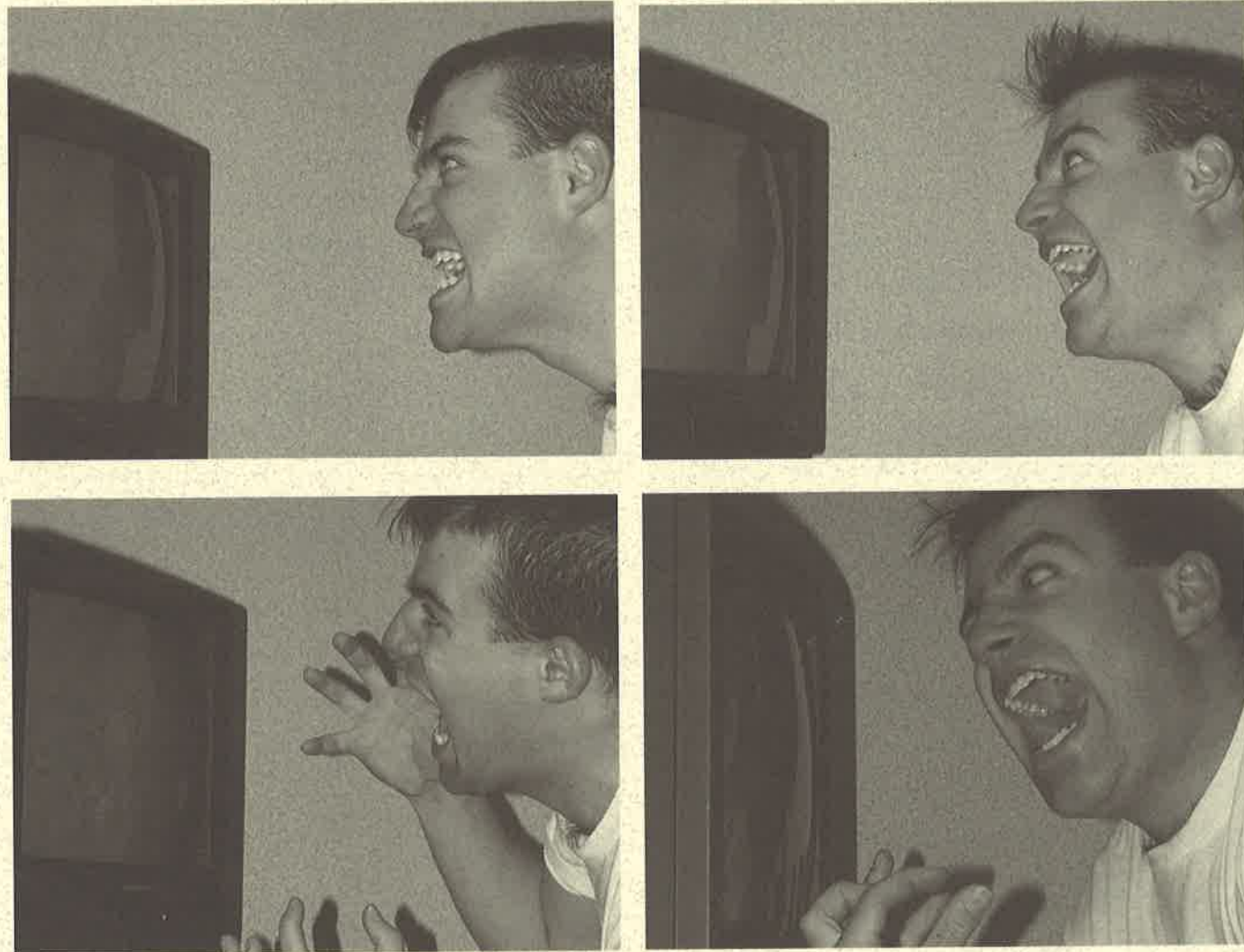
ridiculed excessive displays of sympathy and acceptance for people with disabilities through the character of a school nurse with a dead fetus attached to her head. The entire town insists on honoring her at innumerable banquets and events, declaring a day "conjoint-twin myslexia syndrome day" and even bringing in a guitarist to sing a song which runs something like, "you're my conjoint-twin myslexia, dead thing hangin' offa your head wooman." This excessive attention upsets the nurse, who finally declares something to the effect of, "Can't you see that all I want is to be ignored and made fun of like the rest of you?" This is an excellent example of acerbic American humor *in extremis*. The show deploys the philosophy of cynicism through (scathing) satire, using exaggeration and unusual contexts to expose the fraudulence and shallowness of an idea or principle.

The Daily Show provides another genius example of cynicism at its most biting. While episodes consist of several variable components, the primary segment is the actual "news" portion of the show, in which the top stories are related by anchor Craig Kilborn. The stories are invariably given ridiculous names wherein lurk insidious puns. For example, a story on a recently debated measure to ensure the deposition of senile Supreme Court members was entitled, "Sanity Clause is Comin'." What can become a bit disturbing about this humorous treatment is that

often the stories involve complex moral dimensions which are completely precluded by this partial treatment. For example, *The Daily Show* handled the TWA 800 crash with a big string of (largely hilarious) jokes; such parodies tend to desensitize the issue. I am not implying that it is a news anchor's job to inject pathos into depressing stories; I am suggesting that sarcastic treatment can be a bias all its own in that, through its tendency to ridicule events, it can leave people entirely unconcerned about the material it covers.

But I certainly do not wish to suggest that Comedy Central is the only breeding ground for sarcasm; I merely think it is probably the wittiest at its trade. Outside of a few excellent shows (such as 20th Century Fox's *The Simpsons*), humor, particularly that aimed at younger audiences, on most major networks is of the most coarse and gaudy kind. Shows such as *Beavis and Butthead* (now thankfully defunct) employ a tackily commercial, rebellion-rooted sort of sarcasm as their primary source of appeal. Even *Tonight Show* host Jay Leno's increasingly pathetic monologues rely on a certain tepid cynicism to keep them as feebly amusing as they are.

TV ads, too, are increasingly using implications of sarcasm and rebellion to lure younger Americans into buying their products. These 30-second doses of sniveling irony traditionally follow one of a small number of plot lines: there's the



TV ads, too, are increasingly using implications of sarcasm and rebellion to lure younger Americans into buying their products.

board game commercial where the "cool" kid absolutely dismembers an older relative, the weapons-of-mass-destruction commercial where kids pelt the fat whiny gym coach with rapid-fire foam pellets, and so on.

Beyond television, sarcasm is sprouting in nearly all media: from the drunken anarchistic ramblings of punk rock to the shallow "rant columns" in such trendy magazines as *SPIN*, to most humorous books and stand-up comedy, cynicism prevails.

3) THE ALLURE OF CYNICISM.

Admittedly, cynicism can be a rather attractive philosophy. It hinges on the timeless fallacy of, "You're wrong, ergo, I'm right." Cynicism, used effectively and economically, can prove a nearly impregnable philosophy; it is close to impossible to prove a skilled cynic wrong. Sarcasm and irony are ideal escapes for people who lack belief or lack proper courage to state and defend what they believe. There's also a power motive involved; the ability to look with scorn upon others, whether by mocking their actions or deriding the principles they live by, provides a tremendous sensation of superiority. Sarcasm is remarkably easy to create and improvise because it doesn't even have to have a point, other than deriding its target. This is where rampant degenerate cynicism and true satire differ: true satire has a purpose; it strategically employs such devices as sarcasm and irony to expose flaws in its targets, whereas degenerate cynicism is merely shallow derision.

4) WHY ARE AMERICANS SO UTTERLY SARCASTIC?

Given that Americans live in an era of vast economic prosperity, little political tension, and high life expectancies, how can we possibly have this voracious appetite for vitriol? Why are the citizens of arguably the world's most successful nation so bloody bitter about everything? To paraphrase the Indian guru, the answer lies within the problem, because it is an inherent part of the problem. A large portion of the reason we're so cynical about everything is because we're one of the few societies in history that's ever had the free time to analyze matters in such a manner. Americans are comparable to (in fact, they somewhat are) spoiled rich children; we are raised in a world where life is fairly easy, and we end up snapping irritably but not injuriously at the various appendages that feed us. But I do not wish to imply that there is no such thing as self-actualization. Comfort does not necessarily lead to contentment. Americans are living proof that being well-to-do can also entail being incredibly bitter and resentful.

What is lacking? For one thing, America can prove too vast and diverse for people to feel a solid sense of identity anymore. The rapid expansion of the country, sharp rise in population in recent years, the continued influx of immigrants from various and vastly different cultures, and the sudden loosening of cultural organization after the Cold War all have left people with a weakened sense of identity. The enormous advances in com-

munication in recent years have shown people a world outside their own, but they do not feel intimately connected with it; therefore, it means little to nothing to some Americans if others starve in Ethiopia or are swept away screaming bloody horrors by hurricanes in New Zealand, unless they have been to the places themselves and have some connection there. This is a major factor in the amount of external disdain and misunderstanding exuded by Americans; but, many also feel increasingly isolated from the government and the rest of the country as politics becomes more centralized. Goldfarb describes the nature of critics: "The most truly humane social critics are those most intimately linked to their communities" (152). As many Americans feel more detached and isolated, their responses to the world become increasingly cynical.

It is also significant that America is a land where free speech is taken almost entirely for granted. People are allowed to say whatever they want, so, naturally, many begin believing that everything they have to say is important, and, therefore, they should have something to say. One easy way to get attention and, thus rally support, is by mocking bloated bureaucratic institutions and economic/moral superiors (although the homeless can certainly become targets too). Soon, a skilled

cynic can build up a fair following of like-minded people, simply by complaining at length over things most people disdain.

Also, there is an awful dearth of self-esteem throughout America. We are first going to have to assume the somewhat radical notion that what really makes people happy is respect for themselves (usually solidified through the respect of others) and a sense of purpose, and not raving materialism. Being raised in a society where it is not altogether difficult to scrape together a living (especially when one receives help along the way from one's relatives and acquaintances) does not usually generate confidence. It's not unlike cheating on a test: it gets the results, but you don't feel like you've earned any of it. There's no life-and-death struggle, no sense of achievement. It's like a Rocky movie without the long, grueling, eighties-pop-music-backed training scene, a sad short movie where Sylvester Stallone knocks the dirty commie out with the first punch on the first try. Empty. In addition to engendering sarcasm, this voidity of purpose leads to such obsessions as recreational drug use, "extreme" sports, and Beanie Babies. This absence of direction also, incidentally, fuels consumerism beautifully. We're sort of perpetuating our own imprisonment in our attempts to escape it.

The cynicism is just a symptom of the bitterness, which is itself symptomatic of a deep, ingrained disgust on the part of society with the world and with itself.

5) WHAT'S WRONG W/ SARCASM AND THE LIKE.

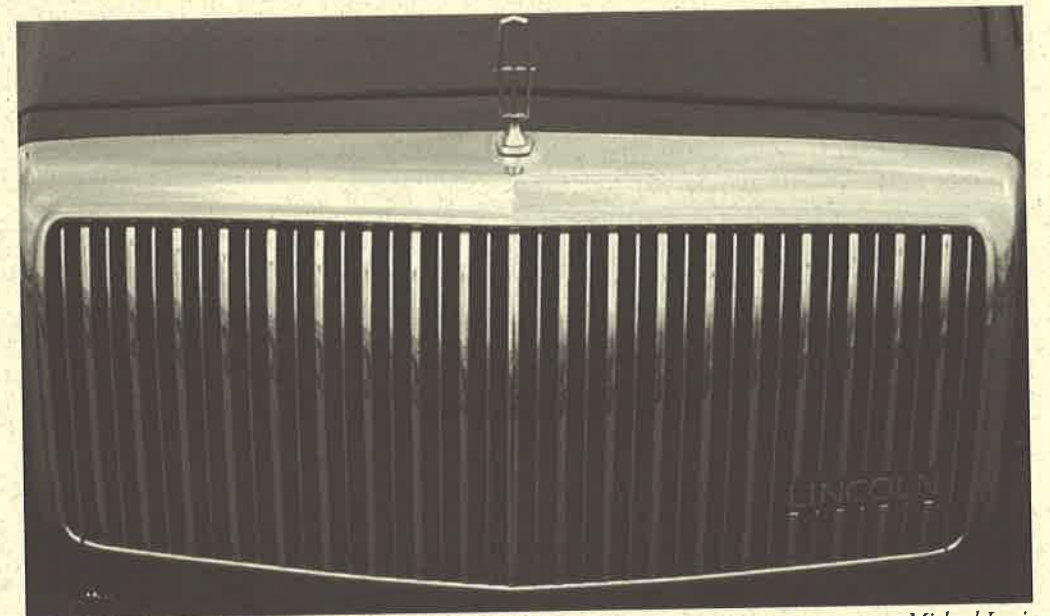
That's exactly the problem with sarcasm; it may undermine social standards, but it does nothing in the way of proposing or building up alternatives. Cynicism is hollow and one-sided and

Americans are comparable to spoiled rich children

lazy. To some extent, it actually celebrates what it's deriding rather than deposing it. And the power motive in cynicism is empty; simply disdaining something does not really provide any control or power over it. This is simply entertaining the "delusion that cynicism and naivete are mutually exclusive" (Wallace 36). People who use cynical and ironic approaches are rarely revolutionaries or leaders. Usually, they are people who feel trapped in a somewhat vacant world that is too vast and strange for them to change. They are daunted by the actual effort involved in changing the problems they ridicule, and, despite their dissatisfaction with their lives, they're too bloody comfortable with them to leave them behind to pursue some great unknown. To quote Hyde, "Irony...carried over time...is the voice of

the trapped who have come to enjoy their cage" (Hyde 197). Sarcasm becomes ingrained in the life-philosophy of its proponents; they begin to need things to complain about. So sarcasm easily becomes more a veneration of social ills than a route to a cure. And sarcasm is a parasite; as it becomes more deeply ingrained in an individual, they begin to apply it to more and more matters.

Sarcasm, like most great contemporary American pastimes, is quick and brutal. It reaches its point in a very short time indeed. I will not enter into a lengthy discussion on the



Michael Louis

deterioration of the American attention span (because, I am sure, it would thoroughly bore most people), but I will say that the rise of cynicism as humor is both attributable to and symptomatic of this. So, cynicism becomes a fix and a container. It's a way of acknowledging problems without dirtying your hands and actually doing something about them. It's addictive and progressive.

6) IS AMERICAN HUMOR TOXIC? 7) WHAT'S TO BE DONE.

Finally, the widespread sarcasm is basically just symptomatic of a ubiquitous commercialized rebellion in America. The danger here is that advertising companies, rather than allowing themselves to become targets of cynicism and sarcasm, are turning that cynicism back around into incredibly successful rebellion-based advertising campaigns. Cynics are targeted with commercials humiliating alternative products or touting, for example, "the drink of the next generation," implying some sort of soda beverage-involved uprising. It's basically getting to the point where cynicism is encouraged; shows and ads ridicule previous shows and ads ridiculing society. People are becoming cynical about being cynical. The real problem with this is that it makes the pervasive sarcasm inescapable. You cannot overthrow an entity which absorbs and profits from rebellion. As David Foster Wallace explains it, "if anarchy actually wins, if rulelessness becomes the rule, then protest and change become not just impossible but incoherent...you are voting for an end to all voting" (Wallace 69).

Clearly, there is an inherent danger in excessive cynicism. It can eradicate viewpoints and completely desensitize life. It can end up as one endless chain reaction. And American humor tends to teach people the only way to solve problems is by ridicule.

Despite its hold on American culture, I don't exactly think cynicism is causing America's widespread laziness and disgust. The vast amount of empty sarcasm in American humor is simply symptomatic of our discontent with a hand-me-down life.

There are several possible solutions:

The first calls for a sudden advocacy of values and beliefs, not necessarily old-fashioned ones, mind you, just an insistence on believing firmly in some principles and fighting for them. There could be a renewal of conviction and debate; people might start caring about matters on a large scale once again and moving to change things. Personally, I think this can prove horribly dangerous. A great potential exists in such a climate for people to get so consumed in a fervor that they don't understand their beliefs (the natural polar opposite of apathy and cynicism), and this leads to oppression and tyranny.

The second solution (and this is going on now) involves ridiculing the culture, and often even ridiculing the culture ridiculing itself. This is the least productive (but also least dangerous) method; in fact, it only worsens conditions. Degenerate, convictionless cynicism against anything is, at best, merely rattling the cage. It's no escape, and it's not even looking to escape. It's just making noise.

We are first going to have to assume the somewhat radical notion that what really makes people happy is respect for themselves.

The vast amount of empty sarcasm in American humor is simply symptomatic of our discontent with a hand-me-down life.

My personal proposal is probably the flightiest and most far-fetched of all these, though it's pretty much the only one I can advocate. I think what's really necessary is for us to develop an appreciation for ourselves and the world we live in again. The cynicism is just a symptom of the bitterness, which is itself symptomatic of a deep, ingrained disgust on the part of society with the world and with itself. If you can get people to rethink their whole pessimistic life philosophy, you can treat all the nagging symptoms. Of course, the catalyst in all of this is a sense of wonder and adventure, a desire to learn and explore. Granted, that's not something you can easily excite in people. But, consider people who can keep their innate sense of wonder about the world, who can derive satisfaction from their very respiration, who aren't afraid to believe in causes but are also willing to question and reexamine their beliefs in conflict; surely these are the people who will naturally make strides to improve society, and thoroughly enjoy doing it.

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with (in) visible distance

*in which minutiae triumph
over the universe at large*

1 There is a picture of Ho-Chi Minh, it's 1945 and he is standing next to Vo Nguyen Giap. He is already looking old and tired; his neck ruffled to attention, yet there is something distinctly captivating about the figure he cuts. I identify. I understand. A man two generations behind, squatting on the backdoor of a subcontinent.

2 Minutiae, those things which are menially meaningless, are the foremost determining factors in our perception of existence. Details, so to speak, are far more important than the credit we seem capable of giving them. The complex of trivialities and ritual inconsequentialities that make up our daily lives is, in fact, the whole world in itself. They are all we will ever know of the universe,

and, no matter what we endeavor to comprehend, we will know it only through the sieve of a lifetime of minutiae.

3 In "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" Wallace Stevens wrote:

*I know noble accents
And lucid, inescapable rhythms;
But I know too,
That the blackbird is involved
In what I know. (94)*

To truly understand a thing takes more, somehow, than what we can say about it. Stevens realized this. On a certain level, we all realize this,



yet we have a hard time enunciating it.

An interesting approach was attempted when the nineteenth century Ukio-e artist, Hokusai, sought to display the eminence of Mount Fuji. He didn't do so in one grand schematic, but, rather, in 36 different impressions

proper. Vocabulary and dialect, however, are arbitrary by nature—a ripple on the surface, governed by an infinity of variables, a construct of environment and coincidence. Capricious and shifty, elusive and changing, it nevertheless shapes the consciousness of every human being.

But the sign, the sign means something.

as a background to carpentry, a point of stability in a pitching sea. He holds up to us a field of nuances, most of which do not feature Fuji-San as the primary subject, but merely as an element. This is getting to know totality, for totality can never mean everything in one thing, but rather understanding one through everything.

When we consider minutia we still struggle to separate the infinitely small from the presumably inconsequential. This, of course, is a simple polemic of linguistic semantics, which brings us to another example.

When he wrote, "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously" (Achbar 28), Noam Chomsky attempted to illustrate the underlying laws of "universal grammar" that, in theory, all humans possess. These laws of syntax exist as an unclear element of our consciousness, yet are enormous as a part of the human experience. While being obscure and hard to grasp, "deep syntax" cannot possibly be minutiae

You are language. You think language. Concepts are deciphered through language, yet this language is at best capable of doing for meaning what Hokusai did for Mount Fuji through a multitude of ukiyo-e. This is the territory of minutiae.

Vagary is indeed all that can be gained from human communication. If we could actually enumerate existence through vocal communication, our level of being would shift so dramatically that this discussion would be pointless. Profundity is simply the elegance of using the wayward particulars of language to indicate a thematic. Rhetoric can only take us as far as our shared minutiae, so our discourse must remain on this plane.

4 As our society accelerates into posterity, technology is intensifying and shrinking. It is imminently important that we not confuse mere smallness, or micro-being, with minutiae. Indeed, as we pursue means by which to craft a technological



representation of human consciousness through a machine making an innumerable rapidity of choices between one and zero, the definition is never more necessary.

If smallness or, micro, is an infinitesimally small chip choosing between one



and zero, then this process can never accurately be defined as minutiae. True minutiae are to be found in the apparent insignificance of the numerical sequence itself. For example, 1001110 carries far less obvious consequence than the mere number 1; 101110 is the true "minutiae," the science of the perfunctory, the universe of the trifling.

5

There is a small, reflective green sign on a four-lane highway in south Alabama. It reads, "South." An identical sign lies on the northbound side as well, so I'm not quite clear on its function. I know of people who've died on this road. I can remember spending all day broken down in a red clay field, next to a gas station, beside this road. I remember when this road was built. But the sign, the sign means something.

On the back porch of a small Mexican restaurant in Austin, Texas, David asks me why two people not given to rank sentimentality cry when discussing the Civil War. "It's just something that's there" is my best explanation. Meaning a lot of things to the both of us but meaning, to me, the sign.

6

When we share common minutiae, we have familiarity. Regionalism itself is based on this concept. Shared details create a warmth; a comfort based on intimacy. Think of what makes your locale

yours. Is it a name on a map, a line across territory? Or is it a smell or a corner or a combination of unrelated factors that are so intertwined in memory as to be inseparable? If you encounter a stranger from the same area, are you not immediately rendered sympathetic in that a common arbitrary factor has helped to shape what both of you are? The smell from the bakery downtown is not just a byproduct of business, but a component of atmosphere.

7

"Listen," I say. "I can here him breathe through his nose. Here! Wait... no... maybe... Here! I don't know, maybe it's just this tape player. I know I heard it before." "I love it," she says, "When I hear a finger catch on the string." Sometimes things just make sense.

8

Those in captivity often develop a flourishing culture of minutiae.

"They had seen him crouched on his bed, hungry, silent, morose. In his maimed right hand he clutched a lump of coal. With pained, awkward movements, he tried to draw pictures on a scrap of paper. A stubborn man, Otto Ungar." (Green 3)

Ungar, an inmate at a German concentra-

tion, camp knows that small things like charcoal drawings on a scrap of paper, represent a reality that he has control over. His access to the broader world cut off, he finds his own world.

Australian nurses held captive by the Japanese during World War II kept diaries and sketchbooks that detailed everyday trivialities, and they sewed them into their pillowcases or hid them in lavatories (Kenny xii). American prisoners of war in Germany kept detailed wager charts on what days the war was not going to end (Spiller 117). What could be less important than the date the war was not going to end? But, with the rest of the world out of your hands, you are forced to perceive that which is ubiquitous, that which was meaningless before.

*Cigar, the guy in the next cell,
has got a jar where he keeps a big spider.
The other day he says,
"Hey man look at this,"
passes me his jar, an' shows me
his spider eatin' a cockroach. (Farrell, 95)*

9

*Important things joined hands with the most
Trivial things, and the political developments
In Europe about which I had read in the
Morning paper became inextricably connected
with the old clog that lay at my feet. (Mishima, 174)*

Does it make us more vulnerable to admit that random details such as these hold an unprecedented sway over our lives? Or is it just a diversion, a bulwark against terrifying irrelevance, that Mishima's young priest, pondering his clog, and I hang on to? If we are insignificant to the world, then in return shouldn't that which we find insignificant be elevated to the level of "developments in Europe"?

I, however, don't think it's that simple. If the clog and political developments are both perceived, then they both effect the viewer's consciousness in ways that are entirely dependent upon the circumstances of that particular mind.

If we are insignificant in the world, then in return shouldn't that which we find insignificant be elevated to the level of "developments in Europe?"

Even if political developments do win out in perceived importance, they too must be filtered through the knowledge of the clog, and every other detail built up to that point.

There is nothing that can be done about the desultory nature of this discussion. It won't mean the same thing it does to me, if only because I have an extra belt loop half an inch above the final one, that was gouged in one day when the belt got too big. These are the fine points that shape lives. The world is a random place, and must be accepted as such.

10

And finally I grasp it. What had been getting at me about Ho. It's his pants, his shirt; he dresses like me. All the policy writing George Keenan attempted, all the suffering of all the soldiers, couldn't live up to one fact: I identify with Ho. One insignificant picture of one outfit, in one book, won me over. I know that, at least for one moment, we shared the same predilection, measured our world through similar circumstances, and sometimes that's enough. This is the power of minutiae. I know. I identify.

Wesley Cheek is a junior in New College. Originally from Destin, Florida, his depth study is in Anthropology and Urban Planning. He will spend next year studying in Osaka, Japan. Currently he is trapped beneath a great pile of minutiae—a shiny nickel to his rescuer.

In Our Own Image

*Historically, men have created the feminine image.
Now it's time for women to define their own.*

Simone De Beauvoir observed that "the whole of feminine history has been man-made" (173). When I first read that statement in De Beauvoir's landmark treatise *The Second Sex*, I was outraged and I rejected the notion. I wanted to correct this French intellectual and argue that this was wrong. If feminine history has been man-made, then feminine definition is also man-made. I thought about my mother, my daughter, my sixth grade teacher, my girl friends, and my first boss in a corporate middle management position. These women are strong, independent, expressive, and successful; they are my heroes, muses, and my standards. These women reflect who I am. I gaze at them and see my reflection; their presence in my life has helped me to define who I am and who I am becoming. I cannot see myself reflected in the life of a man in the same way. Once I got past the anger and really thought about the statement, I understood what De Beauvoir meant. I agree that



what is reported, for the most part, is from a male point of view but I don't agree that feminine history has been man-made. There is another side of history told by women not found in history books.

Through every phase and transition in my life I have always loved women and I have loved being a woman. Being a woman is important to

try has changed from a rural farm culture to a more industrialized and technological society. Many women spend less time working on making the home beautiful; they are more likely to spend time on careers and creative endeavors that might involve art production. Men have come out of the fields and are more likely to work in corporate and business environments. Of course, some

These women are strong, independent, expressive, and successful; they are my heroes, muses, and my standards. These women reflect who I am.

the way I define myself, and I enjoy expressing that definition. When people talk about me, they come very close to defining me as I define myself. I believe that is because I live out loud. I hold nothing back. I say and do what is on my mind. I was clear about how I wanted to be and I became that. The women in my life are also clear and honest; they are problem solvers and decision-makers. Each one of us is a sensitive being, who expresses life from the inside out. The history created by men about women usually projects a different image, and that is why I disagree with De Beauvoir's theory. The history I read about women is different from the history I know from personal experience.

In 1620 the Mayflower arrived on the new continent. Early Americans lived in an agrarian culture. Roles were distinct: men hunted and planted, women were the homemakers and the caregivers. Mothers in the home provided stability, nurturing, and training for their families and a sanctuary for the men. They were the conveyors of culture; they taught the children proper etiquette, art and nature appreciation, patience, gentleness, and responsibility. Today, domestic responsibilities have evolved as much of the coun-

women choose to work at home and find that choice fulfilling.

Men's ideas about women are slowly changing as roles for both men and women are changing. Because men now go to school with women and work with women in leadership positions, they are constructing new paradigms. Men who have worked with women in business and the arts are beginning to see that women have value outside of the home and that they can be an asset in business, bringing a different perspective and a different style into the work place that can result in new directions and new opportunities. Yet, some men still see women only as homemakers and baby bearers. They see women as the weaker sex and still exclude them from some decisions regarding retention and promotions in the workplace.

The history of women and our world is constructed, interpreted and defined by men. In the meantime, while men are making decisions more favorable to other men, women will continue to live, create, and construct our own story. History can be revised and rewritten. For 500 years we believed that Christopher Columbus discovered America. Today, we know differently.

As more resources are uncovered and more information becomes available, history is being corrected.

Women have played the muse and have been a source of inspiration to men since the days of Herodotus (484-420 BC). Men seem to be fascinated by women, or at least they spend a lot of time thinking about us. Surreal artist Andre Breton was fond of remarking, "women should be free and adored" (Breton 7). "The muse, an externalized source of creative energy and a personification on the female Other, is a peculiarly male invention" (Chadwick 66). Yet the female Other has inspired men like William Shakespeare and Langston Hughes who have constructed the history of women by writing poems, books, plays, and songs about women. Men like Matisse, Cézanne, and Rubens painted pictures of women. Richard Avedon photographed women, Michelangelo and daVinci sculpted images of women, and George Balanchine and Alvin Ailey choreographed dances immortalizing women. As Eva Rieger noted, "Of

course, music was also used to represent and praise the many images of woman, but she was always the creation of the male imagination, either as idealized mistress or as a representative of the underworld, of the unconscious, the arcane, and the evil. Male fantasies, longings and fears were projected onto her but the realities of women's everyday existence were ignored. It would have been difficult to idealize them in art" (Rieger 137).

The fact that men have been inspired by women and thus have, in a large measure, constructed the feminine image of women does not mean that women have not contributed to history or are less than men. Women are also inspired by women, and construct feminine images and feminine history. Until recently, however, feminine history has been man-made because "society is man-made and within it women cannot be themselves, they cannot speak, since language is male, they can only be what men want them to be." (Grace and Stephen 82) Men dominate publishing houses, fashion magazines, the media, politics,



education, the arts, entertainment, film, sports, and other businesses. Men make decisions about which attitudes and images are presented about women. Sometimes the images are barely there at all. For example, "in the early 1970s, two teachers discovered that a standard collection of 1300 slides for use in art survey courses, organized by men, contained only eight slides by women, and that the most widely-used textbook had no references to women artists at all. Another teacher found only three women writers in a two-volume

she dedicated herself to the project of reinventing Greek dance, a folk dance that she was attracted to.

Dance historian Susan Foster has pointed out that in Europe, dance was viewed as a disciplined activity that defined and shaped mind and body. "Because in social as well as concert dance the body's movement conformed to and was evaluated in terms of ideal forms. Dancing, like the art of rhetoric, was approached as an effective method for improving one's appearance, and consequently,

I gaze at them and see my reflection; their presence in my life has helped me to define who I am and who I am becoming. I cannot see myself reflected in the life of a man in the same way.

text that covers six centuries of English literature." (Hedges Wendt 65) With the growth of the feminist movement in the 1970s, more scholarship has been done; women have uncovered work that was previously hidden, overlooked, and omitted.

How some women have changed traditions and redefined women is important. The tradition of concert dance began in Europe in the 16th century for both entertainment and enlightenment. These first dance performances were produced in the courts of reigning monarchs and the aristocracy for social and political occasions. While the masquerades and social dances served as evening amusements in aristocratic households, these events emphasized both the importance of dancing and a need to join together all the arts. The Renaissance choreographers were exclusively men. It would be 500 years before women would choreograph concert dance. In 1903, a young dancer named Isadora Duncan introduced a new paradigm in dance. Born in California in 1876, Duncan traveled to Europe as a teenager, where

one's identity" (101). Early court dances became more sophisticated and the lines formed by the placement of the head, shoulders, arms, and legs became controlled and rigid, replicating current attitudes and images. Eventually the court dance evolved into what we know today as concert dance. Women danced in tight satin shoes with wooden toes and satin ribbons that laced tightly around their ankles in order to form the lines that men believed were aesthetically correct. Duncan changed the syntax of dance; she threw away the point shoes, the corsets, and the crinoline. She relaxed and softened the movement; she danced barefooted and covered her body in soft, flowing fabrics. Duncan was more interested in spiritual expression than physical appearance. It was the first time a woman's thoughts were expressed in dance.

Egyptian kings and artisans as well as European master painters and writers recorded the images of the women who inspired them. Many of these works of art, some as old as the sphinx, are

still around reminding us that women have always acted as guides and muses. Art museums throughout the world stand as testimony to this in the number of paintings in their collections that are by men and about women.

Before the nineteenth century women were not pursuing higher education or careers. It may have appeared to men that they were more available for inspiration. The first school in America to educate women in liberal arts was Vassar. There were 353 women enrolled in 1861. Most early education for women in the 19th century was in education, nursing, and domestic science. For the most part, they were being taught to be caregivers because those were the jobs women did at home for their families. Women's roles began to change in the 1940s during World War II. Women began working in defense plants and other manufacturing factories, replacing the men who

had entered the military to fight the war. The economic prosperity that followed World War II brought new consumer goods. Electric washing machines and clothes dryers, vacuum cleaners, and refrigerators were becoming available to working-class families. These aids reduced the workload at home, and women began to have more time to work outside of the home.

Women have been working in the helping professions since 1860 when they began pursuing college educations and today women still dominate these professions. But by the 1960s when equal opportunities for women and minorities were being instituted, women began to slowly move into management positions in major corporations. Today, women are still grossly under represented in decision-making and image making positions in business. Of the 4,012 highest paid officers and directors of *Fortune* 1000 companies in 1995, less



than half of 1% were women. Today, only 5.6 percent of corporate board directors are women, less than 5 per cent of management positions are held by women, 12.8 per cent of full professors are women, and 18 percent of physicians in the United States are women, while more than half the population in the United States is female, 52 per

ance the dual roles of homemaker and worker. They are demanding that they be given the opportunity to compete fairly for more decision-making positions in the business world. These events echo DeBeauvoir's observation of more than 20 years ago that "women are demanding a new status; and once again their demand is not that they be exalt-

Women want their own voices heard in arts and letters as well as in business and commerce.

cent of the 300 million people.

Women are over represented in subordinate jobs in the helping professions. The teaching staff in schools is 72 per cent female, yet 95 per cent of the superintendents are men, and 72.3 per cent of principals are men. The gap is similar in hospitals and social service agencies, where women make up the majority of the workers but men make the decisions and are paid higher salaries (DeMona).

By 1980, when divorce rates reached new heights, more homes had single women as heads of household and more women returned to work outside of their home. Still more women returned to work in the 1990s, when downsizing and company layoffs resulted in a loss in family income. Today, of women with children over six years old, 75 per cent work. With more women than ever in the work force, greater advancements toward positions of greater responsibility and higher salaries are slowly being made by women. But even with women outnumbering men in the census, they will never outnumber men in the labor pool. As long as women are the only gender that is biologically equipped to reproduce, a portion of their time will have to be spent birthing babies and caring for them. The majority of women are still likely to stay in the home parenting and managing households. Some women, however, continue to bal-

ed for their femininity" (180), but also for their thought, courage, and strength. Women want their own voices heard in arts and letters as well as in business and commerce. Women will continue to be muses but not in the image made by men. We will continue constructing our own history and being muses, not just to men but to one another and in ways we define.

As women take a larger role in defining themselves in the arts, we may begin to see women in all walks of life identifying with these women-made images, their own identities, and reflecting the stronger identifies of women around them. Maybe in the twenty-first century the force of this reflection will result in books published by women about women, paintings by women of women hanging in galleries and museums, and songs and poems written about women by women. If so, in the next millennium, we may come to a time when DeBeauvoir's observation may be less true and more of a historical artifact.

Sylvia Elliott is a sophomore in New College, having returned to college after a 40-year hiatus in which she raised three children, worked in business, and volunteered in the community.

Living in the OCD Loop Again, Again, and Again

Where five-alarm watches and three bottles of juice are more than casual oddities.

Casio Electronics manufactures, with no small degree of pride, a watch called the TELEMEMO 30. It features a quartz-crystal digital clock with a liquid crystal display of both time and date, a large button to backlight the screen, a full alphanumeric keypad, an eight-digit calculator with a memory button, a stopwatch able to record both lap and split times, and a telephone/name/fax number memory for storage of up to thirty names and numbers. The whole thing is encased in a plastic and metal case with a stylish black vinyl wristband.

This watch seems built for quiet grade-schoolers who are mature for their age, careful enough to not destroy the device, and whose fingers and eyes possess sufficient dexterity to use the thumb-sized keypad. The many features would

make the watch, and its owner, an object of much attention. However, despite some flashy features, the watch has a down side. It drains its batteries in less than a year if one presses the "light" button often, lacks any serious water protection, would likely not survive any substantial blow, and costs about forty bucks. If asked what watch I would recommend – go ahead, pretend you are asking – my answer would be a Timex in the twenty dollar range for which you can get a timepiece that will survive water pressure, impact, radiation, and other abuse far beyond the point that you would, and, of course, includes the time/date, stopwatch, backlight, and battery that will carry you into the next millennium, all of which come standard on nearly every watch designed to actually function as a watch.

Every person with OCD, just like every person with diabetes, or arthritis, or any illness, finds the effects slightly different.



With an opinion like that, why do I carry, without fail, a black Casio TELEMEMO 30?

It has five alarms. That is correct, five separate alarms, programmable for five different times, all of which activate a small beeping noise and a flashing screen. This single function elevates the watch from a self-inflated piece of overpriced electronics into one of the few voices for which I always listen, because five times a day it reminds me of one the most influential forces in my life, the fact that I am severely mentally ill.

Some people bounce from event to event in their lives, driven by nothing more than the winds of whim and chance. Others' lives are shaped by the pursuit of status or wealth or power or often all three. Some live only to be compressed,

pegged, and pigeonholed by anyone putting on the pressure. A great number subsist in places where simple needs for food, shelter, and safety override any superfluous concerns about abstract personal motivations. Although I am shaped under the hands of many people, I still listen five times a day to the call of a cheap watch, because it reminds me five times a day to take my medication. Three blue colored in the morning, plus one yellow. Another yellow at noon, another at 4 p.m., another at 8 p.m. (plus two orange) and then two yellows at midnight. This plethora of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (Zoloft and Luvox, the blues and oranges) and long-action benzodiazepines (Klonopin, the yellows) allow me to lead a much more "normal" life as a person, rather than hiding

under the bedcovers and staring into space all day.

Have you ever seen the movie *As Good As It Gets*? You know, in which Jack Nicholson plays the overbearing control-freak novelist Melvin Udall. Greg Kinnear is the artist, Simon, who lives down the hall with that little dog. Simon gets severely beaten, Nicholson falls in love with Helen Hunt, you know what I'm talking about. If you haven't seen it, go rent it. Yes, right now. Stop reading, get up, get the movie, sit down, watch it, and then start reading again at the next paragraph. I'll wait.

Did you notice that Nicholson threw the deadbolt five times, counting to himself, every time he shut the door? His M&Ms were sorted by color and stored in separate jars. He took his own flatware to the diner every day, sat in the same seat, demanded the same waitress, and ordered the same thing. When the waitress quit her job, Nicholson's existence froze until he paid a doctor to help her son, which got her back at work. Perhaps he did this out of charity, wealth, or selfless religious devotion? Not at all. He helped her son as the way to get her back as his waitress. He simply could not deal with the change in his routine due to her absence. It did not bug him, bother him, sadden him — he simply could not continue his life until things had been restored to their "proper" order.

Nicholson, and the script writers, did their homework. The movie conveyed fabulously well how life works when one suffers from obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Three blue colored in the morning, plus one yellow. Another yellow at noon, another at 4 p.m., another at 8 p.m. (plus two orange) and then two yellows at midnight.

Unlike Melvin Udall, I don't carry my own prepackaged flatware (thrown away after every meal, to avoid contamination). Every person with OCD, just like every person with diabetes, or arthritis, or any illness, finds the effects slightly different. The most encompassing definition of OCD, however, might be summed up as, "We can either play by my rules, or I cannot play at all." Notice the important distinction here; I do not say that I will not play, but I cannot play. This statement springs not from narcissism; it simply cuts to the heart of the illness. The "rules" do not mean that I get to be in charge, or I always win, or even that we only play what I want to play. The rules for a person with OCD might involve only doing things in only odd-numbered groups, or washing one's hands every thirty minutes, or just taking a quiet break every hour or so. Do those rules make sense? No, not particularly, and the OCD person knows that fact. Why, then, do we odd ones insist on touching chairs twice before we stand up, always sitting with our backs to the wall, or worrying about unlikely possibilities?

Imagine you live in a dingy apartment somewhere in the bad part of town, where burglary runs rampant. To avoid theft, you carefully lock your door every time you leave. It makes perfect sense to do it; the deadbolt has always deterred would-be robbers. One day, you leave for work, but halfway there realize that you left the door unlocked, to be easily opened by any intruder. It is perfectly reasonable to go back home and lock the door. Otherwise, at the very least, you would

spend the whole day fretting about whether or not your stereo had decided to move out. You turn around, go home, and lock the door. You needed to lock the door, you did, life goes on.

Not if you live in the world of obsessive-compulsive disorder, as the "disorder" part kicks in now. The problem lies in completing the work of locking the door. A normal person locks the door and goes on, knowing the bolt is thrown. Someone who obsesses over locking doors, however, never gets to step two. He never "knows" the bolt is thrown, and so, as he heads back for work, the worry starts to gnaw—did I really get the door locked? What if I thought I did, but it is still unlocked? And so, he turns around, goes back and locks the door again, and again, and again.

Now realize that, usually, our OCD friend knows what he is doing is irrational. He knows that the door is locked just fine and that he should get to work. But as he heads off for work again, that familiar gnawing starts again. Did he really lock the door? Better check. Just once more.

Like any illness, obsessive-compulsive disorder comes in a spectrum of severities. A mildly OCD person, usually simply called a "perfectionist," or a "worrywart," might check the door once. Many people exhibit this level of obsessive behavior, and it does not really interfere with functioning day-to-day. An average OCD person might check it three, maybe five times. A severely OCD person would spend the rest of the day, checking and re-checking, usually fully aware how silly the whole thing is, that it will cost him his job and should be easy to overcome. The door is locked, right? He never really knows for sure.

Current neurobiology indicates that OCD probably relates to a section of the brain which deals with completing tasks. When a set of



instructions passes through the mind, this area watches and checks off the tasks as they are finished. In OCD-affected people, however, the watcher is asleep on the job. The task may be done a thousand times, but the rest of the brain never gets the "all clear, move on" signal. So, life becomes like a looped film reel, occasionally moving on when the defective watchman wakes up for a while. OCD affects around 2.5% of the population, equally common in men and women, and usually begins in adolescence. Vocal or physical tics occur in many OCD patients, and depression is fairly common as well.

I do not worry about door locks or washing my hands. Instead, I obsess over sensible things, like doing things in odd-numbered groups. My shopping list consists of ones, threes, and fives of

an item; rarely twos, never fours. I know it makes no sense, but that does not stop me from always buying three apple juices. If someone puts two in the cart, I get bothered. If someone puts four in, I will not continue until I have put one back (three) or gotten another (five). The need for odd numbers is not an attempt to be difficult, or just a way to be annoying. I cannot just work a little harder, or focus a little better, and overcome it, anymore than I can "overcome" having blue eyes, or being six feet tall. The problem lies not in my childhood, or my attitude, or anything like that. It resides in some not-understood, dysfunctional slice of brain matter. I don't hate it; it is part of who I am. Medication does not perfectly solve everything,

but it does allow me to deal with stress. I can actually go to the grocery in the first place. Rather than being overwhelmed by the noise, crowds, chaos, and input, I can move on to the carrots.

Blessed as I am to live in a time when treatment exists, I do not sit at home and trace wood-grain on the floor, or count items on the shelves, or rearrange everything until no item fails to line up perfectly. Faith, medication, psychiatric care, understanding family, and supportive friends allow me to live a fairly "normal" life; I can go to school, make friends, and pay my bills. However, I find a great deal in common with a diabetic friend. He lives a "normal" life, but he will die if denied access to his insulin for more than a day or



two. He never eats food without considering its impact on his sugar levels. He will never remove the bracelet on his wrist that identifies him as a diabetic. Barring any breakthroughs in medicine, he will never be "cured." I won't die if I can't have my rainbow of psychoactives, but I will become

fied, or someone who did things well but would not be satisfied until every angle, possibility, and problem had been considered, dealt with, and triple-checked?

Still, I might well do none of those things. Skilled labor – carpentry, masonry, gardening, fine

My shopping list consists of ones, threes, and fives of an item; rarely twos, never fours.

non-functional within four to eight hours. Being obsessive-compulsive means I always pack my medications first and check for them last.

These daily habits shape my long term plans as well. I know I will likely never work a job that requires eight-to-five, five days a week. That schedule lacks enough latitude for days when I'm doing worse than usual and need to take a few hours off to let my stress level drop. No jobs in commodities trading or currency speculation. My particular flavor of OCD makes life stressful enough without having my job and income depend on constantly watching screen-tickers, news reports, and stock indices. Too much input, too much time-pressure, not enough time to sit down and let things calm. I cannot work in an average office, with phones ringing, constant interruption, chaos.

Of course, for every door God closes, He opens another. Being obsessively careful and compulsively repetitious makes many jobs impossible, but can create an excellent surgeon, or engineer, or craftsman, just as being manic influenced some of our greatest artists to create what they did. Who would you rather have build your house, write the software you use, or operate on your sick child? Someone who did things well once and was satis-

woodworking – actually rank as some of my favorite tasks in the world. No matter how many times you rewrite a story, or recheck a set of blueprints, or repaint a picture, you still deal with abstracts – what might be, what could be, what exists in the nebulous aether of possibility. If, on the other hand, you build a set of bookshelves, it is very simple. You design the shelves. You build the shelves. They stand up, or they fall down. Regardless, the task runs its course and ends. No worries about completing it: it is obvious, the shelves are either built, or they are not built. Very relaxing and satisfying if a shaping factor in your life is your inability to feel like you have successfully finished a task. I love to paint walls, caulk windows, repair things, and refinish furniture – tasks that many people find tolerable only if money is involved. I find peace in activities where the unknowns and variables are minimal, the task to be completed is very obvious, and the work involves not only the brain but the solid, definitive effort of using one's hands. Most of the world does not share the opinion that moving to a Mennonite sect would be a satisfying life, waking up at dawn, growing your own food, following very exact rules, and spending decades learning to hand-make everything from clothes to furniture. A growing

Medication does not perfectly solve everything, but it does allow me to deal with stress. I can actually go to the grocery in the first place. Rather than being overwhelmed by the noise, crowds, chaos, and input, I can move on to the carrots.



trend in some groups of Amish and Mennonites finds historically closed-off people now going for advanced degrees, traveling more, and even using computers. Yet, these people, while trepidatiously testing some of the options available in our "modern world," still keep to their basic ideas. Godliness. Order. Compassion. Peace. Simplicity. Perhaps I could trade skills with calculus and com-

puters in return for the secrets of raising food and building houses. Some people seek peace, some happen on it, and a few find themselves driven towards it because it is the only alternative to spending the rest of one's life in bed under the covers.

One of the darker sides to being obsessive-compulsive, a side that I often make light of, is



No matter how much one gets told it is okay to be different, alright to be sick, and not so bad to handle life from another angle, it is hard to be abnormal.

diagnosis. Biochemistry continues to make leaps and bounds, allowing for ever more powerful and selective medications to be made. Even in basic face-to-face therapy, refinements in technique and better paradigms make for more effective sessions. None of which may amount to anything, of course. The grand total of all this research may be that we simply find out the complexity of mental illness far exceeded our expectations. However, it might also be cured tomorrow. Hope, as I said, springs eternal, and does not allow one to give up. For now, I will stick to going to my psychiatrist, taking my pills, and not forgetting to take naps in quiet places. Come visit my house, and you can even take home a piece of handmade furnitu— oh, sorry. Got to go. My watch is beeping again.

despair. No matter how much one gets told it is okay to be different, alright to be sick, and not so bad to handle life from another angle, it is hard to be abnormal. Other people get tired of cutting extra slack, and it gets really old asking for it. Most ill people, while they may enjoy occasional special perks, mostly want to feel like a part of the mainstream world again, a life one does not appreciate until it is gone.

Hope springs eternal, however. The Human Genome Project, a massive undertaking to map every human gene, passed the 50% mark recently. By 2005, all the genetic markers, including those associated with mental illness, should be known, hopefully ushering in whole new types of treatment involving gene therapy and very precise

Will Hooper hopes to eventually get his brain together enough to take a class schedule approaching normal, thus enabling him to graduate sometime before 2074. In the meantime, he busies himself working with the Alabama Environmental Council, playing with his computers, and trying to make the world a better place in his own small ways. He can often be found waist-deep in recyclables, talking to squirrels, or asking trees about God (or vice-versa). This marks his first major publication.

Democracy in Alabama

In the Heart of Dixie, it's easy to believe in democracy. It's much harder, however, to truly practice it.

In the fall of 1998, members of the Social Science I class in the New College program at The University of Alabama analyzed the meaning of democracy and its actualization in Alabama. Class members consisted of eight women, most of them lifetime citizens of the state, now pursuing undergraduate degrees at the University. They analyzed data, conducted polls, interviewed political scientists, elected officials, reporters, international students, and average citizens to assess the state of democracy in Alabama. This is a report of their findings.

All photographs for this article taken by Mary Rachel Fanning



In the Heart of Dixie, it is easy to believe in democracy. Pledging allegiance to the flag every morning in elementary school, standing for the national anthem at football games, going to small town Fourth of July celebrations, or watching the Birmingham Veteran's Day parade — the oldest in the country; we were raised on democratic ideals. Democracy was unquestionably the best form of government, and, as one Chinese student exclaimed, "America is the number one democracy!" When asked if Alabama was a democracy, we, like many, answered quickly and surely, "yes." However, as we began to explore the question in greater depth, looking at the various factors that enable, support, and constitute a true democracy, we began to question our assumptions. We discovered that democracy depends on more than simply the process of voting; it depends on laws that protect and ensure equal participation in that process. It depends on representative governance responsive to its citizens regardless of race, class, or sex. It depends on a government in which both the weak and the powerful have an equal voice in the fate of their society; an informed populous dedicated to the protection of all. And, when we weighed the democracy of Alabama against this ideal, the picture that emerged was not as attractive as we had previously imagined.

The flaws we discovered in the Alabama democratic system are not unique to this state; frequently they are shared not only by other states but by other democratic nations as well. Voter apathy and large gaps between the rich and the poor, gaps that correspond closely with voter representation and participation are, unfortunately, nearly universal. However, some problems do seem to plague Alabama in particular. These include the powerful influence of interest groups as a result of unlimited campaign funding, voter fraud, an education system in which one third of the population does not graduate from high school, and huge economic disparities between local education systems. In addition, without the tools needed to affect real change within the sys-

tem, large groups of the Alabama population, often identifiable by race, sex, and class, are stranded outside of it. In an interview, Patrick R. Cotter, associate professor of political science at The University of Alabama, stated that, "if you define democracy as the ability to participate, Alabama [is a democracy] as much as any other state; participation rates are the same." However, if you define democracy as whether or not the government responds to the will of the people, "there seems to be a fair amount of disconnection between public preferences in Alabama. . . and public policy."

Now we must ask ourselves why Alabama's government is not more responsive to the will of its people. There are only three possible reasons: people are not involving themselves in their own governance, the system is corrupt, or both. We discovered that both are true, so our next step must be to examine the reasons why. As we sorted through the tangled connections and perceptions we had collected, four prominent issues emerged: economics, education, minority status, and government corruption. Intertwined as these issues are, it would be a mistake to assess any one of these separately. Apart they are factors of participation, and together they are the forces that shape Alabama's democracy.

VOTER TURNOUT

In recent years, news media have stressed the dismal state of citizen participation in the democratic process. Voter apathy is cited as the most ubiquitous evil, with constant speculation as to its causes and solutions. Alabama, however, while not necessarily an exception to the rule, is not particularly demonstrative of it, either. Generally, 45 – 50 % of registered Alabama voters turn out to vote. In 1994, Alabama ranked 27th in the nation for the number of registered citizens voting with 46% participation (US Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract*). Although the 1998 statistics are not yet available, it is possible

our ranking will increase, since, in the Nov. 3, 1998 election, 57% of the registered population voted (Secretary of State).

While the percentage of registered voters who vote is a significant indicator of democratic efficacy, it is also important to consider how much of the population is in fact registered to vote. In this area, as well, Alabama has a strong showing. In 1994, 71% of eligible citizens were registered to vote, and the state ranked 15th in the nation for registered voters (Hovey D-17). After the passage

A person will vote only if he or she feels that their actions will have an impact on the political system.

of the "Motor-Voter" bill in 1995 which allows citizens to register to vote while renewing their drivers license, registration has increased consistently and now it is estimated at 76% (Secretary of State). While impressive on the surface, these statistics also reveal definitive shortcomings in the Alabama system. We must ask why 24%, almost one-fourth, of the state population has chosen not to have an opportunity for a voice in government. Of those that do have at least a chance to cast a ballot, why do almost 43% fail to do so? Even more significantly, when the two statistics are combined the result indicates that only 40% of the population is deciding the leaders and issues of state government.

Interestingly, not everyone believes that this lack of participation is hurting our state; a federal circuit court judge, who wished not to be named, feels that having apathetic, uninformed people not take part in elections is probably just as well. But if we content ourselves with current statistics, what does that indicate about our "democracy?" And, what factors create that uninformed populace? Many of the people interviewed answered that, first and foremost, we must look at

the Alabama constitution.

STATE CONSTITUTION

Ratified in 1901, the state constitution is considered by many to be obtuse, convoluted, and antiquated. Even its passage was marked with controversy when, in order to maintain control of state politics, a small group of white planters scattered through twelve Black Belt counties fraudulently reported black votes, maligning the democratic process to ensure ratification. Among the most visible flaws in the document is the necessity of a full constitutional amendment to address even minor and local problems. The result is that the constitution has over 600 amendments, many written in unclear and complicated language which makes even expert interpretation problematic.

A second problem in the constitution is the provision for a vast and unwieldy number of elected officials, resulting in a long and arduous voting process. In an interview, *Birmingham News* city editor Randy Henderson criticized the ridiculous number of elected posts in Alabama. The Jefferson County general election ballot has become so cluttered with offices and constitutional amendments that it was a full four pages in the last election. With such a large number of candidates and issues, it is difficult for most voters to make informed decisions.

The problems continue after election day as well. Instead of having a few officials responsible for the success of various state programs, their sheer numbers allow politicians to shirk responsibility and blame. With endless finger pointing, it is difficult for Alabamians to delineate effective and ineffective leaders, and just as hard for capable leaders to get anything accomplished. Henderson stated that in other states many of the positions we elect are appointed by, and then responsible to, the governor.

Without the guarantee of a responsive government, many citizens are unsure about where to look for solutions to pressing local problems. Many concerns, therefore, go unaddressed and



only become worse with the passage of time. One of the most glaring of these is the vast wealth inequity that plagues the state, and the close correspondence of those inequities with racial divisions.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS

Studies show that higher levels of education and wealth are proportional to higher levels of political involvement. According to this data, the needs of large sectors of Alabama's population are probably not being represented: 20% of the state's citizens live below the poverty line, and one in three do not graduate from high school. Only 13% of Alabamians get a college degree or higher (US Bureau of the Census). With so many living

hand-to-mouth or not attaining the education necessary to have an economic stake in the political process, it is not difficult to see why many Alabamians might not be voting.

Additionally, and significantly, there tends to be a racial bias in economic and educational circumstances throughout Alabama. Only 11.5% of whites are below the poverty line, while the figure rises to 36.5% for blacks. These discrepancies continue in education, where 29.7% of whites and 45.3% of blacks fail to graduate from high school or get their graduate equivalency diploma (US Bureau of the Census, 1990 *US Census Data*). These high levels of racial and economic disparities are likely to continue as long as public schools around the state spend vastly different amounts to educate their students. In Mountain Brook, an

almost completely white, wealthy city in Birmingham, the school system spends \$6,670 per capita on students. In Tallasee, a predominately black town, the school system spent \$3,810 per capita (Commerce and Business Administration 79).

It seems clear that education does affect democratic participation, and schools should be more universally and equitably funded. But what should they teach in order to prepare the citizens of tomorrow?

ROLE OF EDUCATION

Opinions differ on what sort of education fosters civic participation. Some claim that exposure to higher education is sufficient; others feel that it is more important to teach specifically about the democratic process. In an interview,

Pam Campbell, a 12th grade government teacher at Pelham High School in Pelham, Alabama, explained that teachers have a great deal of material that they are required to cover, leaving little time for in-depth discussions on specific issues such as voting and local elections. However, Victoria Barnes, a freshman at The University of Alabama, claims that students receive clear information on voting. According to her, the Alabama school system is proficient in sending the message that in order to have your voice heard in a democracy, you must participate.

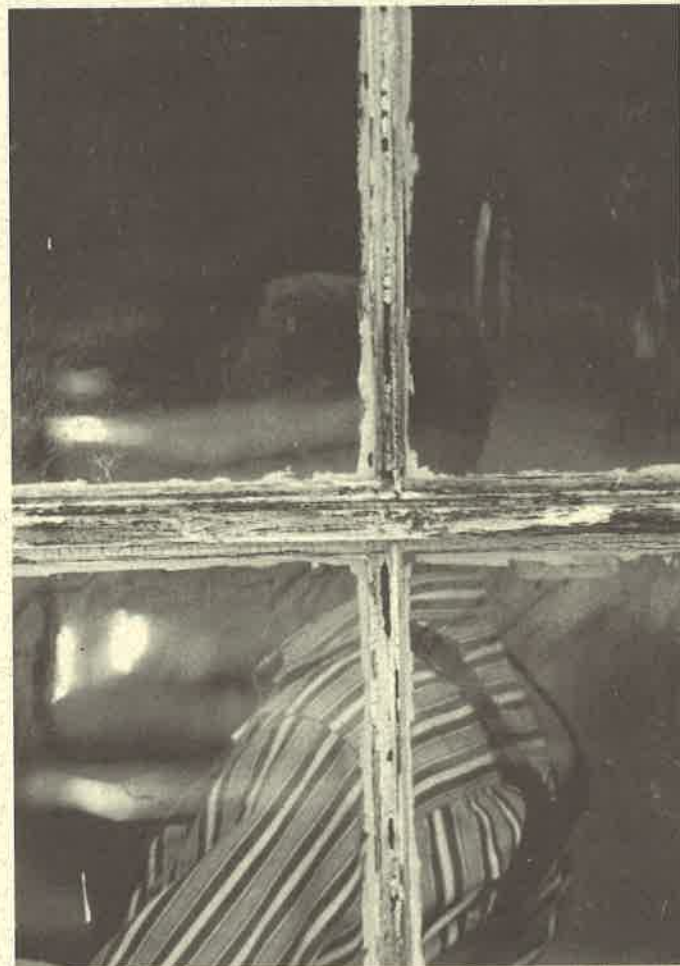
The state schools do have programs intended to increase student political awareness. Student

“It can’t be overstated that education is the greatest weakness of Alabama as a democracy.”
Randy Henderson
City Editor
The Birmingham News

mock elections is one such program that is held a few days before regular elections to allow students to make their own voices heard. This program is in place nationwide, and Alabama has consistently ranked near the top in student participation with numbers over 300,000 (Secretary of State).

Despite this, learning specifics about democracy or elections appears to be statistically less important in increasing political participation than exposure to a variety of political and social issues. This sort of education allows students to understand how political events affect their lives and to develop a critical consciousness to approach and understand them. Through this, students are better able to work for legislation, policies, and candidates that will better improve living conditions.

When asked to name the biggest influence in their lives, most teenagers cited parents over schools, churches, peers, and the media. Pam



Campbell of Pelham High School suggests that the impact on political participation from schools is small and that much of a person’s attitude comes from the home. Also, she has seen over her years in the classroom a decrease in political interest levels. She attributes this to the cynicism parents express toward political figures and scandals. Many parents do not vote because they feel they are simply choosing between the lesser of two evils and their children, the future voters of Alabama, adopt a similar attitude.

A person will vote only if he or she feels that their actions will have an impact on the political system. Education can provide this feeling of empowerment, but one’s sense of political efficacy

with a solution for the lack of minority representation in public office. In a process called cumulative voting, citizens do not elect leaders from geographic districts, which almost always put blacks in the minority, but, instead, elect city council seats citywide, and everyone has as many votes as there are council seats. Thus, if there are five council people to be elected, each citizen gets five votes and these can be either all cast for one candidate or split among several. In this way, minorities can use all of their votes to elect a single representative. This program began in Chilton County, Alabama, in 1988 where 9.9% of the voting age population was black. In the previous 100 years not a single black had been elected to the

Many parents do not vote because they feel they are simply choosing between the lesser of two evils and their children, the future voters of Alabama, adopt a similar attitude.

is influenced by a myriad of factors, including race, gender, and upbringing.

MINORITIES

Another issue closely linked with voter participation is minority representation. Although the 1990 census revealed that 73.6% of the state population is white and 26.4% black or other racial minorities (US Bureau of the Census), Alabama’s leaders are consistently white, male, Christian heterosexuals of upper class standing, with only 15.9% of Alabama’s legislators being racial minorities (Center for Voting and Democracy). As a result, 80% of Blacks living in Alabama feel that they are not being represented by their state government, and therefore fail to see a reason to participate (Capstone Poll).

Edward Still, a civil rights attorney in Birmingham, Alabama, and member of The Center for Voting and Democracy, may have come up

county commission. But after establishing cumulative voting, the first black was elected to the county commission (Engstrom 1-4).

It should also be noted that although only 10 out of 140 Alabama legislators are women, putting the state last among all 50 states in the number of females elected to public office (Hovey D-6), 38.1% of women feel that they are well represented by their state government (Capstone Poll). Influences that might create this condition are the Bible Belt and the widespread acceptance of traditional gender roles in the population.

One of the most important factors affecting the election of women and minorities to public office is corruption within the government, within voting, and within campaign finance. In a world where money runs elections, the ability to give and receive unlimited funds ensures a voice in government that is not always available to all.

CAMPAIGN FINANCE

Campaign finance is one of the main forms of corruption which continues to infest Alabama politics. In contrast to the federal government which placed limits and conditions on campaign finance some 25 years ago, Alabama has yet to



VOTER FRAUD

Voter fraud occurs mainly in three ways: false absentee ballots, biased polling officials, and imposter voting. Tuscaloosa City Councilman Lee Garrison states that "Alabama has no safeguards to eliminate fraud."

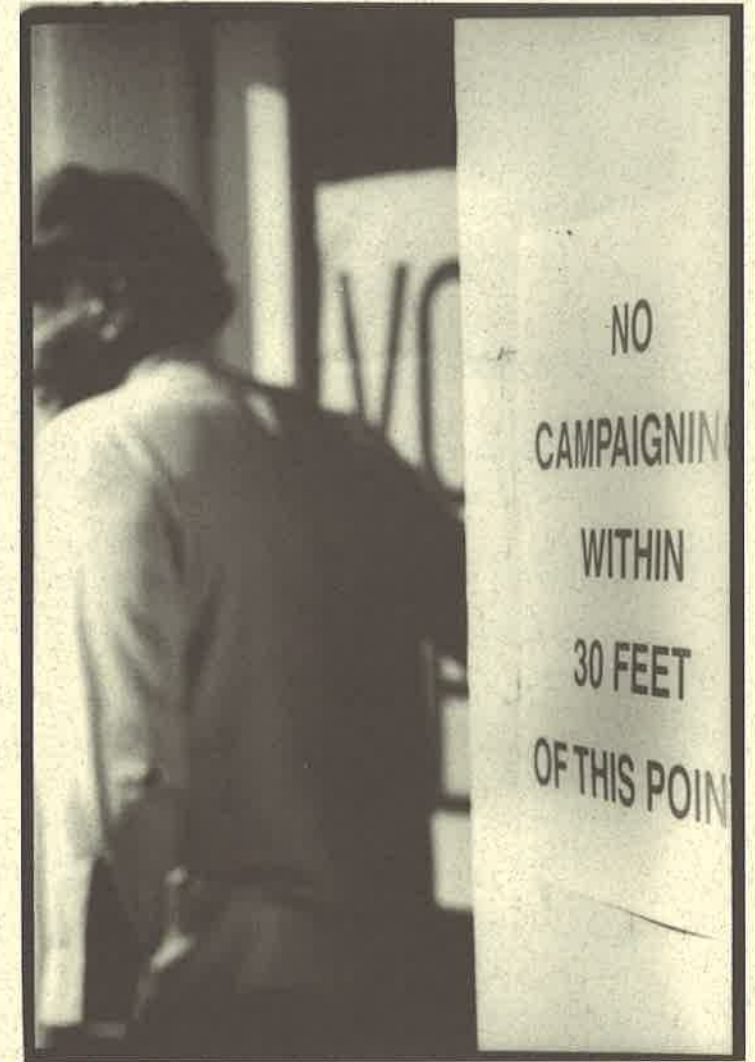
curb the influence of wealth and interest groups on state politics. Federally, there are limits on contributions from political action committees (PACs), and individuals and corporations must give full disclosure concerning all contributions. Federal politicians must also reveal all their financial resources, and this information is cross-referenced by individual industries and can be found on the Internet. In Alabama, there is no easily accessible mandated public disclosure of campaign finance information. So we must rely on the media to research and report this information, which is also difficult to find. The result is that any financial contributor has unlimited access through unregulated channels. As Cathy Donelson of Common Cause Alabama states, "It's not government by the people in Alabama. It's government by special interest groups" (Center for Voting and Democracy).

According to Paul Heywood's book *Political Corruption*, in Alabama, "election laws and procedures are followed—or ignored—in each county at the discretion of a board comprised of the local sheriff, the probate judge, and the circuit court clerk. Frequently these individuals are all members of the same political party" (Heywood). In some counties, such as Greene County, a small metal box with a flimsy lock is the holding place for hundreds of ballots. After an election, these boxes have been reported "missing" for as long as four hours. In Tuscaloosa County there is frequent suspected voter fraud. In the November, 1998 election, some polls were not reported until 10 a.m. the next morning. Where were these boxes?

Creating a uniform and secure state-wide voting system could be accomplished, in part, by mandating a voter identification system. This system would make the presentation of a government identity card necessary before receiving a ballot.

While some feel that requiring a government identity card with a picture is unfair to the old and poor that might be without such identification, all agree that current security methods are obsolete. Currently voters approach a designated table and state their name, which is then highlighted by the pollster. The practice creates opportunities for an individual to view the names of those who are not participating and return later, claiming to be one of those persons. In some counties, such as Greene County, poll officials do not even follow the highlighting method feeling, as one stated, that "they know everyone that comes in the door anyway." Lee Garrison asks, if "we ID for beer and tobacco, why in the world would you not do it for the vote?"

Absentee ballots present another way to influence Alabama's election process. By fraudulently completing and submitting ballots, it is possible for political parties or candidates to sway the election in their favor. In Greene County, a young man reported that his family recently discovered that his deceased grandmother had been "voting" for the past five years. Fortunately, the practice seems to be decreasing as elections won by absentee ballots are contested more and more frequently. Secretary of State Jim Bennett discovered that in the November 1998 election fewer absentee ballots were cast than in any year in recent memory, and he stated that this indicates a ebbing of voter fraud (Secretary of State). Finally, corruption in Alabama politics is almost completely preventable if concerned citizens will force state law makers to reform the system. Jim Aucoin, professor of journalism at the University of South Alabama, states, "Political corruption is the inevitable result of an intentionally flawed election system designed and maintained to benefit the rich, the powerful, and the incumbent" (Aucoin).



CONCLUSION

The forces that shape Alabama democracy, or rather those that misshape it, are numerous, amorphous, and, most of all, symbiotic. While the situation may sometimes appear grim, the systemic flaws we have uncovered are not without remedy. A true panacea will require a concerted effort to improve the education and economic status of those now marginalized by the powers that be. Whether these will occur before, after, or despite a restructuring of government to solve corruption and inertia, we cannot say.

This report was prepared by Cash Casey, Tammy Colbert, Ruth Fitts, Susan Harney, Stephaine Holcombe, Amber Jennings, Amanda Stewart, and Laura Ashley Rowland.

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Colophon



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Heather Rainey