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Tom Robbins' Chink: A Posthumous Zarathustra

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by

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For
KIM
Among the graffiti found in Boston in the early 1970's was the suggestion, "Martin Heidegger is a Zen Buddhist"; I expect that today one would find it accompanied by, "The Chink is a Nietzschean". The "Chink" referred to here is of course the anti-guru of Tom Robbins' Even Cowgirls Get the Blues (hereafter referred to as Cowgirls). The thought about the Chink presented here originates in studying Robbins' protagonist, Sissy Hankshaw. Sissy is a unique heroine in a number of ways but most importantly because she goes on a quest. In contrast to most female quests in contemporary fiction Sissy's quest is quite like that described for the male-only hero of Joseph Campbell's The Hero with a Thousand Faces. Sissy quests for those ultimate truths that Campbell's heroes seek rather than for the love that her literary sisters traditionally have sought. The philosophical model of such a quest can be seen as far back as Plato's "Allegory of the Cave". The development of these thoughts I would like to present is that Sissy is also unique in that the truth she discovers on her quest is philosophically radically different from the truths male questors have been discovering.
since Plato’s Philosopher-Kings.

Several introductory points need to be made about the "philosophy" found in Cowgirls. The major source of the wisdom learned by Sissy is the Chink; he is, however, not the only source of philosophical ideas - others include the narrator's reflections-the theories of Sissy’s psychiatrist, Dr. Robbins,-and the visions of Delores del Ruby. The most accurate picture of Sissy’s "philosophy" is a combination of all these sources-for she certainly understands them all whether she articulates them or not. This composite is far from a philosophical "system" as encountered in Plato or Hegel, but it is nevertheless a coherent perspective on existence. Here already we find a point of contact with Nietzsche. Understanding Nietzsche demands seeing the connections of his deepest thoughts to one another; yet his philosophy is hardly a "system". Nietzsche believed that the "will to system" is a lack of integrity. Our primary concern is to disclose the similarities between Nietzsche’s thinking and that presented in Cowgirls—we shall use the Chink as the primary source simply because we hear more from him than from anyone else.

We can begin our inquiry by looking at how
Nietzsche and the Chink evaluate the spiritual health of western civilization. Nietzsche was the first philosopher of modern times to place the death of God at the center of his thought. It is quite important to be clear about the meaning of the death of God in Nietzsche. First of all the death of God is seen by Nietzsche as a metaphysical event, it is a fact, a part of our historical heritage. The death of God is not a matter of belief, Nietzsche does not say, "I no longer believe,"; rather, he says, "I notice that..." The fact noticed is that the values that have dominated western culture have lost their compelling nature, we have placed our values out of reach, and with the realization that they are not attainable, a feeling of absurdity prevails. What Nietzsche sees is the occurrence of Nihilism; he is perhaps best understood as the prophet of Nihilism for when he wrote of the death of God in the 1880's few people understood him-today his ideas are seen in many places, including novels about cowgirls.

We need to take another step here. The death of God is presented by Nietzsche as a fact, but it is clearly not an accidental fact, he does not talk of the disappearance of God but rather says that God has been murdered, that we have murdered him ourselves. This
nihilism, this devaluation of life began argues Nietzsche 2400 years ago in the metaphysical beliefs of Plato. Prior to Plato philosophers concerned themselves with understanding nature; from Plato onward human beings have been the special focus of attention. What distinguishes human beings is reason, that mental ability which has discovered algebra, geometry and hopefully much more, similarly absolute, knowledge. This privilege to reason, however, poses a problem for Plato, because he was well aware of the irrational, the paradoxical in life. In fact the small bit of reason found in the human mind seemed so special because it is surrounded by the irrational. At this point Plato makes a decisive moral judgement and says that the rational is the most important, that true Being must be fully rational, fully good. Thus the philosophical quest is defined, one must overcome the irrational and find a world without contradictions. Plato found that world and called it the world of ideas-it is a world of absolute justice, absolute beauty, absolute truth. In the famous "Allegory of the Cave" this world of ideas is the world outside the cave, the place where the philosophers must go to discover the truth before they return to the cave to be philosopher-kings and create a just society.
For Nietzsche there are some fundamental problems with this picture of existence. Plato's world of ideas, the world outside the cave is really a creation of Plato's mind. The actual difficulty, however, is that concealed in this dualistic perspective is an unconscious nihilism. Life says Nietzsche is fundamentally ambiguous; Plato's world of ideas is built upon a denial of ambiguity, and thus of life itself. For Nietzsche, the goal of ascending out of the cave to the realm of pure Being where everything is rational and good is unattainable. Because western culture has maintained this same Platonic dualistic metaphysics we have continued to accept values that are out of reach. Understanding Nietzsche's idea of the death of God means the realization that nihilism is the internal logic of our civilization.

When we turn to the Chink we find that he too sees that the mainstream of our society believes in values that are out of our reach. He expresses this quite clearly in telling Sissy of the Clock People and their waiting for the "Eternity of Joy".

"I loved those loony redskins", the Chink said to Sissy. "But I couldn't be a party to their utopian dreaming. After a while it occurred to me that the Clock People waiting for
the Eternity of Joy was virtually identical to the Christians waiting for the Second Coming. Or the Communists waiting for the worldwide revolution. Or the Debbies waiting for the flying saucers. All the same. Just more suckers betting their share of the present on the future, banking every misery on a happy ending to history. Well, history isn't going to end, happily or unhappily. And history is ending every second-happily for some of us, unhappily for others, happily one second, unhappily the next. History is always ending and not ending, and both ways there is nothing to wait for. Ha ha ho ho and hee hee.” (This and all subsequent references to Even Cowgirls Get the Blues are from the Bantam edition of 1977. Page references will be included parenthetically in the text.) (Cowgirls, p. 230)

For the Chink there is, thus, the same unconscious nihilism in the Clock People, the Marxists and the Christians that Nietzsche saw in Plato’s world of ideas and, like the Chink, in Christianity.

We can take a step further here. The Chink could not accept the Clock People’s utopian dreaming so he left, but to build his own Clockworks-while being critical of the Clock People the Chink remains friends with them.

Sometime in the course of things, the Chink had made it clear to Sissy that, while he might not buy the Clock People’s dreaming, he did respect the quality of their dream. The vision of an era, however lasting, during which all ritual
would be personal and idiosyncratic, made the Chink's heart want to stand up and dance. (Cowgirls, p. 230)

We find this same respect in Nietzsche for the idealism of Plato and those who follow Plato, including Christianity. In the "Prologue" to Nietzsche’s Thus Spoke Zarathustra Zarathustra, the teacher of the Übermensch, the Will to Power and Eternal Return, chooses to return to society after the death of God; he has a gift, a new perspective on existence that is only possible after the death of God. The first person Zarathustra encounters is a saint who lives alone in the forest, talking only witty God, no longer to humans. Zarathustra and the saint meet as friends, they laugh with each other, understand each other. When the saint asks of Zarathustra’s gift, Zarathustra responds that he could give the saint nothing and chooses to leave immediately to avoid taking something from him. It is only after leaving that Zarathustra wonders how it is possible the saint hasn’t yet heard of the death of God.

The respect of the Chink for the Clock People and of Zarathustra for the saint is rooted in their realization that God is dead, that there are no fixed, eternal values, nor are we ever going to find such absolutes in the course of history. Since there are no absolutes telling
someone else what they must do is no longer possible. The Chink is not a Guru, he stones all the pilgrims who come to get the "truth" from him, because he possesses no such truth, no one does. Even Sissy seems to think that the Chink might possess such truths, at least in the beginning. These absolute truths are what all questors seek; it is this kind of truth that enables the heroine or hero to return and transform society.

Like the Chink, the philosopher Zarathustra is also aware that there are no absolutes, he calls himself a teacher but not a preacher - one can no longer preach after God has died. Zarathustra comes with a gift for us all, the content of which is quite important. Zarathustra initially goes to the market-place to teach the people the Übermensch, his gift. He quickly learns that such an approach is not possible, the people are unable to understand him. Waking up the next day Zarathustra sees his path more clearly.

"An insight has come to me: companions I need, living ones-not dead companions and corpses whom I carry with myself wherever I want to. Living companions I need, who follow me because they want to follow themselves - wherever I want."

"An insight has come to me: let Zarathustra speak not to the people but to companions. Zarathustra shall not become
the shepherd and dog of a herd.” (This and all subsequent references to Nietzsche shall be from Kaufmann’s Portable Nietzsche, 1954) (Zarathustra, p. 135)

Zarathustra from that time forth speaks only with companions who "follow" him by following themselves.

Remaining faithful to their insight that there are no absolute values is quite difficult for Zarathustra and the Chink. Their problem is that they live during the time when the unconscious nihilism that dominates our culture is slowly becoming conscious-"the international situation is desparate as usual”. What is happening is that as society becomes aware that our highest values are out of reach the first path taken is to look for other sources of absolute truth; the response is that while we haven’t found those unchanging truths yet, they must nevertheless exist. For the Chink all the people who come to his cave, or seek any master want to find "another Jesus"-but what they are getting from contemporary guru’s is simply "oriental therapy”. Getting this therapy does not help us to realize and thus deal with the fact that God is dead, it simply provides contentment.

"But it’s therapy. Marvelous therapy, wonderful therapy, ingenious therapy, but only therapy. It relieves symptoms,
ignores disease. It doesn’t answer a single universal question or put a person one step closer to ultimate truth. Sure it feels good. I won’t knock it. But let nobody kid himself: spiritual devotion to a popular teacher with an ambiguous dogma is merely a method of making experience more tolerable, not a method of understanding experience or even of accurately describing it.” (Cowgirls, p. 259)

In Nietzsche we find this same criticism of those who seek contentment. The reality after the death of God is the life of the "last men”. The last men call themselves the inventors of happiness.

" 'We have invented happiness,' say the last men, and they blink. They have left the regions where it was hard to live, for one needs warmth. One still loves one’s neighbor and rubs against him, for one needs warmth.”

"Becoming sick and harboring suspicion are sinful to them: one proceeds carefully. A fool, whoever still stumbles over stones or human beings! A little poison now and then; that makes for agreeable dreams. And much poison in the end that makes for an agreeable death.”

"One still works, for work is a form of entertainment. But one is careful lest the entertainment be too harrowing. One no longer becomes poor or rich: both require too much exertion. Who still wants to rule? Who obey? Both require too much exertion.”

"No shepherd and one herd! Everybody wants the same, everybody is the same: whoever feels different goes voluntarily into the madhouse.” (Zarathustra, pp. 129-130)
For Zarathustra the last men are the most contemptable, their paradise on earth is the least desirable kind of existence.

We can take this one step further. The Chink tells Sissy that the best he can do is "teach" by driving his disciples away.

"In order to tolerate experience, a disciple embraces a master. This sort of reaction is understandable, but it's neither very courageous nor very liberating. The brave and liberating thing to do is to embrace experience and tolerate the master. That way we might at least learn what it is we are experiencing, instead of camouflaging it with love."

"And if your master truly loved you he would tell you that. In order to escape the bonds of earthly existence you bind yourself to a master. Bound is bound. If your master really loved you, he would not demand your devotion. He would set you free-from himself, first of all."

"You think I am behaving like a cold-hearted ogre because I turn people away. Quite the contrary. I'm merely setting my pilgrims free before they become my disciples. That's the best I can do." (Cowgirls, p. 259)

After Zarathustra had been "among people" for a while he told his fellow companions, his "disciples", that he must go into solitude, for his own benefit and theirs. "One repays a teacher badly if one always remains nothing but a pupil." (Zarathustra p. 190) Zarathustra says he will return but only when his friends have
found themselves on their own. This is of course the link between Sissy and the Chink; she had found herself before she found the Chink. Not only had Sissy found herself but she had done it alone; she knew "unconsciously" that God is dead. Sissy’s vision originated in hitchhiking; but she learned quite early that hitchhiking for her had a totally different meaning than it had for others, "... it should be made clear, here and now, that Sissy never really dreamed of hitching to anywhere; it was the act of hitching that formed the substance of her vision." (Cowgirls, p. 27) Most see hitchhiking simply as a means, it is a part of the effort to make existence tolerable, as is Oriental therapy. For Sissy there is no goal, it is the act itself that has the deepest meaning.

We have seen thus far that the Chink and Zarathustra have the same evaluation of the spiritual health of western civilization. We should call Zarathustra the Prophet of Nihilism and the Chink an observer of the unfolding of the truth of this prophecy. Zarathustra and the Chink also share a second element, one even more important than the first; both remain hopeful that a different, less nihilistic perspective on existence might emerge. Zarathustra does return to talk with his
friends; the Chink, among other things, also talks with Sissy.

The Chink and Zarathustra have been shown to be consistent with their realization that there are no absolutes by not becoming Gurus or Preachers. As we turn to the hope they also share we see that their hope is also consistent with their original insight. The essence of the Chink's message to Sissy is that she must begin by paying attention to her own spiritual heritage.

"You Westerners are spiritually poor. Your religious philosophies are impoverished. Well, so what? They're probably impoverished for a very good reason. Why not learn that reason?... Admit first of all, your spiritual poverty. Confess to it. That's the starting point ... A Westerner who seeks a higher, fuller consciousness could start digging around in his people's religious history." (Cowgirl, p. 264)

This task, however, is not quite so simple. The basic problem, according to the Chink, is that getting back to the supreme deity of the west prior to Jehovah, The Homed One, The Old God, is blocked almost completely by Christianity.

Nietzsche sees precisely the same task for those who are seeking to find themselves, though he sees a different obstacle blocking the path to our ancient heritage. Nietzsche goes back to ancient Greece to find the
Spiritual wealth that could be a part of our thinking today. Specifically Nietzsche finds in Greek tragedy an affirmation of existence, the highest affirmation possible. With the rise of Platonic philosophy came the rejection of Greece's earlier tragic wisdom and its replacement by Plato's rational idealism. Thus for Nietzsche it is most truly Plato who blocks access to our earlier spiritual heritage. Christianity of course also blocks any return; but this is simply because Christianity has adopted Plato's dualistic metaphysics, and his unconscious nihilism. Zarathustra would suggest to the Chink that Christianity is simply Platonism for the people, that it is Plato who stands on our path.

What we are seeing here is merely a formal similarity between the paths suggested by the Chink and Nietzsche that we must follow in order to discover who we are. Seeing that the Chink and Nietzsche see Plato and Christianity blocking our access to earlier spiritual wisdom would be a rather worthless realization if it were not also for the fact that they also see the content of that lost ancient wisdom as essentially the same. The final question we must ask here is, "What do they see as the elements of spiritual health?"

Sissy asks the Chink directly—what will she find
in her heritage. The initial answer is that she will find women and plants. This answer is important for the obvious political reasons; I think, however, that we must look more deeply here. To remain on this level would be to stay at Delores del Ruby's second vision—that men are the enemy of women. This is an important, necessary vision, as necessary as realizing our spiritual poverty. But Delores has a third vision; the true enemy is the tyranny of the dull mind, the mind that thinks dualistically. This dull mind thinks in terms of men or women, black or white, capitalist or communist, and world of appearances or world of ideas. Delores' third vision tells her that there are no absolutes, that God is dead. Thus we must ask more about those women and plants Sissy will find in her past—what did those women learn from the plants?

Let us begin this final step in our inquiry by turning to Nietzsche. As already suggested Nietzsche found the spiritual wealth he hopes will be re-created by us in ancient Greek tragedy. The most complete development of his notion of tragedy can be found in Nietzsche's first published book, *The Birth of Tragedy*. A brief glance at that fascinating text gives us the central elements for our questions here. Nietzsche begins by
discussing tragedy in terms of the two artistic deities of the Greeks-Apollo the God of sculpture and Dionysus the God of music. The extreme differences between these two deities suggest, at first, an essentially dualistic perspective; a perspective indicated further by the use of two different psychological categories, dreaming for Apollo and intoxication for Dionysus, as initial characterizations. We quickly learn, however, that Nietzsche's primary concerns are neither philological nor psychological when the Apollinian and Dionysian are identified with Schopenhauer's distinction between World as Representation / World as Will; Nietzsche's concerns are onotological. An adequate examination of Nietzsche's notion of tragedy must begin in philosophical categories.

The philosophy of Schopenhauer employed by Nietzsche is a curious melange of Kant, Plato and the Hindu Vedas; what is most important for us is to see that Schopenhauer is clearly involved in the mainstream of dualistic western metaphysics, a "disciple" of Plato. In spite of the apparent acceptance of Schopenhauer and of considering the Apollinian-Dionysian a duality the essence of Nietzsche's argument about tragedy is in fact a radical break with this entire tradition.
Nietzsche ends up discussing Apollo and Dionysus as *consanguineous* deities; tragedy is in the end seen as *equally* Apollinian and Dionysian.

"... we must understand Greek tragedy as the Dionysian chorus which ever anew discharges itself in an Apollinian world of images. Thus the choral parts with which the tragedy is interlaced are, as it were, the womb that gave birth to the whole of the so-called dialogue, that is, the entire world of the stage, the real drama. In several successive discharges this primal ground of tragedy radiates this vision of the drama which is by all means a dream apparition and to that extent epic in nature; but on the other hand, being the objectification of a Dionysian state, it represents not Apollinian redemption through mere appearance but, on the contrary, the shattering of the individual and his fusion with primal being. Thus the drama is the Apollinian embodiment of Dionysian insights and effects and thereby separated, as by a tremendous chasm, from the epic." (Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. by Walter Kaufmann, New York, 1968, pp. 64-65)

Tragedy, thus, is indeed Apollinian; there is the actual drama on the stage in which we clearly see the hero and know what is happening. The drama seems to be as clear, intelligible as the world outside the cave to which the Platonic philosopher ascends. Nietzsche, however, prevents this interpretation; the drama does not represent redemption (release) but is rather an
objedtification of the Dionysian. What is made clear, what is seen in tragedy is Dionysian wisdom. The truth expressed in tragedy is not rooted in the clarity of the Apollinian but rather in the chaos of the Dionysian.

"Saying yes to life even in its strangest and hardest problems; the will to rejoicing over its own inexhaustibility even in the sacrifice of its highest types-that is what I call Dionysian, that is what I understood as the bridge to the psychology of the tragic poet. Not in order to get rid of terror and pity, not in order to purge oneself of a dangerous affect by its vehement discharge-Aristotle misunderstood it that way - but in order to be oneself the eternal joy of becoming, beyond all terror and pity that joy which includes even the joy in destroying." (Friedrich Nietzsche, Ecce Homo in Basic Writings of Nietzsche, trans. and ed. by Walter Kaufmann, New York, 1968, p. 729)

The Dionysian is most importantly an affirmation of life, an affirmation that differs from that of Plato. Plato could only affirm a world without contradictions, a rational world, the world outside the cave. The Dionysian discloses a chaotic, ambiguous world, the world inside the cave and is able to say yes to that world as it is - "even in its strangest and hardest problems." Tragedy then is an alternative to the nihilism that has dominated our culture since Plato. Spiritual health for
Nietzsche must be not merely an acceptance of life, a contentment with or without therapy; rather it must be an affirmation of all of life.

When Nietzsche begins to express his mature philosophy we encounter the philosopher Zarathustra, a tragic thinker. Zarathustra returns to society after the death of God with a gift, a hope called the Übermensch. The Übermensch could best be described as a lonely, childlike creator. We have already touched upon the idea of being alone rather than being the shepherd, the preacher, the guru. We need to add now the child and the artist. In *Zarathustra* Nietzsche discusses three stages on the path to the Übermensch, the third is the child.

"The child is innocence and forgetting, a new beginning, a game, a self-propelled wheel, a first movement, a sacred 'Yes'. For the game of creation, my brothers a sacred 'Yes' is needed: the spirit now wills his own will, and he who has been lost to the world now conquers his own world." *(Zarathustra, p. 139)*

The child and the artist look at existence as playing a game; in so doing they reject Plato’s requirement that Being is fully rational. The creator is innocent, the child in playing builds a sand castle and then destroys
it to build another; both actions are without the moral judgement that says one castle was good another evil. In playing the child participates in the process of change, affirms change without judging change to be evil. Change for Plato is to be found only inside the cave, outside things never change. The creator is thus able to participate in and affirm the world of becoming as the Greeks did in their tragedies; the creator overcomes Plato's nihilism. For Nietzsche, then, it is in art that we can find a new perspective on existence, one that pays attention to an ever-changing ambiguous existence and chooses to participate in that existence. In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche says that art is the highest and truly metaphysical activity of life.

In one of their final discussions the Chink is telling Sissy that our primary questions are philosophical—and the solution to those problems is the same as Nietzsche's.

... "I say this much and no more: there's got to be poetry. And magic. Your thumbs taught you that much didn't they? Poetry and magic. At every level." . . .

"Do you think such a thing can ever happen?"

"If you understood poetry and magic, you'd know that it doesn't matter." (Cowgirls, p. 379)
The Chink says we must pay attention to art, poetry, magic; when we understand them we can achieve the innocence of the child, no longer believing that it mat' ters if such a thing happens or not. Existence remains a riddle for the artist, Nietzsche and the Chink.

We need to look at one final, crucial point where the thinking of Nietzsche and the Chink coincide. It has become clear that they both see that the mainstream of our culture has believed in fixed eternal values, that since such values are out of our reach we are finally becoming aware of the nihilism implicit in our culture. While most choose to look for new gods to replace the ones that have died, Nietzsche and the Chink see the possibility of radically renewing our idealism. Such a renewed idealism would be an affirmation of existence, an affirmation of change. In turning to the artist as a new source of wisdom Nietzsche and the Chink are saying something more than merely that we must learn to affirm the world of becoming. In art we find a special kind of change-creativity; by paying attention to area' tivity Nietzsche and the Chink disclose that they share a similar view of time.

When we go back to Plato to examine the origins of the nihilism Nietzsche and the Chink seek to over'
come, we see that Plato in opposing any change, in re-
jecting the world of becoming, also devalues time. The
world of ideas is outside of time; time only exists inside
the cave. Nietzsche and the Chink see us as existing
totally inside the cave; yet within the cave, in the world
of becoming, there are two possible notions of time.
It is possible to see change as a rational process, to see
a rational necessity between the moments of time-this
is precisely what Hegel achieved in his dialectic. Neither
Nietzsche nor the Chink consider this rational time to
be the most important. The Chink learned of time
from the Clock People who had two forms of time-
keeping. The first was the gigantic hourglass filled with
acorns, a notion of time essentially Hegelian. Their
second clock is a pool of blind catfish which have an
innate sensitivity to the occurrence of earthquakes. The
Chink constructed his own clockworks in his cave on
Siwash Ridge to be even more removed from the ra-
tional change of Hegel; the Chink's clock struck totally
at random. For Nietzsche the most important notion
of time is the same as the Chink's, "Verily it is a bless-
ing and not a blasphemy when I teach: 'Over all things
stand the heaven Accident, the heaven Innocence, the
heaven Chance, the heaven Prankishness.' ” (Zara-
thustra, p. 278) Here Nietzsche pays attention to, blesses, chance, accident, prankishness. All of these are radically temporal. The Chink’s clockworks and Zarathustra’s chance-accident-prankishness do indeed involve time as a sequence of events, all change involves such a sequence. Where Nietzsche and the Chink oppose Hegel and turn to the artist is that they see moments of time juxtaposed,-but connected merely by that juxtaposition. The connections of time are ambiguous, paradoxical and remain a riddle. It is only this notion of time that truly allows creativity and it is only by being creative that we can participate in existence fully by imitating life itself in its ambiguous creativity.

Nietzsche once said that some people are born posthumously; now that we have encountered the Chink we have had a glimpse into the riddle in and the truth of that statement.
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