Un(Reed)ing Robbins: a comparative study of Tom Robbins's Still Life with Woodpecker and Ishmael Reed's Flight to Canada

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Un(Reed)ing Robbins:
A comparative study of Tom Robbins’s *Still Life with Woodpecker* and
Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada*

by

Michael Philip Mattison

A Thesis Submitted to the
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Signatures have been redacted for privacy

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INTRODUCTION

"In 1968 the student movement had swept across Europe, striking against the authoritarianism of the education institutions and in France briefly threatening the capitalist state itself. For a dramatic moment, the state teetered on the brink of ruin: its police and army fought in the streets with students who were struggling to forge solidarity with the working class. Unable to provide a coherent political leadership, plunged into a confused melee of socialism, anarchism and infantile behind-baring, the student movement was rolled back and dissipated...and the French state regrouped its forces in the name of patriotism, law and order. Post-structuralism was a product of that blend of euphoria and disillusionment, liberation and dissipation, carnival and catastrophe, which was 1968."

Terry Eagleton
Literary Theory: An Introduction (1983)

Over the course of my undergraduate and graduate studies, I have come into contact with a good bit of theory that could be classified under the term used by Eagleton: post-structuralism. In both political science and literature courses, I have encountered the works of Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes, three Frenchmen whose writings are generally credited with laying a large portion of the foundation upon which post-structuralism is built. But the metaphor points to one of the major difficulties, or complexities, of post-structuralism: it does not build, so much as unbuild. As David Richter claims:

"poststructuralism is more easily characterized as an activity than as a philosophy: it is not a body of accepted doctrines--indeed, its central aim is to generate skepticism about most of the doctrines we unquestionably accept" (CT 943). Such skepticism can be a powerful tool for change, but it can also become quite disconcerting; it allows us to re-vision our world, and in doing so, sometimes illuminates how attached we are to the world as it is.

In the field of literary criticism, the process of using poststructuralist skepticism to generate new readings has become quite common. The same could be said for literature; authors as well as critics utilize skepticism to call for change. Two of the more adroit practitioners of this are Tom Robbins and Ishmael Reed. Both authors work to question some
of our "accepted doctrines"; they seek to unbuild the walls of belief we have constructed. Yet, their questioning is by no means identical. For the most part, what each chooses to question is dependent on his position in the world. Their re-visioning is determined by their context. So, too, is their discomfort with certain types of questioning. As I mentioned, skepticism about our accepted doctrines can be extremely unsettling, and Robbins and Reed both exhibit some signs of disconcertment. To explore the similarities and differences between Robbins and Reed in terms of their desire for change and their resistance to it, I shall focus on two texts: Robbins’s *Still Life with Woodpecker* and Reed’s *Flight to Canada*. Both texts are bound up in a process of re-vision but are still connected in certain ways to the norms they are questioning. Each text wants to be skeptical about the society it originates from, but at the same time each is dependent upon that society for its creation. Rebellion is not a simple matter--the “confused melee” of the student movement. Both Robbins and Reed, though, do call for change--in large part by generating skepticism; to appreciate how they generate that skepticism requires a brief overview of poststructuralism.

Poststructuralism is so powerful and disconcerting because much of the theoretical ground we assume to be walking upon is brought into question: our absolutes are nullified, our passport for transcendence revoked. Concepts such as “truth” or “justice” or the previously mentioned “law and order” are not granted immunity from scrutiny. We cannot appeal to a “natural” order. As Foucault says: “We are living in a society that, to a great extent, is marching ‘toward the truth’--I mean, that produces, and circulates discourse having truth as its function, passing itself off as such and thus attaining specific powers” (*PPC* 112). Instead of truth being so because it is true, or real, it is “truth” because it has displayed itself as such and is granted certain status. For poststructuralism (Richter and others delete Eagleton's hyphen), the idea of "discourse" assumes prominence. The language that a society uses, the types of language styles that it privileges, both enforce and indicate what is true for that society.
That is so because there is nothing outside of discourse. The idea of a center, or a fixed origin, for any system, is nullified by Derrida. Language cannot “refer back” to anything, cannot ground itself at any point:

From then on it was probably necessary to begin to think that there was no center, that the center had no natural locus, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play. This moment was that in which language invaded the universal problematic; that in which, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse...a system where the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. (961)

Meaning is dependent upon context. Language means by the interplay of various signifiers--the “differance” of Derrida--not by reference to something outside its system of interplay.

What this “de-centering” brings about, like the student movement in Europe, is a serious querying of authority, and power. As Foucault claims: “For me, power is the problem that has to be resolved” (PPC 104). Moving towards that resolution involves recognizing the connection between the valuation of truth in our society, and the forms of power. Elsewhere, Foucault argues:

Truth isn’t outside power, or lacking in power...Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourses which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth, the status of those who are charged with saying what is true. (qtd. in Richter CT 951-52)
Again, truth is not a static, unbending concept located outside of any discourse, but a construct of discourse. A construct of society.

Moving outside the theoretical realm, into the "society," if you will, a concept which is closely related to poststructuralism is important to take notice of: postmodernism. Though some debate is ongoing as to the relationship between the two concepts and to whether or not the terms are interchangeable, I will propose for this discussion that poststructuralism is a collection of theoretical proposals (illustrated in the writings of Derrida, Foucault, and Barthes) that seek to unbuild, while postmodernism is, in Linda Hutcheon's words, a "contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges--be it in architecture, literature, painting, sculpture, film, video, dance, TV, music, philosophy, aesthetic theory, psychoanalysis, linguistics, or historiography" (Hutcheon 3). In simple terms, postmodernism can be thought of as a way of defining cultural practices: "Postmodernism teaches that all cultural practices have an ideological subtext which determines the conditions of the very possibility of their production of meaning" (Hutcheon xii-xiii).

Furthermore, the phenomenon of postmodernism is not so much grounded in skepticism as in contradiction:

Willfully contradictory, then, postmodern culture uses and abuses the conventions of discourse. It knows it cannot escape implication in the economic (late capitalist) and ideological (liberal humanist) dominants of its time. There is no outside. All it can do is question from within. (Hutcheon xiii)

Poststructuralist thought councils a non-centeredness, a move to discourse with a perpetual sliding of signs. It is the practice of criticism as Foucault defines it: "a matter of flushing out...thought and trying to change it; to show that things are not as self-evident as one believed, to see that what is accepted as self-evident will no longer be accepted as such. Practicing criticism is a matter of making facile gestures difficult" (PPC 155); poststructuralism is concerned with unbuilding. Postmodernism is the slide of signs and also the cultural barriers
that stop the slide. Postmodernism, then, would council a recognition of the paradoxes within poststructuralist thought, as poststructuralist thought is a theoretical practice originating from a given culture (as Eagleton outlined). Quite often, if not always, poststructuralism is unaware of such a paradox. For example, calling for a decenteredness would seem highly contradictory to the centered authorial position that Barthes, Foucault, and Derrida hold in literary classrooms and critical circles. This "blindness" of poststructuralist thought is what postmodernism recognizes.

Though poststructuralism is not the only theoretical (cultural) practice that is postmodern, there is a closer relationship between postmodernism and poststructuralist thought than other practices. As Hutcheon notes: "[Poststructuralist theory] is the theory most often associated with postmodernism. The reasons for the association are fairly obvious. Both share a concern for power--its manifestations, its appropriations, its positioning, its consequences, its languages" (70). The bottom line is power. That is the concern for Foucault, and other poststructuralist thinkers, and that is the concern of postmodernism.

The reason for laboring so over this distinction, and association, between poststructuralism and postmodernism is because Robbins’s and Reed’s texts have been labeled as postmodern and I feel both have some ideological resemblance to poststructuralist thought. Let me step back a bit and further introduce the two novels that have piqued all my interest in the “post” disciplines.

My initial encounters with the two texts are rather telling. Tom Robbins’s *Still Life with Woodpecker* was handed to me by a friend while we were both in high school, and my second reading was also prompted by an acquaintance, this time in college. In both cases, the book was handed out like a favorite possession, a secret decoder ring or stuffed animal that had brought the holder so much pleasure; but it was a possession that could, and should, be shared. The other text, Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada*, was presented to me by a class syllabus for a graduate course in American Literature that focused in on the image of slavery as
presented in various texts. There was no excited voice behind it, no enthusiastic request to "Read this!" It was a requirement in the education process.

Right away, my relationship to each text can give some insight into the cultural standing of the works. Reed is an academic insider; Robbins is an outsider. Reed and his work are highbrow; Robbins is low. Reed is one of "the most important and gifted authors to have emerged in the tumultuous period of the 1960s, when the complacencies of the previous decade were disordered significantly" (Fox ix); Robbins is a member of the "paperback literati" who "fill their books with literary profundity [and] permit characters to spout all sorts of heavy, bogus wisdom--and it leaves the center of the book hollow" (Ross 86). Both writers are also featured in the Western Writers Series from Boise State, in which the book on Reed opens with a discussion of him and his placement in the literary world while the text on Robbins begins with a discussion of the Western novel--the genre leads the author. Reed precedes and dominates the critical concerns, while Robbins is secondary to them. Such a discrepancy is reflected in many other critical writings: Reed is mentioned and discussed often (as in Hutcheon herself), while Robbins is lucky to make the index (in Hutcheon's work he is mentioned once, and not discussed). A scan of the MLA Bibliography over the past few years is further proof: almost a hundred articles on Reed and less than ten on Robbins, fewer than half of which feature him as the focal point.

Such academic disdain, though, does not transfer out to society. Robbins is an extremely popular writer, making the New York Times bestseller list with his last effort, Half Asleep in Frog Pajamas, and racking up millions in paperback sales. Just last year, his novel Even Cowgirls Get the Blues was released as a major motion picture starring Uma Thurman, Keanu Reeves, Angie Dickinson and Pat Morita. Anecdotally, it might be appropriate to mention that most people recognize the name Tom Robbins when I mention it to them. But they don't recognize Reed. Or if they do, they recall a Reed work they had to read for class. Simply put, people don't hand around Reed's books like they do Robbins's. They don't set up web
pages for him or make pilgrimages to his home to ask him about the universe. Not that Reed
doesn't have admirers, but he moves in academic circles, respected as a literary fashioner,
lecturer and poet. If people want to talk to him, they take a class or attend a reading. Robbins is
a guru, a goof who lives in the woods of Washington State.

The two authors and their works, then, move in vastly different circles. Perhaps
because of that, they have not yet been connected in any critical conversation. Their names pass
on a page, but no more. However, they are aware of each other—or at least Robbins is aware of
Reed. In an interview with Michael Strelow, Robbins listed the writers he admires: "Norman
Mailer...Blaise Cendrars, James Joyce, Anais Nin...Ishmael Reed and the Spanish poets"
(101). And there are similarities between their two bodies of work. Western culture is heavily
criticized by both of them as overly serious, oppressive, anal-retentive, and a stifler of
creativity. Both writers hold considerable disdain for the Judeo-Christian tradition, and the
religious figures in their works endure similar attacks and characterization, as do members of
other social institutions, such as the government. Reed frequently parodies presidents of the
United States, and Robbins likes to target government agencies, particularly the CIA.

These similarities, though, are minor points when compared to the direct connection
between Robbins's Still Life and Reed’s Flight. The former is a calculated response to the
latter; the two form a textual conversation that needs to be listened to and given critical
attention. It is not simply a matter of two texts being contemporary, but of texts debating issues
within the realm of fiction. Written four years after Reed's text, Still Life parallels Flight in
many ways: both works have protagonists with avian names (Woodpecker, Raven); both
birdmen are fugitives, running from laws which limit them; both have a relationship with a
princess; and most importantly, both works are primarily concerned with ideological questions
about freedom, writing, romance, individuality, history and social activism.

Reed's text deals with these questions by presenting the story of an escaped slave,
Raven Quickskill, who attempts to flee to Canada using the money he earned by writing a
poem about his escape. It was the act of writing that preceded, and made possible, the move to freedom. Though the story is set during the Civil War--historical characters like Lincoln and Robert E. Lee make appearances--modern technology and events are woven into the tale, and the characters use modern slang along with antiquated phrases. During Raven's adventure, which involves being chased by trackers sent by his owner, Massa Arthur Swille, he has a relationship with Princess Quaw Quaw Tralaralarala, a Native American dancer and art lover, who is married to Yankee Jack, a rather ruthless pirate and capitalist. Ironically, it is on Jack's pirate ship that Raven finally sails to Canada. Raven and Quaw Quaw have a spirited relationship, often arguing about the importance of race and politics and art in their lives.

Meanwhile, back at the plantation, a slave named Uncle Robin ends up inheriting the plantation after Swille dies. Robin is a house slave who chose not to run away, but managed to outwit Swille by pretending to be loyal and subservient. His capability to read and write allowed him to alter Swille's will. After Robin inherits the plantation, Raven comes home to write Robin's story, without Quaw Quaw.

In Still Life, the fugitive is Bernard Mickey "Woodpecker" Wrangle, a bomber who is on the lam for blowing up a science building during the 60s. Unfortunately, he crippled a graduate student in the blast. Though repentant, Bernard does not stop blowing things up and while attempting to blow up a conference called the Geo-Therapy Care Fest, he is "captured" by Princess Leigh-Cheri Furstenberg-Barcalona, an aspiring social activist who quickly falls in love with him. Both are redheads, and are thus connected in the text to a semi-divine race of people who populated the earth several hundred years ago. They too, like Raven and Quaw Quaw, spend a lot of time discussing the role of art and politics in their lives, and how an individual is able to fit in with a larger society. Their affair is disrupted when Bernard is actually arrested and a misunderstanding leads Leigh-Cheri to become engaged to Prince A'ben Fizel, a foreign multimillionaire. Bernard is released and comes to Leigh-Cheri's side, which causes A'ben Fizel to try to kill them. Bernard and Leigh-Cheri escape, using dynamite, and
they both retire to a house in Seattle, presumably to live happily ever after. This story, though,
is told in *Still Life* by an intrusive narrative voice that remarks upon the happenings, sometimes
going off on ideological tangents; the narrator also takes interludes from the story to comment
on his relationship with his typewriter. So, *Still Life* is not only the story of Bernard and
Leigh-Cheri, but also the story of their story's creation.

As will be apparent from these summaries, ideas about writing and authorship are
important to the texts, with Raven and the narrator of *Still Life* each making claims about how
writing is produced and what effects it can have, and each raising questions about the
autonomy of the author. Conceptions about individuals and their relationship to society are also
important, as Raven and Woodpecker are fugitives, at odds with the dominant society. Yet,
their circumstances make us wonder if it is possible to be an individual, separated from a social
definition. At the same time, the issue of romantic relationships is raised by the fugitive-
princess couplings. What is the role of romance in our lives? Raven and Quaw Quaw's
tumultuous pairing can seem highly politicized in contrast to Bernard and Leigh-Cheri's, but is
that because *Still Life* ignores the social positions of the lovers? As with the individual, the
question is whether or not love goes beyond social definition. Finally, the notion of history and
how we use it is examined in both texts, most explicitly perhaps in Reed's text, but it is a major
component of Robbins's work as well. *Flight* takes on the Civil War era, connecting it to
contemporary American society, while *Still Life* creates an alternate history, focusing on the
semi-divine race of redheads who once ruled the earth. Both works find the stories we tell
ourselves about the past affecting our present day lives.

Given this subject matter, the connection with Hutcheon’s work becomes apparent:
The tenets of our dominant ideology (to which we, perhaps somewhat
simplistically, give the label "liberal humanist") are what is being contested by
postmodernism: from the notion of authorial originality and authority to the
separation of the aesthetic from the political....History, the individual self, the
relation of language to its referents and of texts to other texts--these are some of
the notions which, at various moments, have appeared as "natural" or
unproblematically common-sensical. And these are what get interrogated.
(xii-xiii)
The dominant notions of liberal humanism are contained within the two texts, as are challenges
to them. One of the ways they are challenged is with certain poststructuralist theories: theories
that "unbuild."

For instance, Reed's work seems to deny the existence of an author by setting Raven
up as a poet and then taking away his ability to tell his own story. Robbins, on the other hand,
with the narrative voice so present in Still Life, seems to reinstate the author. Yet, that critical
configuration only recognizes half of the postmodern paradox per book and ignores the
ambidexterity of each text; it finds a paradox between the texts, instead of within them:

These paradoxes are, I believe, what has led to the political ambidexterity
of postmodernism in general, for it has been celebrated and decried by both
ends of the political spectrum. If you ignore half of the contradiction,
however, it becomes quite easy to see the postmodern as either
neoconservatively nostalgic/reactionary or radically disruptive/revolutionary.
I would argue that we must beware of this suppression of the full
complexity of postmodernist paradoxes. (Hutcheon xiii)

We must therefore ask if Reed doesn't give some credence to the idea of individual creation and
Robbins, to the disappearance of the writer. Both Foucault and Barthes have taken up the issue
of the author, and their unbuilding of the authorial presence constitutes one half of the paradox.
Finding connections between their work and Reed's is the first step, as is noticing the
disagreement between their work and Robbins's. However, to take note of the "full
complexity" of the postmodern, it is necessary to find connections between their work and
Robbins's and to find disagreement between their work and Reed's.
In addition, the topic of history fits well into this discussion, as it is taken up by Reed and Robbins: is history a collection of objective facts that lead us to the present, or a type of malleable discourse shaped by those in power? Such a question connects to the work of Hayden White (who is influenced by Foucault) and Jack Zipes (influenced by Barthes), both of whom view history (or myth) as a type of discourse that disguises its constructedness. Again, I am not trying to claim the works of Reed and Robbins are poststructuralist. Instead, I am curious as to whether we can notice some of poststructuralism's unbuilding strategies in the works—half of the postmodern paradox. If those strategies are there, and they are coupled with some liberal humanist conceptions of history—the other half of the paradox—then that leads to the texts' classification as postmodern. The dominant view of history will be both supported and challenged, as will the view of the author. Drawing out this postmodern paradox, in addition to letting me form some conclusions about the texts and their relationship, will also let me form some conclusions about literary theory and cultural practice as it stands today. Who holds the power in the questioning of power?

Those conclusions will, I believe, be highly dependent upon the respective social positions (and propositions) of the authors. Reed is an African-American writer, highly interested in notions of control and oppression; Robbins is a white author, also interested in types of control. Should that make a difference? Race is one of the more pressing concerns for our society, and it is in literary studies. Hutcheon raises the point by describing writers like Reed as "ex-centrics." These are people who are not given central positions in the present social system, people kept from the center of power in society: "The right of expression (however unavoidable in liberal humanist assumptions) is not something that can be taken for granted by the ex-centric. And the **problematizing** of expression...is what makes the ex-centric into the postmodern" (70). According to this definition, Reed is an ex-centric, but Robbins is not. Is poststructuralist thought handled differently by "centrics" and "ex-centrics"? Is postmodernism an equal-opportunity cultural phenomenon? These are the
questions that I want to focus on in the concluding chapter. They are also the questions raised by Derrida in his work when he distinguishes between two types of interpretation: one longing for a centered meaning, the other for absolute freeplay. Those interpretive moves, I will argue, are in part dependent upon the social position of the interpreter in relation to the center.

The first two chapters, however, will take up the issues mentioned above: the notion/role of author and the structure of history. Throughout both chapters, though, the concept of the individual and ideas about romance and freedom will be in the forefront. "Author" and "History" will serve as frameworks upon which to hang the discussion.
“A” IS FOR AUTHOR

It might seem strange to begin my discussion by focusing on a topic that, according to a majority of the critical voices now being raised, is relatively well-settled. The once popular notion of an author standing behind (or above) a work has largely been dismantled, as have most critical theories that tended to allow the author prominence when determining meaning. The words of E.D. Hirsch—"This permanent meaning is, and can be, nothing other than the author’s meaning"—ring hollow to many modern readers and have caused more than a few eyeballs to roll in graduate seminars (1396). Much more acceptable would be Ivo Kamps claim that “interpretation implies an at least two-fold ideological operation: an encounter with the texts’ ideologies, which is in turn mediated by the reader’s own ideological make-up” (3). Here, the critical procedure seems to be remodeled from a one-lane alley to a modern highway, with the term “author” conveniently left by the wayside in deference to the more accommodating “text” and the reader allowed to take over the wheel.

This transformation of critical thought might well be likened, by proponents of the author, to Frankenstein’s monster taking over the laboratory and pitching his creator off the nearest parapet. As David Richter explains, “[the] formal detachment of the author of a text from its expressive content...was a repudiation of the romantic obsession with creative genius that had begun early in the nineteenth century” (FT 208). On the other side of the argument, though, the change can be seen as a necessary acknowledgment that both scientist and creature are constructed within the laboratory and that the villagers need to be allowed access. Richter continues: “Writers indeed put words down on paper, but it is not they who speak but their class, their moment in history, their milieu, that speaks through them” (208). No longer does the creator-creature paradigm hold, if it ever did. Now a text can be incorporated into the community, regardless of who channeled the electricity through the bolts. Monster analogies aside, though, this debate about authorship is one I need to raise as both Reed’s and Robbins’s texts make claims about who is writing and who is creating.
The first textual encounter we have within the novel Flight to Canada is a poem of the same name. Actually, calling it a poem is a bit premature, as the form it takes is more like a letter and it is only later that we hear it called a poem. The writing (letter) is addressed, in the first line, to a “Massa Swille” and in the following lines, the first-person voice is used to describe the various actions of an escaped slave, who identifies himself as “Quickskill” at the end of the note. Such a textual construction, a personal communication with an ‘I’ confronting a “you” and detailing past exploits that the “I” has lived, seems to partially remove us from a literary discourse and into one that might not equate writer with Author. But, this text’s placement within a larger, literary text (the book in our hands) strengthens the traditional notion of an author, one who is “always conceived of as the past of his own book: book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a before and an after” (Barthes IMT 145). This “Quickskill” seems to have existed before the letter, lived through various events, and then written the letter. The writing is beholden to the life of the writer. The use of the past tense to describe all of Quickskill’s actions guides the reader to that conclusion, especially when juxtaposed to the one line that describes his writing: “I must close now” (5). The work is subservient to a world beyond it, and a life preceding it.

This connects to Barthes’s comments concerning the erroneous thoughts about the author that we commonly hold, thoughts concerned with the temporal relationship between writer and work:

The Author is thought to nourish the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child. In complete contrast, the modern scriptor is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing, is not the subject of the book as predicate; there is no other time than that of the enunciation and every text is eternally written here and now. (Barthes IMT 145)
The letter writer in *Flight* is a substitute for the nourishing author. But, his power will soon be usurped, in favor of a modern scriptor.

Immediately after the conclusion of Quickskill’s letter, the first chapter begins with the following:

Little did I know when I wrote the poem “Flight to Canada” that there were so many secrets locked inside its world. It was more of reading than a writing. Everything it said seems to have caught up with me. Other things are running away. (7)

Suddenly the notion of a predicated text is rendered problematic. The opening lines of *Flight* represent not a letter, but a poem. The suspicions we might have had about the literariness of the work have been confirmed, and our reading of the piece now shifts the work into a discourse that does recognize the writer as Author. That shift might seem minor, but I think it is possible that it has the ability to illuminate our various conceptions of Author. A letter writer is not the same as a poet, or poetic persona, at least in contemporary literary discourse. We do not read for the symbolic and the hidden in letters as we do in poems, nor do we immediately assume that a poet is detailing his or her life in the same way as a letter writer would. If we viewed the “I” of the letter as a determining subject at first reading, cataloguing his life for us and preceding the act of writing, we might well take back that opinion.

The “I” of the prose, who could be the “Quickskill” of the poem (though we are not certain), claims to be unaware of what his writing contained. And perhaps, as he says, it wasn’t a writing, but a reading: the poem reading him? There is still the notion of an authorial presence, but now the poem might be doubling back on that presence, creating him more than it was created. That idea of interplay (or power reversal) between author and text is pushed further in the next few paragraphs as Harriet Beecher Stowe is accused of stealing the plot of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* from a short book by a former slave, Josiah Henson: “It was all he had. His story...Taking his story is like taking his gris-gris. The thing that is himself.” And such a
move is not without implications: “Harriet paid. Oh yes, Harriet paid. When you take a man’s story, a story that doesn’t belong to you, that story will get you” (8-10).

Here the idea of an individual’s history providing the base for stories is re-emphasized, though the traditional author-story hierarchy has been shaken. Stories seem to be the property of people, of certain authors, but if taken away from their natural owner, then stories can turn around and “get” the illegitimate writer. In this configuration, it seems that there should be one self who “fits” or “owns” the text. But that notion is in opposition to what Raven has just said of his own work: the poem is his, but it “got” him. That contradiction indicates that it might not simply be a matter of finding the “right” author of a story, but of removing the author altogether.

This idea of one author-one text is further undone as Flight quickly leaves this second “I,” changing from its italicized format and beginning in plain type with: “Dressed in white planter’s pants, white waistcoat and white shoes, Raven Quickskill dines alone at the end of a long white Virginia table” (11). Quickskill, who was assumed to be the “I” of both the poem and the opening of Chapter One, is now the object of a narrative voice. He is put into the third person, and inverts his relationship with the text: instead of the text embodying his viewpoint, he is viewed by the text. It probably wouldn’t be going overboard to add that such a switch in voice is accompanied by a striking image of Raven: assuming Raven to be a slave, and therefore black, he is starkly opposed to the “whiteness” of his surroundings. He is, in fact, dressed as a plantation owner. That is a drastic reversal of roles, as is the reversal of writer and text.

Raven is, in fact, inhabiting a multitude of selves: escaped slave, letter/poem writer, a solitary diner, plantation owner, all of which are dependent on the speaking voice. As Barthes says: “the author is never more than the instance writing, just as I is nothing other than the instance saying I: language knows a ‘subject,’ not a ‘person.’” (145). The text so far (in only eleven pages) has indeed given Raven many subject positions. The italicized section, then,
could be the thoughts of Raven as he sits at the table; they are the ruminations of an individual considering the relation of authors to their stories. But, these ruminations belong to an individual unaware of his position within a larger story. So, the idea that a story belongs to one person has been undercut if that idea comes from one who does not have control of his own story. How can Raven complain about Harriet Beecher Stowe taking Henson’s tale when someone is telling Raven’s tale? Raven’s gris-gris has seemingly been stolen and the reader of Flight to Canada has lost momentarily lost the author. The author here is ultimately dependent upon the language that forms him. It is also important to note the switch from past tense to present, as the recalling of events has been abandoned for the “here and now.” The temporal situation has been remodeled, bringing the reader to watch events unfold instead of hearing them recalled.

As events unfold in the first chapter, we learn that Raven Quickskill is indeed the scriptor of “Flight to Canada” and has been both blessed and cursed by the poem and his relationship to it: “It made him famous but had also tracked him down” (13). As the Author of the piece, Quickskill had made money, become popular, and had even been invited to the White House. But the poem also gave his location away, and guided the slave trackers who pursued him. It shaped his life more than he shaped it. However, Quickskill, as we learn in these early pages, has been asked to write Uncle Robin’s story. Uncle Robin is another slave, one who did not run away but stayed with Massa Swille on the plantation, and subsequently inherited it. Now Raven is empowered by Robin to write a story; he is perhaps becoming an Author.

Beginning with Chapter Two, the text flashes back to present the goings-on at the Swille plantation, Swine’rd, as well as the exploits of Quickskill and the other escaped slaves. At the end of the book, it is announced to Uncle Robin that “Raven is back!”—presumably prior to the scene at the dinner table in the first chapter. The narrative has circled around, allowing us to find Quickskill, not in any pre-text existence, but in the text itself. His story and Robin’s have been told, although the book ends at just the point when the request is made to tell the
stories. The story precedes the intention of telling, a complete inversion of the traditional view of the Author. What Barthes said of Proust is applicable to Reed: “[he is] making of the narrator not he who has seen and felt nor even who is writing, but he who **is going to write**...the novel ends when writing at last becomes possible” (IMT 144). In fact, we never see (read) about the writing of “Flight to Canada.” There is no textual construction by an individual in the text, even though Raven is a writer. He is constructed instead.

By implication, it is the “here and now” reader who nourishes the text, not the writer: “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination” (148). This is the idea that **Flight** seems to be supporting, in part because Raven Quickskill believes his unity lies not in his origin, Virginia, but in his destination, Canada. But Raven as a writer must be undone. The demise of the author is necessary to allow for a re-viewing of texts, to enable a multiplicity of ephemeral meanings to swirl about without authorial guidance:

> Classic criticism has never paid any attention to the reader; for it, the writer is the only person in literature. We are now beginning to let ourselves be fooled no longer by the arrogant antiphralstical recriminations of good society in favour of the very thing it sets aside, ignores, smothers, or destroys; we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author. (Barthes IMT 148)

The reader of **Flight** is given control, as Raven does not remain in an authorial position. It is the reader who is empowered; the reader is “the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost” (IMT 148). It is the reader who is aware of the multiple selves of Raven, of the contradictions between his thoughts and his position in the text.

All of the textual shifts in **Flight** lead us to ask Barthes’s question, and also to understand his answer:

> Who is speaking thus?...We shall never know, for the good reason that writing
is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing. (IMT 142)

Such a claim takes on added significance, or is simply made much clearer, when we consider the subject of Flight to Canada: slavery and the attempt to escape from it. Quickskill, the author whose identity we lose, has already lost his identity by being a slave. He is not allowed to exist as a full person; his very existence is based on the ownership of his body by another.

But Raven is not the only author in question. Though the story ends with his return to the plantation, the text concludes somewhat differently:

12:01 A.M.
Tamanaca Hotel, Room 127
Fat Tuesday
March 2, 1976
New Orleans (179)

This endnote works much like Raven’s name at the end of his poem: it gives the impression that the preceding text is from someone, a message delivered to a reader with a specific intention from the author. Unlike Raven’s name, though, this “signature” is not undone by the text. We are left with the final impression that another Author, Ishmael Reed, has offered us some meaning.

There’s the rub. Even if we can trace certain poststructuralist ideas in the depiction of Quickskill, does the overall text, and its cultural dimensions, allow for the author’s dirge to be played if Reed is standing behind Flight to Canada? Or is the text, as Robert Elliot Fox seems to be suggesting, more of a call for the replacement of a dominant form of authorship (ownership) with the ascension and recognition of another, the African-American novelist:

Among other things, the book is a takeoff on the slave narratives which inscribe
the beginning of Afro-American literature, reminding us, at a moment when the country has celebrated 200 years of independence, that there is, unfortunately, still something “fugitive” about black writing and black experience. It also emphasizes...that history is made up of many stories, most of which have been distorted and suppressed in “official” accounts. (68)

The idea of a “distorted” story requires that there is an undistorted one, one that, by implication, Reed is after. To find it, he is distorting the distortions: abusing the discourse while using it. With Raven, he sets up an Author figure and then seems to disempower him. Yet, Reed himself is still firmly behind the creation of Raven. What Reed seeks is not so much the death of the Author as the death of white control (like Stowe’s theft of Henson’s tale) over black narratives. In that way, black writing might become legitimate instead of fugitive. For poststructuralist thought, though, the idea would seem to be that all texts should be fugitive, or at least anonymous. As Foucault hopes: “All discourses, whatever their status, form, value...would then develop into the anonymity of a murmur” (“WA” 988).

A murmur, though, might be much too close to silence, which signals an absence. That absence is what black writing has long tried to overcome, most particularly in the slave narratives. As Henry Louis Gates notes:

The slave narratives, taken together, represent the attempt of blacks to write themselves into being. What a curious idea: Through the mastery of formal Western languages, the presupposition went, a black person could posit a full and sufficient self, as an act of self-creation through the medium of language. Accused of having no collective history by Hegel, blacks effectively responded by publishing hundreds of individual histories which functioned as the part standing for the whole. As Ralph Ellison defined this relation, “We tell ourselves our individual stories so as to become aware of our general story.” (LC 57)
Reed is conscious of the importance of slave narratives in the struggle for identity, and brings that struggle to the fore by playing upon the structure of the slave narrative. For all the critics agree that Flight utilizes the slave narrative form; it is a “return to the subject matter of the archetype of Afro-American fiction, the slave narrative” (Walsh 58).

But it is not straight mimicry; it is an appropriation, a use and abuse of a particular genre. This is nothing new for Reed, who, before Flight, utilized the confessional narrative (The Free-Lance Pallbearers), the western (Yellow Back Radio Broke Down) and the detective story (Mumbo Jumbo) as stepping stones for his fiction. As Hutcheon has described it, Reed brought a dominant genre into question by utilizing (and parodying) many of its rules. With Flight, part of the intent seems to be to reaffirm the value of writing as a tool for freedom. This affirmation of writing, though, is what can make Flight paradoxical, if we consider what Foucault has said.

Like Barthes, Foucault undermines the myth that “the author is the genial creator of a work in which he deposits, with infinite wealth and generosity, an inexhaustible world of significations” ("WA" 988). Foucault expands the issue, however, by claiming that the death of the author has been kept secret, or at least nullified, by the way we view the notions of “the work” and “writing,” both of which “are intended to replace the privileged position of the author [but] actually seem to preserve that privilege and suppress the real meaning of his disappearance” ("WA" 979). For example, the idea that there exists a solid “work,” complete in itself, is, for Foucault, much the same conundrum as an authorial presence. How are we to construct boundaries around a work? What of textual notes, or unfinished manuscripts? And writing, if viewed solely in terms of “the space in which it is dispersed and the time in which it unfolds” risks becoming a substitute for the author by dint of the fact that it implies a sense of being created, and of holding meaning. These are the same qualities that the author lends to a text ("WA" 980). And these are the qualities Reed gives to Flight by cataloguing its time and place of creation, or completion—the reader has the image of the author setting down his pen.
and leaning back in his hotel room chair, at last satisfied that the story has been told. That sense of completion helps support the idea of the text as a complete work, done to authorial specifications and replete with whatever meaning the author wished to include. The endnote couldn’t be written until the preceding text was “finished.”

In this discussion, it might be helpful to consider Robert Burns Stepto’s classification of slave narratives into four types, from his essay “I Rose and Found My Voice.” That is exactly what the narrative progression, for Stepto, is accomplishing: finding a voice. The more basic narratives, the “Eclectic” and the “Integrated,” spend much of their time and space bringing in outside voices to authenticate the slave’s voice (letters from abolitionists, former masters, etc.). The other narratives, the “Generic” and the “Authenticating,” work to incorporate authenticating strategies more firmly into their text. The “Generic Narrative,” illustrated by Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, occurs when “authenticating documents and strategies are totally subsumed by the tale; the slave narrative become an identifiable generic text, e.g. autobiography.” The “Authenticating Narrative,” meanwhile, comes about when “the tale is subsumed by the authenticating strategy; the slave narrative becomes an authenticating document for other, usually generic, texts, e.g., novels, histories.” One example of this is William Wells Brown’s Narrative of the Life and Escape of William Wells Brown—including its attached tale, Clotel (226-27). The first category helps itself find a voice, while the second works to help free other texts.

Flight can be seen as an “Authenticating Narrative,” especially in light of its explicit reference to William Wells Brown. Raven runs into Brown as both are traveling on a steamer on Lake Erie. Raven is headed to Buffalo to give an anti-slavery lecture:

“Can’t be two of us, Mr....Mr....”
“Quickskill.”
“Mr. Quickskill. What line of work are you in?”
“Why, I guess you might call me an anti-slavery writer, too, but I...well in comparison with your reputation, I...I’m just a beginner. I read your novel Clotel and...I just want to say, Mr. Brown, that you’re the greatest satirist of these times.”

“Why thank you Mr. Quickskill...What kind of stuff do you write?

“I...well, my poem “Flight to Canada” is going to be published...It kind of imitates your style, though I’m sure the critics are going to give me some kind of white master. A white man. They’ll say that he gave me the inspiration and that I modeled it after him. But I had you in mind.” (Flight 120-21)

As Raven uses “Flight to Canada” to authenticate himself, Reed uses Flight to Canada to authenticate black writing, and black authors. Black writers should be allowed as much freedom and tradition as any other writers. To claim only a white master, as slave narratives did with authenticating strategies of documentation, is to limit the authenticity of black writers. Reed thus plays off the slave narrative, and Brown in particular, and separates himself from the “white inspiration” that Raven fears.

Flight is quite textually elaborate and highly representative of the postmodern. It is important to remark how Reed, though creating an author character who disappears into the text, manages to firmly situate the “Author” in a role of power. As Stepto says of Brown’s personal narrative: “[it] most certainly authenticates himself...[and] functions...as a successful rhetorical device, authenticating his access to the incidents, characters, scenes, and tales which collectively make up Clotel” (240-41). Brown, like Henson, has his own story, but unlike Henson, Brown has captured the rights to that story. He has reclaimed his “gris-gris.” So has Reed. As Raven says: “And so for him, freedom was his writing. His writing was his HooDoo....It fascinated him, it possessed him; his typewriter was his drum he danced to” (89). Reed can use Raven to mock the image of the writer, to bring the Author into question,
but Reed can also use his creation of Raven to shore up the notion of a creative writer using a
text as a depository for significations. Raven may disappear, but the black author does not.

What, then, of Robbins? Where does he stand in terms of "Author" and "story" and the
relationship between the two? He, like Reed, also has as his main character a fugitive, only this
one is a bomber who has been wanted by the law for several years. In much the same way that
Raven Quickskill is running from Massa Swille, Bernard Mickey “Woodpecker” Wrangle is
hotfooting it from the authorities; he is, in his own words, an “outlaw.” He is not, however, a
writer. At least not a writer like Raven. But Bernard does sense a kinship with writers, or at
least with poets: “Outlaws, like poets, rearrange the nightmare” (64). While Raven works with
words, Woodpecker works with dynamite. Raven's social commentary is contained within his
poems; Woodpecker's is contained within sticks of TNT. For Woodpecker, that distinction is
one between thought and action:

"We all dream profusely every night, yet by morning we've forgotten ninety
percent of what went on. That's why poets are such important members of
society. Poets remember our dreams for us....I'm an outlaw....Outlaws are
not members of society. However, they may be important to society. Poets
remember our dreams, outlaws act them out." (95)

Woodpecker puts himself on a plane related to, but separate from, the one occupied by writers.
If Woodpecker is an author, he is the author of explosions.

Behind Woodpecker, though, stands another figure, one who could more properly be
termed the main character: the narrator. In Flight, the primary writer discussed is Raven, but in
Still Life, the primary writer is the narrator of Still Life, the composer of the tale. The book
opens with a prologue, and establishes a presence behind the words on the page:

If this typewriter can’t do it, then fuck it, it can’t be done....I sense that the
novel of my dreams is in the Remington SL3--although it writes much faster
than I can spell....This baby speaks electronic Shakespeare at the slightest
provocation and will rap out a page and a half if you just look at it hard. (ix-x)

Here is the creative genius that has previously been dismissed by all those critical voices. Although at the moment he seems locked in a struggle with his machine as to who, or what, will have power over the forthcoming words.

This opening, like that of Flight, immediately brings into question what we construe as the Author. To whom will we grant authority? Reed’s text gave us an author, then proceeded to disqualify him as the source of creation. Robbins’s work, on the other hand, presents us with a writer who is battling to retain creative control. Part of the strategy here involves using the authorial voice before the standard pagination of the text, working with the readerly understanding that roman numerals indicate some sort of precursor (or predecessor) to the ensuing text. Additionally, throughout the work, there are interruptions to the narrative of Bernard’s exploits so that the writer can detail his ongoing struggle with his typewriter. By the first interlude, serious doubt has set in: “Maybe I’m mistaken about the Remington SL3. I’m no longer convinced that it will do” (34). It is too mechanical, too technologically advanced, and the writer is worried it cannot handle the needs of a novelist: “Perhaps what the novelist needs is a different sort of writing implement...a typewriter that could type real kisses, ooze semen and sweat” (35). By the next break, the typewriter has been painted red (also the color of Woodpecker’s hair); then the author recognizes the danger that he is in, claiming:

And despite my insistence upon traditional literary values, it remains petulantly moderne....I guess there’s nothing left to do but ram in the clutch on this bourgeois paper-banger and try to coast to the finish line. In the event that I don’t make it, in the event that you, dear reader, must finish without me, well, you’ve been a good audience, probably better than an underdeveloped novelist with an overdeveloped typewriter deserves. (204)

The author might not make it; his absence is a possibility that must be considered. It is if the narrator is aware of Barthes’s and Foucault’s arguments, and is preparing for his own demise.
The narrator, though, locates his death not in a theory, but in a machine: “Yet the Remington SL3, in its wanton dedication to humdrum technological practicality, persists in obstructing attempts at old-fashioned literary genius” (226). How much different this is than the image of the typewriter in *Flight* when Raven views his machine as his instrument of freedom.

Obviously, there are two different perspectives on technology in these texts. Reed seems to acknowledge the importance of it in our lives, and admits to its influential power: he portrays Mrs. Swille as a devout watcher of the Harriet Beecher Stowe television show (similar to Oprah or Donahue) and the show causes Mrs. Swille to doubt the institution of slavery; Lincoln’s death is caught on videotape and replayed over and over again on television, and Reed details the impact that has on different viewers. Technology also, through Raven’s typewriter, and airplane ride, is a means to freedom. Technology can be beneficial. Not so for Robbins, who expresses a cynical view of the machine. The narrator of *Still Life* is distrustful, and that distrust seems to stem from a sense of impending loss of control: “Much of this growing distrust of technology is based on the belief that technological development is ungovernable and ultimately outside of human control” (Rybczynski 5). For the narrator, the human aspect of life, specifically art, is paramount, but that fact is ignored by the modern age: “What is more likely is that technology will bypass artists, that a day is coming when our novels will be written by computers, the same devices that will paint our murals and compose our tunes” (SL 36-37).

So who wins in this battle between technological instrument and living narrator? The epilogue to the tale of Bernard concerns not Bernard, but the final confrontation between author and instrument: “I’ll never write another novel on an electric typewriter. I’d rather use a sharp stick and a little pile of dog shit” (271). Such a remark does not stop the Remington from embarking on a thematic study of the story just completed, quite against the author’s will:

And when it comes to themes, how about the--but wait a minute. Hold on. I’ve been trapped. This is the very kind of analytical, after-the-fact goose gunk the
Remington SL3 cut its teeth on. No wonder it’s still yammering away, despite a lack of fuel, despite the red enamel house paint that’s run down into its guts. Enough already. I’m going to pull its plug

The remaining few pages are written in longhand. The author has symbolically escaped from an unwanted influence on his writing.

Others have made the same point, often assuming that the author figure in the novel is Robbins, acting on the romantic idea of creative genius that Still Life promotes:

Robbins clearly dissociates himself as narrator from the narrative action, and the result is more of a fable-with-commentary than a novel of ideas, as he himself seems aware....Ironically, this dissociation suggests that Robbins’s personal involvement in his work is actually greater than it was in the past. Sometimes he seems to be explaining himself rather than the plot developments. He is clearly a writer...struggling with a machine--with a technology, or perhaps a cultural vocabulary--that shapes his ideas in ways he doesn’t always like. He is able to finish the novel only in longhand. (Siegel 47)

If, however, it is a cultural vocabulary that is shaping ideas (and I think this is exactly the case), then how can a move from electronic to manual writing escape it? Whether you travel by boat, canoe, or water wings, you are still on the ocean. As Rybczynski notes:

The technological system is also universal, not only geographically but also in its impact on every possible human activity. Finally, the system, in [Jacques] Ellul’s words, tends to “totalize” society: as it affects the various aspects of human life it tends to restructure them according to its own rules. It is not so much that man is subordinated by technology, but that it tends to reconstitute his reality. (21-22)
However symbolic the gesture of unplugging the typewriter, it cannot overcome the argument that the writer is still within the reality he was before. Though he does not use the typewriter, he still lives in a world where typewriters exist, and where typewriters have greatly influenced the act of writing. In fact, all of the pages preceding these final, handwritten ones exist because of the typewriter. They form the immediate context to which the author is responding; they are the story that he is concluding.

Like Quickskill, the narrator of Still Life seems to have come into possession of himself as an author by the end of the text. Yet, also like Quickskill, it has taken the text to bring him to this point, and it is the text that defines him: "It was more of a reading than a writing" (Flight 7). Might it not be that Still Life is as much a reading for its narrator as the poem "Flight to Canada" was for Raven? Might it not be that the narrator is another “modern scriptor” who is “born simultaneously with the text”?

Quite possibly. Remember, the author said that his novel was in the Remington SL3. It was not so much a matter of a complete story existing in the author’s mind as it was a matter of the author extracting an already existing text. If the story was in the typewriter--the cultural vocabulary/technology--then it originated there, with the author not a creator so much as a medium. In Barthes's words: “the scriptor no longer bears within him passions, humours, feelings, impressions, but rather this immense dictionary from which he draws a writing that knows no halt: life never does more than imitate the book, and the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred” (MT 147). Still Life, if drawn from the typewriter, from the cultural vocabulary (“dictionary”), is writing not halted--even though the author tries to pull the plug. It is a construction of signs, a construction that life imitates.

For instance, Still Life makes constant reference to “the last quarter of the twentieth century...a severe period for lovers." It is this period that shapes and fuels the actions of Bernard and his Princess Leigh-Cheri: "[Bernard] grinned because it was the last quarter of the twentieth century, and something momentous was happening" (Still Life 33). That
momentousness is not due to the characters' actions, but to their social surroundings. They do not influence their story, but are compelled into it. Or after it. The narrator is also culturally determined, as is his story, and his fear of his typewriter: “Our fear of the machine is heightened by the feeling that the twentieth century is the first to experience the unintended side effects of technology” (Rybczynski 8).

Of course, part of the difficulty, I believe, in making a critical move that puts the narrator in debt to the story resides in the fact that the text works so hard to disallow it. The narrator constantly asserting his presence works in tandem with Wrangle's story, which is one of radical individualism beyond the boundaries of any social constraint or construction. Again, Bernard considers himself an “outlaw,” by his own definition, one who lives not “merely beyond the letter of the law...[but] beyond the spirit of the law. In a sense, then, we [outlaws] live beyond society” (64). This outlaw status gives Bernard a platform that is not culturally determined, and he can therefore claim a type of immunity from influences, be they textual or otherwise:

While Wrangle presumably learns something from his love relationships, his philosophy of life does not change much during the novel, nor does he seem to experience much personal growth. His relationship with Leigh-Cheri seems more of a confirmation of his having been right all along. (Siegel 44)

The same goes for the narrator. He had been right all along and just needed to get away from his typewriter.

What Bernard and the narrator (and Siegel) do not recognize, though, is how heavily Wrangle is defined by the circumstances around him. His own outlaw status is dependent on all the non-outlaws he harangues. Just as Bernard’s various recipes for bombs take into consideration the supplies that one might have on hand (Drano, playing cards, Froot Loops), the character of Bernard should be seen in light of the elements present for his construction. On a textual level, Bernard’s author is using him to respond to other works and ideas that he finds
problematic--like the prior text *Flight to Canada*. In *Still Life*, Bernard must respond to problems particular to the last half of the twentieth century. He is also conditioned partially by his upbringing, at the hands of adoptive parents: “Growing up...the abandoned redhead learned philosophy from Kathleen and the wiles and ways of the drugstore cowboy from Dude” (232-33). Would Bernard still have his Spinoza-style drawl if it weren’t for that? Would he have his outlaw attitude? And how is it possible to speak of an outlaw tradition without taking into account certain influences? In the same way, the narrator is determined by his surroundings. Without the technological advancement of the twentieth century, the story of *Still Life* could not be told. The confrontation between author and machine is what drives a good part of the narrative.

Having made these points about Robbins and Wrangle and the narrator, it would be prudent to recall Raven and Reed. Essentially, with *Still Life* we have a book that works to reintroduce a Romantic view of Author--a creative genius freed from outside control. Yet, at the same time, the text shows how situated writers and people are in their culture. With *Flight*, we have a text that looks relatively compatible with certain poststructuralist principles, but also establishes the authorial presence, or at least the power of writing. At the conclusion of Reed's work, Uncle Robin takes over the estate by actually re-writing Massa Swille’s will. The texts work from different directions, but do cross paths. In particular, the endings of the works illustrate a textual similarity that arises from dissimilar intentions. I mentioned earlier that Reed leaves a cryptic final entry on his text, suggesting that the text is a depository for authorial significations, but Robbins feels forced into such a move: “If that pissant typewriter has got me in a situation where I must make a closing remark, well then I guess in all fairness I should” (273-74). Both texts do make some sort of final statement which provides closure and thereby strengthens the concept of a work. If we understand postmodernism to be contradictory, then these two texts seem to be postmodern:

> [P]ostmodernism is a fundamentally contradictory enterprise: its art forms (and
its theory) at once use and abuse, install and then destabilize convention in parodic ways, self-consciously pointing both to their own inherent paradoxes and provisionality and, of course, to their critical or ironic re-reading of the art of the past. In implicitly contesting in this way such concepts as aesthetic originality and textual closure, postmodernist art offers a new model for mapping the borderland between art and the world, a model that works from a position within both and yet not totally within either, a model that is profoundly implicated in, yet still capable of criticizing, that which it seeks to describe.

(Hutcheon 23)

These texts contest both social and artistic conventions. Yet they also support them. They use and abuse, install and destabilize, mock and enforce, and are truly postmodern.

However, the contestation and support of dominant ideology does not seem entirely similar in each text. The paradoxical nature of the texts might be similar, but the intentions are disparate. Reed wants to unbuild in order to build--the literary slave emancipating himself through writing--while Robbins wants to build but does some unbuilding--the creative genius battling his typewriter. Both texts do then work towards granting the author an individual identity (counter to Foucault and Barthes), but approach the project from different directions. Reed sees writing as a process of coming into being; Robbins views writing as an extension of being. It is as if Robbins can take being for granted but Reed, as Gates suggests, must work to attain it. Not surprisingly, the same might be said for the two protagonists. Before investigating this disparity further, though, it will be helpful to look at some of the conventions of the past, artistic and social, that the two works are contesting and/or supporting.
With the simultaneous displacement and empowerment of the author taking place in both *Flight to Canada* and *Still Life with Woodpecker*, the texts can well be claimed as postmodern. They use and abuse the literary conception of a creative power, and each can be seen to posit contradictory claims. Does this postmodern description, however, hold true if we look at the standard idea of history? Are there unbuilding strategies to be found in the works, along with a reaffirmation of the liberal humanist conception of the past? Obviously, the texts differ in their respective settings. *Flight* takes place during the Civil War, even though modern technology and language are brought in; *Still Life* is described as a story taking place in the "last quarter of the twentieth century." Again, there is a contrast between the works. But, what of the contrasts within?

Since it is impossible to read *Flight to Canada* without the anachronisms slapping one in the face, the topic of history must be raised. In the opening poem, Raven talks about flying to Canada on a jumbo jet, because he fears the Trailways station will be watched. This conflation of past and present, this "disruption," according to Richard Walsh, "serves both to negate the sense of history as a linear evolution, a measure of progress, and to undermine the [Civil] war's conventional significance as a watershed in Afro-American history" (19). Reed, in some sense, has reworked history from dynamic process to static entity, containing all aspects of itself in a single moment. Anything we can throw into the pot we should: Harriet Beecher Stowe with a television show? Yes. Lincoln’s assassination on the nightly news? Yes. Our (te)m(p)orality is questioned, and with it, the idea that slavery is a vanished social practice.

Walsh continues by asserting that Reed’s “basic strategy is an equation between the Civil War itself and the civil unrest of the 1960s, a parallel impressionistically caught in the image of Lincoln’s assassination being endlessly replayed in slow motion on the Late News” (19-20). The eerie connections between Lincoln’s and Kennedy’s death have been well documented, and they are not so subtly highlighted here. For Joe Weixlmann, such
highlighting shows that “Reed wants us to understand that slavery continues to inform American social, political, economic, and cultural dynamics, although the war which was to have ended slavery was fought more than a hundred years ago” (“DRM” 64). History become Our-story, detailing contemporary American life as much as Southern plantation life. That is because, in large part, Southern plantation life shapes our contemporary life.

Such a literary move is highly reflective of certain theoretical claims made by Hayden White. White, writing in the late 60s and early 70s, on the heels of Foucault and others, also looked to move the discipline, or understanding, of history from an objective cataloguing of facts and events to a type of narrative, a discourse. For White, the work of Foucault is paradigmatic:

Unlike the conventional historian, who is concerned to clarify and thereby to refamiliarize his readers with the artifacts of past cultures and epochs, Foucault seeks to defamiliarize the phenomena of man, society and culture which have been rendered all too transparent by a century of study, interpretation, and conceptual overdetermination. (TD 256)

Such a defamiliarization is paramount to Reed’s work, as is the apparent instability, or at least uncertainty, in the discipline of history.

To bring about such defamiliarization, it is necessary to understand that historical narrative involves interpretation: “A historical narrative is thus necessarily a mixture of adequately and inadequately explained events, a congeries of established and inferred facts, at once a representation that is an interpretation and an interpretation that passes for an explanation of the whole process mirrored in the narrative” (TD 51). Part of the reason for this is that historical data most often takes the form of verbal propositions, which cannot be verified except through more of the same: “Every verbal proposition about a particular thing existing in an absolute past...refers us to an entity which we know only through another verbal proposition” (TH 7). Without an ability to perceptually verify, we are caught in an unstable
web of language, dependent upon words to illustrate happenings. Note how well White’s argument follows poststructuralist notions of language and discourse, this time historical discourse. Now it is not only the self that is brought into being through language, but also the world the self inhabits.

The verbal propositions that White mentions are not without a certain structure, though. There are stabilizers to offset the shakiness of a past known only through language. The historical narratives, according to White, are dependent on particular forms, or stories that we tell:

In other words, the historian must draw upon a fund of culturally provided mythoi in order to constitute the facts as figuring a story of a particular kind, just as he must appeal to that same fund of mythoi in the minds of his readers to endow his account of the past with the odor of meaning or significance...The types of stories that can be told about the French Revolution [one example out of many] are limited to the number of modes of emplotment which the myths of Western literary tradition sanction as appropriate ways of endowing human processes with meanings. (TD 60-61)

We tell our history in certain ways, and therefore read our history in certain ways. By extension, we read ourselves in certain ways, for the meaning or significance we take from our history is applied to our own lives; the mythical form of history in not innocuous.

History, then, is a question of power; it is a determining factor for both the social structure and for personal behavior. It operates on a general and a specific level. And, when history is seen as objective, it is difficult to question:

We live in a society whose past is given to us in images that assert the inevitability of the way things are. In more or less subtle ways, politicians and the media invoke history to show that the contemporary distribution of wealth and power is at once freely chosen and preordained. By the same
token, past efforts to contest prevailing social and political arrangements
disappear from dominant versions of our history—when they are not simply
labeled as foreign or dismissed as utopian. (Visions of History ix)

White agrees with this viewpoint, and therefore believes that a strict examination of history is
necessary for social change: "the historical record as presently provided offers little help in the
quest for adequate solutions" (TD 41). The aim, and the need, is to rewrite history.

Flight recognizes this, and its rewriting of history tries to show the influence of
historical narrative. The novel is a sharp, chaotic, lyrical, historical novel of un-history,
written with the Foucauldian spirit of “creative disordering, destructuration, unnaming...a
sustained promotion of the ‘disrememberance of things past’” (White TD 233 emphasis his).

Not only does it attack the sense of temporality associated with historical narratives, but also
our usual set of “facts” which are catalogued rather nonchalantly in a multitude of texts,
whether a history book or an encyclopedia. In addition, Flight seeks to disrupt the mythoi that
shape these facts. Its structure, in basic terms, is the attempt to subvert a well-known myth.
The dominant figure here is King Arthur: romantic hero, leader of the realm, wielder of
Excalibur, long-standing symbolic figure in a multitude of works from Malory (Morte
D’Arthur) to Tennyson (Idylls of the King) to Hollywood (Camelot and Excalibur) to
Barthelmae (The King).

Many critics have made the claim that Reed’s intent in writing the novel was to subvert
and undermine the Arthurian legend, as well as American myth in general:

Flight to Canada teases out historical contradictions at the roots of American
thought. Far from being fundamentally democratic, Reed argues, Americans
moon over a medieval dream of being lords and ladies, members of a happy
aristocracy supported by the necessary servants and slaves. (508)

Or, if the text seems to do more than tease, Jerry Bryant’s claim might be more appropriate:

"[Reed] exaggerates and simplifies to reveal the absurdity of the world he describes, to suggest
what America is ‘really’ like when we strip away its rationalizing myths and self-justifying assumptions” (196). Either way, though, teasing or stripping, there is a dream/myth that Reed’s work is trying to exhume. That myth, a “continuation of the old European feudal order...is embodied in the character of Massa Arthur Swille (King Arthur: the South as Camelot; master’s will: the dominantal tendency; swill: devour greedily, garbage), whose credo is never to yield a piece of property” (Fox 68). Here is the romantic, capitalistic, domineering “hero” redone. Massa Arthur is the glowing king tarnished, and, with the coupling of the Civil War to the 1960s, the modern-day Camelot of JFK is also “stripped.”

Again, Reed’s touch is anything but light. We have a full-frontal assault on the glowing Arthurian legend, the target laid out in full detail:

According to the family records we do have, we know that the first Swille, a zealous slave trader, breeder and planter, was “indescribably deformed.” He did his business from the tower of a Castle he built on his grounds, said to be the very replica of King Arthur’s in the Holy City of Camelot, the Wasp’s Jerusalem, the great Fairy City of the old Feudal Order, of the ancient regime; of knights, ladies, of slaves...Camelot became Swille’s bible, and one could hear him in the tower, giggling elflike as he came to each new insight; and they heard him dancing as Camelot, a fairy tale to most, became for him an Anglican Grand Design. (Flight 15-16)

This is the lineage of Massa Arthur. He is the third such named and the one who will lose the kingdom.

It would be appropriate here to re-mention Barthes. Barthes argues that “what must be firmly established...is that myth is a system of communication, that it is a message” (“MT”)

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1Though the essay I refer to, "Myth Today," is more of a structuralist piece than a poststructuralist one, it does lend to the discussion by posing myth as a type of discourse, like history, that can hide itself in our culture as obvious or natural. Recognizing such a structure is the first step in attempting to unbuild it.
Again though, the type of message that myth conveys is problematic if we believe that society needs change. Myth does not subvert, but confirm. Barthes writes: “We reach here the very principle of myth: it transforms history into Nature...[M]ythical speech...is immediately frozen into something natural; it is not read as motive, but as a reason” ("MT" 116).

Objectiveness, or a sense of naturalness to events, is woven into the fabric of historical narratives. Such a stance might not seem to be of concern, unless of course one believes that the current social structure could use a bit of an overhaul. Then, the mythic quality of history becomes dangerously restrictive. If, for example, the oppression of blacks, or women, has been coded into our historical narratives, then the oppression becomes a “natural” process, supported by its historical basis and continued because of it.

The "naturalness" of myth is why wresting the crown away from Arthur is not a simple task. Undoing myth never is: “Myth can reach everything, corrupt everything, and even the very act of refusing oneself to it” (Barthes "MT" 120). For example, the slaves who ran away from Swille were said to have “Dysaethesia Aethipica...that disease causing Negroes to run away” (Flight 18). The process of refusal is rendered as a natural imbalance, a disease. Even worse, those in servitude can become accomplices to their own slavery, as one of Swille's servants does. When Swille allows the servant, named Cato, to be married, Cato responds by promising to uphold the Arthurian standards:

"Thank you, sir! Thank you also for giving me such a good education. I knows the Bible by heart. I knows things like 'standards,' and how to pronounce 'prolegomenon.' I caught some of [the other slaves] praying to them old filthy fetishes the other day; they seemed to be habbin a good time too. I called in the overseer, and he give them a good flogging. That he did.

Whipped them darkies. (53)

It is also understood that Cato is Swille's son by a slave woman, though Swille does not acknowledge that. Therefore, it is the master-servant relationship that is promoted over the
father-son relationship. Slavery is stronger than family, as both father and son further the idea of servitude.

At the same time, myth propagates simply by being passed along, most notably in literature. A striking example of this is when Swille hands Lincoln a copy of *Idylls of the King*, remarking that “This book tell you about aristocratic rule...How to deal with inferiors. How to handle the help. How the chief of the tribes is supposed to carry himself” (27). What is so striking about this is not the Arthur-Lincoln connection (Lincoln having long been held up as the “Great Emancipator”), but that Lincoln wants to refuse the myth, and is unable to do so: “Phone the networks. We’ll put an end to this Fairy Kingdom nonsense. Guenevere, Lancelot, Arthur and the whole dang-blasted genteel crew” (49). Lincoln cannot undo the myth because he attacks the result, not the cause. He attempts to move in the political realm and not the ideological. Lincoln drafts the Emancipation Proclamation—a political move—which he believes will disrupt the Southern lifestyle, but he leaves the underlying theme of superior/inferior races intact. As a consequence of that theme, Lincoln is killed: “the Saxon chief, is slain” (141).

Besides Cato and Lincoln, it is also the runaway slaves who have trouble noticing the influence of the myth in their lives. Raven, 40s, and Leechfield are the three slaves who run away, hoping to outdistance the “physical” confines of slavery by making it to Canada. It is Canada that is the great new society: “Everybody had turned their attention to Canada....the Prime Minister of Canada...was the most enlightened man in the Western world. The world expected great things from this man. His wife was a former flower child: intelligent, well-bred, capable of discussing cultural subjects on television. So good-looking!” (69-70). With the flower-child reference, the Canada of the 1850s is connected to the freedom sought in the 1960s: any criticism of the Civil War period transfers to the twentieth century.

Once in Canada, Raven is rudely awakened by the fact that his dreamed-of free country much resembles the place he left. His friend Carpenter tells him:

“Man, they got a group up here called the Western Guard, make the Klan look
like statesmen. Vigilantes harass fugitive slaves, and the slaves have to send their children to schools where their presence is subject to catcalls and harassment. Don’t go any further, especially with [Quaw Quaw]. They beat up Chinamen and Pakistani in the streets. West Indians they shoot....Of the top ten Canadian corporations, four are dominated by American interests....Man, Americans own Canada. They just permit Canadians to operate it for them.” (160-61)

Raven is dejected that the promised land looks so much like home: “‘I don’t really care at this point, Carpenter. After what you’ve said of Canada. All my life I had hopes about it, that whatever went wrong I would always have Canada to go to’” (161). It is important to note that Raven followed “Carpenter” to a promised land and was disappointed. The Judeo-Christian myth is brought into question as well as the Arthurian.

One of the other escaped slaves, Leechfield, who spends his time making pornographic pictures with female Abolitionists, eventually goes back to the plantation, having been captured by slave trackers. He has earlier sent money to Swille, buying his freedom, but the trackers take him anyway. Once at the plantation, though, they learn that Swille has died and Uncle Robin has inherited the place. Leechfield is released, again claiming freedom, but is rebuked by Uncle Robin for his previous, business-like attitude toward slavery:

“Did you really think it was just a matter of economics? Did you think you could just hand history a simple check, that you could short-change history, and history would let you off as simple as that? You’ve insulted history, Leechfield. The highest insult! You thought he’d let you off with a simple check. It was more complicated than that. You thought you were dealing with straw when you’re dealing with iron. He was going to return you the check. He had money. He didn’t want money. He wanted the slave in you. When you defied him, took off, the money was no longer the issue. He couldn’t conceive of a
world without slaves. That was his grand scheme. A world of lords, ladies and slaves. You were showing the other slaves that it didn't have to be that way.

That the promised land was in their heads. The old way. The old way taught that man could be the host for God. Not one man. All men. That was the conflict between you and Swille. You, 40s, and Quickskill threatened to give the god in the slave breath.” (177)

Notice how “history” slides easily into the pronoun “he” which then becomes “Swille” at the end. History is Swille. The Arthur myth is the iron among the straw people. It is not enough to barter with money; one must barter with ideology. Slavery, for Robin, and for Reed, is not about money, but about an ideology. It is about myth.

It is Uncle Robin who is most instrumental for Reed in deconstructing this myth of the feudal order. He is, in fact, a more important character in that regard than is Raven. The outright disobedience of Raven, as we shall see, is largely ineffective. Instead, the quiet, behind-the-scenes maneuvering of Uncle Robin works best. In large part, Robin deconstructs the myth of slavery by supporting it. In “Myth Today,” Barthes makes an intriguing claim that seems to describe what Robin is doing: “Truth to tell, the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn, and to produce an artificial myth: and this reconstituted myth will in fact be a mythology. Since myth robs language of something, why not rob myth?” (123). This is exactly what Uncle Robin does. He robs Swille (by changing, literally, Arthur’s will), and robs the myth. By pretending to be a compliant slave, and ignorant, Robin gives mythical status to the idea of slavery, just as he gives Coffee Mate to Massa Swille, pretending it to be slave mothers’ milk. Instead of something natural, it is highly artificial, as the listing of ingredients shows: “…artificial flavor, tricalcium phosphate, and artificial colors” (Flight 174).

Swille’s dependence upon Robin is due to the fact that Swille is an unnatural writer. As Robin says: “Swille had something called dyslexia. Words came to him scrambled and jumbled. I became his reading and writing. Like a computer, only this computer left itself
Swille’s whole estate” (171). It is Swille who has a disease, not the slaves. And since Flight to Canada shows writing as a means of attaining identity, it is Swille who loses his identity (and his property) while Robin gains an identity, and a plantation. Thus, Robin is mythifying the myth of the plantation while on the plantation. In this case, it is Robin who more resembles Flight’s creator than Raven. It is as if Raven is the front man, both as an celebrated author and as an escaped slave, who is given the most notice, but it is Reed and Robin, as hidden author and compliant slave, who are the most effective social critics. It is also Robin who remarks that the before the physical release must come the mental: “Well, I guess Canada, like freedom, is a state of mind” (178). Again, here is the recognition of slavery as a force composed of more than iron chains.

Though he does not take the same critical slant with regard to mythology, Walsh does accord Robin the same status as social critic that I do:

Uncle Tomism, Reed is suggesting, has many guises, and often the forms of collaboration with the oppressor are confused with the forms of revolt. By depending on violence, 40s concedes the law to the white establishment; by depending on economics, Leechfield and to some extent Quickskill locate their emancipation at the material level, and acquiesce in a higher, cultural subservience...In fact it is Uncle Robin’s guise which prevails most effectively. Swille dies according to the conventions of a Poesque gothic tale, the decadent culture collapsing from the violence of its own internal contradictions. (70 emphasis mine)

Trading “culture” for “myth” renders much the same argument. Either way, though, it is Uncle Robin's guise which most helps the slave culture collapse.

Walsh’s mention of the “Poesque” yields up another indication of how the myth of slavery is mythified, helping it to collapse. This mythification is not a practice within the text, as is Robin's, but is practiced by the text. Reed uses Flight to Canada as Robin uses his
position as servant; both undermine from within. Reed will critique the literariness of the feudal order with a text about the feudal order. In the italicized section of the first chapter of *Flight*, which the reader assumes to represent Quicksill’s thoughts, several questions concerning Poe are asked:

Why isn’t Edgar Allen Poe recognized as the principal biographer of that strange war? Fiction, you say? Where does fact begin and fiction leave off? Why does the perfectly rational, in its own time, often sound like mumbo-jumbo? Where did it leave off for Poe, prophet of a civilization buried alive, where, according to witnesses, people were often whipped for no reason....Poe got it all down. Poe says more in a few stories than all of the volumes by historians. (10)

What this section does is to transfer authority for the South’s history from historians to a writer of fiction. The “mythological” aspect, which has been naturalized in its presentation to us, is forced back into a discourse that takes away its naturalness. In fact, Poe’s works tend to stress the unnatural.

In his work on *Flight to Canada* and Reed, Weixlmann clearly outlines the connections between several of Poe’s works and *Flight*: Swille’s lust for his dead sister (shown in mausoleum trysts), his fondness for whips, his fiery death in the arms of a ghost-like figure. Twice Weixlmann cites the same passage in Reed: “Raised by mammies, the South is dandyish, foppish, pimpish; its writers are Scott, Poe, Wilde, Tennyson....It wasn’t the idea of winning that appealed to them. It was the idea of being ravished” (*Flight* 141-142). For Weixlmann, Reed realizes that “Southern culture is founded upon thanatos, death, and that principle is, perhaps, expressed most clearly in Poe’s writings. Certainly his fiction more successfully embodies the fact of the South’s spiritual barrenness than any history book” (“PPG” 48). In Poe’s hands (through Reed’s), Camelot is a dark and dreary place. King
Arthur is an incestuous necrophile and a sadist of the first order (descended from a long line of black-and-blue bloods). The beautiful myth is turned hideous, and unnatural.

In fact, the beauty and glamour of the myth seem dependent upon drugs. Like Poe, Swille is an addict, often taking “siestas” in his room, helped by Mammy Barracuda, the domineering house slave who has a great fondness for Swille:

Barracuda entered the room carrying a silver tray in the center of which was a logo of the House of Swille: a belligerent eagle with whips in its talons. She wore a purple velvet dress with silver hoops, a pongee apron with Belgian lace, and emerald earrings. Lying on the platter was an apothecary bottle full of an emerald-green liquid. Next to this was a hypodermic needle and a syringe. He rolled up his sleeve. Mammy Barracuda put the tray down on the table and prepared the injection. She shot it into Swille’s arm. He convulsed slightly. Then he began to babble. “Quite good, quite good, Mammy,” he said, wetting his lips. (109)

It is during these drug-induced states that Arthur finds his true Camelot, remembering his dead sister: “Vivian, my disconsolate damsel, if only you...my fair pale sister. Your virgin knees and golden hair in your sepulcher by the sea. Let me creep into your mausoleum, baby...ours is a romance of the days that were” (109). Here again, the text reaches beyond the Civil War era, as the actor playing Scarlet O’Hara in Gone with the Wind was Vivian Leigh. The archetypal Southern Belle is transformed into a corpse being molested by her brother.

Arthur and Vivian’s was the perfect love: “And that night before you died, you were just right. What would I do without our great love, a love as old as Ikhnaton, the royal love, the royal love...the royal” (110). In this case, though, given the societal taboo of incest, the love is horribly wrong. And by extension, so is the whole social system whence that love came. Swille’s rambling also suggests that their love-making brought about Vivian’s death; instead of bringing about new life, this love destroys existing life.
Given Barthes’s ideas about mythifying myth, letting Poe rewrite the Arthurian legend is the most effective step Reed takes to dismantle the myth of the feudal order; but it is not the only step he takes. Reed also seeks to substitute another legend in its place: the story of Raven:

Schooled, as most of us have been, in the literature of the white West, the mention of a raven is almost certain to evoke Edgar Allen Poe’s 1845 poem....Readers with some anthropological background, however, might prefer to understand Reed’s Raven Quickskill in the context of Tlingit mythology, particularly since the Tlingits, a native American tribe situated in the panhandle area of Alaska, are alluded to in the second chapter...In fact, [Reed said]..."Raven Quickskill...was based more or less on a Tlingit legend—a raven myth." (Weixlmann “IRR” 205)

Nevermore should we immediately move to the assumption of the white West; the Raven is shifting its symbolic connection. That shift, though, might not be as productive as hoped, at least in terms of providing a narrative structure to shape our stories, and by extension, our lives.

Compared to the Arthur myth, the Raven one seems more flexible, more inclusive perhaps:

The Raven stories are many, and they take many forms. Raven may be a “trickster,” a foolish creature who deceives, lies and steals, to satisfy his greed—but who often becomes the victim of his own duplicity. On the other hand, Raven may also be a “transformer,” one who arranges the land, sea and sky, and the animals living on earth, to give them their present structures...He is also a “culture hero,” one who gives mankind the things it needs to survive...To some extent, the Tlingit and their neighbors regard Raven as a “creator,” the deity who was responsible for the very existence of the world, or at least its present form. (Goodchild 8)
Such a definition seems to give Raven the same exalted status as an Arthur—but with a sense of humor. Raven is multi-faceted, existing in different forms to satisfy different needs. Weixlmann sees the same in Quickskill: “Like the mythological character, Quickskill is a creator, a poet...and he is guileful” (“IRR” 206). For Weixlmann, Uncle Robin is also a guileful creator, and together, Raven and Robin stand opposed to Poe’s creation: “Raven and Robin celebrate life, healthful love, and the development of full human potential” (“IRR 206). Weixlmann's linking of Raven and Robin as equal partners in this process is problematic for me, as their opposition to Arthur is vastly different. I have already examined Robin's form of rebellion, so let me explain Raven's.

Raven's opposition is nothing new for Reed, whose works strive to offer other possibilities than those of the West. Raven is part of Reed’s Neo-HooDoo aesthetic, an African-based paradigm that stands against Western rationalism: "The way of singularity is the way...of Western thought and culture...The African way, however, recognizes plurality, multiplicity, indeterminacy” (“AAD” Weixlmann 63). Raven stands in line with other Reed heroes like Papa LaBas (Mumbo Jumbo) and the Loop Garoo Kid (Yellow Back Radio Broke Down), and with Reed himself:

A cosmic jester himself, Reed would have us embrace spontaneity as well as the familiar order of things. HooDoo asks us to look to the rhythms of the heart and soul as well as to the linear processes of the mind, to the lessons of a past our history books ignore as well as toward the possibilities of the future. But it asks most of all to embrace Eros as well as Logos, before it’s too late. (Boyer 8)

What Arthur doesn’t offer to people, or to all people, Raven tries to.

But can he? Weixlmann allows for a quick and easy replacement: one myth for another. Barthes does not. For Barthes, myth, by assuming the cloak of naturalness, is “depoliticized speech.” It hides its effect on the social world. But, “wherever man speaks in order to transform reality and no longer to preserve it as an image...myth is impossible” (“MT” 135). It
is unanimous among the critics that Reed is working toward transformation, and that makes the difference:

That is why revolutionary language proper cannot be mythical. Revolution is defined as a cathartic act meant to reveal the political load of the world: it makes the world; and its language, all of it, is functionally absorbed in this making. It is because it generates speech which is fully, that is to say initially political and finally natural, that Revolution excludes myth....The bourgeoisie hides the fact that it is the bourgeoisie and thereby produces myth; revolution announces itself openly as revolution and thereby abolishes myth. ("MT" 135)

Given that Raven is (1) a slave attempting to run away, and (2) a character in a text that seeks to rewrite history, the idea of revolution is predominant. In attempting to become a natural story, the Raven myth gives away it unnaturalness to readers. In part, this could be why Reed does not appeal to the majority of American readers. Most are comfortable with the Arthur story, familiar with it, and this retelling is uncomfortable. Like children who demand the same bedtime story night after night and quickly correct any "misreadings," readers respond negatively to any change in the tale. It is especially difficult to handle changes that grotesquely alter our standard images: Arthur shooting up, Vivian (Leigh) decaying in a crypt, Lincoln acting like a buffoon.

That unnaturalness, that discomfort, though perhaps exactly what was intended by Reed, hampers the circulation of revolution and its language. And how are changes to be made if the announcement of the problem is hindered? Even if revolutionary language, or a revolutionary story, does manage to "hide its name...and distort itself into 'Nature,'” becoming part of the left, it still is inferior to right-wing (bourgeois) myth: “Left-wing myth is inessential...Left-wing myth never reaches the immense field of human relationships...Everyday life is inaccessible to it” (Barthes "MT" 135-36). It is as if the revolution is co-opted into being a permanent foil for the dominant structure. Weixlmann,
though, claims that Raven celebrates the "development of full human potential." The Raven myth would then be a replacement for the dominant. And this is the crux of the disagreement for Reed and Robbins, or at least for Flight and Still Life. Does Reed’s Raven myth allow for full human relationships? Weixlmann says it does; it is capable of handling healthful love and everyday life. Robbins disagrees. This disagreement is especially evident when we look at the romantic relationships in the texts.

In Flight, Raven and his “love,” Princess Quaw Quaw, present one of the more dysfunctional couplings, with the barrier between them the issue of slavery: “She said that slavery was a state of mind, metaphysical. He told her to shut the fuck up” (95). Their relationship is highly politicized, their discussions always centering on obligations and social roles. A telling scene is when they make love, or when they “cleave” to each other. Their physical actions are interposed with the televised showing of Our American Cousin at Ford’s Theater. When they climax, Lincoln is shot. Any personal connection is evaporated in light of the larger social concern. Raven’s ejaculation is eclipsed by Booth’s, the gun more important than the penis.

And Raven’s concerns are more important than Quaw Quaw’s. Thomas Banks has said that Quaw Quaw “embodies the romantic dream of innocence, pure love, art for its own sake, and the nobility of primitive American life: She is the Native American” (171). Yet, Reed has her succumb to the lure of fame and fortune. She crosses Niagara Falls on a tightrope and is captivated by all the attention she receives. Banks says this is her true nature: “her real nature emerges when she sacrifices her integrity to the god of commercialism” (171). This is no doubt due to the fact that she was sent to “the best Eastern schools and trained...in ‘the finer things of life’ She is under a white spell and has no feeling for her own people’s culture” (FC 147). Surprisingly, it the narrative voice, italicized and parenthesized, that tells the reader this. It is as if the writer wants to make sure we do not side with Quaw Quaw. Raven doesn’t: “You seemed to lick it all up. All of that open. Them loving you. I thought you were so abstract. A
‘pure’ artist you always said... You’re an ambitious mountain climber” (164). Not that Raven is immune from dreams of fame and fortune, but his ambition seems more aligned with his political views. What is mentioned only once is the banner Quaw Quaw carries aloft over the Falls. It read: “Quicksill, I love you” (157). That declaration is then ignored by Raven, Quaw Quaw, and Reed.

This is the main aspect of Reed’s work that Robbins critiques. When Reed fashions his critique of society and myth so that the Princess in the tale is not seen as a romantic heroine but a fop of ignorant poets, and love is usually secondary to politics, it is Robbins who rides in to the rescue. *Still Life* is the white stallion that gallops forward, holding the banner of Romanticism aloft and containing a familiar story of royalty, dragons and castles. This is not the Raven myth; this is the Woodpecker tale.

As outlined above, Reed’s work seeks to undo the Arthurian legend, which allows for knights, dragons, dungeons, and damsels in distress. Such a move leaves Quaw Quaw out of luck. She is faithful to the notion of art for art's sake, and the notion of universality: the former being a path towards the latter. But, Raven tells her, her artistic path is not emancipatory:

Look, Quaw Quaw, they want your Indian; that’s what they want, and you’re going to give it to them. You’re the exotic of the new feudalism. For what Camelot can’t win on the battlefield it’ll continue in poetry... But your friends, and their exotic dabbling—their babbas, their yogi—are on the same trip. They’re going to get your Indian and my slave on microfilm and in sociology books; then they’re going to put them in a space ship and send them to the moon. And then they’re going to put you on the nickel and put me on a stamp and that’ll be the end of it. They’re as Feudalist and Arthurian as Davis, but whereas he sees it as a political movement, they see it as a poetry movement... You’ve been hanging out with the Apostles of Aesthetics and you like them because you think they want to put you in a tower and fight dragons over you. You don’t
look like Guenevere to me. (96)

The old fairy tales are not productive, and in fact are simply literary continuations of vile social practices. At least for Raven. Quaw Quaw, though, disagrees: "There you go with that race stuff again. Politics. Race. People write and paint about politics because they have nothing else to say" (96).

But Raven emphasizes that art cannot ignore the political aspect of the world. It must be conscious of the social context in which it is created. He contrasts himself to Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot after Quaw Quaw claims that Pound correctly identified America as a "half-savage country":

"[Pound] hardly ever spent time in this 'half-savage country,'" Quickskill observed. "His mind was always someplace else. That was his problem, his mind was away somewhere in a feudal tower. Eliot, too. The Fisher King. That's Arthurian. How can anybody capture the spirit of this 'half-savage country' if they don't stay here? Poetry is knowing. When I wrote "Flight to Canada" it was poetry, but it was poetry based on something I knew" (104).

Quickskill must discuss slavery in his art, as that is part of what forms him. Quaw Quaw, by trying to submerge her identity in art, fails to recognize this.

Enter Robbins. In Still Life, Guenevere is back, with a passion. Princess Leigh-Cheri Furstenberg-Barcalona, living with her deposed parents King Max and Queen Tilli in Seattle, is the damsel in distress, or at least out of love. Having had both an abortion and a miscarriage, Leigh-Cheri has sworn herself to celibacy and sequestered herself in the attic (not quite a tower, but close). What brings her out is news of a Geo-Therapy Care Fest to be held in Hawaii, with "information that Ralph Nader would deliver a key speech there and one whole evening would be devoted to the subject of alternative methods of birth control" (24-25). Social activism has become the Princess's new occupation. But what of love? The narrator has informed us early on that this is to be the most important issue: "There is only one serious
question. And that is: **Who knows how to make love stay?** (4). Though she descends from the attic, the Princess is still locked away inside herself.

An indication that the Care Fest, and social activism, might not be the best ideas for the Princess can be seen in her attachment to Ralph Nader (nadir?). He is called a “hero” by Leigh-Cheri, and “the Hero” by the narrator; it is in the figure of Nader that our longings for change have coalesced, have bottomed out: "the Hero was addressing the multitudes [d]ressed in an inexpensive gray suit and a terminally drab necktie" (100). There is no life in this image, no color. And if the Hero is drab, then the kingdom is probably in trouble. So it is with the Care Fest: “Numerous accusations and at least one ripe papaya were lobbed at the podium. There followed an extended general exchange familiar to all who lived in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Women said the men had eaten the cherries out of the chocolates. Men said the women were peeing in the pool” (90). Such disagreement sounds similar to the arguments of Raven and Quaw Quaw over race, as well as to another exchange in *Flight*, when Raven and the immigrant Mel Leer debate injustice:

> “Nobody has suffered as much as my people, says Quickskill calmly.
> The Immigrant, Mel Leer, rises. “Don’t tell me that lie.”
> The whole cafe turns to the scene.
> “Our people have suffered the most.”
> “My people!”
> “My people!”
> “My people!”
> “My people!”
> “We suffered under the hateful Czar Nicholas!”
> “We suffered under Swille and Legree, the most notorious Masters in the annals of slavery!” (68)
Who is worse off? Who has suffered more? Who should have the lead in making changes? Peter Nazareth claims the exchange “ridicules this kind of obsession with one’s own history,” but given the overall shape of the text that contains the exchange, it seems more to strengthen Raven’s claim (213). With Flight, the position of supreme sufferer is given to Raven, as he is the focal point. Mel Leer--such a name does not elevate his position either-- quickly disappears, as does Quaw Quaw. If we want ridicule, we should look at Still Life.

There, in the form of Woodpecker, comes the ridicule, the questioning of such an obsession with victimization. The Woodpecker comes to blow up the Care Fest with dynamite, and to blow up assumptions with his words. As he tells Leigh-Cheri, and, given her stance on social activism, tells Raven/Reed:

Don’t let yourself be victimized by the age you live in. It’s not the times that will bring us down, any more than it’s society. When you put the blame on society, then you end up turning to society for the solution. Just like those poor neurotics at the Care Fest. There’s a tendency today to absolve individuals of moral responsibility and treat them as victims of social circumstance. You buy that, you pay with your soul. It’s not men who limit women, it’s not straights who limit gays, it’s not whites who limit blacks. What limits people is lack of character. What limits people is that they don’t have the fucking nerve or imagination to star in their own movie, let alone direct it. Yuk. (116-17)

Such sentiment is reminiscent of Quaw Quaw’s concerns. This is the dynamite beneath the social activists’ building. Reed’s attempt to connect slavery to modern society has been leveled in the blast, and Quaw Quaw redeemed. The connection between Woodpecker and Quaw Quaw is also strengthened by a description of Quaw Quaw given by Raven: “He once called her an emotional anarchist bomb. She was a love terrorist. You didn’t know when she was going off” (106). The figurative bomber of Flight becomes the literal bomber of Still Life.
As Quaw Quaw is redeemed, so too is Princess Leigh-Cheri because part of what helps form character and imagination and nerve are the stories we tell ourselves: romantic stories. As Bernard tells Leigh-Cheri, such stories are a necessity:

“You know,” [Leigh-Cheri] said at last, “you make me feel good about being a princess. Most of the men I’ve known have made me feel guilty about it. They’d snicker up their sleeves at the mention of beauty and magic tricks and--what else did you say a princess stands for?”

“Enchantments, dramatic prophesies, swans swimming in castle moats, dragon bait--”

“Dragon bait?”

“All the romantic bullshit that makes life interesting. People need that as badly as they need fair prices at the Texaco pump and no DDT in the Pablum.”

(96-97)

What Flight attempted to erase, Still Life puts back up on the chalkboard. Love and romance, and all the “essential” qualities in life that “inessential” myth cannot contain.

There is even a love-making scene in Still Life that plays off of the one in Flight, and reverses it. The first time Woodpecker and Leigh-Cheri unite, their coupling is described along with excerpts from (what is presumed to be) Nader’s speech at the Care Fest. The speech was the main reason Leigh-Cheri came to the Fest, and her attention, or inattention, to it, can be used to measure her interest in social activism. In Still Life, the speech (the political) goes unheard by the lovers. They are oblivious to it, relishing their private moment, unattached to the social. It is here that romance triumphs over activism and the individual over the group (100-104).

It would be best to mention here that the romantic stories, the fairy tales that Bernard speaks of and that Still Life presents, work in the same manner as myths and serve the same function for us. Jack Zipes has made this argument quite lucidly in Fairy Tale as Myth, and he
works from Barthes. Zipes also sees myth as communication, and operating primarily from/for those in power:

It was the rising bourgeoisie that spoke out in the name of all human beings while really speaking out in its own interests, and these interests are the myths that pervade our lives today. But these myths are not new, nor are they just myths, for they are also fairy tales. These myths and fairy tales are historically and culturally coded, and their ideological impact is great. Somehow they have become codified, authoritative, and canonical. (4)

So, the fairy princess story has much the same impact as the Arthur legend. Each is a constructor (and constrictor) of social behavior.

Robbins's text even echoes Barthes's language: "There are essential and inessential insanities" (77). Just like myths. Barthes claims that inessential myths have an "essential barrenness" which "produces rare, threadbare myths: either transient, or clumsily indiscreet; by their very being, they label themselves as myths" ("MT" 137). So, too, with the insanities:

Inessential insanities are a brittle amalgamation of ambition, aggression, and pre-adolescent anxiety--garbage that should have been dumped long ago.

Essential insanities are those impulses one instinctively senses are virtuous and correct, even though peers may regard them as coo coo. (Still Life 77)

Still Life is championing the essential insanities, and would claim that Flight is too concerned with the inessential. Some proof of that is when Leigh-Cheri is profiled for People magazine, by a writer named Reed Jarvis (jar-us?). The narrator of Still Life informs us that:

About Leigh-Cheri [and princesses in general], it would have made more sense to write a poem than an article. Reed Jarvis, with his Remington SL3, wrote an article. Others would follow. It remained for Bernard Mickey Wrangle, with his dynamite, to write the poem. (77)
(Ishmael) Reed (Jarvis) is the analytic, technical, inessential one, while Bernard is the spontaneous outlaw. Flight is the article, Still Life the poem. The Woodpecker has been firmly positioned at odds with the Raven. Though both fly in looking to change the landscape, their required changes are quite different. The romantic notion is obsolete for one, indispensable for the other. The myth displaced in Flight is retold in the fairy tale of Still Life. Does it, though, still carry the same assumptions and restrictions?

Not that the fairy tale is completely normal in Still Life. As I mentioned earlier, Robbins's text also calls for social change, and implementing the usual "prince gets girl" plot would just be undoing the changes Reed offers without suggesting anything new. Even though the argument is for princesses and "romantic bullshit," the fairy tale does not follow the usual lines. In this case, it is the dragon who rescues the princess and the prince who is the evil danger that must be defeated. Woodpecker's red hair, and his penchant for dynamite and matches give us the "fire" of the dragon here. As for the prince, he is one A'ben Fizel (fizzle?), a "gallant but unattractive companion" with "bulbous jowls and a greenish complexion" which give him the appearance of a "tall toad" (214). The toad, following the fairy tale structure, does turn handsome when Leigh-Cheri becomes engaged to him, but it is mostly because of sex: "[Leigh-Cheri] knew that she was only in love from the waist down" (219).

This lack of true love between princess and prince reverses the social dynamic. It is the prince who is the "other," the outsider. He is from an African country that is characterized by Leigh-Cheri as having "oil wells, excessive profits, religious fanaticism, and vulgar taste" (215). Her engagement to him is not so much romance as escape. Leigh-Cheri accepts A'ben's proposal because she and Bernard had an argument. Bernard was arrested and incarcerated, and, to show support for him, Leigh-Cheri locked herself in her attic. Seclusion, however, is merely more activism in Bernard's mind when Leigh-Cheri's plight becomes public and people begin following her example. He chastises her: "Leave it to a naive world-saver like you to view our love as a Sacred Cause when in actual fact all it was was some barking at the moon"
(201). So, Leigh-Cheri submits to A’ben Fizel’s wishes. The relationship, though, is most unromantic (compared to the Princess and Bernard). A’ben is jealous, shallow, insecure, and constantly spying on his fiancee. Eventually, Bernard comes to see her, and the two of them are locked up by A’ben within a pyramid that he was building at Leigh-Cheri’s request. The Princess then takes some of Bernard’s dynamite (accepting and utilizing the dragon’s breath), and blows a way out. The couple, though mostly deaf because of their proximity to the explosion, retire to the Seattle home which is now fortified with blackberry bushes: a northwestern, natural, castle.

So maybe the story is not changed that much. The basic format is maintained. The fairy tale seems to be rearranged, but keeps its important structural qualities. And, I would argue, its power. Though Bernard argues against making love a Sacred Cause, Still Life does exactly that. And that could be part of Still Life’s popular appeal. Having Bernard and Leigh-Cheri together, in love, is more acceptable than having Raven return home, alone:

Newly written fairy tales, especially those that are innovative and radical, are unusual, exceptional, strange, and artificial because they do not conform to the patterns set by the classical fairy tale....We are safe with the familiar. We shun the new, the real innovations. The classical fairy tale makes it appear that we are all part of a universal community with shared values and norms, that we are all striving for the same happiness, that there are certain dreams and wishes which are irrefutable, that a particular type of behavior will produce guaranteed results, like living happily ever after with lots of gold in a marvelous castle. (Zipes 5)

For most readers, Raven is an unfamiliar character, representative of a new pattern. He claims a multitude of communities based on various norms and values. Woodpecker is a close approximation of the usual story. He aims for universality.
Part of the desire for universality is illustrated by Bernard's view of history. Like the fairy tale of *Still Life*, it seems to be a new version, but again, the structure doesn’t seem to change much. Bernard explains it best:

I can tell you this much. In Central America, South America, Mexico, there are prevailing myths about a race of redheaded Caucasians who appeared thousands of years ago and conquered tribe after tribe with benevolent magic. As a matter of fact, the Incas, Aztecs, and Mayas attribute the development of their highly advanced civilization to the “Red Beards,” as they called them. The pyramids and other massive New World masonries were built by these demigods...Myth is crystallized history. All these stories couldn’t possibly be coincidence. So, assuming that there was a race of demidivine redheads, and assuming that one day it just up and vanished from the face of the earth--the accounts are consistent about that, too--that leaves us with an inviting hoop through which to slam-dunk our basketballs of romantic bullshit. (114)

The idea is that the Red Beards were opposed on their original planet by the “Yellow Hairs,” who were more technologically oriented than the Red Beards, whose pyramid power was more natural. The Red Beards were then “poofed” somewhere by the Yellow Hairs, presumably into another dimension. They now communicate with earthlings by various, subtle means, involving the pyramids on dollar bills, Camel packs, etc.

On the surface, the tension between the Red Beards and the Yellow Hairs seems quite similar to that between Reed's HooDoo and Western rationalism:

The Red Beards would have been a lunar people--mystic, occult, changeable, feministic, spiritual, pacific, agrarian, artistic, and erotic. While the Yellow Hairs would have been solar: abstract, rational, prosaic, militaristic, industrial, patriarchal, unemotional, and puritan. (115)
Again, these latter qualities are much like the ones opposed in many of Reed’s works. Reed’s social change calls for a replacement of the puritan with the changeable and the mystic. In *Flight*, Swille does not represent all of the Yellow Hair qualities, but he is the patriarchal tycoon, hateful of the mysticism of other cultures. By contrast, Robbins’s text presents this clash not as a socially induced one of cultures, but as a “natural” one: “It’s a classic struggle here on earth. Since suns and moons are universal, the struggle could extend throughout the universe, or at least throughout our solar system” (114-15).

This “classic struggle” argument pulls the carpet out from under Reed, and anyone else who tries to claim that there is oppression and that it is culturally determined. Instead, oppression is replaced by struggle, a natural struggle, residing in the universe, and one that must, as *Still Life* states elsewhere, be dealt with not in terms of groups, but in terms of individuals. It is not that slaves must unite to overthrow a feudal order, or women to topple patriarchy, but that individuals must struggle to become more lunar. We need to follow the example set by the Red Beards. What is frightening about all of this, to go back to Bernard’s story of the Red Beards, is that this version of History seems not to supplant Arthur, but cement him into the culture—with a new hairdo. Notice it is Caucasians who are demi-gods, instructing the “lesser” cultures of the Maya and Aztec. Marginalized groups remained marginalized, and whites retain their powerful position. The only thing that really changes is that redheads take over for blondes (a minor change on the Hitler propaganda). Arthur transforms into the Woodpecker. As with the fairy tale, the change in myth becomes more cosmetic the closer we look.

I must also mention how, in both the fairy tale and historical view of *Still Life*, women do not seem to be much helped, even though feminism is a Red Beard quality, and Robbins has been called a feminist writer. It is still a man, Bernard, dictating beliefs to a woman, Leigh-Cheri. *Still Life* maintains the status quo. Even though the desire for a female hero is expressed, it is not to be: "Fairy tales and myths are dominated by accounts of rescued
princesses,' [Leigh-Cheri] reasoned. 'Isn't it about time that a princess returned the favor?''

Leigh-Cheri had a vision of the princess as hero" (16). That vision is taken over by Bernard, who seems to give Leigh-Cheri power while still controlling her.

A prime example of this is when Bernard and Leigh-Cheri first make love, and Bernard orders the princess to take a form of birth control: "Bernard handed her a capsule and a cup of tequila with which to wash it down. 'Here. Swallow this.'" (101). He then informs her that he will teach her "lunaception," with is a contraceptive method that involves aligning the woman's body with the moon: "'You can learn to synchronize your body with moon phasing and be knock-up proof and in harmony with the universe at the same time'" (102). Bernard's concern with her womb delights Leigh-Cheri, as does the naturalness of his methods. And it pleases the narrator, who has described modern methods of birth control as "the insidious design of capitalistic puritans...supposed to technologize sex" (14).

Yet, Bernard's methods still place the responsibility on the woman and give authority to the man. He looks to control Leigh-Cheri's body, making it "run right," making it natural. Bernard's interest in birth control stems from the fact that the graduate student he injured in an early bombing attack was working on a new method of contraception. Bernard feels compelled to complete the work. However, the graduate student was working on a "oral contraceptive for men" (57). It would be men's bodies that are regulated. Bernard conveniently ignores that aspect.

As Still Life was published in 1980, and the control of female bodies was a major topic of discussion at that time, it is not surprising that Robbins's text weighs in on the issue. What is surprising is how the novel doesn't help emancipate women so much as reconfine them. Just as the stories in Still Life give power to Caucasians, they also give power to men. Robbins, though, in an interview conducted during the composition of Still Life, claims that he is a more than appropriate mouthpiece for feminism:

I think some of the attitudes of women involved in the so-called women's
movement are preposterous. The movement as a whole, I think, is maybe the most important social movement to occur in a thousand years. I think many of the women involved in it don't understand it. How can I, a male, say that a woman doesn't understand the feminist movement? Well, I can never know what it's like to be a woman at the gut level, but I've probably read more about matriarchal societies than most of the women involved in the feminist movement. I have a historical and philosophical perspective on it. (Ross 76)

In addition to slighting the Civil Rights movement, Robbins takes a seemingly rational, unemotional look at feminism, using the qualities of the Yellow Hairs. The idea of having an "historical and philosophical perspective" on the movement, and the idea that it is a superior perspective, is in opposition to most of Woodpecker's arguments. What these comments suggest, and what the structure of Still Life suggests, is that Robbins is a bit anxious. As a white male, he has the most to lose when African-Americans and women begin to talk about claiming power. Any textual support for such empowerment is quite shallow, as I have demonstrated. Still Life feints a move toward changing the social structure, but really works to keep society stable. The skepticism derived from poststructuralist ideas is quickly snuffed out, and a familiar confidence reasserted.

However, before giving all support of the dominant ideology to Still Life, let me look back a moment to Flight and once again mention Uncle Robin. The "essentialness" that might be lacking in Raven could be found in Robin, for with Robin and his wife Judy we have a picture of a rather "healthy human" relationship. In one scene, they too move in the opposite direction of Raven and Quaw Quaw, from the political to the personal. Lying in their waterbed, Robin and Judy discuss Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation, drinking champagne and caressing each other. The conversation is familiar and eventually gives way to other, more personal concerns (56-60). The relationship between Robin and Judy is paramount, their relationship to society secondary.
That healthy relationship, though, is partially structured on the image given by the old Feudal order of Swille, and that point is emphasized when Robin and Judy take over the plantation:

The next morning Uncle Robin and Aunt Judy were having their first breakfast in their new home. The whippoorwills were chirping outside. In the distance a Negro harmonica could be heard twanging dreamily.

"Isn't it amazing," Aunt Judy said, lifting a mouthful of pancake with her silver fork, "last night we were in the Frederick Douglass Houses and now we're in the Master's Castle." (170)

They have become the lord and lady, repeating the cycle which previously enslaved them. Judy is even told by Robin not to do certain chores, as that work is for the servants. Judy's ascension bothers her, though, and her fear rubs off on Robin, who does recoil somewhat from the new position. He realizes he needs to look for a solution: "The rich get off with anything, it's us serfs who have to pay. I don't want to be rich. Aunt Judy is right. I'm going to take this fifty rooms of junk and make something useful out of it" (179).

The solution, which is suggested by Raven, is to turn the plantation into a haven for southern craftsmen. The socio-economic make-up of the new community is not quite clear, but the restrictive nature of the plantation has been altered: "All of the boarders had left the Castle for the weekend. All fifty of them...blacksmiths, teachers, sculptors, writers. Uncle Robin had become exultant when Quickskill first made the suggestion. He hadn't been able to figure his way out of his inheritance" (11). Nor is it obvious that this is the way out. Raven, who lives on the first floor of the Castle, eats dinner in the dining room dressed as a plantation owner, and he is served by Bangalang, another former slave who now lives in the same Frederick Douglass Houses that Uncle Robin and Judy once inhabited. The relationships mimic those of Swille and his servants. Part of Robin's inheritance is the social order.
Furthermore, *Flight*, like *Still Life*, is open to attacks about its handling of gender. Males are dominant throughout the text, especially black males. Swille can be subservient to Mammy Barracuda, but Raven will not be to Quaw Quaw nor Robin to Judy. As Katherine Hume says: "Reed [does not try] to accommodate women within his system...Reed is so bent on reestablishing black manhood that he can picture it only in conjunction with a differentiated and...subordinated black womanhood" (511). Women, and white men, become inferior in order for black men to gain prominence.

This paradox, again, is the postmodern. Reed’s text, in unbuilding, builds up the social structure at the same time, much as it does with the idea of author and self:

[Postmodernism’s] aims are more limited [than Utopian or negative apocalyptic views of the future]: to make us look at the past from the acknowledged distance of the present, a distance which inevitably conditions our ability to know that past. The ironies produced by this distancing are what prevent the postmodern from being nostalgic: there is no desire to return to the past as a time of simpler or more worthy values. These ironies also prevent antiquarianism: there is no value to the past in and of itself. It is the conjunction of the present and the past that is intended to make us question--analyze, try to understand--both how we make and make sense of our culture. Postmodernism may well be...the expression of a culture in crisis, but it is not in itself any revolutionary breakthrough. It is too contradictory, too willfully compromised by that which it challenges. (Hutcheon 230)

*Flight* is challenging of and compromised by history. *Still Life*, though, does not seem to be as postmodern on this score.

Perhaps the reason that Barthes’s early, structuralist, writings have particular application for Robbins’s text is that *Still Life* and its ideas are highly modernist, highly structured. Poststructuralist notions are not highly evident when we look at the novel in terms
of history and myth. They are in Reed’s, but not in Robbins’s. At most, Still Life, with its re-telling of the princess tale, is a lightweight attempt at postmodernism. Going in with the idea of re-establishing romance, it is difficult, if not impossible, for the text to remove much of the ideological baggage that comes along with the heroic tale of a white knight rescuing a damsel in distress (or any dress for that matter). There is not much unbuilding here. Any serious questioning of myth or fairy tales or history is nullified by the re-entrenchment of the usual ideas. The world, after being run through the pages of Still Life, looks much the same.
CONCLUSION

If postmodernism were a contest and we were keeping score, it might seem that Flight was leading Still Life by a good two-to-one count. Reed's text is both using and abusing the dominant ideologies of its time, asserting and critiquing, whether in terms of the author or in terms of history/myth. Robbins's work, though, seems more comfortable asserting liberal humanism than dismantling it. The text might be seen as more modernist in its beliefs, with a creative author and a re-telling of the usual stories about master and subjects, women and men.

Yet, the most poststructuralist character in either text makes his home in Still Life. It is surprising at times how much Bernard, the Woodpecker, can sound like Foucault:

I love the magic of TNT. How eloquently it speaks! Its resounding rumble, its clap, its quack is scarcely less deep than the passionate moan of the Earth herself....For all of its fluent resonance, a bomb says only one word--'Surprise!'--and then applauds itself....I love that architecture, under the impetus of dynamite, dissolves almost in slow motion, crumbling delicately, shedding bricks like feathers, corners melting, grim facades breaking into grins, supports shrugging and calling it a day, tons of totalitarian dreck washing away in the wake of a circular tsunami of air....I love public buildings made public at last, doors flung open to the citizens, to the creatures, to the universe. Baby, come on in! (SL 64-65)

Compare that with Foucault's description of the intellectual:

I dream of the intellectual who destroys evidence and generalities, the one who, in the inertias and constraints of the present time, locates and marks the weak points, the openings, the lines of force, who is incessantly on the move, doesn't know exactly where he is heading nor what he will think tomorrow for he is too attentive to the present; who, wherever he moves, contributes to posing the question of knowing whether the revolution is worth the trouble...
it being understood that the question can be answered only by those who are willing to risk their lives to bring it about. (PPC 124)

This is the same philosophy of the Woodpecker, a philosophy of spontaneous unbuilding. No structure is secure if either Foucault or Bernard are allowed to have their way. Both are outlaws, given Bernard's view: "Outlaws, being less frightened by the bewildering variety of experience, being, in fact, slightly mad for encounters new and extreme, will seek to choose even when no choice readily presents itself" (SL 196).

Uncovering the possibility of choice is the main objective. The goal is not to assert some new philosophy or creed, but to undermine any that are established, and unquestioned. As Foucault claims:

A critique is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest. (PPC 154)

Much of what Foucault and other poststructuralists do is to plant theoretical bombs--poststructuralist dynamite--within the culture. They work much like Bernard's dynamite:

A bomb is not one of your pat solutions. Dynamite is a question not an answer. It can keep things from solidifying, it can keep the ticket open. Sometimes, just raising the question is enough to regenerate life, enough to reverse the decay that results from indifference. (SL 255)

Bernard and the French intellectuals share a love for being able to explode assumptions: "As long as there are matches, there will be fuses. As long as there are fuses, no walls are safe. As long as every wall is threatened, the world can happen. Outlaws are can openers in the supermarket of life" (SL 65). And poststructuralists are the outlaws in the world of theory.

However, the same blindness that affects the theorists affects Bernard. He is not extremely quick to point out his major assumptions, as I mentioned earlier. Furthermore, he is
contained in a text which proposes the supremacy of the individual, and the ability of the individual to freely connect with a universal reality: "Funny how we think of romance as always involving two, when the romance of solitude can be ever so much more delicious and intense. Alone, the world offers itself freely to us. To be unmasked, it has no choice" (269). *Still Life* assumes a self that can perceive and appreciate a universal reality. Though this begins to problematize the issue of romance between people, it strengthens the Romantic notion, the radical individualism present throughout the book. The text doesn't dynamite that idea; it is up to the reader to do so.

The ability of the reader to take Bernard's credo and use it on the text, though, does seem to grant *Still Life* a paradoxical, postmodern position. Dynamiting the narrator's and Bernard's control of the typewriter and Leigh-Cheri, respectively, brings out contradictions in the work. Like *Flight*, the text is ambidextrous, speaking both for and against the culture it resides within. But unlike *Flight*, there is an anxiousness in *Still Life*. Throughout my study of these texts, though I have no problem labeling them as postmodern, I have been uncomfortable with the seeming generality of that classification. *Still Life* is *not* postmodern in the same sense that *Flight* is. The reason for that, I believe, is that the texts originate from different points within the society.

As we have seen, one of Reed's concerns is with writing as a means to being. The narrator of *Flight to Canada* underscores that point by having Quickskill, an individual writer, contemplate a longer line of writings:

Book titles tell the story. The original subtitle for *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was "The Man Who Was a Thing." In 1910 appeared a book by Mary White Ovington called *Half A Man*. Over one hundred years after the appearance of the Stowe book, *The Man Who Cried I Am*, by John A. Williams, was published. Quickskill thought of all the changes that would happen to make a "Thing" into an "I Am." Tons of paper. An Atlantic of blood. Repressed energy of anger that
would form enough sun to light a solar system. A burnt-out black hole. A cosmic slave hole. (82)

Paper (and writing) is equated with blood and both are spilled out of this anger and energy that is related specifically to slavery, and to being black. Reed himself has commented on the relationship of writing to emancipation: "We use our plays, novels and other writings as a way of talking back....What America tends to do historically is to dump off all of its pathologies on black people, sort of purging itself of sin. But we get a chance to fight back, by using writing" (Zamir 1151-52). Part of Reed's writing is Flight to Canada, a re-telling of the slave culture, and a connecting of that culture to modern day America.

But it is not just in Flight to Canada alone that Reed takes up the issue of race and oppression. Though that text explicitly makes the connection, given its subject matter, Reed argues that he cannot step away from such concerns at any time:

A black boxer's career is the perfect metaphor for the career of a black male. Every day is like being in the gym, sparring with impersonal opponents as one faces the rudeness and hostility that a black male must confront in the United States, where he is the object of both fear and fascination. My difficulty in communicating this point of view used to really bewilder me, but over the years I've learned that it takes an extraordinary amount of effort to understand someone from a background different from your own, especially when your life doesn't really depend upon it. And so...I can understand why some readers and debating opponents might have problems appreciating where I'm coming from.

(WF 6-7)

Reed is working to announce his identity in a world that is unwilling to admit dependence upon that identity, and a world that is largely unsupportive of his endeavor. This is the ex-centric dilemma: being defined by being not like the center, by being in conflict with it.

Hutcheon briefly touches on Reed, and she echoes some of the points that I have made:
Those in power control history. The marginal and ex-centric, however, can contest that power, even as they remain within its purvey. Ishmael Reed's "Neo-HooDoo Manifesto" exposes these power relations in both history and language. But in several ways, he reveals the inside-ness of his insider-outsider marginalized position. On the one hand, he offers another totalizing system to counter that of white western culture: that of voodoo. And, on the other hand, he appears to believe strongly in certain humanist concepts, such as the ultimately free individual artist in opposition to the political forces of oppression. This is the kind of self-implicated yet challenging critique of humanism, however, that is typical of postmodernism. The position of black Americans has worked to make them especially aware of those political and social consequences of art, but they are still part of American society. (197-98)

The marginalized position can be highly political. Where is the power and how can it be redistributed? That question, though, must originate within the power structure.

One of the originating points for questions concerning power is the university, especially the field of literary criticism. Critics such as Catherine Belsey argue for the understanding that the theoretical proposals of Foucault and others be used to eradicate injustice:

In poststructuralist theory meanings are cultural and learned, but they are also unfixed, sliding, plural. They are in consequence a matter for political debate. Culture itself is the limit of our knowledge: there is no available truth outside culture with which we can challenge injustice. But culture is also contradictory, the location of resistance as well as oppression, and it is therefore ultimately unstable. It too is in consequence a site of political struggle. (10)
As I hope to have shown, Reed has taken this notion of the unfixed and plural to reconfigure the notions of author and history: the creator (Author and Arthur) have been slain in some respects.

But the space they leave behind is quickly filled, by the (Other) Author and Raven. The ex-centric criticism is not a dynamiting of buildings so much as a re-zoning process. As Hutcheon notes: "But feminist and black theory and practice, to name only the most evident, have qualified the (male, white, Euro-centered) poststructuralist rejection of the *cogito* and bourgeois subjectivity: they cannot reject that which they do not have, that to which they have not been allowed access" (226). Reed cannot critique as Foucault does. He doesn't have the same privileges. What he can do is critique in a manner similar to Foucault as a way of moving towards these privileges. The same can be said of other marginalized writers. Before they reject self and individual identity, they need to claim those notions.

Part of that claiming process involves the university. For one thing, Reed is an academic. He is a lecturer and respected teacher. His books are reviewed and discussed in numerous academic publications, as are those of numerous other ex-centric writers. Classes in multiculturalism are popping up at colleges and universities across the country and reading lists for courses contain more and more names that do not belong to white males, either dead or alive. The movement of Robin from slave to master is similar to the academic ascension of minority/postmodern writers. Authors and critics like Toni Morrison, Annette Kolodny, Eve Kofosky Sedgwick, Edward Said, and bell hooks have been working toward re-viewing literature, so much so that they have frightened George Will into proclaiming: “The supplanting of esthetic by political responses to literature makes literature primarily interesting as a mere index of who had power and whom the powerful victimized” (287).

Will's comment is interesting, albeit perhaps paranoid, because it does recognize the central concern of postmodernism, at least in literary theory. Will's comment prompted a reply from Stephen Greenblatt:
If we allow ourselves to think about the extent to which our magnificent cultural tradition—like that of every civilization we know of—is intertwined with cruelty, injustice, and pain, do we not, in fact, run the risk of “deculturation”? Not if our culture includes a regard for truth. Does this truth mean that we should despise or abandon great art? Of course not... I am deeply committed to passing on the precious heritage of our language, and I take seriously the risk of collective amnesia. Yet there seems to me a far greater risk if professors of literature... refuse to ask the most difficult questions about the past—the risk that we might turn our artistic inheritance into a simple, reassuring, soporific lie.

Greenblatt’s concern with uncovering the injustice of the past is similar to Belsey’s desire to combat the injustice of the present. Both critics, and many others with them, believe in challenging the power structure, as does Reed.

What is important to note is that these critical voices that focus on the political, and the postmodern texts that they claim as tools, are operating, for the most part, from a central position. These voices determine which books are read and taught in classrooms; these voices determine what is literature and how it is interpreted. Given that not all books can be taught, some will need to be dismissed, to be pushed to the margins. Making Reed a central author will marginalize someone else.

We also need to ask how much of an impact the university has on the world outside its walls. I am familiar with the names of most critics and many ex-centric writers due solely to my enrollment in college English courses. Few people outside of the university would recognize many of the ex-centrics gaining popularity within, and fewer would recognize the critics. Foucault has remarked on the limits of the university:

We know perfectly well that today so-called avant-garde literature is read only by university teachers and their students. We know very well that...
writer over thirty is surrounded by students writing their theses on his work. We know that writers live mainly by teaching and lecturing [Reed], so here we already have the truth of something: the fact that literature functions as literature through an interplay of selection, sacralization, and institutional validation, of which the university is both the operator and receiver. (309)

The avant-garde literature is now that of the ex-centric, supported and validated by the university which chooses to study it.

What then, of Robbins, who is neither an ex-centric, nor an academic? It probably isn't even appropriate to use the term postmodern to describe him, as few of his readers would. He is, instead, the eccentric writer. He is a member of the paperback literati, an outlaw of the university. He is, at times, provocative, but in a largely non-threatening way, like a slightly delusional relative who always livens up reunions. Based on the sales of their books, Robbins would probably be seen as the Billy Carter of the book store to Ishmael Reed's image as a literary Willie Horton.

When Robbins challenges society, it is in a manner different from the ex-centric. The emphasis in Robbins's work is not on the political. Any socially constructed group must always be left in favor of the self:

A romantic, however, recognizes that the movement, the organization, the institution, the revolution, if it comes to that, is merely a backdrop for his or her own personal drama and that to pretend otherwise is to surrender freedom and will to the totalitarian impulse. (SL 150-51)

It is the personal that takes precedence, not the social. Robbins's tales are standard American ones of radical individualism carried out in every Eastwood movie, every Chandler paperback, and most other popular stories.

This individualism is also, in a strange way, the stance of Foucault:

For me intellectual work is related to what you could call aestheticism,
meaning transforming yourself...I am not interested in the academic status of what I am doing because my problem is my own transformation...This transformation of one's self by one's own knowledge is, I think, something rather close to the aesthetic experience. (PPC 14)

Though Foucault and Robbins have different ideas of the self, their remarks have the same sense of separation from larger goings-on. The group is always suspect.

Foucault has in fact been criticized for what some see as a reluctance to become involved with political issues. Nancy Fraser compliments the thought, but questions the thinker:

However, even as I have taken up Foucault’s thematic focus, I have been puzzled by his self-positioning. What, the activist in me has repeatedly wondered, were the sources of his engagement? What was his practical intent, his political commitment? On the one hand, his account of the “capillary” character of modern power seems to multiply possible sites of political struggle and to valorize the proliferation of new social movements; it thereby gives theoretical support to New Left critiques of economism and to an expanded sense of what counts as “political.” On the other hand, it is harder to know what to make of Foucault’s extreme reticence on normative and programmatic matters, his reluctance to consider how all these various struggles might be coordinated and what sorts of change they might accomplish, and his much-discussed archaeological “coldness.” (3-4)

Fraser makes the same assumption as Belsey and Greenblatt, that the new questions need to be directed toward combating injustice. Her critique of Foucault, though, does not seem to be one that we can level against Robbins. Instead of remaining uninvolved in the political issues, Robbins mostly reinforces the dominant power structure. Woodpecker might have the Foucauldian "coldness," but not Robbins.
This reinforcement of the dominant ideology from Robbins, and the challenge of it from Reed, once again puts the postmodern paradox between the texts instead of within them. We see the "political ambidexterity of postmodernism" that Hutcheon describes, with Reed and his work being primarily "radically disruptive/revolutionary" and Robbins and his work taking the "neoconservatively nostalgic/reactionary" position (xiii). Yes, this does deny half the contradiction for each text, but the texts, their origins, and their differing social receptions work for that denial. They must, if they wish to have any hope of generating meaning.

Hutcheon realizes that the postmodern paradox she describes cannot offer any answers: "It tries to problematize and, thereby, to make us question. But it does not offer answers. It cannot, without betraying its anti-totalizing ideology" (231). Recognizing the ambidexterity of a text puts us in limbo, unable to move. Reading Reed or Robbins as both supportive of and challenging to the dominant ideology is essentially the end of the road, leaving us sitting in the car with our blinkers flashing both ways. That, though, is exactly the dilemma of postmodernism: "The postmodern paradoxes both reveal and question prevailing norms, and they can do so because they incarnate both processes" (Hutcheon 230). To move at all, we will have to deny one half of the paradox.

This is exactly what critics of Flight to Canada do. For Joe Weixlmann, the early references in the novel connect to Reed's much cited notion of Neo-HooDooism, a reliance upon spiritual forces derived from early African culture. In Flight, these references to "African and Indian gods" work to show how Reed is "embracing a creative return to and acceptance of the 'old ways'...and seeks to release himself from the constraints that European culture would place upon him and reconnect with his African roots. Thus, Neo-HooDoo is both a means by which Reed can assert his deep and abiding sense of freedom and the method which he has selected to create distinctively Black art" ("PPG" 45). Neo-HooDoo is the political deconstructor and the new center. The view is radically disruptive and revolutionary, both for Reed's work and for the criticism. The main concern is with unbuilding the central power.
Compare that reading with Jerry Bryant's comments about Reed:

Indeed, while Reed urges replacement of rationalism with magic and intuition, his own style takes its strength directly from rationalism. His metaphors sway us not because they appeal to our passion or emotion but because they please our intellect. They are not in the slightest incantatory, and produce no altered states. We are delighted by the inventiveness with which Reed yokes together the unconnected, but it is an intellectual delight, similar to what generations of J John Donne readers have felt when they are drawn into an effective metaphysical conceit. As a white Western rationalist myself, I feel a little badly treated by Reed. It may be that Reed is attacking only one or two strains in the Western tradition. But it comes off as a blanket indictment, as if there is not mystery or emotion in the West, no St. Francis or St. Theresa, no mystical poetry. Reed employs the same techniques he accuses the Western rationalists of using, guilt by association....Nor can I accept an unqualified rejection of rationalism. The truth that rises from the "possessed" can no more guarantee completeness than the truth that rises from rational observation and inference. If it is true that the Western mind has swung excessively toward rationalist scientific empiricism, we do no service to the species by swinging excessively to the other extreme. (201)

Here is the neoconservatively nostalgic/reactionary view, uncomfortable with a possible usurpation of the social norms. Bryant's discomfort matches Robbins's anxiety about the revolutionary nature of the ex-centric. Essentially, they are two white guys insecure about their central role, and looking for ways to justify it.

What Bryant does in his criticism, Robbins does in Still Life--the novel after all is another piece of criticism on Reed's work. They both try to emphasize the role of mystery in the Western tradition:
I should say one more thing about making love stay. When the mystery of the connection goes, love goes. It's that simple. This suggests that it isn't love that is so important to us but the mystery itself. The love connection may be merely a device to put us in contact with the mystery, and we long for love to last so that the ecstasy of being near the mystery will last. It is contrary to the nature of mystery to stand still. Yet it's always there, somewhere, a world on the other side of the mirror...a promise in the next pair of eyes that smile at us. We glimpse it when we stand still. (SL 274-75)

The longing for this mystery diverts attention from the social power structure, and suggest that the revolutionary aim of the ex-centric is misdirected:

As for magic, there's none at all because the aim of any social activist is power over others, whereas a magician seeks power only over himself: the power of higher consciousness, which, while universal, cosmic even, is manifest in the intimate. It would seem that a whole human being would have the capacity for both intimacy and social action, yet sad to say, every cause, no matter how worthy, eventually falls prey to the tyranny of the dull mind. In the movement, as in the bee house or the white ant's hill of clay, there is no place for idiosyncrasy, let alone mischief. (SL 150)

Attempting social action is essentially worthless, as it will deny the individual his existence. This, of course, ignores the fact that some people are being denied their individuality by society.

What I would like to suggest at this point is that Flight to Canada and Still Life with Woodpecker, their characters, their authors, and their respective reception from the academic community, represent, in varying degrees, the two forms of poststructuralist interpretation discussed by Derrida:
There are thus two interpretations of interpretation, of structure, of sign, or freeplay. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering, a truth or an origin which is free from freeplay and from the order of the sign, and live like an exile the necessity of interpretation. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms freeplay and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology--in other words, through the history of all of his history--has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of the game. (970)

Reed, and Belsey, and most of the other critics would be interpreters in the first fashion, searching for a truth or a new center. The ex-centric, and proponents of the ex-centric, need to establish an origin before they can turn away from it. Robbins, too, would be an interpreter in the first fashion as his anxiety over keeping the current center is a matter of deciphering a truth. Robbins disguises this need for truth, giving us the Woodpecker with his poststructuralist tendencies, but as I have shown, *Still Life* is primarily a nostalgic desire for a humanistic vision of life. Hutcheon might seem to be an interpreter who is not turned toward an origin or truth, what with her emphasis on the paradox and its inability to provide answers when both sides are taken into account. Yet she is also interested in working away from freeplay: "In [postmodernism's] contradictions, we may find no answers, but the questions that will make any answering process even possible are at least starting to be asked" (231). There is the goal of providing answers, and creating a "poetics of postmodernism" is a first step.

The best two candidates for exemplifying the second type of interpretation would be Woodpecker and Foucault. I earlier linked the two in terms of philosophical outlooks, and their desire to explode assumptions comes closest to affirming freeplay in the Derridian sense. Of course, Woodpecker does seem to have some longing for a sense of origin, given his tale of red-bearded ancestors, but he is the character least likely to mind if everything goes up in
smoke. In fact, he might be the one to light the fuse. What, though, are we to make of this process of categorization, especially when these two interpretive strategies, for Derrida, are “absolutely irreconcilable even if we live them simultaneously”? Are Foucault and the Woodpecker irreconcilable with Reed and Robbins, and all the critics? In a way, yes. The explosive power of the Woodpecker's dynamite and poststructuralist theory must be contained, or directed, by those who are searching for a truth. However, that search for truth is conducted quite differently, being dependent upon the position of the searcher in relation to the current power structures.

Elsewhere in his essay, Derrida describes the breach between the two types of interpretation another way:

As a turning toward the presence, lost or impossible, of the absent origin, this structuralist thematic of broken immediateness is thus the sad, negative, nostalgic, guilty, Rousseauist facet of the thinking of freeplay of which the Nietzschean affirmation--the joyous affirmation of the freeplay of the world and without truth, without origin, offered to an active interpretation--would be the other side. This affirmation then determines the non-center otherwise than as a loss of the center. (970 emphasis his)

What I want to suggest is that the two sides described here do not correspond to the two types of interpretation, but are representative of the split within the first interpretation.

Robbins, in trying to regain an absent (or departing) origin with Still Life, presents the sad, nostalgic facet. Even the title of the book indicates a desire to keep the structure stable. Reed, and other ex-centricrs, represent the joyous affirmation of freeplay, but not because it indicates a permanent absence of truth or origin. Instead, it offers the possibility for a new truth or origin. The affirmation of freeplay does see the non-center as a loss of center, and thus as an opportunity to re-center in a different way. This is Hutcheon's political ambidexterity of the postmodern--the neoconservatory and the revolutionary. That ambidexterity is contained within
the first type of interpretation. So, it is not only the types of interpretive strategies that are at odds, but the interpretations within the first strategy.

Another point Derrida makes that I would like to pick up concerns the matter of choice, specifically, choosing an interpretive model: “I do not believe that today there is any question of choosing...because we must first try to conceive of the common ground and the difference of this irreducible difference” (970). I agree, for the most part, and would apply this belief to the split within the first strategy as well. There is not a matter of choice, for some. That is because the difference of the difference seems to reside in the position of the practicing interpreter. The turning away from the origin, which Woodpecker exhibits, and the sad, nostalgic longing displayed by Robbins, are both luxuries for those who are currently centered in the societal structure. Reed, and other ex-centrics writers, do not have that same luxury. They need to work towards centering themselves, towards establishing a base of identity. To become nostalgic or to move beyond origin to complete freeplay risks stranding ex-centrics permanently on the fringe. For poststructuralism (of the affirmative freeplay variety), de-centering is entirely proper. But it ignores, as it would have to, the current positioning of power and social relationships. Woodpecker sets off his social dynamite because he has little to fear in the way of repercussions. Robbins can be nostalgic because the old center empowers him—that is in fact why he is nostalgic. Reed, and Raven, and Robin, on the other hand, are fighting for their freedom, for their lives. They must disrupt the society in a certain way in order to empower themselves.

A recognition of such a distinction is crucial, not only for the writers, but for the critic/reader. Especially if that critic/reader believes that the stories we read do influence the way we live our lives. I do, and over the course of my study of these texts, the exuberance I have always felt for Robbins has been tempered. How can I read the novel in the same way after viewing it as a (perhaps unintentional) repudiation of Reed’s work? For example, Robbins elaborates upon the idea that the Red Beards sent us a message from another
dimension, secreted upon packs of Camel cigarettes, and I remember finding that message positive and uplifting when I first encountered it. Now, though, the one word message rings slightly hollow:

- How carefully was that word chosen!
- The word that allows yes, the word that makes no possible.
- The word that puts the free in freedom and takes the obligation out of love.
- The word that throws a window open after the final door is closed.
- The word upon which all adventure, all exhilaration, all meaning, all honor depends.
- The word that fires evolution’s motor of mud.
- The word that the cocoon whispers to the caterpillar.
- The word that molecules recite before bonding.
- The word that separates that which is dead from that which is living.
- The word no mirror can turn around.

In the beginning was the word and the word was

**CHOICE** (190)

How to celebrate the idea of choice, of freeplay in the affirmative sense, when choice is exactly what is denied to others? In *Still Life*, the idea of choice becomes another smokescreen, like "mystery" or "magic," which hides the marginalization of others by claiming it is possible to gain power by simply choosing.

Not to wallow in a pool of theoretical self-pity. But, these are the questions and concerns that are raised for me, and also seem to be the ones being bandied about in critical discussions today. Poststructuralism, with its turning away from the origin, seems to present us with the option of choice, but it is an option for only a select few, and even those folks are limited in certain ways, as we see with the Woodpecker. For others, the choice is reduced to
the process of finding an origin. Some work to re-center themselves, and others to find an initial center. Both, though, are limited by the other: Robbins and Reed collide.

In that collision, though, Robbins has the better position. He has the luxury of winning with a stalemate. All he needs is a draw, for the two sides of the paradox to cancel each other out, and the social structure will remain much the same. Robbins exhibits this luxury in interviews, as he allows certain concerns to be ignored in favor of others. There is the idea of eccentricity for its own sake, as opposed to a culturally determined ex-centricity:

As he himself says in the novel, the Woodpecker stands for “uncertainty, insecurity, surprise, disorder, unlawfulness, bad taste, fun and things that go boom in the night.” Viewed collectively and in a positive light, these items define a philosophy of life I much admire, a philosophy that encompasses the rewards of cutting against the grain, the giddy exhilaration of moving against the flow, the boldness of deliberately choosing the short straw, the crazy wisdom involved in taking the advice of the Spanish poet Jimenez when he said, “If they give you ruled paper, write the other way”....My formula is to try to avoid formula, to remain open and spontaneous, to allow images and ideas to marinate in the unpredictable but vital waters of the sub-conscious imagination, and to keep myself cleansed of preconceived notions of what a novel should or should not be. Critics maintain such preconceptions, which is why, by and large, they are an impediment rather than an impetus to the evolution of meaningful literary expression. (Strelow 99)

There is the idea of the erasure of history:

When I wrote the last sentence in Woodpecker, 'It's never too late to have a happy childhood,' some critics looked at that and saw an endorsement of frivolity, but that was not the intention. I think you can cut loose from the past. The past can be a prison. I view my books as cakes with files in them.
You can eat the cake and lick the frosting, but inside there is a file that you can chop through the bars with, if you are so moved. I really do believe we do not have to be weighed down by the past. (Whitmer 238)

And the dismissal of the political:

It boils down to this: what happened in the Sixties was only secondarily political. First and foremost it was a spiritual phenomenon. And I believe it proved my thesis that if we work on changing spiritually, philosophically, then the political changes will naturally and automatically follow. For centuries, we’ve been putting the cart before the horse. The magic of the Sixties, the triumph of the Sixties, began to dissipate when we took our eyes off the spiritual ball and shifted our focus to the political fallout from our spiritual advances. Next time, I want us to get it right. (Whitmer 247)

It is the spiritual, not the political; the individual, not the historical; and the eccentric because there is a center. Robbins’s ideas and opinions are possible because his identity is the defining one in American culture. It is a luxury that does not necessarily notice those who must take the short straw, who are imprisoned by a history that does not recognize them, and for whom there is no spiritual without the political. In other words, it is a luxury far removed from Reed.

Before dismissing Robbins, though, let me claim for him and his work a large degree of seriousness. Though the goal is to be “eternally subversive” (Strelow 102), it is dependent upon an understanding that the world is not working as it should be. Much like Belsey’s sense of “injustice,” I think Robbins has a sense of dis-alignment in the universe. While not founded upon the same de-centered life that Reed has, it still has some merit, I believe. For, how can Robbins, or I for that matter, ever actually inhabit an ex-centric position? That is not where we operate from and given the culturally determined nature of being, a place we cannot jump into. We have to work with what we have. I, too, have a sense that the world is not a perfect place and that assumption will dictate certain actions of mine.
One of those actions, of course, is recognizing the limitations of Robbins's work, and the hazards it poses, as well as the difficulties of poststructuralism. Both have blind spots: spots that lead to the complicitousness that Hutcheon finds in the postmodern. Not that either needs to be discarded, as the confrontational aspects of Robbins's work and of poststructuralist thought are quite effective—like vigilant sentries, constantly asking questions and demanding identification. However, that confrontation needs to be seen in light of its origin, and its nostalgic longing. When, and if, Robbins does come into the critical conversation, that will have to be one of the first issues addressed. And it no doubt will be, given the current critical discourse.

In addition to bringing Robbins into the critical discourse, it would be profitable to bring Reed out of it. How can we let the revolutionary nature of the ex-centric operate more outside the walls of the university? With that move, however, the difficulty would be in having readers recognize the confrontation and not the complicity. Or, perhaps simply accepting the confrontation and the need for it.

These, though, are large-scale problems that will not be remedied by a thesis. What I have hopefully accomplished here is to show how two texts can both be postmodern, but not equal, and how each text can utilize similar poststructuralist ideas, but must use them in different ways. Reed is the ex-centric, writing from the margin, and Robbins is the eccentric, writing for the edges. Derrida is right when he says these are "absolutely irreconcilable," but perhaps by examining them together, we can gain a clearer picture of our current literary, theoretical, and social arenas, and how we position ourselves, and our texts, within those arenas.
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