OUT OF THE DEPTHS AND INTO THE HEIGHTS:
A MANIFESTO FOR STORYTELLERS

by Wim Coleman

> But what is important is *Hamlet* and *Midsummer Night's Dream,* not who wrote them, but that somebody did. The artist is of no importance. Only what he creates is important, since there is nothing more to be said. (17)

So said William Faulkner, a writer of extraordinary depth, in a famous *Paris Review* interview. I am very fond of the first thirty words of this quote and frequently recite them to anyone who promotes a heroic, egotistical image of the storyteller. But I generally stop before the last eight words:

"… since there is nothing more to be said."

Alas, these words are almost certainly true. To demonstrate this, I shall begin with a simple statement of fact:

All stories which illuminate the human condition have great depth.

Now surely no one will disagree. We were all taught this fundamental truth by our earliest literature teachers, and it's not my place to refute received wisdom. So I can move on to another fact:

The depths are finite.

This may take a bit of explanation, but you'll soon see that it's correct. When I talk about "the depths," what can I mean except the universal truths of the human heart? And what regions of the human heart remain uncharted by the great stories of our culture? We learned from Oedipus that kings never know when to leave well enough alone; we learned from Medea how much ill treatment a wife can take before she murders her children; we learned from Lear how badly the elderly handle real estate; we learned

from Othello how murderously jealous all normal husbands naturally are.

Surely there is nothing in any of *our* run-of-the-mill hearts that can't be found much more abundantly in the vastly grander coronary organs of Oedipus, Medea, Lear, or Othello. But just in case such canonical stories left any loose ends, Sigmund Freud tied them together once and for all in his own marvelous works of fiction. So what can we conclude except that the human heart is a bounded receptacle like a jar or a box or a room? It can only contain *so much stuff.* Its depths are truly finite. And this leads inevitably to Faulkner's conclusion:

There is nothing more to be said.[1]

There are no more stories to tell, and therefore no work for a storyteller to do. Worse than that, the world itself is hopelessly unchangeable and unimprovable, because a finite heart has only finite possibilities. Today's storyteller is merely a professional spelunker fully equipped with a rope and lighted helmet, wandering forlornly among Minolta-wielding Japanese tourists in the midst of Carlsbad Caverns, exploring depths that are already replete with a paid tour guide, a dazzling light show, and a gift shop with souvenirs and picture postcards. There is nothing more for me to say. I really ought to stop right here.

But I won't, because I notice a glimmer of darkness at the end of our well-lighted

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[1]This idea is expressed at much greater length in *The Anxiety of Influence* by Harold Bloom. If I understand Bloom's argument incorrectly—and I am confident that I do—it can be summarized thus: During the seventeenth century, poets ran out of things to say and have been terribly anxious about it ever since; it is surely not coincidental that René Descartes reached the absolute limits of human knowledge during this same century, all subsequent "discoveries" in science and philosophy being either derivative or erroneous. Every poet since Milton has wisely refrained from reading any works by philosophers and scientists, reading instead only the works of prior poets—who have, after all, said everything that can ever be said. A "strong" poet is one who successfully disguises his recycling of the insights of prior poets; this leads to Bloom's conclusion (central to his book *The Western Canon)* that aesthetics are everything and content nothing. Bloom limited his argument in *The Anxiety of Influence* to poets; but of course, what is true for the greatest of all the arts must be all the more true for such a foolish, paltry, trivial form of creativity as storytelling. Let me emphasize that I agree with Bloom entirely and regard him as the greatest intellect of our age. My entire argument in this essay rests squarely upon his shoulders.

caverns. What the prevailing wisdom tells us about the storyteller's plight only applies to one direction—*down.* It tells us that the *depths* are bounded, but it says nothing whatsoever about the *heights,* by which I mean simply everywhere.[2] And how can *everywhere* be said to have boundaries? If I succeed in finding a recipe for a storytelling of height, the rewards will be great. For such storytelling will be much more than merely descriptive of a fixed, finite, and static "human condition." It will be genuinely transformative, freeing human beings from the trance of consensual possibility—and from human nature itself. "Man is something that shall be overcome," said Nietzsche's Zarathustra. "What have you done to overcome him? (124)." While the meaning of this injunction is rather charmingly enhanced by its archaic sexism, it also must be said that woman as well as man shall be overcome.

I'm not claiming that such storytelling will be new. There have already been great storytellers of height, even though they have been vastly outnumbered by storytellers of depth during recent centuries. Unfortunately, they are seldom recognized for what they are. Most, like Shakespeare, have been conveniently mistaken for writers of depth.[3]

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[2]I admit that term "height" carries some baggage with it. It typically connotes qualities I do not mean to suggest: sophistication, legitimacy, respectability, etc.—for example, the distinction between "high" and "low" art. Height, in my view, is a matter of expansion rather than hierarchy, of "out" rather than "up." The zenith of someone in China is also my zenith here in Mexico, even though China lies beneath my feet. Moreover, my "heights" are all-inclusive, encompassing even the depths of the human heart.

[3]In citing Shakespeare as a storyteller of height, I rely on the authority of Peter Brook, who makes the following observation in a short essay entitled "What is a Shakespeare?":

> [H]is fabric reaches us today, not as a series of messages, which is what authorship almost always produces, but as a series of impulses that can produce many understandings. This is something quite different. It is like tea leaves in a cup. Think of the chance arrangement of tea leaves in a cup—the act of interpretation is a reflection of what is brought to the cup by the person looking at it. The whole act of interpreting tea leaves—or the fall of a sparrow, for that matter—is the unique meeting, at one point in time, between an event and the perceiver of the event. (76)

So in Shakespeare we have no depth, but an incredibly rich and detailed *surface* from which we are free to soar aloft into galactic regions of infinite possibilities. Shakespeare does not take us *down,* but cuts our moorings and lets us discover our own innate weightlessness, sending us

Some, like Melville, have compounded the problem by conveniently mistaking *themselves* for writers of depth. Great writers who unapologetically forgo the depths inhabit at best a marginal region of the canon. Such is the case of Aristophanes.

Although Aristophanes' greatness is generally acknowledged, he is not granted the same exalted status as the three Athenian tragic dramatists whose works have come down to us. Aristophanes' plays are not considered *deep* like the works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides.[4] And since works without depth cannot be *universal* works, we have little to learn about the human condition from Aristophanes. As it happens, this argument is correct—which is exactly why Aristophanes' works are of such extraordinary value.

Let's consider Aristophanes' quintessential story of height, *The Birds.* In it, two Athenian citizens, Pisthetairos and Euelpides, become embittered with life among their fellow humans and unite with the birds to found a utopia called Cloudcuckooland, strategically located between the realms of the humans and the gods. Since sacrifices must pass through Cloudcuckooland on their way to Olympus, Pisthetairos and Euelpides

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soaring *up*. This being the case, Shakespeare must be exiled from the Western Canon, for his presence there is clearly a mistake.

[4]Most damningly, Aristophanes' characters are said to lack psychological reality. The question is, does psychology have a place in stories of height? I think not. In his essay "No More Masterpieces," Antonin Artaud voices this eloquent objection to psychology:

> Psychology, which works relentlessly to reduce the unknown to the known, to the quotidian and the ordinary, is the cause of the theater's abasement and its fearful loss of energy, which seems to me to have reached its lowest point. And I think both the theater and we ourselves have had enough of psychology. (77)

Echoing Artaud, the allegedly late playwright/director/actor Charles Ludlam describes an anti-psychological mode of characterization which lends itself perfectly to stories of height:

> Characters as agents; characters as vehicles; characters as masqueraders; characters without pretense or psychology; characters precisely motivated; characters with composite histories; characters which do not endeavor to be believed … (80)

It should be fairly obvious that, in its quest for consistency, psychology can produce no titanic and contradictory figures such as Falstaff, Hedda Gabler, or Blanche DuBois. I would go as far as to say that not a single great character in all literature is based on psychology, which perhaps tells us how profoundly traditional the supposedly radical viewpoints of Artaud and Ludlam really are.

and their avian allies soon find themselves masters of the entire universe. And there it is—a tidy parable about the renunciation of the human for the transhuman, of the depths for the heights. In *The Birds,* Aristophanes has given us a stunningly simple recipe for narratives of height: they are about the impossible, the fantastic. To escape Faulkner's dreaded depths, all storytellers have to do is abandon realism in favor of the unreal.

I really ought to stop right here. But I can't, because my argument falls short. Fantastic storytelling never disappeared after Aristophanes. From Ovid's *Metamorphoses* through today's tales of science fiction and the supernatural, storytellers have turned to the fantastic again and again. Such stories ought to have transformed intelligent life into a whole new order of being by now, but this has never happened. If fantasy is not enough to make a story genuinely transformative, what is the missing ingredient?

Our mistake is in assuming that stories of height are *about* transformation, are mere illustrations of it. Instead, such stories are transformation itself, acts of practical alchemy; a story of height has the power to alter the reality of every receptive person it touches. But how do we replicate this process in our own work? What is the missing ingredient in our recipe—the philosophers' stone that will allow us to change literary lead into storied gold?

Let's turn to Shakespeare's ostensibly non-fantastic and history-bound *Antony and Cleopatra.* The Shakespearean scholar Rosalie L. Colie once analyzed the play's infamously bombastic language and discovered that the bombast is necessary to convey sheer grandeur of its title protagonists. The play, she says, upholds that "human beings who can be elevated are nobler than those whose nature is too small to permit such enlargement" (83). And as Antony and Cleopatra increasingly elevate and enlarge themselves and each other, the play's innumerable hyperboles become fact, while the language "unmetaphors" itself into literal truth (72).

I would put the case more bluntly and say that there are *no* metaphors in *Antony and Cleopatra;* this is true even (or perhaps especially) when the play's language is most

floridly figurative. Consider the moment in Act I when Antony declares his love for Cleopatra and his contempt for empire: "Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch / Of the rang'd empire fall! (I, i, 33-4)." This is not metaphorical language but a reality wrought from Antony's preternatural eloquence. Today, ancient Rome really does lie in ruins—not because of historical factors exhaustively itemized by Edward Gibbon, but because, about four hundred years ago within the "wooden O" of Shakespeare's theater, an actor playing Mark Antony stepped outside the causal trap of time and history and retroactively willed the end of Rome with a Kabbalistic spell of words. Likewise by Antony's verbal spell, his love for Cleopatra endures forever.

Shakespeare's Cleopatra displays similar powers, as when, shortly before her suicide, she dreads to see "Some squeaking Cleopatra boy my greatness / I' th' posture of a whore (V, ii, 220-1)." When this line was spoken at the Globe by the teenage prodigy John Rice, that young man literally became the bodily Cleopatra herself in all her gloriously overripe "infinite variety." He was *transubstantiated* as surely as are bread and wine in the act of holy communion.[5] In a similar manner, Aristophanes did more than merely describe a transhuman utopia; he took his audience on a tour of a real place which transcends the confines of the heart.

What philosophers' stone did Shakespeare and Aristophanes use to produce this amazing effect? The answer is quite simple: *laughter. The Birds* is one of the funniest comedies ever written, and *Antony and Cleopatra* is the Shakespearean tragedy most intricately permeated by laughter. In his book *Rabelais and His World,* Mikhail Bakhtin describes the power of laughter thus:

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[5]I am very fond of Harriett Hawkins' assessment of Cleopatra as a "strange attractor" and a catalyst of chaos, and can't resist sharing this lovely quote from her book *Strange Attractors:*

> Banish chaos, banish butterflies, banish Cleopatra (or banish Falstaff, the comic personification of a "strange attractor" in *1 Henry IV)* if you will—or if you must—but along with them you have to banish excitement, adventure, along with all risk and temptation from your world, and you will miss them when they are gone. (136)

> True ambivalent and universal laughter does not deny seriousness but purifies and completes it. Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naïveté and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality. Laughter does not permit seriousness to atrophy and to be torn away from the one being, forever incomplete. It restores this ambivalent wholeness. (122-3)

So laughter has both the power to deny and the power to affirm, the power to destroy and the power to renew; it unites opposites, demolishes dichotomies. It really is our alchemical quicksilver.[6]

Bakhtin considers François Rabelais's sixteenth-century novel *Gargantua and Pantagruel* to be the high-water mark of "true ambivalent and universal laughter." It tells the story of the giant Gargantua and his equally enormous son Pantagruel. From his earliest childhood, Pantagruel displays a superhuman thirst for both knowledge and booze—which amount to much the same thing in Rabelais' grotesque, carnivalistic universe. Indeed, the fifth and final book of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* ends with Pantagruel's roguishly noble companion Panurge literally *drinking knowledge* under the

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[6]Quicksilver is a fortuitous image of laughter, particularly given its connection with the mischievous Hermes or Mercury, god of thieves and tricksters. In his book *Alchemy,* Titus Burckhardt describes quicksilver as "the true key to the alchemical work, just as Mercury or Hermes is the ancestor of alchemy (81)." And in *The Book of Thoth,* the alchemically-minded Aleister Crowley says the following about this god:

> [B]ecause he is duality, he represents both truth and falsehood, wisdom and folly. Being the unexpected, he unsettles any established idea, and therefore appears tricky. He has no conscience, being creative. If he cannot attain his ends by fair means, he does it by foul. (70)

In an appendix to the same work, Crowley offers this quote from *The Paris Working:*

> "The sense of humour of this god [Hermes] is very strong. He is not sentimental about his principal function; he regards the Universe as an excellent practical joke; yet he recognizes that Jupiter is serious, and the Universe is serious, although he laughs at them for being serious. His sole business is to transmit the force from Jupiter, and he is concerned with nothing else. The message is Life, but in Jupiter the life is latent." (129)

This observation bears a remarkable semblance to Bakhtin's regarding laughter.

guidance of the Priestess Bacbuc:

> "The philosophers, preachers, and doctors of your world feed you with fine words through the ears. Here we literally take in our teaching orally, through the mouth. Therefore I do not say to you: Read this chapter, understand this gloss. What I say is: Taste this chapter, swallow this gloss. Once upon a time an ancient prophet of the Jewish nation swallowed a book, and became a learned man to the teeth. Now you must immediately drink this, and you'll be learned to the liver. Here, open your jaws." (704)

How else could Rabelais have conveyed the possibilities of his age, so suddenly unbounded by world navigation and the revolution of Gutenberg, except through such extravagant storytelling? Bakhtin describes the sheer anarchic power of Rabelais thus:

> No dogma, no authoritarianism, no narrow-minded seriousness can coexist with Rabelaisian images; these images are opposed to all that is finished and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook. (3)

This is alchemical storytelling on a world-shattering level.

Alas, Bakhtin also accurately describes the denigration and decline of laughter, which set in almost immediately after the completion of Rabelais's fearless work. According to Bakhtin, few people have truly laughed since the seventeenth century.[7] Our laughter is almost always limited to either shallow mockery or mere diversion. It is seldom whole. This puts today's storyteller in a bind. If we have never experienced true, ambivalent laughter, how can we ever hope to use it as an alchemical philosophers' stone? And how did things get to this dreadful pass? A good text to turn to for an understanding of these problems is the biblical book of Genesis.

Now, I am a devout believer in the literal truth of every word of the Bible, as I am in all the world's great fictional texts. And the first few chapters of Genesis explain very

[7]Note that the demise of laughter occurred during the same century as the end of poetic possibilities and Descartes' arrival at the absolute limit of human knowledge. Coincidence? I don't think so.

specifically the denigration of levity, for even the most casual reader can see that the Tree of Knowledge is also the Tree of Laughter. When Eve ate the fruit of that tree, she became the first person to laugh. And when she handed that fruit to Adam, she shared the first joke. Thus the Bible illustrates that stand-up comedy is *really* the world's oldest profession. This capacity for laughter is exactly what caused God to exclaim to his heavenly companions (I always quote the King James version of the Bible, which is by far the funniest and least reliable in English), "Behold, the man is become as one of us (3:22) …" For once mortals learned the gift of laughter, the gift of immortality could not be far out of their reach.

Eve's deed had to be nipped in the bud. So she and all her daughters and granddaughters and great-to-the-*n*th-power granddaughters were alienated from their most natural and innate gift: levity. The female comic, personified by Phyllis Diller and Lucille Ball, was sentenced to be a grotesque, an object of ridicule, and her performance was really a kind of divinely enforced self-punishment, a cruel penance for the crime of giving birth to laughter. The very laughter she generated was negative, sanctioning her audience in its smug sense of respectable normality. She was an example of what *not* to be.

The death of the patriarchal anthropomorphic God on April 8, 1966 changed all this.[8] Since then, we have been faced with a loss of absolutes and an influx of information vastly greater than that of the age of Gutenberg. In the terminology of complexity theorists, we are perched at the boundary between order and chaos—a dangerous place, but also the *only* place where creativity, evolution, and life itself are possible.[9] It is a

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[8]See the cover of *Time* on this date.

[9]In his book *Complexity,* Roger Lewin offers this quote from computer scientist Christopher Langton:

> "I'm saying that the edge of chaos is where information gets its foot in the door in the physical world, where it gets the upper hand over energy. Being at the transition point between order and chaos not only buys you exquisite control—small input/big change—but it

robust, terrifying, deadly serious, wildly hilarious time in which we can only be certain of one thing: certainty has abandoned us forever.[10]

These developments have ended the curse of Eve and opened the door for the

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> also buys you the possibility that information processing can become an important part of the dynamics of the system." (51)

It is doubtful that any storytelling of depth can hint at the risk and excitement inherent in this view of life and nature.

[10]Readers familiar with "Brillig in Cyberland," a piece of speculative prose I wrote in collaboration with Pat Perrin and the allegedly late Timothy Leary, may be surprised that I don't cite William Gibson's *Neuromancer* as a piece of "high" storytelling worthy of our chaotic age. Gibson is, after all, the prophet who composed his first high-tech masterpiece *Neuromancer* on an electric typewriter; it was he who coined the term *cyberspace,* which has come to denote not only the hypertext reality which humanity may very well inhabit in the future but also the informational domain we step into every time we use an automated teller machine.

But "Brillig in Cyberland" presents Gibson's world as perceived through Dr. Leary's irrepressible sensibilities; much to his credit, Leary is constitutionally incapable of reading any text with a straight face. I myself find Gibson's fiction impossibly dour. And in a paper entitled "The Death of Cyberpunk," Claire Sponsler made the following observation:

> … Gibson's stories dissolve into well-worn realist narratives whose plots follow a predictable cause-and-effect patterning and whose heroes remain, in spite of massive technological invasion, resolutely human. (48)

Frankly, I disagree with much of Sponsler's thinking. Like many postmodern academics, she runs deeper than she runs high (despite her protestations of a commitment to a two-dimensional surface), failing to see the discrepancies in her own received theory. For example, she seems not to notice that "the coveted transcendence … usually manifested in an optimistic belief in both scientific progress and human resourcefulness (52)," which she reviles, is neither more nor less wrong-headed than the academically correct belief in "cultural or material determinants and the frightening possibility of meaninglessness (53)," which she extols. Doesn't poststructuralism ultimately mean that no single kind of "determinant" is more privileged than another?

But I stray from my current digression. Sponsler scores a valid point in her criticism of Gibson's essential realism and adherence to conventional psychology. He is a *deep* writer after all. And like all deep writers, his ultimate message is this: *Human nature never changes, so there is nothing more to be said.* No matter how extravagantly we transform our universe through the wonders of technology, we ourselves are doomed to cynicism and despair due to the eternally limited capacities of the human heart. After all, we are exactly like Oedipus, Medea, Lear, and Othello—except that we are much, much smaller.

This grim viewpoint is why we find no humor whatsoever in Gibson's works—only an occasional smirking snicker, the kind which marks the self-proclaimed superiority of a being who knows better than the rest of us just how bad things really are. While the avowed conservative Aristophanes revealed himself to be the ultimate incendiary in his quest to liberate the human spirit, the avowed radical William Gibson has revealed himself to be the ultimate reactionary in his quest to shackle it.

"Brillig in Cyberland" appears as a chapter in *The Jamais Vu Papers* and in somewhat longer form as the epilogue to Leary's *Chaos & Cyber Culture.*

reemergence of the female comic. As personified by Ellen DeGeneres, Mo Gaffney, Josie Lawrence, Kathy Najimy, Rosie O'Donnell, and Rita Rutner, she is what she chooses to be—ridiculous, grotesque, resplendent, sexy, self-effacing, arrogant, demure or brazen, femme or butch. In her hands, the world itself becomes an object of laughter and merriment—but never of debasement or punishment or cynicism. Courtesy of her, we are becoming capable of relearning the "true ambivalent and universal laughter" of Rabelais. Although this may be a laughing matter, it is not a trivial one, for I believe these women promise to set our stories free. Let us hearken to them and pour their transmutational quicksilver laughter into our stories. This is how we shall find our way back to the alchemical miracles of Aristophanes, Shakespeare, and Rabelais.

I *will* stop now, but not because there is nothing left to say—not in a universe exploding with literally infinite possibilities. In this uncharted realm, the transformative trick is to *say nothing;* one has only to laugh and imagine and create. Eve has returned to Eden, where she is munching happily on the fruit of her tree and sharing its limitless supply with the rest of us. The Priestess Bacbuc is holding out her bottle again—and unlike the human heart, this receptacle never runs dry.

In Memoriam

Charles Ludlam, 1943 - ?

and

Timothy Francis Leary, 1920 - ?

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A verson of this paper was presented at the
International Conference on the Fantastic and the Arts
Ft. Lauderdale, 1997