

Ronald Reagan's American Gothic

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You can twist it . . .

You can twirl it . . .

You can bend it . . .

You can curl it . . .

The new revolutionary collar on Van Heusen century shirts won't wrinkle ever.

"The neatest Christmas gift of all!" says Ronald Reagan.

—Caption accompanying a picture of Ronald Reagan starring in Universal International's *Law and Order*, color by Technicolor.

It is by now notorious that the United States, alone among 157 nations, voted against an international convention to regulate the marketing of baby formula. Mixed with contaminated water in the Third World, and used improperly in other ways, baby formula is estimated to cause up to one million infant deaths a year. Has the most pro-family administration in our history come out against mother's milk and for formula?

"The United States strategy supports breast feeding," a Reagan spokesman explained. It is not against mother's milk; it is simply for freedom of commerce. One interpretation of the Reagan administration agrees. It sees the President's pro-family stance as a mask, obscuring the profit-hungry corporations that market baby formula. But the administration's difficulties with mother's milk, I want to suggest, also reside in Reagan's problematic relationship to the American family. The administration has to attack that family as it actually is in order to preserve it as a wrinkle-free ideal. On this reading, sadism is not just a by-product of greed, but exerts a power of its own. For evidence I will follow the lead of the President himself, and turn to his favorite source.

Movies are forever," was the theme of the 1981 Academy Awards. President Reagan, the first Hollywood actor elevated to the presidency, was scheduled to welcome the Academy from the White House. On the day of the ceremonies, however, John W. Hinckley shot the President. As if to demonstrate Reagan's faith in the power of the movies, Hinckley was obsessed by *Taxi Driver*. He had seen it several times, and he cast himself in the role of its isolated, deranged, and violent protagonist. Like the character played by Robert De Niro, Hinckley became a gun freak. Like him, he determined to win Jody Foster's love by assassinating a political leader. Hinckley, like the De Niro character, failed as a political assassin. But he preempted the Academy Awards, and postponed them for an evening. Living inside a movie, Hinckley chose the night of the Awards for his attack. De Niro, who had planned to absent himself from the ceremonies, did appear the following night to accept an award for his performance in *Raging Bull*, and to tell the audience that *he* loved everybody. De Niro was testifying that he was not really the character he and Hinckley had played.

"Film is forever," the President told the Academy. "It is the motion picture that shows us all not only how we look and sound, but—more important—how we feel." As if to prove him right, millions of Americans experienced the assassination attempt by watching it over and over again on TV. But the power of the image to confirm the shooting also allowed Reagan to speak to the Academy the next night as if it had never happened. The television audience watching a screen saw a Hollywood audience watch another screen. One audience saw the other applaud a taped image of a healthy Reagan, while the real President lay on a hospital bed. Reagan was President because of film, hospitalized because of a film, and present as image because of film. The single figure to acknowledge the cost of film's ingestion of reality was De Niro.

If the assassination attempt dissolved the boundaries between film and real life, Reagan also called attention to another boundary confusion. "I have come to speak to you tonight about our economic recovery program," the President told a joint session of Congress several weeks after he was shot. But first he digressed "for a moment" to thank the millions of Americans who had offered him their "expression of friendship and, yes, love" after the assassination attempt. "Now let's talk about getting spending and inflation under control and cutting your tax rates," Reagan continued. "Thanks to some very fine people, my health is much improved. I'd like to be able to say that with regard to the health of the economy." The President was identifying the recovery of his mortal body with the health of the body politic, his own convalescence with his program to restore health to the nation. Reagan was presenting himself as the healer, laying his hands on the sick social body. He was employing a very old symbolism, one that confuses the body of a political leader and the body of his realm.

The doctrine of the king's two bodies developed in the sixteenth century to address the relationship between a ruler's mortal body and his body politic. That doctrine, which marked a shift in the locus of sacred power from the church to the state, derived from the two bodies of Christ. Theologically, the death of Christ's mortal body created a mystic body, the regenerate, Christian community. But sixteenth-century political leaders sought, like divine kings, to reabsorb that mystic community into their own, personal bodies. American presidents and their publics have also identified the president's welfare with the health of the body politic, and attributed magical, healing power to the presidential touch. But the locus of sacred value has shifted during Reagan's lifetime, not from the church to the state but from both to Hollywood.

America is unique, Reagan has often insisted, because Americans are God's chosen people. The President quoted Carl Sandburg in his economic recovery speech: "The republic is a dream. Nothing happens unless first a dream." "And that's what makes us as Americans different," Reagan explained. We inhabit a dream. Wolfenstein and Leites, in their book on American movies of the 1940s, agree. "When a group of people share a common culture, they are likely to have certain day-dreams in common," they write, and they find the "ready-made day-dreams" of Americans in the movies.¹ Hollywood is also Reagan's repository of the American dream, the source of what he sees as real and enduring in this land. At the 1981 Notre Dame commencement, for example, the President insisted that the movie line, "Win one for the Gipper!" not be spoken of "in a humorous vein." He told his audience of an injured player carried off the field who was heard to say, "That's the last one I can get for you, Gipper." The Gipper died two weeks after his last game; Reagan played him in *Knute Rockne, All-American*, a 1940 film about the legendary Notre Dame football coach. In his Notre Dame speech, too, the President used bodily injury to mobilize political support. That was not just good politics in the wake of the attempted assassination. The shooting returned Reagan to the movie he has identified as the source both of his birth as a star and of his personal rebirth as well.

I pointed out in these pages several months ago (April 1981) that Reagan has singled out *King's Row* as the movie with the deepest significance for his life. In the movie, Reagan speaks the line, "Where's the rest of me?" when he discovers that a "sadistic doctor" has "cut off my legs at the hips." By losing his legs in *King's Row*, Reagan wrote, he discovered that "part of my existence was missing." That was why he called his autobiography *Where's the Rest of Me? King's Row*, I ar-

1 Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites, *Movies: A Psychological Study* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1950).

gued, freed Reagan from the contaminated actuality of his small-town past. It allowed him to reinhabit, as a fantasy life for millions, an ideal image of America. The revelation that one has been living an incomplete, unreal life is one made by the born-again Christian. Losing himself as body and finding himself as spirit, he discovers the higher reality of Christ. Reagan's conversion experience took place in *King's Row*. Losing his legs at the hips, he gained the higher reality of Hollywood. By reenacting *Taxi Driver*, John Hinckley gave the President the chance to replay *King's Row*. This time, however, Reagan did not rise to stardom by losing his legs. He found the rest of him in the nation's love, and set out to fulfill his healing promise for America.

At least that is how the President would like us to understand the meaning of his political life. But the source to which he has directed us paints a darker picture. *Where's the Rest of Me?* was out of print during the presidential campaign. Reissued this spring, it is being marketed as "an engaging, unpretentious, and good-humored account of what inspired a small-town boy to become a Hollywood actor, and how Reagan came to his political convictions." *Where's the Rest of Me?* is not simply engaging and good-humored, however. Not only does it place amputation at the center of Reagan's life, but it also locates his conversion experience in an American gothic nightmare.

King's Row is a classic in the American gothic form. The gothic sensibility has Christian roots (to which the label, gothic, points), and it reveals the black underside of born-again Christianity. American gothic depicts a titanic struggle between the forces of good and evil, in which the world is under the devil's sway. American gothic art is an art of dualism, of haunted characters, violence, and horror. Though it claims to stand for good, it is fascinated by evil. Rebirth carries less conviction, in the gothic imagination, than does the power of blackness, and the regenerate remain filled with vengeance against the world that has damaged them. Aaron Copland, who does not have a gothic imagination, refused to allow Reagan to be inaugurated with his "Fanfare for the Common Man." Reagan chose music from *King's Row* instead. That evening, San Francisco television viewers were shown the movie. We watched the film that, on the evidence of Reagan's childhood, his autobiography, and his subsequent political career (evidence presented in my previous *democracy* essay) speaks most intimately to his sense of himself and his world. We watched the new President play the one role about which he has written as if the character were himself. We entered Reagan's dream life, as it intersected with an American public daydream. This is what we saw:

King's Row opens with a shot of a sign: "King's Row. A good clean town. A good town to live in. A good place to raise your children." We watch a young girl and boy walk down a country lane, come to a pond, and disrobe. They swim, naked, together, and the outlines of her nude body are visible beneath the water. The girl is Cassandra Tower, daughter of one of the two town doctors. She invites

the boy with whom she swam, Parris Mitchell, to a party. But Louise Gordon, daughter of the other town doctor, gives a competing party, and only Parris comes to Cassandra's. Then Parris and another boy stand outside a house. They hear screams from the second story, screams repeated by Parris's friend. The boy's father is in that house, and Dr. Gordon is cutting off his ulcerous legs. Cassie Tower, Parris Mitchell, and the viewer have now been punished, socially and physically, for their idyll in the pond. Dr. Tower withdraws his daughter from school. In the final childhood episode, Parris and another boy swing on the rings of the ice house with a girl named Randy Monaghan. The other boy, Drake McHugh, has planned the excursion; he wants to see Randy's drawers. Preadolescent sexuality, punctuated by violence to destroy its innocence, has introduced and concluded childhood in King's Row.

Parris Mitchell and Drake McHugh are several years older in the next scene. The two youths, played by Robert Cummings and Ronald Reagan, are more than best friends. They are doubles in a movie of doubles. Both boys are wealthy orphans, and both will lose the relatives who replaced their parents in the course of the movie. Parris is drawn to Cassandra Tower, Drake to Louise Gordon. Both the girls' doctor-fathers are forbidding, and both their mothers are menacing as well. Each mother peers from a second-story window, and the viewer does not know if he is observing a madwoman in the attic or a witch. (Mrs. Tower will turn out to be the former, Mrs. Gordon the latter.) Wolfenstein and Leites describe the hero and heroine of the typical movie romance as unbound by family ties. The young protagonists are homeless in such romances, and jauntily self-sufficient. Menacing, surrogate parents appear only in gothic melodramas, set far from the familiar world. *King's Row* collapses melodrama into romance. The boys may be orphans, but (to quote Wolfenstein and Leites) there is no "escape of children from protracted involvement with their parents." The children in *King's Row* are trapped in the American family.

Parris studies medicine with Dr. Tower. As the doctor begins to treat Parris like a son, his daughter begins to treat Parris like a lover. Dr. Gordon, by contrast, keeps his daughter away from Drake McHugh; Drake takes the loose-living Ross sisters out riding instead. He sleeps with both of them indiscriminately, the movie implies, because he can't have the doctor's daughter. Speaking of his physical desire for Poppy Ross and his spiritual love for Louise, Drake says to Parris (in dialogue from the book, *King's Row*, sanitized for the movie), "Cassie Tower is both of them rolled into one as far as you are concerned."

Cassandra promises to unite spirit and flesh, and so she must die. One night, after she has pleaded with Parris to run away with her, Dr. Tower murders her and kills himself. Parris, searching for a clue to explain this horror, discovers the doctor's diary. Beginning to read it, he leaps to the conclusion that Mrs. Tower was the victim of hereditary insanity. Cassandra, he decides, would also have

gone mad in time; Tower killed her to save Parris from marrying the daughter of a madwoman and inheriting the doctor's fate. Parris's interpretation, by making the doctor his protector, saves him from reading further in the diary and discovering what actually happened. Little in the movie justifies the conclusion Parris has reached. The visuals connecting Tower to his daughter in the movie point to incest; the incest is explicit in the book. (There Tower has previously killed his wife to get her out of the way.) Explicitly in the novel, implicitly in the movie, incest has aroused Cassie to desire Parris, but made her finally inaccessible. Her disturbance comes between them, and Tower kills her to keep her from Parris. The doctor leaves Parris his estate, nonetheless. Parris goes to Vienna to complete his psychiatric studies.

Drake McHugh (Reagan) starts dating Randy Monaghan after Parris leaves King's Row. Randy is the Irish, working-class girl whose drawers were exposed in the ice house. She was an object of adolescent physical desire, like Cassie, and as a woman she joins pleasure to spiritual integrity. Louise knows that Randy is no Poppy Ross, and that Drake is in love with her. When her mother tells her (in the book's more explicit dialogue), "You can be sure Drake McHugh's just after one thing when he rides around with a girl like that," Louise shouts back, "I'd give it to him in a minute if he asked me!" Louise will be punished for that avowal, but Drake will suffer more. Randy is his Cassie, and so their relationship cannot last. Drake loses his money, is hurt in a railroad yard accident, and Dr. Gordon cuts off his legs. Drake wakes in a hospital bed, to speak the lines that made Reagan a star, "Where's the rest of me?" Louise accuses her father of amputating Drake's legs solely to punish her, and the movie lets us know that the accusation is true. (Dr. Gordon disfigures one woman and sterilizes another in the book, but the movie also makes his sexual hatred perfectly clear.) Drake is now "only half a man" (in the words Parris will use about him and Reagan will use about himself), but Randy insists that they marry. Since they can no longer have sex (the book is explicit; the movie conveys this with visuals of Reagan), Randy shifts from being Drake's lover to being his mother. She cares for him, and awaits Parris's return.

When Parris comes back to King's Row, he and Drake have switched places. Drake was the leader in their childhood, and took care of Parris after Tower killed Cassie. Now Parris helps Drake recover his self-respect, and with the money from the Tower estate, Drake and Randy become successful real estate developers. Parris visits his old home, and meets the young woman who has taken over his bedroom. Like Randy, she has a benign father and no mother; Parris will marry her. Neither Drake nor Louise fares so well, though their fates in the movie diverge from those in the book. Mrs. Gordon confines Louise to an asylum in the book. Drake contracts cancer, it spreads to his "pelvic structure," and he dies. In the movie, Parris saves Louise from her family. Drake survives, and he and Randy

move into one of their houses. But the Hollywood ending underlines the gothic lessons of *King's Row*. The movie offers three morals:

1. The classic American family in *King's Row*, with working father, housewife mother, and child, is a horror. There is incest in one doctor's family, sadism in the other. (In the book, Dr. Gordon beats his daughter and Dr. Tower sleeps with his.) The Family Protection Act, sponsored by the born-again New Right, punishes departures from the classic American family. *King's Row* locates the desire and necessity for punishment within that family itself.

2. The two-parent family generates incest and violence, and, in the movie's iconography, mothers are to blame. The monstrous mothers drive their husbands to violence, or embrace it themselves. They derange fathers and contaminate daughters as well. That is why the women Drake and Parris marry are motherless. Perhaps mothers unite body and spirit, and therefore endanger the men. Certainly, where a daughter is complete, either she must be destroyed or her lover must become "half a man." The protection men need in *King's Row* is not the protection of family but protection from women.

3. The happiness of the intact young male is bought at the price of the legs of his double. Brothers are rivals in the typical American movie romances Wolfenstein and Leites describe. There is no overt antagonism between Parris Mitchell and Drake McHugh; yet the physical one is sacrificed so that his spiritual brother can become whole. The happy family announced at the beginning of *King's Row* is promised again at the end. But Drake has been swallowed up by the gothic nightmare in between. He will raise no children. Drake's happy family will exist only as a dream.

Where's the Rest of Me? acknowledged the cost to Reagan of his conversion experience. To remain an actor, Reagan explained, was to be only "half a man." He left the movie "monastery" (his word suggests both holiness and impotence) to put his ideals into political practice, "find the rest of me," and become whole. The President would have us believe that, having recovered his legs, he rules as the healed Drake McHugh. He is also Dr. Gordon. Reagan's glorification of American life goes with his refusal to inhabit its actuality. The people in his celluloid dream world can be twisted and twirled, bent and curled, without suffering real damage. They can lose their legs on film and keep them in life, and since no real harm comes to anyone, the President appears benign. He is cut off from the effects of his political program. But Reagan's dream of law and perfect order has punishing consequences for the sensuous, living humans down below. Drake McHugh had to give up his legs; he could not marry the surgeon's daughter and inherit the surgeon's power. Ronald Reagan needed to become Drake Mc-

Hugh, he has told us, but he refused to accept the cost. He married Nancy Davis, a surgeon's daughter, and adopted the punitive, right-wing views of her father. Drake McHugh suffered from the netherworld; but to punish that world is to become Dr. Gordon. In the guise of healing the nation, Reagan enacts the politics of revenge.

Reagan's domestic social programs, his military plans, and his environmental policy embody the politics of Dr. Gordon in the Reagan administration. Both his supporters and detractors see the President as wielding a domestic ax. One Republican sent Reagan an ax to support his cuts in federal programs. Reagan and David Stockman could be seen on network television plunging it into the budget. On two consecutive days in March, the *San Francisco Chronicle* ran the headlines, "How the Welfare Ax Would Hit California," and "Reagan Hacks Away at the Regulatory Thicket." A few weeks later the Democratic leadership in the House of Representatives proposed a substitute for the Reagan budget. It's like "cutting your legs off at the knees instead of the hips," complained Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill. The Reagan budget will force the House Education and Labor Committee to "slash . . . more than a fourth of all the money under its jurisdiction," according to the *Wall Street Journal*. "It's like being told to amputate your own leg," complained a committee aid. Neither the Speaker of the House nor the legislative aide knew they were quoting *Where's the Rest of Me?* Like Reagan, they were confusing real human bodies with the body politic. But the Democrats had an opposite purpose from the President. They wanted to call attention to the pain the Reagan budget cuts will inflict on millions of ordinary people—those aided by "programs that range from public-service jobs to child nutrition and 'black lung' benefits," to quote the *Wall Street Journal* again. Reagan focuses on celluloid, and on his own body, to evade the impact of his budget cuts on the bodies of others.

The political climate does not now sanction open expressions of violence against domestic social groups. Those involved in foreign upheavals are another matter. Alexander Haig testified that the three nuns and the Catholic lay woman shot in El Salvador were killed in "an exchange of gunfire." The "most prominent theory" to explain their deaths, he said, came from an autopsy performed on the body of one of the nuns. It "found that pieces of the windshield had been propelled into her body by the bullet. Some have constructed the theory," Haig continued, "that either they were perceived or may actually have been running a roadblock." The nuns challenged Haig's effort to control El Salvador, as Drake McHugh challenged Dr. Gordon. Dr. Gordon used Drake's accident as an opportunity for revenge; Haig used the nun's body the same way. Gordon found Drake guilty, and mutilated him. But Drake's body established his innocence thereafter. For Alexander Haig, a parochial school graduate, the glass in the nun's mutilated body established her guilt.

Haig has a punitive Catholic imagination, more sensual than that typical in Protestant gothic. Secretary of the Interior James Watt is the most prominent born-again Christian in the upper reaches of the Reagan administration. Asked if he were not concerned to preserve the wilderness for future generations, Watt responded, "I do not know how many future generations we can count on before the Lord returns." Ron Wulf has pointed to the role Watt's religious beliefs play in his support for destroying the natural world.² Environmentalists, writes Wulf, see man as a part of nature. That sensibility, the opposite of American gothic, makes them believe in their stewardship of the earth. Watt, by contrast, radically splits our sojourn on earth from our eternal life. He inhabits a world of temptation and danger, like Drake McHugh's King's Row. The discipline of domination serves Watt as the Hollywood dream serves Reagan; it rescues him from contamination by nature. The language of resource exploitation masks the desire to punish and destroy.

The gothic sensibility looks forward to Christ's Second Coming, but it is obsessed by Judgment Day. The Reverend Jerry Falwell told his television audience last year (Frances FitzGerald reports³) that the apocalypse prophesied in Revelations and the Book of Daniel was at hand. The Jews have returned to Israel, Falwell explained, as foretold in the Bible. A war will break out in the Middle East, and the Russian beast will invade. (To make the Last Judgment real to his audience, Falwell showed them movies of himself inspecting the projected battlefield.) The Antichrist will unleash a nuclear war, Falwell went on to say, and 400 million people will die. The saved will not suffer, however. Uprooted from the earth, they will escape the violence they have visited on those down below, "and meet Christ in the air."

The mystic body of Christ has traditionally included the physical bodies of the members of the church. Falwell's Christ (as incarnated body and as community of the saved) is disembodied, abstract, invulnerable. Like Reagan's movies and Van Heusen shirts, he is forever. You can twist him, you can twirl him, you can bend him, you can curl him. The new, twentieth-century, revolutionary saviour won't wrinkle ever. He will make the neatest Christmas gift of all.

2 "The High Road to Power," *San Francisco Chronicle*, March 29, 1981.

3 *The New Yorker*, May 18, 1981.

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