

## Andrew Ross: On "They Dream Only of America"

In reading such poems, we are shown how and why language has nothing at all to do with unmediated expression, except when it chooses to voice parodically the fallacy of such an idea. This paradox is best demonstrated in some of the most celebrated lines of The Tennis Court Oath, the opening of "They Dream Only of America":

They dream only of America

To be lost among the thirteen million pillars of grass:

"This honey is delicious

Though it burns the throat."

Four different, and successively more marked, levels of conventionality are stressed here, from the general assertion of the freestanding first line to the specific, quoted, emphasized, and dependent clause of the fourth; each line is decontextualized, automatically, as it is succeeded by the next. Because of the syntactical "rhyme" between the two couplets, moreover, the stanza is allowed to flaunt its own symmetry. But it is only under the pressure of this stanzaic logic that the aching lyricism of the first couplet prefigures and is thrown up against the deadpan irony of the second. Semantically, of course, the reader has the choice of naturalizing the various elements of meaning suggested in these lines. An "American dream" (exceptionalist?"they dream only") of pastoral innocence and plenitude (the land of milk and "honey") is stripped once again of its hopes of a Whitmanesque pluralism by the reality and sheer numericality of mass culture ("thirteen million"), while the new consumer religion either chemically simulates or doctors "natural" products in ways that are harmful to our health ("burns the throat"). To recuperate the world of meaning in this way is, however, to short-circuit those strategies of poetic artifice which offer us less in the way of interpretive freedom than does the acte gratuite of the more discontinuous areas of The Tennis Court Oath. What we are asked to accept and acknowledge in this passage are the various levels of artifice and convention which separate us from any unmediated expression of sympathy with, or complaint against, the protocols of mass culture. To recognize this is doubly important if it involves the reader in critically following through exactly the same procedures by which we constitute ourselves conventionally as citizens in a mass consumer society. Writing and reading at the beginning of the 1960s, this consumer imagination made all the difference for involved readers who were not only aware of the limited democracy of the historical avant-garde project but also responsive to the demotic passion of those artists and writers, like Ashbery, busy revising the medium forty years later.

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