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Holy Fools, Secular Saints, and Illiterate Saviors in American Literature and Popular Culture

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Abstract: In her article, "Holy Fools, Secular Saints, and Illiterate Saviors in American Literature and Popular Culture," Dana Heller identifies and analyzes characteristics of the holy fool figure in American literature and culture. Heller defines the holy fool, or divine idiot, as a figure central to U.S. myths of nation. One encounters such figures in American literature as well as in American folklore, popular culture, and mass media. In American culture, the Divine Idiot is a hybrid form which grows out of the crossings of numerous literary and historical currents, both secular and non-secular. This unwieldy hybridity -- the fact that Divine Idiots in American literature resonate across so many historical, national, cultural, and ethnic boundaries while retaining some loose correspondence with earlier Christian prototypes -- has rendered them difficult to locate. However, this identification -- or unveiling -- is a crucial part of an idiot's social function and performance. In her analysis, Heller discusses writings by Flannery O'Connor, Jack Kerouac, Norman Mailer, and films such as *The Green Mile* and *Forrest Gump*, in an effort to define divine idiocy in American culture as a means of addressing historical contradictions in American society.

Dana Heller

Holy Fools, Secular Saints, and Illiterate Saviors in American Literature and Popular Culture

In the early 1990s, two aspiring American satirists, Chris Marcil and Sam Johnson, created a pair of characters whom they called "The Idiot Teens." The characters were based on ordinary young people whom the writers had known while growing up in the mid-west; however, Marcil and Johnson magnified their simplicity and naiveté rendering them so repulsive and unsuited to the world around them that they became extraordinary in their idiocy. When Marcil and Johnson began writing for Mike Judge at MTV, "The Idiot Teens" provided the basis for the once controversial, yet indisputably successful animated series Beavis and Butt-head. Today Beavis and Butt-head are well known in media markets world over for the notorious vulgarity which drives their continuous commentary on rock music and American popular culture. And while some U.S. Senators have bemoaned their appearance on the media scene as incontestable evidence of the final decline of Western Civilization, culture critics and media observers have claimed that a type of primitive philosophical authenticity underlies their monumental stupidity. Indeed, Beavis and Butt-head have captured the attention of academics and intellectuals from Maine to Moscow, where they have been described as contemporary Rousseaean innocents and "idiot-savant oracles of cultural criticism" (Sun 20). A Russian website devoted to the "cult" of Beavis and Butt-head (<http://www.beavis-butthead.ru/barticles.html>) testifies to their attraction for teenagers and the intelligentsia alike. No matter whether one is repulsed or enlightened by the spectacle of Beavis and Butt-head, it seems that they may well constitute one of the latest popular examples of divine idiocy in American culture, an example that has been successfully exported and internationally adapted to numerous non-U.S. cultural contexts.

One possible explanation for this success may be found in the history of the Holy Fool or Divine Idiot, a theme that is frequently encountered in the history, folklore, literature, and religious traditions of many Western cultures. While the image of the holy fool has its roots in early Christian thought, it has been historically reshaped along a variety of secular trajectories as well, mainly as the result of the social and ecclesiastical transformations that took place in Europe from the medieval to early modern period. According to John Saward, the religious significance of the divine idiot constitutes "one strand in the history of sainthood," a figure related to although not identical with the ancient tradition of holy fools, or folly for Christ's sake (ix). The Christian tradition of holy folly begins with St. Paul who first used the expression "a fool for Christ's sake" and referred to the idea of divine folly in his account of his conflictive relationship with the Corinthian Church (Saward 2). In the First Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul draws a distinction between worldly wisdom and the one true wisdom which can only be found in God: "If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise" (1 Cor. 3:18). Throughout Christian history, forms and manifestations of divine idiocy have varied -- including marked eccentricity, self-imposed poverty, the simulation of madness, perpetual vagrancy, unlettered simplicity, public self-humiliation and nakedness. But what the figures representing this tradition all seem to share is a denigrated, outsider status: holy fools and divine idiots are despised, mocked, persecuted, disgraced. Theirs is a chosen condition of degradation and suffering, a choice that makes them all the more obedient followers of Christ.

While the saintly vocation of the holy fool has gained most recognition in the Orthodox Christian East, and particularly in Russia where the tradition flourished from the Middle Ages up to the eighteenth century, the divine idiot has nevertheless played a significant role in the West, both in Western Catholicism and in the Protestant denominations. Saward's history focuses mainly on the tradition of folly for Christ's sake before and in seventeenth-century French religious thought; however, he rightly identifies the phenomenon as existing "in the radical and spiritual wings of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, in the "Methodism" (in the full, pejorative, eighteenth-century sense of the term) of the early followers of Wesley, and in the many revivalist groups of the present day, indeed in all the enthusiastic and hectic religion on the fringe, and sometimes at the centre, of the Reformed

communions" (x). The tradition of divine idiocy in all of these contexts expresses a similar paradox: if the wisdom of the world is but folly to God, and if God's own foolishness is the one true, divine wisdom, then the worldly must renounce all worldly wisdom in order to become truly wise. One must become, by an act of will, a fool. Divine idiocy is thus a form of repudiation: one repudiates the vainglorious wisdom of the world and cultivates the childlike trust and spiritual naiveté which is a defining mark of Christian perfection.

Early American Puritans and evangelical Methodists -- generally critical of mixing religious worship with foolishness and playful blasphemy -- rejected the tradition of folly for Christ's sake as degenerate and degrading to Christian integrity and enlightened human reason. However, as American writings of the eighteenth and nineteenth century gradually developed into discernible and distinguished patterns of narrative form, theme and character, the image of the holy fool or divine idiot found its place. In American literature, the divine idiot is a hybrid concept which grows out of the crossings of numerous discursive currents and traditions, both secular and non-secular, none of which are themselves utterly monolithic or unified: the history of Christian Saints; the philosopher fools of ancient Rome; the professional fool tradition, traceable back to the courts of the Egyptian pharaohs and the Mexican Aztecs who may have believed that the physically deformed and/or mentally handicapped possessed supernatural powers of magic and healing; the secular fool imagery which developed out of Renaissance Humanism, and, related to this, traditions of courtly and/or royal fool imagery, as that which informs Shakespearean tragedies such as *Hamlet* and *King Lear*; the natural and/or rural divine idiot of Romanticism, such as that represented by Dostoevsky's Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* and Wordsworth's Idiot Boy; and the folkloric and oral narratives of African-American tradition and Native-American tribal cultures (for example, the coyote or "trickster" figure who bears a resemblance to the Holy Fool).

This multi-accentual character -- the fact that divine idiots in American myth resonate across so many historical, aesthetic, national, and ethnic boundaries while retaining some loose correspondence with earlier Christian themes -- has rendered them all but amorphous and extraneous to critical analyses of genre and archetype in American literary studies. However, it is my argument that the divine idiot in American cultural history is an overlooked site of contestation and meaning production in our myths of nation, a chiasmatic figure who occupies the in-between spaces where U.S. cultural authority is fought over, negotiated, and renegotiated. My use of the term "figure" echoes here John Fiske's analysis of popular media figures, both fictional and non-fictional, in his text Media Matters. Fiske's conceptualization of mediated figures as "relay stations" or discursive agents in the ongoing struggle for meaning and visibility in cultural life is a useful model for understanding the recurrent positioning of the idiot as a casualty of U.S. history, an agent of salvation in the ongoing social and political contests over the boundaries of the righteous and the sinful, the sacred and the profane, redemption and damnation (24). Indeed, these contests are not limited to the Christian Broadcasting Network (although one may certainly expect to encounter them here in blunt, unequivocal terms). Rather they register symbolically -- indirectly -- in virtually all spheres of American cultural life, from the spectacle of Homer Simpson in his underwear (in a parody of Tom Cruise in the 1983 film Risky Business) playing air guitar with a cross, to the international mockery directed at George W. Bush's post-9/11 penchant for mixing religious and political rhetoric (combined with his notorious predisposition to verbal faux pas), to comedy writer Al Franken's pronouncement that conservative media pundit Rush Limbaugh is "a big fat idiot." And these contests are insinuated consistently, although not exclusively, in those narratives which engage our national anxieties about the historical contradiction that we, as a nation, seemingly cannot resolve, and the one sin we cannot absolve: the brutal historical realities of race and racial genocide. Here, above all, our idiots come home to roost.

Relationships between religion and popular culture constitute a growing area of interest for scholars of religion as well as culture; nevertheless, in U.S. literary and cultural scholarship, holy fool figures have tended to fall through the cracks, and to this day no scholar has undertaken a full-length study

of divine idiocy in American cultural history. In part, we may ascribe this to the multiformity of the figure, a ubiquity suggesting that holy fools are both everywhere and nowhere. Understandably, this presents a problem for non-secular literary critics and historians who, on one hand, argue that Western literature is descended from Christianity, while, on the other hand, arguing that one should not conflate the powers of salvation (inherent in those who have truly placed their lives in God's hands) with the powers of the imagination (inherent in literary representations). For example, Elena Volkova, in an essay which champions the often unacknowledged Russian Orthodox foundations of the holy fool tradition, discourages the tendency to treat as one and the same the Russian "iurodivyi" -- the holy fools and divine idiots of Western non-orthodox Christianity -- and the literary images which derive from these traditions. It is difficult to disagree with her point, in the sense that we would undoubtedly do well to avoid the kind of "life-as-mere-text" fanaticism that would "read" instances of suffering, sacrifice, deprivation, poverty, self-immolation -- all conditions that real people, for religious purposes or otherwise, have actually endured -- as merely so many signifiers in need of unpacking. At the same time, however, there are risks involved in any such policing of the boundaries of belief in religion and the imagination, the primary one being that we lose sight of the countless and contradictory ways in which the "imagination" has acted forcefully upon the concept of salvation, thus making Western literature a far less reliable heir apparent of Christianity than could properly assure both Don Quixote and Don Corleone a lasting immortality. Here, we might say, the problem in addressing the significance of the divine fool in literature is revealed as perhaps less a matter of canonization than of canons.

At the same time, religious faith in the power and promise of salvation has undoubtedly acted with immeasurable force upon the Western literary imagination, thus calling forth the sort of landscapes, or imagined worlds, that would enable the perception of collective aspirations therein. This, as Benedict Anderson has demonstrated in ways relevant to the imagining of community and nation, and as Arjun Appadurai has extended to include the imagining of global belonging, is where the development of print capitalism, media (news and entertainment), global flows of capital, technology, and peoples (immigration, tourism, guest workers, refugees) assist in bridging the highly fluid and porous (and, perhaps, equally imagined) divide between images and reality, or between the figurative saints of the imagination and the flesh and blood Saints of Christian history. Arguably, it is literature itself -- narrative, images and representations -- which conditions the very necessity of defending one's unique contribution to a local tradition within an imagined global network of Christian communities, some of whom may handle snakes as part of their worship or celebrate Christmas on 12 January instead of 25 December.

My point is that understanding the holy fool requires, rather than a religious approach, an interdisciplinary approach borrowing from the study of myth, comparative cultural studies and comparative religious studies, as well as from historically-situated studies of cultural production and consumption. Modes of representing divine idiocy in U.S. popular culture are influenced by and overlap with multiple traditions of Christian self-fashioning, even those traditions against which Christianity at times defines itself. It is perhaps a truism of American cultural life in post-World War II consumer society that our religious impulses have become increasingly integrated with secular, market impulses that once would have been thought corrupt and corrupting. However, it is arguable that those impulses share a much longer history of amicable co-dependence in American life. Manifestations of divine idiocy in American literature and culture generally have a way of drawing attention to this false duality in American national myth. As embodied connections between the imaginary and history, the metaphysical and the material, the spiritual and the social, the transcendental and the ordinary, holy fools reflect a hope of redemptive powers that science, rationalism, modernity, and consumerism have not eradicated from cultural memory or popular consciousness. Holy foolishness thus testifies to a national longing for redemption via the particulars of the worldly imagination, and it does so in the very instance of demonstrating that such national aspirations -- the salvation of the national body --

can only be revealed through a study of the individual -- the Divine Idiot as American hero.

This may seem like a rather large claim to make on behalf of one type of character whose formal manifestations are, admittedly, so many and so varied. However, as I have indicated above, validity rests on the importance of the image, as well as in the practice of the imaginary, for both the literary and religious tradition of divine idiocy. As Volkova explains, "The holy fool teaches people by means of images of sin and he tells them truth disguised under a fool's appearance and behavior" (154-55). As I see it, the operative terms here are "images" and "disguised": the divine idiot or holy fool is a performer whose play is, indeed, "the thing" inseparable from his or her faith. The fool stages this play, a simulation of madness, for the salvation of himself and others. Divine idiots may be wise men or women who unlearn the wisdom of the world and thus conduct double lives as imbeciles by day, men and women of prayer by night. A performative quality thus defines the meaning of the holy fool's existence. And it is often only after his death that this meaning is revealed, as in the case with Herman Melville's Bartleby, whose madness appears to have no method until his death enables the narrator's recognition of his spiritual authenticity. However, an important distinction between the divinity of the holy fool and the secular version more common to cultural narrative is that the former feigns madness while the latter apparently has no choice, either by reason by physical, emotional, or mental deformity. Like Lenny in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, he cannot help himself. By contrast, the holy fool of Saintly tradition chooses the condition of poverty, homelessness, and persecution.

While in Russian culture the divine idiot has remained a central figure of spiritual life and of magical possibility in folklore, in the U.S. s/he carries a deeply secular significance and is less a figure of explicitly Christian spirituality than a figure whose roots reach back to the enlightenment and to American romanticism. The American idiot is a natural legislator who represents instinctual rather than institutional law. One finds such images and stories of divine idiots in American literature, folklore, popular culture and mass media. These images and narratives often relate the problem of an enlightened individual's relation to an imagined majority that neither recognizes nor values his gifts. They examine the situation of a character who lives outside the conventional moral frames and institutional structures which regulate American society. They express extreme hopefulness with regard to the social contract on which national identity is based, yet they also reveal the inherent contradictions of that contract. The American idiot is thus an important spiritual expression of what Richard Chase, in The American Novel and Its Tradition, termed "radical disunities," or "an imaginative world of radical, even irreconcilable contradictions" in American moral, pragmatic life (7). From Ken Kesey's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* to Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, from Jerzy Kosinki's *Being There* to recent Hollywood films such as *Dogma*, the American idiot is part saint and part madman, part prophet and part con-man, part healer and part lunatic. Dostoevsky's Prince Myshkin may indeed represent the social and philosophical problems inherent in the Christian ideal of goodness, however, the American Idiot represents the contradictions inherent in our utopian ideals of equality, democracy, and freedom, our well ordered -- one might say "religious" -- manufacturing of social consensus and social consciousness at the cost of revolution. Indeed, in order to fully embrace such utopian ideals as the American mythos thrives on, one would have to be an idiot. But at the same time as they express doubt, our divine idiots express faith that such abstract ideals can be made into concrete reality, or into a mode of salvation here on earth. It is in this sense, especially, that divine idiots in American literature do not represent the vast distance between the worldly and the divine as much as they represent an ideal organization of the spiritual realm as part of everyday life. Approaching the study of American literature and popular culture through the figure of the holy fool can help us learn more about widespread perceptions of religion and the role that religion plays in the organization of everyday life. For example, the film Dogma (1999) refers to this figure in its satirical critique of contemporary religious politics, intolerance, and the vanity and arrogance of institutional church leadership in contemporary U.S. society (<http://www.dogma-movie.com/main.html>). Two banished

angels (played by Matt Damon and Ben Affleck), damned to live among humans for all eternity, discover a loophole that will get them back into heaven. However, by doing so they will bring about the end of all existence. An ordinary woman named Bethany (played by Linda Fiorentino), who works in an abortion clinic and attends Catholic Church regularly (although she has lost her faith), is called upon by the voice of God to prevent the angels from carrying out their plan. Her efforts and encounters with various unlikely prophets and apostles reveal that Jesus is actually a black man and that God is a woman. When the latter appears on screen (played by pop singer Alanis Morissette) she smiles with an idiot grin, does head-stands in the church garden, and displays forms of wisdom and power that are clearly foolish and childlike.

Prominent among American idiot characters is the delinquent child or teenager. The traditional holy fool, who is very often marked by an innocent childlike quality, becomes literalized here as precocious, misunderstood youths or teenagers who either rebel against the hypocrisy of the conventional adult world and refuse to accept it, or cannot meaningfully participate in the conventional world because of certain mental or physical handicaps. Holden Caulfield, the visionary hero of J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, and William Faulkner's Benjy from *The Sound and the Fury* exemplify this character who pervades American literature as well as mass culture, in television shows such as *Beavis and Butt-head*, and in recent Hollywood film such as *The Waterboy* and *Forrest Gump*. These characters represent an authenticity of spirit which the adult world has lost. Their youthful naiveté uards them and grants them the freedom to speak painful truths that no one else dares to speak. These characters return us to something innocent and irreverent, qualities that American culture endlessly glorifies. Like Huckleberry Finn and Holden Caulfield, idiot boys reject the complacency and dullness of formal educational and religious institutions. They live according to simple truths drawn from natural law, a native intelligence. Of course, even Prince Myshkin, in the end, returns to the company of children upon failing to manage the complexities of the adult world. However, the American Idiot often retains this connection to youth in body as well as spirit, and in this sense they serve as symbols of a nation that wishes to remain naive, and longs to imagine a world in which such naiveté an survive the vicissitudes of the flesh.

This childish naiveté which often borders on pure ignorance and/or insanity, is a prominent quality of many African-American and Native-American characters in American literature. There are countless examples of such characters: Uncle Tom from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Geronimo from Thomas Berger's *Little, Big Man*, Shadrack from Toni Morrison's *Sula*, and, probably most well-known, Jim from Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Jim, despite his innocence, is able to teach Huckleberry Finn a lesson about natural morality. He achieves this only through his elemental humbleness, modesty, and kindness. Like Huck, Jim is childlike, but the fact that he is a grown man, morally abused by the slavery system, suggests that he is stronger spiritually and closer to divine truth than the "free" white men who Huck and Jim encounter on land, men who constantly lie, steal, and kill for money and revenge. Idiot characters, in such cases, bring to light the contradictions of an economy driven by racism. Dark-skinned idiots, victims of racial injustice, violence, and the most brutal forms of American hypocrisy, thus carry the national burden of guilt for all Americans. On one hand, their suffering marks them as more spiritually gifted than whites, but on the other hand such idiot characters -- often the creations of white writers -- absolve white Americans of the legacy of sins constituted by slavery and Native-American genocide. In this sense, they become receptacles and channelers for the collective guilt of the nation. Indeed, these characters often possess extreme powers of healing. Like idiot children, they perform a ritual restoration of lost innocence, through a radical reevaluation of America's primary historical contradictions (Woodman 74).

An example of this sort of divine idiot character occurs in the film *The Green Mile* (1999), an adaptation of the 1997 novel by Stephen King. The film tells the story of a prison guard, Paul Edgecomb (played by Tom Hanks), who works on Mississippi's death row in the 1930s. Edgecomb comes to befriend the enormous, illiterate, African-American inmate John Coffey (played by Michael

Clarke Duncan), who has been convicted of the rape and murder of two little white girls. However, after observing something inconsistent in the character of this hulking figure who weeps and wails sorrowfully in his cell at night, the prison guard begins to doubt his guilt. Eventually, he understands that this guileless man is actually in possession of a miraculous gift: the power to cure by the laying on of hands. John Coffey has no history and no record of any past offence: he seems to have dropped to earth from nowhere, as Cynthia Fuchs remarks in an online review for *Pop Matters* (<http://www.popmatters.com/film/green-mile2.html>), although it certainly seems unlikely that someone of his size and color would have gone unnoticed in Mississippi. If this mystical element is not enough to clue us in, Coffey's gentleness, nobility, and mental deficiency is there to spell it out: he is a divine idiot figure, although one who has not chosen his vocation. Rather, he is cursed with it, as Coffey himself finally confesses to the guard, who is ultimately so convinced of Coffey's innocence that he offers him a chance to escape prison and execution. Coffey, however, chooses death and release from his cursed position on earth.

Coffey's pain is due to the fact that he experiences the agony of all who suffer; their misery is channeled through him. Moreover, he has prescience and knows what is about to happen before it happens. He is gentle and frightened of the dark. He is also massively dumb. This gentle idiocy combined with his miraculous powers of healing and salvation are what mark him as part of the tradition of divine idiocy; however, this is idiocy with a distinctively American spin. John Coffey is a character whose primary function is to redeem whites of their historical guilt for the crimes of racism. At the same time, he redeems the state for its commission of capital punishment against the wrongfully accused. The film crudely exploits the politics of race in its articulation of Edgecomb's "religious" rebirth, unabashedly sentimentalizing the white prison guard's growing respect for the dull-witted, doomed black man through whom he rediscovers faith. In the film's climactic moments, as Edgecomb determines to release Coffey from prison, he admits that for the first time in his life he is worried about going to hell: that when he meets his maker on Judgement Day he will not be able to explain why he allowed an innocent man -- one of God's true miracles -- to be executed. He turns to Coffey for counsel, and the dumb man assures him that there is nothing he can do but carry out his work orders. He cannot save him. However, by allowing the execution to be carried out, he will free him from his miserable burden. Coffey thus assures Edgecomb's redemption and, indirectly, the redemption of all whites who have stood by, mute and voiceless, as African American men are unjustly imprisoned and executed.

The movie thus celebrates liberalism's discourse of white, middle-class guilt about the racial inequities of the American justice system, and at the same time absolves those who would do nothing to change that system, thus ensuring that it remain unchanged. Divine idiocy is here used as a cover for the film's aggressively ideological message, a message conveyed through a fantasy of African-American male infantilization and overt sexualization. In one particularly striking scene, Coffey cures the prison director's wife of an inoperable brain tumor. The scene plays on historical anxieties over miscegenation and the rape of white women by black men, as Coffey approaches the prone suffering woman in her bed. He places his mouth gently over hers in a posture of sexual advance and then proceeds to suck the brain tumor out of her, taking it into himself. The film repeats this pattern as Coffey takes into himself the miseries of the stunned, helpless white folk who surround him. He cures Edgecomb's urinary tract infection simply by grabbing him and holding him tight against the prison bars while placing his huge hand against the crotch of the trousers. As a result, Edgecomb is able to urinate without pain and make love to his wife all night long; however, the erotic trace of Coffey's touch is retained so that we cannot think of him apart from Edgecomb's restored sexual functioning and his wife's pleasure. Coffey thus functions as a semiotic flashpoint of white America's contradictory emotional and social impulses in imagining black masculinity as docile yet physically and sexually threatening, childlike yet enticingly erotic. And in the end, such contradiction can only be resolved by eradicating it at the source: Coffey must die so that whites may recover their own spiritual and

physical coherence, their faith in the ultimate logic of the system.

Illness and/or physical deformity or handicap is an equally important feature of the American idiot, as is the case with Dostoevsky's Prince Myshkin who suffers from epilepsy and who arrives in St. Petersburg after spending four years in a mental institution. In American culture, which places great value on self-development and physical competitiveness, illness often marks the idiot as cursed, yet graced with the possibility of worldly transcendence. Often the precise nature of the holy fool's illness is left vague, but it is this weakened condition that signals the idiot's greater spiritual strength. Illness grants him extraordinary powers of healing and empathy with fellow sufferers, most significantly the crucified Christ. Illness grants the Idiot freedom to be an observer of worldly activity rather than a participant in a world driven by greed, lust, and desire. Divine idiots in American literature and culture thus represent a complex relation to the body and to the condition of embodiment. Indeed, to rid oneself of the flesh and all its markings and trappings of race and gender, longing and desire would be a virtue, in a spiritual sense. However, in a society where the eradication of "difference" is believed to be the foundation of our liberty, this condition may also be apprehended as a civic virtue. In this sense, the idiocy of the divine idiot is always relative insofar as its meaning can be distinguished only in relation to some other kind of wisdom. Divine idiocy in the American context is also contradictory: other-worldly, yet very much of this world; representative of difference, and yet -- in that very difference -- representative of the lowest common denominator, the great equalizer of the American popular imaginary. The American idiot must, by necessity, represent worldly possibilities of transcendence for a people who share no common origin, religion, or relation to the divine, and he must represent the problems of democratic embodiment for a pluralistic society where, ostensibly, no "body" is privileged above any other.

William Faulkner dramatizes this predicament by focusing on forms of idiot consciousness. For Faulkner, this interior consciousness has allegorical meaning. Historically, the divine idiot was believed to reveal the mysterious truth of a world that lies beyond logos in his mad, inarticulate actions and utterances. Faulkner's idiots gesture to that which stands outside the logic of language, outside the Disney-fied, disciplined myths of history and origin that conceal Frederic Jameson's "political unconscious," or the repression of the historical. In Faulkner's fiction the "mysterious truth" is the repressed past. "The recurring presence of the idiot... appears as a desperate attempt, against all odds, to proclaim and shout the possibility of innocence (like Benjy who keeps howling or moaning, barred as he is of any other way of 'trying to say it')" (Pitavy 98). Benjy remains outside of organized speech, or outside of what Jacques Lacan would call the order of language. From the perspective of psychoanalytic theory, then, one could say that the idiot speaks from the lawless realm of the unconscious, a realm that at once defines us and remains beyond our reach. It suggests the disorder of conventional logic and history. The idiot remains locked out of the world of concrete symbols, a figure of sublime disorder and chaos. He acts counter to accepted values and norms, so that he may appear blasphemous and irreverent. He appears to inhabit a world of his own, a world turned upside down, much like Mikhail Bakhtin's Rabelaisian world of carnival. Idiot speech turns high into low, the sacred into the profane. By exposing himself to the public, the divine idiot in American literature upsets not only the social contract but the linguistic contract by blurring all categorical boundaries between law and lawlessness, morality and immorality. He represents the uncertainty of all moral and ethical categories, the perpetual "decentering" of all metaphysical signs and social structures. And in this sense, the divine idiot may be viewed as an agent of radical post-structuralist logic, unraveling all modes of worldly address and communication.

Indeed, no divine idiot can communicate with this world successfully. To return to a point mentioned earlier, this is what Melville seems to suggest when, in the concluding passages of "Bartleby, the Scrivener," the narrator discovers that Bartleby, in his final days, had turned up working in the office of dead letters, a final resting place for messages that will never reach their addressee, failed worldly efforts to communicate. Just as Prince Myshkin's innocence, his total

sincerity, fearlessness, humility, and lack of self-interest sets him apart from other people, Bartleby's utter lack of pretense, ambition, and phoniness -- the state of total desirelessness expressed in his oft-repeated words, "I would prefer not to" -- sets him apart from the other denizens of Wall Street. However, at the same time we should perhaps take Bartleby at his word when he tells us, "I am not particular." On the one hand, this phrase expresses Bartleby's (in)difference, his condition of absolute desirelessness. On the other, it literally insists that Bartleby is neither singular nor unique. He is not alone in his condition. We are all potential Bartlebies, perhaps, as the narrator seems to suggest in his final lament that juxtaposes Bartleby's own fate with the fate of humanity: "Ah Bartleby! Ah, life!"

Even if they spend the better part of their lives wandering in solitude, holy fools do so in direct proportion to a despised society that would neither recognize nor receive the spiritual gifts which they conceal behind their madness, idiocy, or disheveled appearance. In this way, the holy fool passes judgement on a society of which he/she is nevertheless a member, an insider. Indeed, central to the history and tradition of the holy fool is his/her relationship to the community. The figure of the holy fool is, as Saward points out, a distinctly "social manifestation," a figure who is "in a society yet not of it, challenging its most basic assumptions... or its failure to live the gospel" (17). If the holy fool can be called an outsider, it is only in relationship to the Christian establishment, which has compromised the true gospel and has joined with the sensibility of the worldly.

The short stories of Flannery O'Connor provide rare examples of female idiot-savant characters in American literature and culture. In O'Connor's work, the southern grotesque intersects with the tradition of divine idiocy, or folly for Christ's sake. Many of these characters, according to O'Connor's own admission, are manifestations of her adamant Roman Catholicism, wherein the strange, sometimes outrageous behavior of the prophet serves to shock people into comprehending the truth of their situation, their distance from God's divine plan. God imposes these behaviors upon the idiot/prophet in order to draw attention to the true outrageousness of a fallen world, or as Saward explains: "In a world gone mad the guardian of truth is invariably dismissed as a raving lunatic. That is the lot of every prophet" (1). For example, Lucynell Crater, in O'Connor's short story "The Life You Save May Be Your Own," appears almost a parody of the more traditional holy fool figure; however, as the narrative progresses, it becomes clear that Lucynell's deformity -- what appears initially as her retardation -- is a sign that she is an embodiment of spiritual grace, a spiritual grace that Shiftlett fails to apprehend when he abandons her at a roadside diner. Only the young, dull-witted boy who works behind the counter recognizes something in her naiveté as she sleeps, with the declaration, "She looks like an angel of Gawd" (154). Meanwhile, Shiftlett drives off in his new car toward a stormy, darkening horizon, having refused to take responsibility for his true relationship to the divine.

The unveiling of the idiot to the public is the act that most significantly constitutes his divine purpose. This unveiling typically takes on theatrical dimensions: it is part of the idiot's performance, or simulation, and it requires an audience as well as the willingness of the idiot to expose himself, to produce shock, and to appear a clown and/or potential threat to the established order. In the novel that defined the meaning of holy fool for the post-World War II generation in the U.S., Jack Kerouac's On the Road, this moment of public unveiling compels the narrator, Sal Paradise (his name itself a play on the concept of Christian perfection), to recognize that his idol and wayfaring companion, Dean Moriarty, is detested and misunderstood by their friends and especially by the women who surround them. In what could be called the climax of the novel, Sal watches and observes -- his usual role insofar as he remains throughout the narrative a faithful follower rather than a leader in his own right -- as Galatea angrily accuses Dean of irresponsibility and selfishness. "It never occurs to you," she says, "that life is serious and there are people trying to make something decent out of it instead of just goofing all the time" (194). Galatea concludes her diatribe against Dean by saying that "the sooner (Dean's) dead the better" (195). At this moment, Sal rushes to Dean's defense, as he does often throughout the novel. "Now [Dean's] alive," Sal responds, "and I'll bet you want to know what he does next and that's because he's got the secret that we're all busting to find and it's splitting his

head wide open and if he goes mad don't worry, it won't be your fault but the fault of God" (195). With these words, Kerouac announces that his wild and reckless hero, Dean Moriarty, is touched by something divine. "Suddenly," Sal says, "I realized that Dean, by virtue of his enormous series of sins, was becoming the Idiot, the Imbecile, the Saint of the lot" (193). "That's what Dean was, the HOLY GOOF" (194).

In many ways, the meaning of the term "Beat," as defined by the writers of the Beat Movement, is synonymous with the meaning of holy fool, as it derived from legends of the Christian saints such as St. Paul or St. Francis of Assisi. Dean Moriarty embodies the essence of idiotic divinity. He represents a bridge that connects the world of pure spirit to the material world, the world of the physical, human energy, and desire. Dean, in keeping with the image projected by the Beat writers, rejoices in sex, jazz, drink, food and sensuality. He seeks pleasure and experience. Above all, his divine purpose is to MOVE, and here he converges most meaningfully with the tradition of divine idiocy, in the idea of idiot as pilgrim or perpetual wanderer. As Saward explains: "Peregrination is a way of practising self-abasement, for unlike the Pilgrim to the Holy Places, who has a definite earthly destination, the exile or peregrinus has a dangerously vagabond air and so is despised; he is a voluntary outlaw. Peregrination is a way of imitating, and growing in union with, the humiliated Christ" (44).

The essence of Beat divinity was motion as opposed to stasis. In this sense, the Beat writers recreated the image of Christ crucified as a pleasure-seeking, misunderstood, American rebel, a wandering missionary whose message is conveyed in his rejection of post-war, middle-class values of stability, material acquisition, marriage, work ethic, etc. Through the character of Dean Moriarty, *On the Road* refuses the domesticated, dull, material-oriented bourgeois culture of post-war America and shows that it is possible to live simply by sticking out your thumb on the road, going wherever you want to go, doing whatever you want to do. To live spontaneously, to remain outside the world of conventional morals and values, to reject American consumerism, to live every moment to the fullest, to not know for sure where your next meal is coming from, to lay yourself open to the world of experience without pretense or artifice... this possibility represented an authentic existence, an ideal existence. The character of Dean personified authenticity in a time that many considered to be defined by artificial values and hypocrisy. And the novel *On the Road*, inspired a generation to cultivate the divine idiot within themselves, to make a place within themselves for this untamed, undomesticated, instinctive, and -- by most conventional standards of the time -- un-American part of their nature.

Dean Moriarty, in this sense, was a uniquely American holy fool. Kerouac writes that he possessed "the tremendous energy of a new kind of American Saint" (39). "He was BEAT -- the root, the soul of Beatific. What was he knowing? He tried all in his power to tell me what he was knowing, and they envied that about me, my position at his side, defending him and drinking him in as they once tried to do" (195). If Dean can be likened to Don Quixote then Sal Paradise can certainly be compared to Sancho Panza. Together, they reject all forms of conventional logic, the values of the middle class, the inhibitions of American society. Like Dostoevsky's Prince Myshkin, Dean rejects high society and is attracted to those who fit into no social class, those who are fragile and vulnerable. The Beat writers themselves were an idiotic group whose appearance in American culture was largely a response to the massive devastation of World War II, the dropping of the Atom Bomb, the revelation of the concentration camps. They set out to redefine American literature, to restore it to an innocent primal state. In the mid-1950s, American poetry and prose had become highly formalist, academic and intellectual. The Beat writers wanted to give poetry and prose a new spontaneity and madness, a spirit that was suppressed in the post-war culture as middle class Americans sought to blind themselves to the horror and violence which the American government had helped bring about and was continuing to perpetuate at home and abroad through racism, anti-communism, and an escalation of tensions in Southeast Asia which would inevitable lead to the Vietnam War. For the Beats, the writer himself played an important social role as holy fool. Handsome and charismatic, Kerouac himself often played the fool in public and created for himself an image of spontaneity and recklessness. William Burroughs

and Norman Mailer notoriously played this role and presented the Beat writer not as a learned academician or courtly sage, but as a divine fool, a goof, one who was willing to embrace violence in order to speak the truth about American society that only an idiot would speak.

The Beat writers considered that the recreation of literature would be founded on a recreation of the self. This reinvention was based in the idea of motion, energy, and spontaneity. A far simpler version of this impulse in American culture can be found in the academy-award winning film *Forrest Gump* (1994). This popular film tells the story of a rural Alabama idiot (again starring Tom Hanks) whose kind, selfless and innocent nature, in combination with digitally-enhanced archival newsreel images, lands him at the center of some of the most important events of post-World War II U.S. history. Indeed, the film has been as much noted for its revisionary treatment of post-war history as it has for its depiction of the slow yet virtuous character Forrest Gump himself. Saddled with a leg brace and an IQ of 75, the young Forrest seeks nothing for himself other than the companionship of his childhood sweetheart Jenny, and relief from the taunting of other boys. While he is regarded as too "stupid" to be interested in worldly success or fame, Forrest's mother (played by Sally Field) instills in him the lesson that "stupid is as stupid does." And in the end, health, success, glory, true love and wealth inevitably find Forrest, partly as a result of his mother's stalwart determination that he not be branded an idiot, partly as a result of chance, and partly as a result of others misunderstanding him. For example, when out of grief for his mother's death Forrest spends four years in aimless running back and forth across the United States, everyone he encounters along the road assumes that he must have a higher purpose in mind, that he must be running on behalf of some social or political cause. Nobody can imagine that Forrest runs simply because he feels like it, with no particular statement or goal in mind. People begin to follow him, as Forrest remains seemingly impassive to their presence. He grows a long beard and begins to take on the physical characteristics of Christ wandering in the desert. As he runs, and as joggers and reporters run eagerly alongside him hoping for some words of wisdom, everything Forrest does or says is thought to have some profound meaning. When Forrest steps in dogshit, his response, "It happens," is transformed into the popular catchphrase "Shit Happens." When mud from a passing truck accidentally splatters him, the pattern that it leaves on his shirt -- one resembling a smiling face -- becomes the vapid icon of an irrepressibly optimistic generation. Forrest Gump inadvertently becomes the spiritual guru of the 1970s American jogging craze.

However, as critics such as Robert Burgoyne and Jennifer Hyland Wang have argued, behind the seemingly innocent words and actions of the idiot hero, *Forrest Gump* manipulates technology to articulate a reactionary social message that serves as the foundation for the film's politically neo-conservative reconstruction of popular history and cultural memory. As Wang's essay highlights in the context of the 1994 congressional elections, *Forrest Gump* invites viewers to imagine -- through its discursive repositioning of the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s and 70s -- that the United States lost its innocence and began heading downhill as a direct result of the cultural politics of the 60s -- the sexual liberation of women, civil rights activism, and popular resistance to American military involvement in Vietnam (<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/cinema_journal/toc/cj39.3.html>). The holy fool figure is appropriated to provide a lesson in the virtues of apolitical self-fashioning. The film valorizes Forrest's simple-mindedness and lack of political awareness over the social and political dissent of the 1960s which the film demonizes: the Black Panthers are portrayed as violent ideologues; the Vietnam War is glossed over and mythologized, while anti-war protesters are portrayed as doctrinaire brutes who beat women and sneer in the face of traditional values such as honesty, bravery and loyalty, all virtues which Forrest represents. Early in the film, viewers learn that his ancestors were confederate army leaders and members of the Klu Klux Klan. Forrest, although he does not understand the political implications of his familial legacy, redeems this past by befriending Bubba Blue, a poor black enlisted man whom he meets on his way to Vietnam and with whom he plans to open a shrimping business when the war ends. Bubba is killed in action, and Forrest returns

home to make a fortune in shrimping and investment. When he appears at the home of Bubba's family with a check for one million dollars, viewers are invited to share in a vision of racial equality, and the rise from squalor to affluence, based on the benevolence of private white patronage rather than the interventions of the state. Here again, the figure of the holy fool is used for purposes having less to do with moral or spiritual instruction than with revisions of national myth and the production of social consensus.

In an interesting reversal of the Gump pattern of meaning production and reception, Beat writers' devotion to energy and motion as an antidote to complacency and stasis was often misunderstood and interpreted as political statement, or a simple desire for "life in the fast lane" rather than a philosophical imperative. This veneration for speed and spontaneity also informs the story of how On the Road came to be written. According to popular legend, Kerouac wrote the novel in a spontaneous explosion of creative energy brought about by amphetamines and beer. One story holds that he delivered the manuscript of the novel to his editor on a single, continuous roll of paper. These legends have since been challenged by reports that Kerouac was, in fact, a copious reviser who worked long and hard in order to achieve the affect of spontaneity in his writing. It was this image -- this aesthetic affect -- which inspired Truman Capote to comment on the three weeks which it allegedly took Kerouac to complete the novel "that's not writing, that's typing." But the point is that the idiot philosophy of the Beat movement -- a philosophy of elation and exhaustion -- found expression through the on-rushing language of Beat prose and poetry. Kerouac especially developed a style based in energy and spontaneity. As holy fool, Dean Moriarty expresses this uniquely American fascination with energy and motion, yet at the same time he questions the idea that motion must always be tied to progress or ambition. As Sal and Dean drive back and forth across the U.S., a figurative motion drives the language of the narrative. And the road itself is a metaphor for energy, motion, an idiot life. This metaphor originates in our romance with the American West and with California, the mythical place of self-discovery and reinvention. The itinerant nature of the Beat idiot and the restless motion of Beat language celebrate these myths but also reflect deeply embedded conflicts in American culture between motion and stability.

The Beat idiot also reflects romantic myths concerning the experience of blacks in the United States. In Mailer's influential and controversial essay "The White Negro," he defines the Beat philosophy of "hip" as one originating from the experience of African-Americans. Mailer fashioned for himself a holy fool persona in the 1960s that constituted a form of political dissent. According to Mailer, the source of hip -- as a form of divine idiocy, or simulated psycho-sociopathology -- is the American black who has been living in the margins between totalitarianism and democracy for two centuries. He exalts jazz, marijuana, and an unrestrained sexuality as remedies for the ills that plague white Americans -- weakness, failure of courage, inertia, boredom, repression. By doing so, Mailer promotes an image of the African-American male as a "frontiersman in the Wild West of American night life" (339); however, as James Baldwin trenchantly observes in his response to the essay, Mailer exploits a derogatory stereotype of black people as more primitive, more physical, and sexier than whites. "[T]o be an American Negro male," Baldwin laments, "is... to be a kind of walking phallic symbol" (217). This idea permeates *On the Road*, as Sal longs to "exchange worlds with the happy, true-hearted ecstatic Negroes of America," and wishes that he were "a Negro ... a Denver Mexican, or even a poor overworked Jap, anything but ... a 'white man' disillusioned (180). He and Dean follow black musicians to black jazz clubs where they seek, in the music of jazz itself, the expression of mystical knowledge, the truth of existence. The black man in America thus epitomizes idiot knowledge, although he has not sought for himself this knowledge. Rather it has come to him as a result of his tie to something ancient and tragic. Towards the conclusion of On the Road,Sal and Dean seek this inexplicable power in the figure of the Mexican Indian, the great dark Father. They leave the United States for Mexico and it is here that Sal experiences a hallucination, brought on by lack of sleep, alcohol, and the implied use of peyote. "Go moan for Man" he hears an Indian proclaim, and at once the novel suggests that their

journey has been a trip backwards through civilization, a lament for the spiritual emptiness of modern American life. Spiritual authenticity and truth, like that which Dean as Idiot is believed to possess in some measure, exists only in the marginal communities of dark "others," African-American or Mexican, the places which Dean and Sal wish to experience but always wind up leaving in search of more adventure, more pleasure, more motion. In this sense, Dean's Idiocy is revealed as an illusion, an imitation. What they seek is redemption for the sins of the past, for the genocide and the exploitation of blacks and indigenous peoples. Again, these are the sins which American divine idiots promise salvation and redemption for -- this is the unspoken nightmare of history, truths that only an idiot dare speak. Yet Mailer still refers to the Beat movement as "a muted cool religious revival" (342).

In European as well as in American literary traditions, holy fools generally represent paradox. However, the specific theological/philosophical nature of the paradox and its cultural origins are as varied as holy fools themselves. I will conclude this essay by trying to explain the kind of paradox that the divine idiot in Beat literature represents. The Beat idiot is a philosophical and poetic sociopath. In him there exists something that is both innocent and destructive, sacred and dangerous. This idea is expressed in the first line of Allen Ginsberg's poem Howl, when he declares having seen "The best minds of my generation destroyed" (<http://www.poets.org/poems/poems.cfm?45442B7C000C07050174>), and it is discussed by Mailer in "The White Negro" when he claims that the most exciting and disturbing element of the Beat character is that the "incompatibilities have come to bed, the inner life and the violent life, the orgy and the dream of love, the desire to murder and the desire to create, a dialectical conception of existence" (342-43). In this sense, the idiot is one in whom opposite forces join together, in whom contrary forces come home to rest. But is there anything uniquely American in this? It is possible to compare this idea with the nineteenth-century British romantic idea of dialectic, as expressed in William Blake's "Marriage of Heaven and Hell" and Wordsworth's "emotion recollected in tranquility." It is also possible -- and for our purposes necessary -- to compare this with Dostoevsky's own dialectical conception of *The Idiot*, his desire to create a novel that would explore the theme of "unlimited idealism with unlimited sensualism" (Mochulsky 340). In The Idiot, extreme idealism is embodied by the idealistic Myshkin, "a positively beautiful individual," according to Dostoevsky's plan for the novel (345). Sensualism, on the other hand, is demonstrated by the libidinous Totsky, General Yepanchin, Rogozhin, and Nastassya. In Dean Moriarty these two extremes join together in one character. Dean, as American "holy goof", contains multitudes, extreme idealism and extreme sexuality, the all too human and the all too spiritual. He is both holy-fool and villain, a contradiction that corresponds closely with Dostoevsky's early design for the character Rogozhin (338-339). In both novels there is evidence of a dual movement, a conflict of "double thoughts" that shapes the image of a contemporary generation, historically and philosophically. Both authors explore the capacity for the co-existence of good and evil within the charismatic personality, the struggle of greatness and fiendishness, divinity and destruction. For Dostoevsky, the problem was a distinctly religious one, a problem that extended to questions about Christian imagery in world literature and the spiritual depth of the Russian people. For Kerouac and the writers of the Beat movement, this double capacity was a necessary response to the violence, complacency and hypocrisy of post-war American life. The figure of the Holy Goof in Beat writing emerges, in this particular historical instance, from the ashes of the Hiroshima, the ovens of Auschwitz, and the brutality of the modern state. Only an outlaw who is also a fool could bring salvation to those who have accustomed themselves to living in such a state. Indeed, he would have to be an idiot -- an innocent reborn -- precisely in the sense that Kerouac gave it: "not something that sulked and sneered; it was a wild yea-saying overburst of American joy, it was Western, the west wind, an ode from the Plains, something new, long-prophesied, long a-coming" (10).

Although the Divine Idiot in American culture has evolved into a separate species of national idiot -- one that diverges dramatically from the tradition of "folly for Christ's sake" as it was defined by St.

Paul, the Russian saints, and the earlier literary variations from English and European texts -- a full-scale study of this recurrent figure in American culture, one that goes beyond the preliminary investigation undertaken in this article, would be valuable and potentially revealing. Such a study would enable a broader understanding of the ways in which religion appears in expressions of U.S. popular culture. Moreover, a historically engaged study of this kind might demonstrate not only how religions change and are changed by the cultures that surround them, but how cultures adapt and reshape themselves in relation to religious histories, images, scriptures, and icons. The Divine idiot in American literature speaks to this process, or to the ongoing circulation of Christian tropes in the American imaginary. At the same time, the narratives in which these figures are so often contextualized speaks to the ongoing transformation of Christian tropes and myths, a process which has resulted in a situation aptly summarized by Jean-Luc Nancy: "We are today in a climate... in which Christianity seems able to stretch to anything, provided one absolves it of an element of purely reactive fundamentalism in which Christianity itself would be unrecognizable" (114). Indeed, the divine idiot in American literature and culture never simply asserts the centrality of religion in American life, but stretches it to suit new conditions, to respond to the need for new myths, and to mediate in the battle between rigidly opposed ideologies and versions of history. Religious studies may concern itself with fools who, in the eyes of Church Fathers, achieve spiritual perfection. However, comparative cultural studies seems destined to traffic in national idiots who can be no more than imperfect saints, for they are but reflections and distortions of a world that cannot be neatly divided into good and evil, but rather cries out to be understood as human... all too human.

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