

ADVENTURE WITH A WOLF.

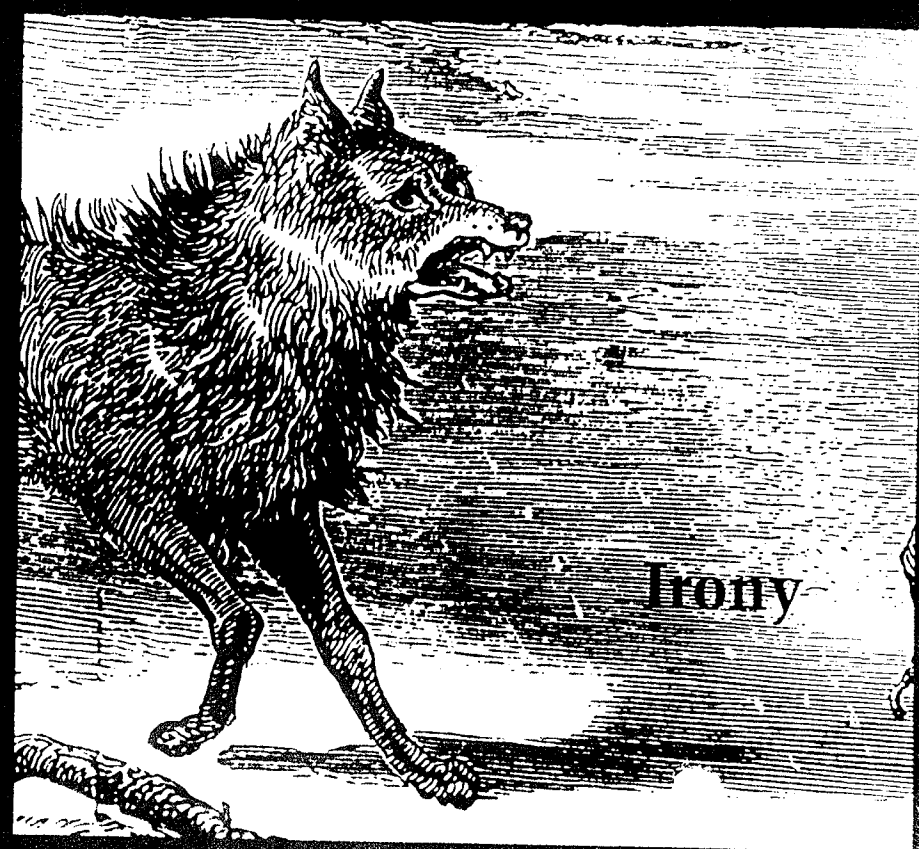
ISSN 0018-1939

1141 1 124

OPEN LETTER

A Canadian Journal of Writing and Theory
Eighth Series, No. 1: Fall 1991

\$5.00



Irony

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Nuclear Enchantment and Discourse

George Hartley

Introduction: The project I discuss here, *The Nuclear Enchantment of New Mexico*, was originally planned as a collaboration between Albuquerque photographer Patrick Nagatani and poet Joel Weishaus. Each photograph was to be presented beside a text card (poem and notes) of roughly equal size which in various ways spoke to the photograph. The crucial element, as I see it, was the intended visual and spatial parity: the poems and notes were not to be simply responses or interpretations of the photos but a discourse of equal stature, at once coinciding with and contesting the discursive space of the photographs (the latter being the usual thing to find in an art project at an art museum).

The project was to have been displayed at the Albuquerque Museum in 1991 and then travel around the U.S. and Europe. My essay was intended as a part of the exhibit catalog. The project was also considered for publication by the University of New Mexico Press, but they withdrew their support at the last minute. As one of the press's readers reported, 'A reader will need to spend far greater time with the text than with the photographs, possibly placing the photographs as the visual 'rest' so necessary between the text entries. . . . I have not yet envisioned how the two are integrated. Consider that Weishaus' text is more enigmatic and byzantine, whereas Nagatani's pictures incorporate irony, humor, and wit.' Three crucial assumptions at stake here: 1) readers prefer easy text and slick photographs, 2) the lack of integration between the various levels of the project – exactly what I prize in this undertaking – must be a mistake, a failure to execute the unity necessary for collaboration, and 3) the pictures are the important part of the project, but the text threatens to take over, to dominate this scene of articulation. Evidently UNM Press will publish the photos sans text.

The problem with these assumptions should become clear in my essay. But let me end this introduction on a different note: what I discuss in the following essay may not really exist, if publication and presentation are seen as the determining factors of a work's existence. In any case, for the readers of *Open Letter* my object of discussion must remain as an absent text, as a precondition that cannot be retrieved. Alas. I find that intriguing in its own right.

New Mexico, Land of Enchantment. A tourist paradise where the icons of the past still mobilize the exchanges of the present. Where the technology of the 'future' – or so it appeared in the fifties – propels the traveling American into a storybook land fueled by the awesome possibilities of limitless power. A Promethean narrative minus the punishment of the gods. Where the gods, in fact, have become commodities for sale in Albuquerque's Old Town or on the plaza of Santa Fe.

What we have in *The Nuclear Enchantment of New Mexico* is a staging of the process of enchantment, of the role of discourses in the propagation of nuclear ideology. And what makes that staging most effective is the three-part structure of the Nagatani/Weishaus project – the photographs, the poems, and the explanatory notes. Each of the three modes raises the issue of discursive enchantment, both internally as a network of competing discourses and externally as they comment on and complicate each other and, by extension, us. For they put us in the position to question how we ourselves are enfolded within, subjected and enchanted by, various competing social discourses.

While each mode of the project could potentially raise the issues I will discuss here, each is nevertheless inadequate and incomplete from this perspective. The particular functioning of each mode or register complicates and ironizes the functioning of the others; each register enters into dialog with the others and thereby questions their completion and adequacy. The issues and methods involved in the photographs, for instance, apply not only to photography but, because of their conjunction, to the poems and notes as well. No one register in *Nuclear Enchantment* by itself, in other words, is adequate to stage the process of nuclear enchantment.

The most provocative triad of the project is probably 'Atomic Museum I,' referred to also as 'Atomic Muse.' To begin with the photograph: large mounted missiles at the Atomic Museum in Albuquerque are surrounded by several nude young women, their backs to the viewer, standing with arms in various postures. In the foreground to the lower left is a military woman surnamed Geiger whose raised hand seems to be a command that the viewer halt. In the background the museum ground creates a horizon with a red cloudy sky. Despite its ominous implications, the photo humorously intertwines elements from quite different contexts as if illustrating an obscene joke or a crude version of Freudian symbolism (such as the antinuclear joke about missile envy). On another level the photo presents a masculine fantasy of women throwing themselves naked before these erect missiles, a fantasy which presents a military career as a good way to get women and to capitalize on power. This fantasy is complicated, however, both by the background (the simultaneously disturbing and attractive blood-red sky) and the foreground (Soldier Geiger halting the viewer). Some of the women appear to be transported into the red sky; towards what is unclear, but the missiles are not their final destination. Red is an erotic color and so on the one hand could repre-

sent the sexual transport of these women after their missile encounters. But it is also the color for danger and blood and could then imply a deadly result to this experience. Or perhaps there is something or someone in the sky out of the viewer's sight towards whom they are gazing and the missiles are not the attraction after all.

The interpretation of this scene as a masculine fantasy is complicated by Geiger in many ways. First, what is her role as a woman in this sexual scene? As both military and woman, how does she figure in the stereotypical scene of male soldier seducing female civilian? Does her presence in this context then imply a lesbian relationship? If so, then what is the significance of the wedding band on the ringfinger of her raised hand? The crucial point is that each of these elements, each carrying with it a host of associations and assumptions, speaks to the viewer in a different way and demands a different response. And this question of appropriate response is precisely the one I wish to emphasize.

How, precisely, does Geiger want the viewer to respond? What response is she halting? The eroticism aroused by the naked women? The admiration of these erect symbols of American nuclear might? The sacrifice of our virgins to the god of death? The desire to rescue these women from likely destruction? Or is the viewer in line, another of the naked women, standing just behind the two in the right corner who await their turn for ecstasy? Is the viewer then being instructed to wait her turn? Or is the viewer to be seen as an extension of the photographer and thus being refused permission to record this scene? The different discourses conjoined in this photograph will demand a response appropriate to the way the viewer is to be written into the scene of each. For example, a particular narrative and code of response is written into the discourse of the Atomic Museum where the icons of nuclear power are displayed. The viewer's role there differs dramatically from the semi-pornographic discourse involving the naked women in which the viewer, no longer patriot and admirer of military might, now functions as voyeur (these women, after all, do not face the spectator and offer themselves to him or her). A new discourse – the result of the intertwining of the two previous ones – writes the viewer into a different narrative and thereby into a different subject position, now either as witness (as in an ancient religious festival) to sacrifice or as impending participant in an orgy of frightening dimensions. In each case the viewer is implicated in the scene and offered a different yet situationally specific and appropriate role to fill each time.

Before discussing the issues raised in Weishaus's contributions, I want to explore a further complication in the photograph – the question of irony as a structuring principle and the implied position the viewer is to fill as a result. Irony is always posed as a counter discourse, the speaking of two discourses simultaneously with one as the latent (previously repressed) truth of the one foregrounded (to be exposed and countered). The 'truth' of the foregrounded discourse – in this case, the institutionalization of responses to nuclear power, or

nuclear enchantment – is ridiculed by the truth of the latent discourse – the antinuclear narrative which completes what official nuclear ideology wishes to leave incomplete, namely the deadly results of nuclear conflict and the exposure of the employment of various seductive techniques to convince New Mexican citizens that nuclear power is not only right and good but also makes them feel good. But the problem with irony is this notion of repressed truth, the opposition of truth to falsity; what must be thought instead in this relationship is the simultaneous inscription of material within two separate discursive registers by which each register counters the other while at the same time remaining partial, constructed. Irony poses itself as the completion of truth (which had been left incomplete in the foregrounded discourse to maintain a certain power relationship). But instead of viewing the elements common to the two discourses in terms of complete/incomplete or true/untrue, we should instead pose the two in terms of competing writings or inscriptions of the same elements. Irony must itself be ironized, raised to the second power, to avoid the posing of truth against fiction.

The view of irony as a self-conscious inscription of elements from one discursive register into another is here itself ironized by the self-conscious inscription of irony *as script* into the field of competing discourses of *Nuclear Enchantment*. This foregrounding of the construction of a discourse, especially through the use of such politically and culturally charged elements as Nagatani uses, also foregrounds the process of enchantment itself as a construction of a discourse, as the rewriting of elements into new discursive positions as sites of new relations to power. Whether foregrounded or not, this reinscription process is a function of all art. In 'Jasper Johns: Strategies for Making and Effacing Art' (in *Critical Inquiry*, Winter 1990) Philip Fisher has suggested that what is 'essential is the fact that art itself is and has always been this double script. For every object in a museum, whether it be a sword, a gold chalice, a funeral urn, a painting of the Madonna and Child, a wood carving from Benin, the looking that we call art is situated at the site of another practice of attention, care, and use' (p.344). Just so, every discourse is also a double inscription which simultaneously effaces the syntactic relations of one context while inscribing a new set of relations. But traces of that other syntax remain; no discourse functions in isolation but always as a palimpsestic dialogue with other effaced discourses. Nagatani's method itself, a cut-and-paste method of writing images into other syntaxes, foregrounds this process and simultaneously foregrounds our inscription into nuclear narratives.

As I have suggested, Nagatani's playfully ironic stance positions the viewer as superior to the military discourse, and Nagatani has already been attacked in print for such seemingly binary logic which poses the issues in a neat us-versus-them format. His photograph in the *Nuclear Enchantment* series, 'White Sands Missile Park,' is attacked in the May 1990 issue of *Arts Magazine* as 'a predictable opposition between indigenous culture and military-industrial culture, a missile site providing the setting for a troupe of Kachina dancers in ceremonial dress' (p.122).

While I would counter that other works in the series, such as 'Atomic Museum I,' complicate this binary logic, the us-versus-them structure of the irony does dominate the photo series and leave it open to such attacks. The addition to this photo series of poetic commentary and notes on the poems, however, resues the project as a whole from this binary bind.

Muse of the museum: such is how Weishaus stages his response to the photoseries. The elements of the photo now are literally written into another discourse, now one of the poet as shaman or poet as conscience of the race. Geiger is recast as Urania, muse of death, source of poetry, granddaughter of Uranus. Poetry, power, and death are thus all written into the single figure of the muse. The apocalyptic tone, like Nagatani's ironic juxtapositions, on one level replays old battles familiar to us, especially in the way it resembles the tone of poets such as Allen Ginsberg. Ginsberg too has written of Uranus in his own 'Plutonian Ode:'

What new element before us unborn in nature? Is there a new
thing under the sun?
At last inquisitive Whitman a modern epic, detonative,
Scientific theme
Penned unmindful by Doctor Scaborg with poisonous hand, named
for Death's
planet through the sea beyond Uranus
whose cthonic ore fathers this magma-teared Lord of Hades,
Sire of avenging
Furies, billionaire Hell-King worshipped once
with black sheep throats cut....
(*Collected Poems* 702)

The morality of this ore from Hell is hardly subtle here. In Weishaus's poem this museum marks the site of 'a new culture snaking its way through collections of mummified nuclear devices, drained of their poisons, ... [s]anitized of rotting organs, hair and teeth falling out, expelled bladder lining exposing shadows of victims burned alive.' This discourse, like Nagatani's, positions the reader as a moral superior whose function is to unearth the repressed content of nuclear enchantment. The stock characters from Classical and Eastern religions (common to much work from the poets collected in the 1960 anthology of *New American Poetry*) write this scene directly into moralistic terms via the Biblical transcription of Hades into Hell, the earth into Eden where this moral drama enacts itself. The Fall of Humankind is its Promethean/Adamic thirst for knowledge. The icons of the classical world are opposed to the suicidal seekers of 'Pure Science' behind modern technology who have replaced the classical muse with one 'programmed to travel a self-correcting course like a poem rewriting itself.' The reader is called on to cry out against such devilish behavior.

There is a double gesture involved, however, in the addition of the religious

elements. While the above mentioned critic is correct to point out Nagatani's 'predictable opposition between indigenous culture and military-industrial culture,' the story does not end there. Yes, on one level a dualistic moralism takes the place of critique and action, but there is also an effect working here that I will refer to as 'Kachina reversal.' Like Godfrey Reggio's *Koyaanisqatsi*, *Nuclear Enchantment* seems to oppose a prehistoric and therefore innocent or natural relationship with nature to the modern and therefore evil and unnatural relationship with nature. The naive romanticism of this binary opposition fails to recognize the complicity of the prehistoric in the very processes it condemns in the modern. Both cultures are technological; both appropriate nature in various ways for their own ends. But the importation of Greek gods and Kachina dancers doesn't simply imply a romantic revolt against technology; the positioning of religious figures within the field of the Atomic Museum also translates the missiles into religious terms. The missiles become signifiers within a religious discourse, icons to the belief in the supernatural powers of the scientist and the atom, of America and its military might (the warriors of these technological gods). Beyond this, the Kachinas at the missile site also reveal the process of nuclear enchantment: the writing of missiles as scriptural figures, of museum visitors as members of a spiritual congregation, of nuclear ideology as just one more religion enthralling (enchanting) the populace. This Kachina reversal, missed by the *Arts* critic, contradicts (speaks simultaneously with) the naive romanticism which is its twin.

Ironically, the above reference to the self-written poem allows the reader to shift attention away from the simply moral script of the poetry and onto the writing of the poems themselves. The poems are a response to another discursive register – the photos – and as such are positioned somewhere between apocalyptic expression (Ginsberg crying in the wilderness) and the reader of cultural artifacts (both those of the museum and of Nagatani's rewriting of the museum). The reader is thus rewritten here on the hinge between shaman and scientist, both of whom have access to knowledge and to the power made possible by knowledge. As for the project as a whole, the poems increase the number of voices in this polyphonic script and thereby destabilize the givenness of the viewer/reader's position in relation to these multiple discourses. The reader is empowered in a variety of ways, especially in the new role as script-writer in the rewriting of the photos into the textual field of the poems in which a figure such as Geiger now appears as Urania, whose 'stunning red eyes expose us to see rosy skies even while coughing up clouds of blood.'

The crucial part of the *Nuclear Enchantment* project for me is the notes (the 'Paratext'). As the reader turns to the notes she soon realizes that many of the terms and phrases in the poems are not simply the expression of an angry poet/prophet – one of the *apparent* voices of the poems – but are the carefully placed (and displaced) embeds from other quite different sources. The line quoted above, for example, ends with the phrase 'coughing up clouds of blood.'

At first this may appear as a more or less heavy-handed use of imagery to increase the validity of the speaker's criticism of the politics of nuclear enchantment. As such the imagery plays into the binary schisms of us-versus-them, right-versus-wrong, and thus contributes to the construction of an alternative hierarchy of values rather than a critique of such hierarchies themselves. But the note to that phrase reads as follows:

clouds of blood 'It is ghastly now to look around when blood-red clouds are gathering in the sky. The air is being dyed with the blood of men while maidens of battle are singing.' From, *Darradarljod*, N. Kershaw, translator. Quoted by R.B. Onians, *The Origins of European Thought*. (Cambridge University Press, 1951) P. 356

We find here that the words are not those of the speaker but those of a victim of some earlier holocaust which the poet has appropriated for this text. Thus what had appeared as a unitary and originary voice in and of the poem now, through the dispersal enacted by the paratext, appears as the voice of another speaker long dead, a voice from elsewhere coming to us through the texts of *Darradarljod*, Kershaw, and Onians, and now the speaker of *this* text. Strings of other texts are thus woven together through this single phrase. The words of the poem are not the utterances of a single present subject but instead produce that subject position as the effect of this discourse, a position not to be filled by the speaker but by the reader as she works her way through this proliferation of texts. Just as in the case of nuclear enchantment, the reader's position in relation to the elements of this text is the effect of the discourse; the difference is that the subject of nuclear enchantment must remain unconscious of this process for that enchantment to work, while the subject of *Nuclear Enchantment* is continually made conscious of and continually rewritten through that process.

Another way the notes complicate the *Nuclear Enchantment* project is by skewing the role of notes as commentary on the poetic text and, by extension, of the poems as commentary on the photos, the photos as commentary on the 'real world,' and so on. At issue, then, is the question of representation, the attempt to explain, to regulate, and to control the elements of a referent. We normally conceive the relationship between the referent and the representation in terms of original and copy, the original as proper authority and the copy as supplement, parasite, subordinate. What the paratext does, however, is highlight the lack of origin and authority in the 'original,' revealing the original as simply one more order of discourse which rewrites elements from another discourse. The poems on which the notes comment are not original utterances but collections of other texts; even the role of poem as commentary on the photograph underscores this textual relationship. But the relationship between poetic commentary and photographic original is also complicated, for the photos are themselves a rewriting of other texts, as we have seen. As this metonymic chain of displacement is put into

motion, however, we realize that even the referents of the photos are copies, elements of other discourses (the particular 'meaning' of the naked women, for instance, depends on the discursive context into which they are inscribed). The enchantment effect covers over this reinscription process by posing itself as the transparent medium of truth, as the road to the referent thought of as existing by itself apart from discursive context. If nuclear power and weapons production can be rewritten into the discourses of tourism and regionalism as the truth and power of New Mexico, as the 'scientific' and therefore real and legitimate relationship to (appropriation of) nature, then we will have been enchanted, written into this story, allotted our proper place of (lack of) power within this reality while being offered the promise of transcendence (world dominance and unlimited generation of power) which all religious discourses offer as compensation for the relative discomfort of the present (the always present possibility of annihilation and the burden of conscience at having killed so many Japanese who now show up as tourists).

What makes *Nuclear Enchantment* politically relevant, then, is not the ironic pose of Nagatani's photographs or the critical rhetoric and imagery of Weisshaus's poems but the effect produced by the concert of all three modes of photo, poem, and notes: the revelation of the enchantment process. After engaging in this discourse, we are no longer quite so susceptible to the rosy view offered by Urania despite the blood-red sky. We are empowered, however briefly and provisionally, by our participation in the writing of this discourse. How exactly we experience or become conscious of that empowerment, of course, will depend on the other discourses written into the project: the gallery space, the institution of the art museum, the layout of the coffee table art book by a university press, the commentaries such as this one which accompany the project and thus rewrite in various ways the context in which it will be read.