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Chapter 15

When I Paint My Masterpiece: Bob Dylan, Ekphrasis, and the Art of Susan Elizabeth Phillips

Eric Murphy Selinger

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At the heart of Robyn R. Worhol's *Having a Good Cry: Effeminate Feelings and Pop-Culture Forms* lies a brief, conflicted chapter called "The Cringe."¹ Unlike her chapters on "The Cry" (on sentimental narrative), "The Thrill and the Yawn" (serial texts), and "The Climax and the Undertow" (soap opera), Worhol's exploration of the marriage plot accentuates the negative. Although she claims to address the "alternation of excitement and shame" stirred up by these plots, of the six paragraphs she devotes to the Julia Roberts and Richard Gere vehicle *Pretty Woman* (1990), only half of one dwells on "the accelerated pulse and pleasure" the film provides.² Alas, "when I adopt the perverse strategy of self-conscious, self-consciously feminist close reading, my eyes lower, my head is down: shame sets in," and the bulk of the chapter details the reasons for her "mild nausea": the film's "regressive gender politics," the "baldly economic and material sources of excitement" it stirs up, and most of all, the formulaic nature of the marriage plot itself, the "predictability and the crassness of it all."³

The movie's saving grace, for Worhol, lies in the way it acknowledges its own predictability: winks of allusion, nods to tradition, even moments of irony. Why, though, should the critic be "startled" that this "mainstream popular text" includes a fistful of smart, metafictional gestures?⁴ As Dana Polan notes, "one recurrent aspect of popular culture is its self-reflexive dimension—its pointed commentary on, and even pastiche or parody of, its own status as cultural item," and popular romance culture is no exception.⁵ Around the world we find romcoms where

¹ Robyn R. Worhol, *Having a Good Cry: Effeminate Feelings and Pop-Culture Forms* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2003).

² Worhol, 65, 67.

³ Worhol, 67, 67, 66, 69.

⁴ Worhol, 70.

⁵ Dana Polan, "Brief Encounters: Mass Culture and the Evacuation of Sense," in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 175. Quoted in Laura Vivanco, *For Love and Money: The Literary Art of the Harlequin Mills & Boon Romance* (Tirril Hall, Tirril, Penrith, UK: Humanities-Ebooks, 2011), 113.

1 characters “hate ‘romance’” (thus Mala, in the Indian film *Jaane Tu ... Ya Jaane* 1
 2 *Na* [2008]), pop hits where the singer swears she “love[s] you like a love song” 2
 3 (Selena Gomez & The Scene, 2011), TV dramas where lovers muse about what 3
 4 would come between them—amnesia? A fatal disease?—if they were lovers in a 4
 5 TV drama (the Korean *Dal-Ja’s Spring* [*Dalja-ui Bom*, 2007], episode 16). Worhol 5
 6 may say that *Pretty Woman’s* “persistent reminder that this narrative exists in a 6
 7 tradition of marriage plots” is, itself, a “subtle kind of shaming,”⁶ but surely it’s 7
 8 meant to elicit a smile of recognition, to *flatter* the viewer, or at least to let her feel 8
 9 the emotional comfort of being part of a community of knowledge and feeling, and 9
 10 also the intellectual pleasure of making connections and spotting differences that 10
 11 Thomas J. Roberts, in *An Aesthetics of Junk Fiction*, calls “reading in a system.”⁷ 11

12 To Roberts, the “system” of any genre is the framework of expectations that 12
 13 lets us recognize surprises: odd pacing, a plot twist, new narrative texture, a 13
 14 shift in timbre or tone. “Genre reading is system reading,” Roberts writes, and 14
 15 experienced readers notice not only the dialogue between some new instance in a 15
 16 genre and those before it, but also how the system as a whole evolves in response 16
 17 to novelty.⁸ “The system,” then, “is always changing” and this aesthetic is shared 17
 18 by every highly conventional art form, from Spenserian stanzas to detective stories 18
 19 to the latest chanteuse’s recording of the Great American Songbook.⁹ In each case, 19
 20 Roberts explains, “readers sense the formal scheme as the norm that permits them 20
 21 to appreciate the figural variation,” such that writers, filmmakers, and visual artists 21
 22 “are like jazz musicians who give us a familiar melody at the opening of the piece 22
 23 so that we can understand the variations that follow. We do not listen for that 23
 24 melody. We listen for the variations.”¹⁰ 24

25 Worhol’s “perverse” account of *Pretty Woman*, we might then say, listens 25
 26 mostly for the melody, and when it hears a variation, it doesn’t quite know what to 26
 27 do with it. Consider this passage in which the critic notices the closing moments of 27
 28 another film, *Charade* (1963) on Vivian’s (Julia Roberts’s) TV. “Evidently in spite 28
 29 of itself and its overt project,” she muses: 29

30 *Pretty Woman* reminds us that Audrey Hepburn—that other, earlier *gamine* with 30
 31 the improbably wide smile and the impossibly thin body—and Julia Roberts 31
 32 are functionally the same pretty woman, the same heroine in the same narrative 32
 33 tradition, where marriage is the only possible outcome despite the absurdity of the 33
 34 circumstances leading up to it. It’s a long and venerable tradition, a convention 34
 35 linking up such unlikely brides as Shakespeare’s Beatrice, Brontë’s Jane Eyre, 35
 36 and Eliot’s Dorothea Brooke. ... The glimpse at the screwball-comic resolution 36
 37 of *Charade* places the self-conscious close reader momentarily outside *Pretty* 37

38
 39 ⁶ Worhol, 68. 39

40 ⁷ Thomas J. Roberts, *An Aesthetics of Junk Fiction* (Athens, GA: University of 40
 41 Georgia Press, 1990), 150. 41

42 ⁸ Roberts, 151. 42

43 ⁹ Roberts, 151. 43

44 ¹⁰ Roberts, 166. 44

1 *Woman's* diegesis, inside a critical space where the ironies of the marriage-plot 1
 2 convention come briefly and vividly into the foreground.¹¹ 2

3 What an unenthusiastic version this is of “reading in a system”! Worhol hears 3
 4 the formal scheme of the film—the melody, the metrical paradigm, the “long 4
 5 and venerable tradition” it sustains—she notes the “unlikely” connections this 5
 6 tradition affords between “functionally” similar, but substantially different female 6
 7 characters (imagine Jane Eyre or Dorothea Brooke as a Hollywood prostitute!); 7
 8 and she hazards a quick insight into some of the complexities that the film’s 8
 9 allusion to *Charade* might suggest to a thoughtful viewer. What, then, makes her 9
 10 think that all this is done by the film “*in spite of itself and its overt project*”?¹² Even 10
 11 if the scriptwriter and director “buildd better than they knew,” as Emerson says, 11
 12 why should Worhol not give them at least partial credit for the result?¹³ 12

13 Worhol’s unspoken assumption seems to be that because this particular 13
 14 “mainstream popular text” is both profoundly conventional (“the same heroine in 14
 15 the same narrative tradition, where marriage is the only possible outcome”) and 15
 16 unabashedly commercial (“the purpose of popular texts is to generate profit” she 16
 17 reminds us), it is also, by extension, artless.¹⁴ Wit, insight, complexity, intelligence, 17
 18 nuance, verve: these may belong to the *viewer* of *Pretty Woman*, especially if she 18
 19 is a “perverse” and “self-conscious” close reader, but they are not properties of 19
 20 the film itself.¹⁵ To say otherwise is to be, at best, intellectually *déclassé*; at worst, 20
 21 it whispers that you’re not just “liv[ing], however reluctantly, under the sway of 21
 22 dominant culture,” but defending it, wearing its blazon: *Honi soit qui bien y pense*.¹⁶ 22

23 I hold no brief for *Pretty Woman* as such. I do, however, have an interest in the 23
 24 marriage plot, especially as it informs the popular romance novel. I don’t cringe 24
 25 when I read a good one, nor do I feel nausea, nor hang my head in shame, even 25
 26 when—as is sometimes the case—I find myself “having a good cry” at some turn 26
 27 in the narrative. My goal in this chapter is to take a romance novel that regularly 27
 28 induces some of those tears, one that “gets me every time,” as they say, and to 28
 29 show, as well as I can, that this novel is a smart, reflective work of art, not least 29
 30 because of the ways it reflects on what it means for a work of popular art to be 30
 31 at once generically self-conscious, profoundly conventional, and unabashedly 31
 32 commercial. (Unabashedly *and* successfully: it was a New York Times bestseller 32
 33 for several weeks in hardback, in 2007, and again as a paperback the following 33
 34 year.) Like Worhol, I will do some close reading; unlike her, I will assume that 34
 35 when the book does something clever, metatextual, or lovely, it deserves credit, 35
 36 36

37 _____ 37
 38 ¹¹ Worhol, 69. 38

39 ¹² Worhol, 69; my emphasis. 39

40 ¹³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Problem,” in *Essays and Poems by Ralph Waldo* 40
 41 *Emerson* (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004), 437. 41

42 ¹⁴ Worhol, 69, 120. 42

43 ¹⁵ Worhol, 67. 43

44 ¹⁶ Worhol, 120. 44

1 as does its author, Susan Elizabeth Phillips. As for the novel's politics, sexual and 1
 2 otherwise, my sense is that the book invites us to put them in quotation marks, to 2
 3 read them primarily as functional elements, part of the novel's nostalgic themes 3
 4 and structures of consolation. The moments when I cock an eyebrow at those 4
 5 politics are thus, to me, neither threats nor embarrassments, but simply one more 5
 6 part of the novel's interest. 6

7 As I offer this reading of *Natural Born Charmer*, I know that I do so oozing with 7
 8 privilege: professional privilege (a tenured professor, I can champion what I like), 8
 9 happily married white heterosexual privilege (I am included by, inscribed within, 9
 10 the conventional version of the good life that this novel represents), middle-class 10
 11 intellectual privilege (the youngest son of two educators, I take highbrow culture 11
 12 for granted, and blithely indulge a taste for the popular, even for kitsch), and above 12
 13 all, male privilege (no one questions my politics when I enjoy such "effeminate" 13
 14 genres as the chick-flick, the love song, or romance novel; quite the contrary, I'm 14
 15 usually told that it's refreshing, or brave, or cool). As Bob Dylan sings in *Blood* 15
 16 *on the Tracks*, "I can't help it if I'm lucky."¹⁷ I hope, like Phillips's protagonists, 16
 17 to put my luck to use. 17

18 19 ***Blood on the Tracks, or its Absence*** 19

20
21 Released to both critical acclaim and popular success in 1975—it reached the 21
 22 number one spot in the US and Canadian charts, and number four in Britain— 22
 23 *Blood on the Tracks* shows up early in *Natural Born Charmer*. To be exact, it's 23
 24 the album's *absence* that makes an appearance, in the form of "an apparently 24
 25 valuable bootleg CD of the original press," of which "only a thousand" exist.¹⁸ 25
 26 "Nine hundred and ninety-nine," crows the novel's heroine, itinerant artist Blue 26
 27 Bailey, who enters the novel having disposed of the copy belonging to her ex- 27
 28 boyfriend Monty, an itinerant poet who, she explains to our hero, quarterback 28
 29 Dean Robillard, "makes his living traveling to poetry slams and writing term 29
 30 papers for college kids who are too lazy to write their own."¹⁹ From Dean's point 30
 31 of view, Monty is a parody of effeminate, literary masculinity. A "long-haired, 31
 32 artistic-looking dude" in his mid-thirties, Monty depends on a string of younger 32
 33 and younger girlfriends to be his muses—two weeks before, he'd sobbed that Blue 33
 34 was his "inspiration," and he couldn't write without her; now it's Sally, the 19-year- 34
 35 old, who defends the "vulnerability" that "makes him a great poet"—and as Blue 35
 36 tackles and pummels him, clumsy in a headless beaver suit, he forgets his "Y 36
 37 chromosome" and "shriek[s] like a pussy" until "Dean couldn't take any more."²⁰ 37
 38 38

39 ¹⁷ Bob Dylan, "Idiot Wind," *Blood on the Tracks*, Sony Music Entertainment, LP, 39
 40 1974; Compact Disc, 2003. 40

41 ¹⁸ Susan Elizabeth Phillips, *Natural Born Charmer* (New York: Avon Books, 2007), 41
 42 9–10. 42

43 ¹⁹ Phillips, 7. 43

44 ²⁰ Phillips, 7, 9. 44

1 The most damning and defining moment, however, comes when Monty learns that
2 that his talismanic CD is lost forever. “Monty was pretty much a broken man after
3 that,” Dean muses, and when Dean “twist[s] the knife” by loudly promising to
4 buy Blue “that two-carat diamond you’ve got your heart set on,” he hears “Poetry
5 Man” whimpering behind them.²¹

6 Like the glimpse of *Charade* that we see in *Pretty Woman*, the appearance of
7 *Blood on the Tracks* in *Natural Born Charmer* is what my romance students call
8 a “WTF moment”: a passage that interrupts the narrative flow by seeming forced,
9 unlikely, over-the-top, or puzzling in its specificity. Such moments of excess are
10 common in popular romance, marking a place where the underlying thematic or
11 ideological design of the novel has trumped verisimilitude, stylistic consistency, or
12 the parsimonious logic of simply telling the story at hand. In Worhol’s terms, the
13 WTF moment is “metadiegetic,” since it “places the self-conscious close reader
14 momentarily outside [the novel’s] diegesis, inside a critical space”²²; indeed, for
15 my students, such moments mark the point where the close and critical reading of
16 a popular novel, one that does not canonically ask for such attention, begins. Why,
17 one might ask, is Monty obsessed with a Bob Dylan album, and not one by Neil
18 Young or Leonard Cohen? Why *Blood on the Tracks* and not some other album or
19 epochal concert? Why are there only 1,000 copies of this CD—unlikely, since as
20 a CD, it can be ripped and burned by anyone with a computer? (Released in 2007,
21 the novel is set in a technologically contemporary America.) Does this allusion
22 invite us to read the novel in some kind of “system,” as *Charade* did, for *Pretty*
23 *Woman*? Does it connect to anything else, bringing a pattern to light, or is it a
24 stand-alone moment, a hapax legomenon?

25 Of such questions is a 50-minute lecture made. For now, suffice it to say
26 that two or three other echoes of the album round out the reference: there’s our
27 heroine’s name (“Blue Bailey,” as in the LP’s opening track, “Tangled Up in Blue”)
28 and a reference to Blue and Dean lying “perfectly sheltered” in the last line of
29 the penultimate chapter (a nod to “Shelter from the Storm,” the penultimate song
30 on the disk); there’s Dylan’s status as a specifically *American* singer-songwriter,
31 from Hibbing, Minnesota, which sets up the characterization of Dean’s father, the
32 deliciously named rock star Jack Patriot (physically he’s Keith Richards, but his
33 North Dakota birthplace and Martin acoustic give the game away); and most of
34 all, there’s the fact that *Blood on the Tracks* is famous for being, in the world of
35 pop music, a work of art. “One of the best albums ever made,” Carrie Brownstein
36 calls it in the *Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan*, praising its “gnarled truth, its
37 ugliness exalted and transmuted.”²³ “To be born in the time of the album,” she goes
38 on, “is to speak using the lexicon it has created”²⁴: a fine example of the overheated

40 ²¹ Phillips, 10.

41 ²² Worhol, 69.

42 ²³ Carrie Brownstein, “*Blood on the Tracks*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Bob*
43 *Dylan*, ed. Kevin Dettmar (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 158.

44 ²⁴ Brownstein, 159.

1 prose that has surrounded the disk ever since Pete Hamill's liner notes linked the 1
 2 LP to Camus's *The Plague*, dubbed its songs "poems," and compared their singer 2
 3 to Yeats and Blake, "speaking for himself, risking that dangerous opening of the 3
 4 veins," so that "he speaks for us all."²⁵ 4

5 Perhaps because *Blood on the Tracks* is an album of love songs, Hamill takes 5
 6 pains to underscore its public, heroic function. Dylan ("the artist") stands his 6
 7 ground against the worst that the century has to offer, Hamill writes: the "plague" 7
 8 of war and consumerism, the "Idiot Wind" of a trivializing media culture, the 8
 9 threat of groupthink, whether it takes the form of journalism or bad art. "What 9
 10 the artist left out of his painting," he explains, "allows us the grand privilege of 10
 11 creating along with him. His song becomes our song because we live in those 11
 12 spaces. If we listen, if we work at it, we fill up the mystery, we expand and inhabit 12
 13 the work of art. It is the most democratic form of creation."²⁶ Dylan is, of course, 13
 14 a painter, and he wrote many of the songs on the album while taking art classes 14
 15 from Norman Raeben, who "brought Dylan to a more fruitful understanding of 15
 16 time," in which a narrative could "telescope past, present, and future together," 16
 17 as it does in "Tangled Up in Blue," "Shelter from the Storm," and other pieces.²⁷ 17
 18 As he links this layered, cubist treatment of time and the artist's use of "spaces" 18
 19 to the ideal of democracy, Hamill rescues its challenging modernist aesthetic— 19
 20 "allusive, symbolic, full of imagery and ellipses"—from the charge of elitism, 20
 21 and he shields the album's romantic emphasis from the charge of sentimentality.²⁸ 21
 22 Writing a love song becomes, itself, a modernist gesture. Dylan "insists on his 22
 23 right to speak of love, that human emotion that still exists, in Faulkner's phrase, 23
 24 in spite of, not because," the critic thus declares.²⁹ A pastoral sketch of "flowers 24
 25 on the hillside bloomin' crazy/Crickets talkin' back and forth in rhyme" does not 25
 26 mark Dylan as the son of Hoagy Carmichael or Elvis Presley (whose "Blue River" 26
 27 flows into Carmichael's "Up a Lazy River" in Dylan's "blue river runnin' slow and 27
 28 lazy"), but rather as "a troubadour, blood brother of Villon, a son of Provence," the 28
 29 lineage famously sketched for aspiring modern poets in Ezra Pound's *The Spirit* 29
 30 *of Romance*.³⁰ 30

31 Given this context, it's easy to see why both Monty and Phillips would cotton to 31
 32 *Blood on the Tracks*. For Monty, possessing that rare, bootleg CD of the "original" 32
 33 Dylan album³¹ certifies him simultaneously as one more man in the lineage the 33
 34 album evokes (the unnamed "Italian poet of the thirteenth century," Verlaine, 34
 35 35

36 ²⁵ Pete Hamill, Original Liner Notes to *Blood on the Tracks*, http://www.bobsboots.com/CDs/cd-b28_Hamilltext.html, accessed January 4, 2014. 36

37 ²⁶ Hamill,. 37

38 ²⁷ Andy Gil and Kevin Odegard, *Simple Twist of Fate: Bob Dylan and the Making of* 38
 39 *Blood on the Tracks* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2004), 39. 39

40 ²⁸ Hamill. 40

41 ²⁹ Hamill. 41

42 ³⁰ Hamill. 42

43 ³¹ Phillips, 10. 43

1 Rimbaud, Dylan himself), and also as a special, even rarer breed, a man not 1
 2 satisfied with the versions of these songs that were released into, and embraced by, 2
 3 the market. For Phillips, meanwhile, this use of the album by Monty is elegantly 3
 4 ironic, since the “Poetry Man” thus shows himself beholden to the celebrity and 4
 5 commodity cultures he so ostentatiously rejects. Monty may hate *People* magazine 5
 6 and its readers, but in this mass-market novel, its first chapter riddled with brand 6
 7 names—from Dean’s Aston Martin Vanquish and his Dolce and Gabbana boots to 7
 8 the “brand name” value of Dylan himself—rejecting mass culture marks you as 8
 9 a poseur at best, and at worst, a hypocrite, unwilling to acknowledge your actual 9
 10 values and motives. Indeed, if Monty is less masculine than Dean, it’s because 10
 11 Dean is utterly comfortable with getting and spending, with the pleasures of luxury 11
 12 goods, and with his own status as an object of consumption and desire, by women 12
 13 and gay men alike. (A tuxedo-dressed Dean had recently featured as one of *People* 13
 14 magazine’s “50 Most Beautiful” people, Blue muses a few pages into the novel, 14
 15 while his nearly naked body stars in billboard endorsements of End Zone, “a line 15
 16 of men’s underwear with the memorable slogan, ‘Get Your Butt in the Zone.’”³²) 16

17 In *For Love and Money: The Literary Art of the Harlequin Mills & Boon* 17
 18 *Romance*, Laura Vivanco outlines three broad, overlapping uses of metafiction in 18
 19 popular romance novels: “claiming kinship with classics” (for example, “works of 19
 20 ‘high’ culture” and “works accepted as part of the literary canon”), situating and 20
 21 discussing romance fiction as “part of popular culture” (for example, cartoons, TV 21
 22 dramas, and romantic comedy films), and through these steps and more, “defending 22
 23 romance and its readers.”³³ Phillips’s deployment of *Blood on the Tracks* certainly 23
 24 claims kinship between popular romance fiction and this album of love songs—an 24
 25 album that sits, as we have seen, on the border between “popular” and “literary” 25
 26 or “high” culture—and, in so doing, the author raises questions that go to the heart 26
 27 of the romance novel’s bad reputation. Why do some versions of popular love 27
 28 culture attract the attention that certifies them as “art,” while others are, prima 28
 29 facie, despised? How did participation and success in the market become signs 29
 30 of artistic vacuity? What might the answers to both of these questions have to do 30
 31 with gender, whether in terms of the artist in question (male or female, as the case 31
 32 may be) or in terms of the relative “effeminacy,” as Worhol puts it, of the art form 32
 33 at hand? 33

34 Phillips structures the rest of *Natural Born Charmer* around the questions 34
 35 raised by this early scene, repeatedly using popular music to talk and think about 35
 36 her genre. When we encounter songs from the wartime 1940s that focus on the 36
 37 nostalgic ideal of “home” in a time of conflict (“Don’t Sit Under the Apple Tree,” 37
 38 “Sentimental Journey,” and “Bill Bailey, Won’t You Please Come Home”), we are 38
 39 invited to see the novel’s nostalgic treatment of gender roles and domesticity in 39
 40 that light—after all, as the novel begins, marriage and family seem threatened by 40
 41 the legacies of the 1960s, whether those are the pursuit of sex, drugs, and rock and 41

42 _____ 42
 43 ³² Phillips, 20. 43

44 ³³ Vivanco, 138, 131, 117. 44

roll, in the case of Dean's parents, or the pursuit of social justice, embodied by Blue's distant, uninvolved mother, peace activist Virginia Bailey. When one of the songs attributed to Jack Patriot asks the listener "Why Not Smile?" we can hear an echo of Phillips's repeated defenses of romantic comedy in the face of a difficult world. ("You believe life is stressful enough without having to read depressing novels," Phillips's website winks at her readers.) As for the contemporary music mentioned, from "Baby Got Back" to Trace Adkins's "Honkytonk Badonkadonk," most of it comes up in reference to dancing, an art which in this novel embodies both sex-as-eroticism, a well-known feature of the romance genre, and sex as the bond between generations, a "dance" that passes genetic traits from parents to children the way that romance fiction, like other genres, stays alive by repeating and remixing earlier styles.³⁴

The fetishized use of Dylan's LP by Monty thus stands out as an exception to the general rule of the novel, in which music serves to bring people, from couples to families to communities, together. The qualities that make pop music popular, here, are sentiment, encouragement, conventionality, and erotic appeal, and all are unqualified goods, endorsed by a market that transparently and uncomplicatedly expresses our desires. To reject or look down upon any one of those qualities is, therefore, to cut yourself off from what the novel presents as the American good life: it's to "cut off your nose to spite your face," as Dean says of Virginia Bailey's determination to keep her income less than \$3,100 a year to avoid paying a war-supporting income tax.³⁵ We see this self-mutilating gesture in Monty's hipster hypocrisy, and in the moments when Dean, at the start of the novel, insists on changing the radio station whenever Jack's "Why Not Smile?" comes on, since the song reminds him of the father and family with whom he refuses to reconcile.³⁶ No wonder Jack's last name is "Patriot," and that Phillips has Blue say that not loving him is "like not liking ... God."³⁷ Pop music and popular romance fiction are both part of the novel's nationalist, providential mythology: one in which domestic and community reunion can be achieved through popular culture, one nation under a groove.

32 **Sofa Paintings and Others**

34 Popular music is not the only art that Phillips uses in this novel to think about
35 and defend the commercial, conventional, and metatextual aesthetics of popular
36 romance. Like the Dylan described in Hamill's liner notes, the heroine of *Natural*
37 *Born Charmer* is an artist—in this case, literally so, supporting herself by painting

41 ³⁴ See, for example, Phillips, 313–14.

42 ³⁵ Phillips, 48.

43 ³⁶ Phillips, 25.

44 ³⁷ Phillips, 25.

1 “children and pets. Also some murals.”³⁸ A few pages after the scene with Monty 1
 2 and his CD, Blue offers to repay Dean for a hotel stay by sketching his portrait. 2
 3 He attempts to seduce her with a sultry, half-dressed pose, but she demurs and, the 3
 4 following morning, hands him two pencil drawings. The first, which leaves Dean 4
 5 “speechless,” looks utterly incompetent: the nose too small, the “eyes too close 5
 6 together, his hairline set back a good two inches, and a couple of extra pounds, 6
 7 giving him jowls.”³⁹ “Fascinating, isn’t it,” Blue asks, “how easily it could all 7
 8 have gone wrong for you?”—at which question, Dean realizes that she has, in 8
 9 fact, deliberately distorted his features, prompting him to reflect on how much 9
 10 he’s gotten, and gotten away with, thanks to his masculine beauty.⁴⁰ “I probably 10
 11 won’t hang it over my fireplace, but I don’t hate it,” he tells Blue. “It’s ... thought 11
 12 provoking.”⁴¹ If Blue’s first drawing shows things as they might have been, her 12
 13 second shows things as they are—but this, too, proves troubling. “Predictably 13
 14 gorgeous,” the sketch shows him “a little sleazy,” with “his pose too calculated, his 14
 15 expression too cocky.”⁴² As the scene ends, Dean studies the pictures and muses 15
 16 that “for the price of a couple of meals and a night’s lodging, he’d received some 16
 17 food for thought.”⁴³ So have we. 17

18 With this scene, Phillips sketches two aesthetic modes, with a quick account 18
 19 of their value. Jarring, deliberately ugly, the first is an art that resists decorative 19
 20 use in the name of intellectual provocation. The second is realistic, a mirror of 20
 21 the scene—and this, too, seems useful in giving the viewer something to think 21
 22 about. Logically, there ought to be a third sketch to round out the set: an idealized, 22
 23 beautified art, one which shows us how things *ought* to be, an image of our 23
 24 desires. If the pattern holds, this art, too, would give us food for thought; instead, 24
 25 its absence sets up a narrative expectation. When will this third art show its face? 25
 26 When, at least, will we learn why we haven’t encountered it? 26

27 Blue, it turns out, once painted “dreamy landscape murals” in that third, 27
 28 idealizing mode, until called on the carpet for it by her academic instructors. As 28
 29 she contemplates the bare walls of Dean’s farmhouse dining room, she recalls their 29
 30 criticism: 30

31 *“A bit derivative, don’t you think, Blue?”* 31

32 *“You need to start stretching yourself. Pushing the boundaries.”* 32
 33 33

34 *“I’m sure an interior decorator would love what you’ve done,”* her only female 34
 35 professor had said, more bluntly. *“But sofa paintings don’t make good art. This 35
 36 isn’t a real statement. It’s sentimental claptrap, an insecure girl looking for a 36
 37 romanticized world to hide in.”* 37

38 39 ³⁸ Phillips, 23. 39

40 40 ³⁹ Phillips, 46. 40

41 41 ⁴⁰ Phillips, 46. 41

42 42 ⁴¹ Phillips, 47. 42

43 43 ⁴² Phillips, 46. 43

44 44 ⁴³ Phillips, 50. 44

1 Her words made Blue feel as though she'd been stripped naked. She'd given 1
 2 up her dreamy landscapes and begun producing bold mixed-media pieces using 2
 3 motor oil and Plexiglass, latex and broken beer bottles, hot wax and even her 3
 4 own hair. Her professors were delighted, but Blue knew the work was phony, 4
 5 and she left school at the beginning of her junior year.⁴⁴ 5

6 Diegetically speaking, this passage helps to explain how Blue became the rootless, 6
 7 defensive, unsatisfied woman we met at the start of the novel. At a metadiegetic 7
 8 level, it offers a displaced account of what both literary artists and academic critics 8
 9 have long said about the popular romance novel: that it is derivative, sentimental 9
 10 claptrap, a genre that offers romanticized worlds for insecure readers to hide in. 10

11 Whether we're speaking of painting or fiction, the terms of this critique date 11
 12 back to the advent of modernism. They call to mind the rejection of middlebrow 12
 13 and sentimental aesthetics by the masculinist "cult of ugliness"—and, more 13
 14 broadly, by modern artists' association of mass culture with the feminine.⁴⁵ (One 14
 15 recalls Andreas Huyssen's quip that modernism was an aesthetic founded on "the 15
 16 uncompromising repudiation of what Emma Bovary loved to read."⁴⁶) Phillips 16
 17 underscores this historic association through an allusion to a work by Marcel 17
 18 Duchamp, whose sardonic mixed-media piece, *The Bride Stripped Bare by her* 18
 19 *Bachelors, Even*, echoes ominously in the narrator's observation that Blue "as 19
 20 though she'd been stripped naked" by her female art professor's words. Phillips 20
 21 represents the modernist repudiation of the feminine as an ongoing phenomenon, 21
 22 institutionalized in the contrast between home decor ("sofa paintings") and 22
 23 disruptive, disjunctive, jarring, ugly "good art," and as a phenomenon that has been 23
 24 internalized by women in the academy. Like Monty, Blue's professors are blind to 24
 25 their own conventionality, unable to see how "phony" and, indeed, "derivative" 25
 26 Blue's "bold mixed-media pieces" truly are.⁴⁷ 26

27 For much of the novel, Blue remains haunted by this encounter with academic 27
 28 criticism. When she itches to paint "dreamy places where life was simple, where 28
 29 people stayed in place, where only good things happened, and where she would 29
 30 finally feel safe," she feels "disgusted with herself" for the impulse.⁴⁸ We readers, 30
 31 however, now know what happened to the missing third aesthetic from that earlier 31
 32 scene of Blue's sketches, the idealizing mode that was abjected by modernism and 32
 33 stripped out of Blue's own art. It survives, Phillips suggests, both in feminized arts 33
 34 like home decor and in the aesthetics of the novel we are, in fact, reading—or, at 34
 35 35

36 ⁴⁴ Phillips, 147. 36

37 ⁴⁵ For the "cult of ugliness" as a masculinist (and homophobic) enterprise, see Leslie 37
 38 Higgins, *The Modernist Cult of Ugliness: Aesthetic and Gender Politics* (New York: 38
 39 Palgrave Macmillan, 2002). 39

40 ⁴⁶ Andreas Huyssen, "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other," in *After the* 40
 41 *Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana 41
 42 University Press, 1986), 45. 42

43 ⁴⁷ Phillips, 147. 43

44 ⁴⁸ Phillips, 147. 44

1 least, as a *part* of those aesthetics. Is *Natural Born Charmer* a “derivative” novel, 1
 2 after all? Of course, if by this we mean that, like any genre piece, it derives from, 2
 3 and works changes on, the conventions of earlier works in its generic system. 3
 4 (Blue thus wonders whether Dean is about to indulge in some “bodice ripping” 4
 5 as one love scene begins.⁴⁹) Is it “sentimental”? Quite unabashedly so, and the 5
 6 small-town Tennessee world it presents might well be called “romanticized,” at 6
 7 least if we focus on the end of the novel, where romantic love, family rebuilding, 7
 8 and community reconciliation have triumphed. 8

9 What the art professor’s lines do *not* account for, however, is the “food for 9
 10 thought,” in Dean’s phrase, that *Natural Born Charmer* also supplies.⁵⁰ To call 10
 11 this novel’s portrait of small-town life “nostalgic,” for example, is to come a 11
 12 step or two behind the novelist, who presents the townspeople of Garrison as 12
 13 trying hard to “capitalize on [the town’s] quaintness,” well aware that Garrison’s 13
 14 nostalgic qualities are money in the bank.⁵¹ To point out the sentimentality with 14
 15 which the novel ultimately presents family life, meanwhile, is to ignore the tonal 15
 16 complexity with which Phillips presents the dysfunctional families that open the 16
 17 novel, marked by estrangement, betrayal, and indifference. (As the novel begins 17
 18 to rebuild a new, partly *ad hoc* family unit, Dean calls what he sees “a travesty 18
 19 of the American family” and “Norman Rockwell on crack.”⁵²) Like the acidity 19
 20 that balances sweetness in a good ice wine, metatextual gestures and moments 20
 21 of reflection balance and structure the sentiment here, calling our attention to the 21
 22 text’s self-consciousness and its author’s *savoir faire*. 22

23

24 **Every Picture Tells a Story** 24

25

26 In the second half of the novel, those metatextual gestures primarily cluster around 26
 27 passages of ekphrasis, the description and interpretation of visual art. As Margaret 27
 28 Anne Doody explains, the trope of ekphrasis dates back to antiquity, and over the 28
 29 centuries it has served a variety of purposes, across a range of cultures. Ekphrastic 29
 30 passages can “display characters’ class, reflected in their lack of the knowledge 30
 31 the cultured are supposed to possess”; conversely, the trope may “support a 31
 32 character’s unorthodox interpretation, in knowing defiance of cultural dictates” 32
 33 or invite us as readers to “engage in another interpretation, which the character 33
 34 cannot—or sometimes will not—undertake, tracing the painting’s meaning in 34
 35 relation to the entire large artwork that is the novel itself.”⁵³ We are “put on our 35
 36 mettle” by ekphrasis, challenged not only to “concentrate on the formal” in the 36
 37 work of art before us but also to become aware of the ways that any person, real 37

38

39 ⁴⁹ Phillips, 227. 39

40 ⁵⁰ Phillips, 50. 40

41 ⁵¹ Phillips, 142. 41

42 ⁵² Phillips, 271. 42

43 ⁵³ Margaret Anne Doody, *The True Story of the Novel* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers 43
 44 University Press, 1996), 392, 393, 395. 44

1 or fictional, gets “constructed into an artifice, a ‘self’ or ‘personality’ that can be 1
 2 visibly knowable. We render ourselves officially into ‘personality’ by a reference 2
 3 to a cultural world. If the characters reflect artworks, so do we.”⁵⁴ Such appeals 3
 4 to the mind may well disrupt our desire to read in a naïve or unreflective way— 4
 5 and yet, Doody insists, such disruption is by no means found only in canonical, 5
 6 high-art works of literature. “In each instance of its *ekphrasis*,” she explains, “a 6
 7 particular novel bespeaks itself a complex representation—and speaking its own 7
 8 representation is something a novel (*even the lightest one*) is bound to do” (my 8
 9 emphasis).⁵⁵ 9

10 *Natural Born Charmer* began “speaking its own representation” as early as its 10
 11 third chapter, where we found Blue’s sketches of Dean. The full complexity of the 11
 12 novel, however, comes into view in the cluster of ekphrastic scenes that fill the 12
 13 book’s climactic and closing chapters. The first occurs once Blue has completed 13
 14 a portrait of the town’s irascible 76-year-old matriarch, Nita Garrison. Like all 14
 15 of Blue’s art since dropping out of college, this is a commissioned, commercial 15
 16 work—she’s doing it for cash to get out of town. Yet although we’re led to believe 16
 17 that those earlier portraits of people and dogs are nothing much, artistically 17
 18 speaking, this portrait commands our attention. In it, the narrator explains, 18

19 Nita wore an ice blue ball gown from a dancing exhibition in the fifties and a 19
 20 sixties beehive that showcased the diamond earrings Marhsall had given her 20
 21 as a wedding present in the seventies. She was slim and glamorous. Her skin 21
 22 was flawless, her makeup dramatic. Blue had posed her on an imaginary grand 22
 23 staircase with Tango [her dog] at her feet. Nita had made her paint out Tango. 23

24 [...] 24

25 ... [D]espite its excessive glitz, Blue was happy with how perfectly she’d 25
 26 captured Nita’s view of herself: the sex kitten’s sparkle in her eyes, the alluring 26
 27 smile on her frosted pink lips, and the perfect shade of platinum in her beehive. 27
 28 More than once, she’d found Nita in the foyer studying it, an expression of 28
 29 yearning in her aging eyes.⁵⁶ 29

30 Put “on our mettle,” in Doody’s phrase, what do we see? 30

31 Nita told Blue to paint her “as she had been, not as she was.”⁵⁷ The portrait, 31
 32 however, incorporates visual elements from the fifties, the sixties, the seventies, 32
 33 and (in the “perfect shade of platinum” in her hair) a hint of the present: a version 33
 34 of Nita that folds many “as she had beens” into a single image, refusing the trade- 34
 35 offs of temporal succession (you can have the diamonds from the ‘seventies, but 35
 36 only 20 years too late to wear them to the dance). The portrait “captured Nita’s 36
 37 view of herself,” as though her self-image were a composite drawn promiscuously 37
 38 from various periods of her life, all polished, here, to a state of ideal beauty, power, 38
 39 39

41 ⁵⁴ Doody, 389, 398, 403. 41

42 ⁵⁵ Doody, 388. 42

43 ⁵⁶ Phillips, 294. 43

44 ⁵⁷ Phillips, 245. 44

1 and poise. Yet the poignant close of the paragraph, where Nita stands “studying” 1
 2 the portrait, suggests that the artwork can teach her things that that an unmediated, 2
 3 purely interior “view of herself” could not. Her gaze is “yearning,” because the 3
 4 portrait-self cannot be possessed, cannot be lived, in time—and in a lovely twist 4
 5 that “expression of yearning” is captured, itself, in the double portrait with which 5
 6 Phillips ends the ekphrasis. We imagine Nita gazing at Blue’s image of her, the 6
 7 “aging eyes” in the first Nita seeing the ideal world represented in the second, 7
 8 and we see how those aging eyes register, for us and for Nita herself, the clash 8
 9 between the ideal and the real. (Let’s note, as well, how *studying*, *yearning*, and 9
 10 *aging* are strung on that final sentence, two participles framing a gerund, the whole 10
 11 set introduced by yet another time-phrase, “more than once.” That’s the kind of 11
 12 sentence-level artistry for which romance authors never get their due.) 12

13 On close inspection, then, Nita’s portrait looks remarkably like the missing 13
 14 third sketch from the novel’s early scene between Blue and Dean: the one that 14
 15 would present things as they ought, ideally, to be. Following Henry James, we 15
 16 might well want to call this third aesthetic “romantic”: that is, it presents us with 16
 17 a world that “with all the facilities in the world, all the wealth and all the courage 17
 18 and all the wit and all the adventure, we never can directly know,” a world which 18
 19 “can reach us only through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thought 19
 20 and our desire.”⁵⁸ Like a romance novel, the portrait is a piece of commercial 20
 21 art, born from a negotiation between the desires of its maker and its purchaser; 21
 22 like a romance novel, the portrait is imbued with the erotic, marked here by the 22
 23 “sex kitten’s sparkle” in Nita’s painted eyes and that “alluring smile,” but also by 23
 24 the desires we see for expertise and showmanship (the “dancing exhibition”), for 24
 25 the pleasures of wealth and extravagance (the diamonds, the staircase), and for 25
 26 proximity to, or conformity with, socially sanctioned ideals of beauty (“slim and 26
 27 gorgeous”) and of the good life (a wedding). Like some romance novels, then, the 27
 28 portrait might be charged with anachronism and nostalgia. Yet its juxtaposition 28
 29 of time frames turns out, in fact, to be quite artful: as deliberate as its mix of the 29
 30 purely confected (that “imaginary grand staircase”) with a selective, idealizing 30
 31 recollection of the real. Only such a concatenation, the passage suggests, can body 31
 32 forth the world as we want it to be—the one we gaze on with “yearning,” the 32
 33 portrait finally suggests, because we know full well that it is, in reality, impossible. 33

34 Like the clip from *Charade* in *Pretty Woman*, then, and like the WTF moment 34
 35 surrounding Monty’s Bob Dylan CD, this ekphrastic scene plucks us out of 35
 36 immersion in the marriage plot as such. As Worhol might say, it transports us into 36
 37 a “critical space” from which we may view the novel as, itself, as a work of art; 37
 38 to cite Doody, it reminds us that “pictures make demands on gazers,” inviting us 38
 39 to transform our engagement with a text by “tracing the painting’s meaning in 39
 40 relation to the entire large artwork that is the novel itself.”⁵⁹ 40

42 ⁵⁸ Henry James, “Preface to *The American*,” *The Critical Muse: Selected Literary* 42
 43 *Criticism* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 474. 43

44 ⁵⁹ Worhol, 69; Doody, 395. 44

1 Living in the Past

2 Like the portrait of Nita, the “entire large artwork” of *Natural Born Charmer*
 3 depends on the juxtaposed representation of public, historical time. As we’ve
 4 already seen, the pop music discussed in the novel comes from the forties, sixties,
 5 seventies, and so on; in terms of material culture, Dean’s 100-year-old farmhouse
 6 was modernized in the 1970s, filling it with “cheap” touches during the same years
 7 when April was going astray with Jack, and raising Dean so badly. April has now
 8 dedicated herself to “erasing those mistakes and restoring the place to what it
 9 should be,” a transparent metaphor for what she’s hoping to do in her relationship
 10 with her son, and one which includes kitchen decor that makes Blue “feel as though
 11 she’d stepped back into the forties.”⁶⁰ (A kitchen from the 1930s would call the
 12 Depression to mind, while one from the 1950s or 1960s would haunt the novel with
 13 the feminine mystique: it’s a very well chosen decade.) Economically speaking,
 14 the novel nods to contemporary American capitalism—there are references to big
 15 box stores and franchise chains displacing local businesses, and Dean’s image is
 16 everywhere in ads—but once the characters arrive in Garrison, they find a town
 17 whose business environment is as retro as its architecture, and Blue’s financial
 18 security at the end of the novel is secured, nostalgically, by sales of her artistic
 19 handiwork, with no mass reproduction or corporate sponsorship involved.

20 The novel’s most striking palimpsest concerns its treatment of gender—and, by
 21 extension, of heterosexual desire. At times, for example, *Natural Born Charmer*
 22 seems to defend or even exult in the sexual freedom that April enjoyed in the
 23 1970s and Blue’s generation two decades later. (Most of Blue’s sex scenes with
 24 Dean take place before love has been declared or any formal relationship begun.)
 25 Elsewhere, however, it presents that female sexual freedom as sad, self-destructive,
 26 and unnatural. Taking their cue from *Sex and the City* to sleep with “whomever
 27 they wanted whenever they’d pleased” left Blue’s college friends “depressed,”
 28 not “empowered,” the narrator tells us, and in what might well be, for Worhol,
 29 a cringe-inducing moment, the novel explains April’s adventures with “boys” as
 30 nothing more than a search for the love that she’d been denied by her father.⁶¹ Jack’s
 31 last name, Patriot, thus signals both a national theme and paternity done right: a
 32 nostalgia, here, not for the *actual* past of masculinity (April’s father did fatherhood
 33 wrong, as did young Jack), but for its utopian ideal. The same novel that dotes on
 34 Dean’s “feminine” obsession with fashion and Blue’s “masculine” fondness for
 35 “Body by Beer” t-shirts and biker boots sometimes wistfully imagines that if men
 36 were men, then a clear-cut gender role for women would also be possible. Thus, as
 37 Blue watches Dean crisply dispatch his opponent in a bar fight, the narrator tells
 38 us that “seeing justice being served so swiftly filled her with longing”: *not* a sexual
 39 longing, but a desire for the sexual division of justice-labor to be restored. If only
 40

42 _____
 43 ⁶⁰ Phillips, 57, 79.

44 ⁶¹ Phillips, 43, 315.

1 men would step up and do the fighting for what's right, Blue thinks, as "chivalry" 1
 2 demands, then women like her mother "wouldn't have to."⁶² 2

3 In her recent study *Why Love Hurts*, Eva Illouz offers a sociological explanation 3
 4 for such gender-role nostalgia. "Strongly coded gender practices," Illouz explains, 4
 5 "enable the ritualization of relationships between the sexes—that is, they are 5
 6 organized in clear patterns of meaning," and those clear patterns, in turn, "enable 6
 7 *play* with meanings" of a kind that is deeply erotic.⁶³ The "semiotic certainty" 7
 8 of old-fashioned gender practices (clothing, behavior, and so on) was, in Illouz's 8
 9 account, "the condition for the creation of pleasurable ambiguous meanings," but 9
 10 the modern "rationalization of love" by feminism, science, and consumer culture 10
 11 has made such certainty harder to come by.⁶⁴ As a result, "uncertainty and irony 11
 12 dominate the cultural climate of romantic relationships."⁶⁵ The romance *novel*, 12
 13 in Phillips's hands, offers an alternative to this irony: a compositional layering 13
 14 or juxtaposition of gender that gives us the best of both worlds. If Blue's "libido 14
 15 was way out of touch with her sexual politics," as we learn in an early love scene, 15
 16 that moment of feminist self-consciousness signals to the reader that this novelist 16
 17 knows full well that what is about to happen is problematic, or could be read 17
 18 that way.⁶⁶ Once that acknowledgment is given, we enter the realm of nostalgic 18
 19 gender role-play: a theatrical performance of "strongly coded gender practices" 19
 20 for the sake of pleasure.⁶⁷ In the novel's vision, these "domination and submission 20
 21 games" have no bearing on the power relationships between the characters once 21
 22 the game is through, nor on the lives of readers.⁶⁸ 22

23 The ekphrastic scene of Nita and her portrait also serves as a microcosm of 23
 24 the novel's treatment of time in terms of its characters. The cast of *Natural Born* 24
 25 *Charmer* matches the painting's temporal pattern, juxtaposing Riley, Blue and 25
 26 Dean (in their early thirties), April and Jack (both starting their fifties), and Nita 26
 27 in a single composition, as though four generational love stories were needed to 27
 28 get at the novel's ideal and composite vision of love—the one that we readers are 28
 29 invited to gaze on, like Nita, with "yearning." Only the heterosexual couples get 29
 30 actual marriage plots, but Dean's hesitant reconciliation with his mother, April, 30
 31 unmistakably plays out like a scene between romantic partners ("Do you want 31
 32 to dance?" he asks), and it *has* to happen, in the novel's structure, before he can 32
 33 achieve a successful relationship with Blue.⁶⁹ Jack's gruff avowal of love to his 33
 34 daughter Riley likewise serves both as a displaced version of the "declaration" 34
 35 element that characterizes the romance novel as a form and as a necessary step in 35

36 _____ 36
 37 ⁶² Phillips, 209. 37

38 ⁶³ Eva Illouz, *Why Love Hurts* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2012), 185–6, 196. 38

39 ⁶⁴ Illouz, 190, 191. 39

40 ⁶⁵ Illouz, 192. 40

41 ⁶⁶ Phillips, 228. 41

42 ⁶⁷ Illouz, 185. 42

43 ⁶⁸ Phillips, 304. 43

44 ⁶⁹ Phillips, 329. 44

1 his sexual and emotional reunion with April.⁷⁰ Widowed Nita's relationship with 1
 2 the town of Garrison, which she mostly owns, is presented as a second-chance 2
 3 romance. (When she moved to Tennessee, decades before, Nita was disdained 3
 4 as a gold-digging New Yorker who'd seduced the town's most important man. 4
 5 Late in the book, at Blue's suggestion, the town's business leaders repent by 5
 6 throwing her a birthday party, not least to sweeten her stance toward the economic 6
 7 redevelopment plan she has heretofore opposed. The ruse is transparent, but it 7
 8 works.) Even Nita's bond with Blue gets defined in marital terms. "Nita loves me 8
 9 for better or for worse," Blue explains near the close.⁷¹ 9

10 The literal marriage plots of *Natural Born Charmer* are thus bound up in 10
 11 romantically informed narratives of family reunification and the rebuilding of 11
 12 community—and as those “re-” prefixes suggest, in this novel, time and love 12
 13 are not rivals, but collaborators. Rather than portending loss, time's forward 13
 14 motion brings our characters the second chances they need to get love right. This 14
 15 spiraling temporal structure is, as Pam Rosenthal has written, characteristic of 15
 16 popular romance. The “loopy shape of the romance story,” Rosenthal explains, 16
 17 usually entails an “ongoing plot making its way along a great circle route through 17
 18 the past,” whether this past belongs to the characters themselves, or to parents, 18
 19 ancestors, or friends.⁷² Turning, turning, things come round right—a structure that 19
 20 suits not only the Christian roots of the genre, in which repetition is an opportunity 20
 21 for redemption (a new Adam, a new Eve, a new Jerusalem), but also the current 21
 22 entanglement of romance fiction with American therapeutic and self-help culture. 22
 23 Even as this novel extols the progress of some characters to maturity—notably 23
 24 Jack, who learns that “rock and roll might keep you young, but there was 24
 25 something to be said for finally growing up”—it is equally invested in the need for 25
 26 Blue, its primary heroine, to set aside the maturity and independence she learned 26
 27 so painfully when young.⁷³ There's a contrapuntal motion here, both forwards and 27
 28 backwards in time, which Nita's portrait hints at but does not entirely capture. 28
 29 (Nothing in the portrait speaks of childhood.) That portrait, however, is neither the 29
 30 longest ekphrasis in the novel nor its final reflection on the aesthetics—and market 30
 31 appeal—of popular romance. 31

32
 33
 34
 35
 36
 37 ⁷⁰ Phillips, 348; for the “declaration” element in romance, see Pamela Regis, *A* 37
 38 *Natural History of the Romance Novel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 38
 39 2003), 34–5. 39

40 ⁷¹ Phillips, 380. 40

41 ⁷² Pam Rosenthal, “Time and Again: Hanging with the Romance Scholars,” *History* 41
 42 *Hoydens*, April 17, 2009, [http://historyhoydens.blogspot.com/2009/04/time-and-again-](http://historyhoydens.blogspot.com/2009/04/time-and-again-hanging-with-romance.html) 42
 43 [hanging-with-romance.html](http://historyhoydens.blogspot.com/2009/04/time-and-again-hanging-with-romance.html); accessed January 4, 2014. 43

44 ⁷³ Phillips, 349. 44

1 **Sentimental Journey** 1

2 In an influential account of the marriage plot, *Romance and the Erotics of Property* 2
 3 (1988), Jan Cohn argues that beneath its “surface story of romantic and sexual 3
 4 love” the romance novel is fundamentally “a story about how the heroine gains 4
 5 access to money—to power—in a patriarchal society.”⁷⁴ That access comes via 5
 6 her acquisition of the romance hero, a man whose “wealth ... property, and 6
 7 economic power, are basic attributes of his masculinity.”⁷⁵ Cohn’s urtext is *Pride* 7
 8 *and Prejudice*, yet where Austen is memorably frank about “the amorous effects 8
 9 of ‘brass’”—“beside her Joyce seems innocent as grass,” as Auden quips in 9
 10 “Letter to Lord Byron”—the twentieth-century romance heroine’s longings for 10
 11 “economic vengeance and appropriation” can never be directly articulated, Cohn 11
 12 asserts.⁷⁶ They must remain “carefully coded” and “heavily masked.”⁷⁷ Indeed, the 12
 13 heroine “must seem to seek *nothing*,” neither money nor sex nor even love, “as 13
 14 if to confess to desire in any form were to confess to the deeper, the vengeful and 14
 15 aggressive, desires that are forbidden.”⁷⁸ 15

16 Phillips’s novel plays deftly with this tradition. Blue needs “access to money— 16
 17 to power”: she starts out broke, her meager savings appropriated by her mother 17
 18 to ransom some kidnapped girls in Columbia, and she spends much of the novel 18
 19 talking about money, bargaining for money, working for money, and even at one 19
 20 point taking “hooker money” from Dean, although that pair of fifties is part of their 20
 21 sex play, not a fee for service.⁷⁹ Rather than gaining financial security (and thus 21
 22 power) through Dean, however, she gains power, and thus money, by regaining 22
 23 access to her own potential as an artist: a therapeutic, temporally “loopy” plot that 23
 24 restores her power by revisiting the traumas that robbed her of it. 24

25 As her “only female professor” realized, Blue’s childhood was marked by a 25
 26 lack of stability and security. Her mother’s charity abroad was spite at home, or 26
 27 at least neglect; when the professor says that Blue’s paintings reveal her to be “*an* 27
 28 *insecure girl looking for a romanticized world to hide in*,” we’re meant to see her as 28
 29 correct, though shaming.⁸⁰ Blue’s landscapes are feminine—or, in Worhol’s term, 29
 30 “effeminate”—and in response to her professor’s words, Blue internalizes those 30
 31 antieffeminate, masculinist values. After “making a statement” with brutal art, she 31
 32 drops out of school to support herself, barely, through unambitious, unreflective 32
 33 portraits of “dogs and children.”⁸¹ This is still Blue’s position when she decides to 33
 34 34

35 35
 36 ⁷⁴ Jan Cohn, *Romance and the Erotics of Property: Mass-Market Fiction for Women* 36
 37 (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1988), 5, 3. 37

38 ⁷⁵ Cohn, 127. 38

39 ⁷⁶ Cohn, 173. 39

40 ⁷⁷ Cohn, 5. 40

41 ⁷⁸ Cohn, 5. 41

42 ⁷⁹ Cohn, 3; Phillips, 184. 42

43 ⁸⁰ Phillips, 147. 43

44 ⁸¹ Phillips, 201. 44

1 accept Nita's portrait commission. Cranky, selfish, conservative Nita is, of course, 1
 2 the mirror image of Blue's mother, the nunlike Virginia. Nita spars with Blue in a 2
 3 therapeutic way, allowing the younger woman to give voice to what Cohn might 3
 4 call the "vengeful and aggressive" emotions she has never let herself feel towards 4
 5 her mother.⁸² Yet she also holds tight to Blue, as her other never did, going so far 5
 6 as to plant a necklace in Blue's purse when she tries to leave town, so that she can 6
 7 then send the police to bring her back.⁸³ 7

8 Phillips braids this surrogate-mother/daughter plot with the novel's primary 8
 9 romance narrative (Blue/Dean) and with its story of artistic-cum-financial triumph. 9
 10 In the course of a single chapter, for example, Blue finishes the portrait of Nita, 10
 11 and this artistic success allows her to return to the farmhouse to start painting 11
 12 murals, as April has long asked. The murals start, but falter—internally, something 12
 13 hasn't been resolved—so she takes a break to go for a Fourth of July walk in the 13
 14 woods with Dean. The date is significant: Blue's independence has been presented, 14
 15 throughout the novel, as radically inauthentic, a strategy to compensate for her lack 15
 16 of dependable family. On the walk, the couple play a "kinky game of prison break," 16
 17 in which Blue plays a prisoner whose bid for freedom (that is, independence) is 17
 18 stopped when Dean, as sexy guard, captures, searches, and makes love to her.⁸⁴ 18
 19 The game is erotically satisfying, but emotionally unsettling. It stirs up Blue's 19
 20 "old feelings of wanting to belong."⁸⁵ Left as "fragile and defenseless as the child 20
 21 she'd once been," she has the artistic breakthrough we've been waiting for, and a 21
 22 paragraph later, she's painting murals that are unlike the "gooey landscapes of her 22
 23 college years": they're "all wrong," but she'd "never done anything she'd loved 23
 24 more."⁸⁶ 24

25 The love and vulnerability don't last. Just pages later, Blue dismisses her own 25
 26 murals as "sentimental bullshit," effectively channeling her old professor.⁸⁷ "You're 26
 27 going to hate them," she warns Dean "in a small, stricken voice" when we finally 27
 28 get the ekphrasis of those murals.⁸⁸ A "woodland glade of mist and fantasy," their 28
 29 profusion of images includes rainbows, a unicorn, an "apple-cheeked" cloud, and 29
 30 an assortment of fairies peeking out on "blooms never seen in nature." "They're 30
 31 terrible," she insists; they "belong in a—a kid's bedroom or a—a preschool," not 31
 32 in Dean's "masculine" house.⁸⁹ After Dean reassures her with sex, however, and 32
 33 after Nita reassures her by having the police bring her back to town (a nonerotic 33
 34 encore of the prison break motif), this self-doubt dissipates. Blue paints cheerful, 34
 35 35

36 ⁸² Cohn, 5. 36

37 ⁸³ The romance-savvy reader will recognize this as a tactic from *His Girl Friday*. It's 37
 38 another metatextual gesture, or at least an allusive one. 38

39 ⁸⁴ Phillips, 304. 39

40 ⁸⁵ Phillips, 307. 40

41 ⁸⁶ Phillips, 307. 41

42 ⁸⁷ Phillips, 311. 42

43 ⁸⁸ Phillips, 350, 351. 43

44 ⁸⁹ Phillips, 351, 352. 44

1 childlike imagery on the jailhouse walls, and turns down one policeman's request
 2 to paint "a warning to obey the law."⁹⁰ Having found the love she lacked as a
 3 child, from Dean and Nita alike, Blue is free to defy "the law," whether by that we
 4 mean the academic rules about "good art" that she learned at college, or the law of
 5 linear time, in which childhood pleasures and vulnerabilities must be left behind
 6 to survive in a threatening world.

7
 8 **Money (That's What I Want)**
 9

10 Over and beyond its "surface story of romantic and sexual love," as Cohn might
 11 say, *Natural Born Charmer* tells the a story about how Blue regains access to
 12 artistic power—and thus, eventually, to money—in an *aesthetically* patriarchal
 13 society, one in which her access to cultural capital and to a responsive audience
 14 have both been blocked by the antieffeminate gatekeepers of academia.⁹¹ In order
 15 for this rebirth to happen, Blue has to be recaptured by a normative "feminine"
 16 life of heterosexual coupledness and domesticity: first figuratively, in the woods, by
 17 Dean the prison guard, and then literally, dragged home on trumped-up charges at
 18 an older woman's behest. Yet is the fact that her transformation happens through
 19 painting a jailhouse ironic, or a sly, preemptive joke? My money is on the latter,
 20 since from that point on, Blue is both a confident artist *and* a marketable one,
 21 and the reader is invited to savor her success through a series of playful twists on
 22 romance convention, each of which highlights our own sense of "belonging" as
 23 romance readers.

24 Do professors claim that the marriage plot hinges on the heroine's getting a
 25 rich hero to propose? Here, with help from Nita, Blue's work gets picked up by
 26 "the most prestigious dealer in the South."⁹² Flush with success, Blue sets about
 27 painting full-time, living alone in the farmhouse as Dean heads to Chicago for the
 28 fall season. It's our hero, now, who's "fragile" and defenseless, racing home in
 29 the final chapter to check if Blue still wants him, and it's Blue who then proposes,
 30 in a "bristling," utterly unromantic way.⁹³ The reversals continue. Dean may be
 31 rich, but with the end of his football career in sight, his "future direction" comes
 32 from his new wife: with April, Dean has begun "marketing a whimsical line of
 33 clothes based on Blue's designs" that will sustain him over the long haul.⁹⁴ Blue's
 34 professor warned her that "sofa paintings don't make good art," but once Dean's
 35 business is underway, Blue's art will serve, not just as a "sofa painting," but as the
 36 *model for the sofa*, since Dean and April plan to branch out into "furniture and

37
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 40 ⁹⁰ Phillips, 362.

41 ⁹¹ Cohn, 5.

42 ⁹² Phillips, 379.

43 ⁹³ Phillips, 369.

44 ⁹⁴ Phillips, 384.

1 home décor.”⁹⁵ As for whether that makes it “good art,” academically speaking, the
 2 novel hardly cares. Blue’s paintings are “selling like crazy” to “ordinary people,
 3 who knew nothing about great art, but knew what they liked”: a nod to the readers
 4 who give popular romance fiction such a large, enduring share of the publishing
 5 market, whatever its status as “great art.”⁹⁶

6 Let me press this close reading one step further. Blue’s purchasers, we’re
 7 told, are people “who knew what they liked.”⁹⁷ This is a riposte not simply to
 8 highbrow criticism (the sort that defines “great art”), but to the aspirational reader,
 9 listener, or viewer who professes to like only the best in art, in search of social
 10 approval. Monty, this novel’s “Poetry Man,” was our exemplary figure for that
 11 kind of consumer, as we saw through his fetishizing of the novel’s first artwork,
 12 that bootleg Dylan CD. And, indeed, Phillips’s description of Blue’s audience in
 13 the novel’s final pages echoes a line from “Buckets of Rain,” the closing song on
 14 *Blood on the Tracks*. “Little red wagon, little red bike,” Dylan sings, “I ain’t no
 15 monkey, but *I know what I like* / I like the way you love me, strong and slow”
 16 (my emphasis).⁹⁸ Monty may love his bootleg CD for its rarity, and love Dylan
 17 (per Hamill’s description) as a modernist hero, but in the song itself, Dylan “likes”
 18 something much closer to the mix of childlike imagery and adult pathos we find in
 19 Blue’s paintings, and in Phillips’s romance.

20 The final paragraphs of *Natural Born Charmer* describe a “huge canvas” which
 21 Blue has painted for Dean as a wedding present.⁹⁹ In its “magical world of summer
 22 and winter, spring and fall,” all happening at the same time, we recognize image
 23 after image from the novel.¹⁰⁰ Many recall unhappy or uneasy scenes, transforming
 24 each through art into something upbeat. We see Blue in the beaver suit she wore
 25 in the opening chapter, but now she’s not financially desperate, just dressed up
 26 for Halloween. Jack plays guitar with his daughter, but there’s no sign (as in
 27 the original scene) that he’s just realized he’d abandoned Riley to an unloving
 28 mother, and so on. We see Blue and Dean, their family, and the town of Garrison
 29 celebrating Christmas, the Fourth of July, the Super Bowl, and Nita’s birthday. We
 30 see a promise of children, although Blue is not pregnant at any point in the book.
 31 Finally, tucked in a corner, we see the stylized gypsy caravan that April bought for
 32 the farm, where Blue has lived for much of the text. “Thick vines held the wheels
 33 firmly in place,” we read, in the last words of the novel. “She and Dean stood
 34 nearby, and the people they loved danced all around them.”¹⁰¹

35 As closure, this painting functions in several ways. It recapitulates, in an almost
 36 musical fashion, the novel’s key scenes and themes, weaving them into a major-

37 _____
 38 ⁹⁵ Phillips, 147, 384.

39 ⁹⁶ Phillips, 384.

40 ⁹⁷ Phillips, 384.

41 ⁹⁸ Dylan, “Buckets of Rain,” *Blood on the Tracks*.

42 ⁹⁹ Phillips, 384.

43 ¹⁰⁰ Phillips, 385.

44 ¹⁰¹ Phillips, 385.

1 key finale. It gives us a privileged glimpse, as though from above, of what we
 2 might call the *providential design* behind the novel: the “matrix of harmonies,” in
 3 the poet Ronald Johnson’s phrase, in which every event, even the sad ones, fits and
 4 contributes to a happy denouement. Tonally, its childlike imagery is consoling, but
 5 not cloying, in part because the canvas also hints at time’s passage and loss. Dean
 6 and Blue may both now be “steadfast,” but the dance that goes on around them
 7 reminds us of the scenes where dance signaled change and temporal motion: the
 8 time when Nita, a former Arthur Murray dance instructor, taught Riley to carry
 9 herself with old-fashioned poise; the time Dean felt the “ladderlike structures” of
 10 his DNA drawing him “back to the source. The dance” as he watched his father
 11 and mother strut to rock and roll.¹⁰² Nita will die, but her values of self-discipline
 12 and artistry will survive; Jack and April won’t be dancing forever, but the dance
 13 itself goes on.

14 To end the novel with the phrase, “the people they loved danced all around
 15 them,” then, is to conjure up the kind of mixed emotions we associate with happy
 16 tears: the ones we conventionally shed at weddings (the painting’s a wedding
 17 present), at the reunions staged in women’s films and TV series (“daughter loves
 18 mother / daughter fights with mother / daughter reconciles with mother,” as
 19 Worhol sums up the plot), and so on.¹⁰³ “For me,” writes Worhol, “the tears signify
 20 the relief that comes with the resolution of a powerful narrative line, moving from
 21 possession, to loss, to restitution”: a narrative structure that leaves us feeling that
 22 everything is, in the end, as it somehow *had to be*.¹⁰⁴ It’s a wonderful image for
 23 “the romantic,” as Henry James describes it: a world which “can reach us only
 24 through the beautiful circuit and subterfuge of our thought and our desire.” To
 25 Worhol, our knowledge that “the romantic” emerges in real life only momentarily,
 26 at best, brings about “a sense of cringing, then, that accompanies the good cry,”
 27 but “cringing” doesn’t get at the poignant sweetness of that knowledge, here, or
 28 the consolation of knowing that this knowledge must be shared, since it’s been
 29 conjured by the book in such an artful, memorable way.¹⁰⁵ (“Life is sad, life is
 30 a bust,” Dylan sings in the final lines of *Blood on the Tracks*; in the face of that
 31 knowledge, “you do what you must do, and you do it well / I do it for you, honey
 32 baby, can’t you tell?”)

33 “This is *what you like*, isn’t it?” the painting thus demands. We can say “no,”
 34 and cringe at the way the painter and novelist have tried to make us suckers for an
 35 American ideal where Christmas and football and procreation and rootedness reign
 36 supreme—an America where other versions of the good life are nowhere in sight.
 37 (Where’s Virginia Bailey? As the novel ends, she’s off in Columbia, “standing up
 38 for those with no voices.”¹⁰⁶ Dean sent her a cell phone.) Still, if we’ve read this

40 ¹⁰² Phillips, 379, 313–14.

41 ¹⁰³ Worhol, 59.

42 ¹⁰⁴ Worhol, 59.

43 ¹⁰⁵ Worhol, 60.

44 ¹⁰⁶ Phillips, 383.

1 far, we're likely instead to respond the way Nita did to her portrait, studying that
 2 ideal scene with "yearning."¹⁰⁷ And whether we're in the circle or out of it, the
 3 complexity Phillips has brought to the generically mandated "happily ever after"
 4 ending is undeniable, and impressive. In her hands, the popular romance novel
 5 shows its potential as a commercial, conventional, thoughtful, and rewarding work
 6 of art.

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