Preliminary Remarks on the Meme and the Text

Geoffrey B. Waldschmidt

Indiana University - Purdue University Fort Wayne

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You will be one of the three people on earth who have read this text. Not that it matters, but the text that follows attempts to articulate something that IS important in our age.

Nothing is forgotten. Nobody dies.

PRELIMINARY REMARKS ON THE MEME AND THE TEXT

Their Relationship Within the Discipline of Language and Literature

Geoffrey B. Waldschmidt

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Chair, Thesis Committee
Chad Thompson, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Linguistics

Mary Ann Cain, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of English

Beverly Hume, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of English

Acknowledgement and Dedication

On this page I acknowledge and appreciate the guidance of Professors Chad Thompson, Beverly Hume and Mary Ann Cain. Dr. Thompson teaches Culture and Linguistics, Dr. Hume, Literature, and Dr. Cain, Creative Writing. The Thesis is an experiment in voice as well as an examination of Memetics and its application to text, culture and literature.
I hope the multiplicity of voice and “playful” prose will not detract from the proposition that Memetics should be seriously and rigorously applied to the study of culture, specifically text and literature. These are serious times, and Memetics applied to the Humanities merits consideration as we break away from the “postmodern malaise.”

To test this idea; the interrelation of culture, text and literature—I thought it ideal to run the gauntlet of people who know far more than I do about cultures, criticisms and rhetoric. The trick was to avoid getting over my head in areas of science, canonicity and creativity where I would fall hopelessly short in synaptic stature.

In endeavoring to integrate Memetics into the instruction of students I will either sink or swim. However, without the instruction, guidance and inspiration of wise teachers I would not have discovered Memetics nor applied it to any constructive purpose. I owe them my thanks, and dedicate this and all future work to the following:

To wife Diana, daughter Amelia, and my boy Ezekiel. To George, JoElla, Robin and Kim. To all the good old boys (especially you, Cully). To all the Great Ladies (you know who you are). And most of all, to my Brothers and Sisters who never came back from a war that never should have happened.

Nothing is forgotten. Nobody dies.

Preliminary Remarks on The Meme and The Text

Their Relationship Within the Discipline of Language and Literature

Preliminary Remarks

All The Way to the End.

(A Christmas Story in memory of Paul Provost)

It’s the day after Christmas-- 2003. Story seemed sadly familiar to me, so what can I say? How does one cloak in allegory the dowager’s hump? Do we toot-wheedle a whimsy maudlin dump to tale and fey pennywhistle away it’s cackling mad? Yep, its gibbering mad culture eyes aflame far beyond satire or sarcasm or shame in the heat waves of summer the volume knobs came… all the way to the end.

Speakers shuck 12-guage seven o’clock jet engines chambering brown wrappers, red meat and screams—skeletons blast out black granite casement pains in the dark night the stark white… reading room light throws a pool on a fuzzy mechanical bear—clock working Scarlet and jingle bell blues muffle next-door xylophone bones, beware. Io- dancing and grinning out there, we contend. We still hear, you fuckers. Go on back to marble town, all the way to the end.

When we are dead let us go instead to a quiet place inside the sun. Its outside all round soft-sound snowing-down feather white noise-kicking-rock Doors. Outside pale nature girl-whispers cool kisses for thousands of miles. And millions of years-- stinging cold, rolling water-cracking ice. When the wind blows easy and the cabin is snug, sun peaking— the horizon will bend—when the band done unplugs and curls home up the chimney. All the way to the
end.

That’s where the silence and science is, connecting billions and trillions of sex and parsecs, starry night gastronomical units all the way to the end. Deep space, man, where pompoms of spider web non-matter scatter and cheer on miniscule P-neutron shaking and waiting in fate and float gloat on a single note-- out all the way to the end. It’s the note, man. The keynote: “Man; the P-note man got a message-- for to send.”

Look, you got eyes. Let them see. You have ears, let them here and there he is down there, singing along with springtime students. Still shilling peanuts-- free for a thousand years, man and they don’t seem to see him. And hell you can hear him sometimes-- for all the Cinco de Mayo Kollwitzstrasse traffic that never sleeps. But it does—with an open eye.

Found a peanut prayer down there: we got memes. All the grunts and screams and hopes and dreams, they connect, and then we have memes. It rhymes with creams and it’s not what it seems, the spiderweb non-matter, memes. Oh say can you see-- the stars are brightly shining. We all serve to make them append. Precludes our drinks and moves our links. All the way to the end.

Coming next, we shovel the Text in the ditch of what each one means, the hope and cheer this trope of year and a letter we got from a friend. “In the soul of wit, its tall bull shit” (as if that sounded crude).

That is what He said. I’m with you reader-dude.

**The Meme:**

(Opening Scene: Sunset, Olduvai Gorge)

**We change Voices.**

We set the stage with the use of memes to demonstrate the variable connections in the mind of the individual reader. One may recognize “…the ditch of what each one means” from Bob Dylan’s “Gates of Eden,” another may not. The possessive pronoun between “wit” and “tall” is deliberate. It’s spiderweb non-matter, an opening story to demonstrate that there are (at least) two voices in this thesis; one voice attempts to be analytical, the other plays to overcome the “paralysis of analysis,” in the spirit of “infinite play.”

Joseph Meeker in his *Comedy of Survival* describes this play as the natural course of things. “As specialized knowledge has become more sophisticated and arcane it has itself begun to undermine specialization by discovering new systemic
relationships that tend to blur disciplinary boundaries” (8). So we have to play nice together.

Memes are replicators, "tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches (Dawkins, 192)" Memes are stored in human brains and passed on by imitation. We are temporary survival machines for our genes and memes, which are (unlike us) capable of making high-fidelity copies of themselves almost forever. You may not consider your children low-fidelity copies, but science does, in the kindest possible way. There is no self to copy. It’s the “benign user illusion” (Blackmore, 225).

Memetics is indeed one of the “new systemic relationships,” and as Meeker notes; “Language is no less miraculous than it always has been, but it is now possible to think about it in the context of evolutionary history” (75). Meeker briefly cites Pinker, Dawkins, Chomsky and others who tend to view language as “innate.” Others have challenged this idea, specifically Gould and Lewontin hypothesizing language innateness as a “Panglossian Paradigm.” (Gould/ Lewontin 1979) It has to do with spandrels, the delta of joined arches where evolution is unintended, but that’s another story.

Dr. Pangloss is a character from Voltaire’s “Candide,” and now Literature jumps into the fracas along with Psychology, Epistemology, Neurology, Sociology, Biology; a boiling mob of arcane specialized knowledge from Anthropology to Zoology. To stay above the brawl and avoid as many deep pools of debate as possible, we must resort to rhetoric that allows the individual reader to fill in the web with their own perspective. While the meme is easily understood by anyone who has suffered an annoying tune playing in their brain—the implications of Memetics are interdisciplinary and profound.

Not so, say the specialists. Memetics explains nothing that (insert specialists’ theory) doesn’t explain, and perhaps that’s true. For example, aren’t textual memes easily explained by intertextuality? Perhaps, but when the textual meme leaves the realm of text and enters another disciplinary area, it may be called a “Mutual Contextual Belief,” but it’s still a meme. When probing the “axis of reality” beyond or between our deep pools of specialized knowledge, we are served better by parable, metaphor and dozens of other devices that allow the “signal” sender and recipients’ brains to play.

In the realm of systems and specialists, play devices may be too easily dismissed as speculation or lack of specifics. In fact, these devices are essential. As Lakoff and Turner point out, “Metaphors are so commonplace we often fail to notice them” (1). Here there be monsters. Aye, the passage is tricky when the letter kills and the spirit gives life. Asleep at the wheel, we cut up the pig to see where the oink went, or in business we open the goose to get out all the golden eggs at once and save on goose food. Or as the Teacher said, we “…sift out the gnat and swallow the camel.”
Failing to notice metaphors could be the opposite extreme of what Lakoff and Turner (out of context) call “literal meaning” (110). What Lynch calls “Thought Contagion” attempts to address how “belief” spreads through society, but “belief” could just as easily be backward hat-wearing. Important to our discussion here is specifically the construction of text.

More specifically; our interest is how authors use memes, whether social contexts, metaphors or mortarboards, deliberately or unconsciously, with methodology or madness, to construct text and how this new web affects the texts’ interpretation through culture. We posit that this use of social context could be what distinguishes “literature” from “other” text.

**Enhancing understanding by creating confusion**

Here in this thesis, we use the memetic perspective to unlock connections in American Literature. There are memes in architecture, painting, poetry or prosthetics in China or in Chile. Whether it’s Jesus saying, “..by hearing you shall hear and not understand…” or the Jazz musician saying “If you don’t know, don’t mess with it,” there are some concepts that simply can’t be grasped analytically. That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t try. So here we attempt a hybrid approach. “Thought Contagion” is as old as culture. Memetics simply gives it a name and a discrete unit.

An analytical versus a “playful” application of text is far beyond being an academic question. Between 1618 and 1648 application of text killed one third of the population of Europe. And sure, textual interpretation was a thin veneer over a multiplicity of causes (largely memetic) then and now. Even today, “textual interpretation” involves a “religious war” that few will admit, and hinges on the “canonicity” of opposing texts. Whether in literature or law, the competition for determining the canon is intense.

Is this “playful?” It can be. Every author down to the most potboiler-jaded mercenary opportunist is aware of both the advantage and danger of surfing popular textual trends. All know the universals; birth, death, love, conflict. When the trends of the day melt away or memes expressing universals evolve or change, will the authors’ works be left behind? Of course the previous question contains a time-moving metaphor, when time probably doesn’t move in three-dimensional space. Rigorous critique would reveal this.

“Rigor,” however, is no defense against thought contagion. Lords of the Polish Death Camps and high-level Nazis of WWII held doctorates. Were they merely opportunists? Evidence suggests the contrary. Opportunists, yes, but a core Nazi doctrine was that Jews were “carriers” of “Bolshevism,” which suggests “National Socialism” was intended to be
a counter-meme. In fact, no one is totally immune to thought contagion, but a healthy sense of play seems to be beneficial to our collective mental well-being. We must think Impossible Things.

“...and things that go boomp in the night.”

“From witches and ghosties and long-legged beasties, and things that go boomp in the night, the Lord deliver us,”

Folklore from the middle ages, when the collision of pagan, classical and Christian memes produced (among other things) a witch-hunt that lasted several centuries. The Renascence and Enlightenment hardly touched the thoughts and emotions of popular culture, despite the probing of high Literature. The allegorical nature of text becomes lost in the anthropomorphic and literal struggle between “good and evil,” not Ockham’s razor, but a swiss army knife with built-in euphuisms, mantras and boilerplate memes to confront any abstract.

Hence the complexities of crop failure, cream curdling, rainfall or return-on-investment can be reduced to “evil-doers” and “things that go boomp in the night.” Leave it to others in later ages to invent the microscope, isolate bacteria or calculate true cost. This day we can bind a woman and kill a witch. Today we call it “accountability,.” Whether we hunt “Terrorists” or “Communists,” “Witches” or “inefficiency,” they are all abstract nouns wrapped in people... we lose touch with originality in the abstract and squander our energy on packaging. This is because evolution has given us brains that resist complexity but love to solve puzzles. This is why unwrapping presents is legal and blowing safes is not.

Literature gives us lots of presents. The thrill of puzzle-solution is why we love art. Whether the art is a teary-eyed eagle on velvet before the twin towers or “Nude Descending a Staircase,” does the complexity of the abstraction determine whether the art depicting the puzzle is different in kind or degree? As we are learning in this age of mathematical uncertainty, most things are a difference of degree, and the taxonomy of “kind” is arbitrary. Yet we cannot deny the totality of difference. If there is indeed a profound difference between a Jurassic fossil and Jesus Christ, we must have memes to wrap our brains around it.

Therefore we play to manufacture these memes. That is art—that is Literature, and that is why both (Art and Literature, host and meme) survive: to manufacture memes that endure long enough to help wrap our brains around a particular evolving complexity. Critical thinking exists on the sidelines to speculate whether the current play has the capacity to embrace the complexity of the evolving abstraction. Memes will arise and evolve as long as culture exists. Criticism and the canon serve as “quality control” for the play. Play continues to exist because it is essential for survival.
Memes evolve by natural and artificial selection. “Artificial” selection is the conscious modifications we impose on a meme or memeplex, similar to the selective breeding of domestic animals or plants. Without this imposition, memes replicate as simply as possible, as Blackmore writes “…the memosphere fills up with catchy tunes and thinkable thoughts.” (1997) What’s good for the meme is not necessarily good for its cultural host. Without awareness of our own commonality and individuality separate from the memeplex, we are as helpless before virulent memes as bread before mold.

Without some form of memetic awareness (generally in the form of criticism), it becomes difficult in Literature to distinguish deep originality from experiments in style. When commodification occurs; the McDonaldization or Walmartization of art, thinking and culture, then the very “virtues” such processes attempt to impose become impossible. It’s the diminishing-return counter to economy of scale. The “voice of the species” becomes a recording.

The paradox at work is that ideas can have their own agency— that ideas can exist (as artifacts, for example) without brains to think them—that imaginary space is indeed real. Like the square root of a negative, what we call “market forces” are just as imaginary as the “metaphysical forces” of the Middle Ages. We may scoff at “long-legged beasties,” but we say an “idea” has “legs.” It is our minds at play in deadly earnest.

It’s the way we see things.

Sight, of course, is a metaphor. In our play we make value judgments. Is it better to hide here or there so the seeker won’t find us? This may enable us to find cover when the seekers are lethal and judgments are final, or to find our quarry when we are the hunter. We remember the experience as all animals do. Our slightly more complex “human” culture allows more play in the abstract, for it is the luxury of culture that we may rehearse more before the opening night.

But the Opening Night does come and then the reviews are final. The Bard cries out, raving mad, but with a vision that will not fade. Memes are real. They are real as Gleichschaltung, Zucht und Ordnung and the fifty million dead that follow, real as Romeo and Juliet. That’s the melodramatic part of the play. The distinctions between fuzzy reality and accurate forgery break down; sometimes reverse themselves with nightmare scenarios.

In the quiet reading room, memes may be applied to Literature to discern its privilege—perhaps it is the hierarchy of art and the “canon” that resists the memosphere filling up with catchy tunes and thinkable thoughts. Artists, specifically authors, use their work and play with memes to produce hybrid artifacts that begin to make copies of themselves. The canon, consciously or not, has its own standards for catchy and thinkable.
Yes, there must be a printer to print the book or a teller to cash the tale, but step outside the anthropocentric circle, and these things are only a medium. That’s the terrifying part—memes are not human. They are a natural force, like fire, to be treated with caution and respect. As with fire, we can either be handlers or fuel.

Let’s just come right out and say it: mixing communication with commercialism was a fundamental mistake… our ultimate undoing, psychologically, socially and ecologically. The job we have ahead of us is to draw a clear line between commercial and human expression, to recreate our communications system— to restore the mental environment.

--Adbusters Magazine  Jan/Feb 2004. No. 51

We must understand the natural forces in our mental environment.

**The Text:**

(The gnat and the camel)

**We define first and then we see**

The value of any theory is its ability to explain existing phenomena, and this is mainstream scientific doctrine. Literary theory attempts to explain the art itself but usually without burden of proof or replication. Isolate the ingredients of ancient or contemporary text through a variety of methods from Formalism to Foucault. It is impossible to “replicate” Herodotus or Hemingway, and the best possible results would be an accurate forgery.

Accurate forgeries do exist. Social criticism, cultural study, even social science appear to inhabit a different realm than what is perceived as “hard” science which is thought to be the study of the physical world and its manifestations. With complex and multifactoral phenomena, it is possible enough to isolate variables but difficult to duplicate results. Hence, the “soft” sciences and the distinction between “concrete” and “abstract.”

The distinctions between art and science, “hard” and “soft” science, “concrete” and “abstract” are taxonomies of our own artifice. Nothing, in fact, exists outside what we call the “physical” world. “No ideas but in things,” says Williams; “These fragments I have shored against my ruin,” notes Eliot,” and what does this mean? It is the quickening of the idea that even the most abstract concepts exist as the interaction of neurons, synapses and neurotransmitter chemicals in real physical brains. What stimulates this process?

What of the spirit? What of the soul? What of the boundless and the limitless and the noble and the beautiful, the dark and mysterious? What of good and evil? Are these things not non-physical and ethereal? In a great sense, they are not. Even the taxonomies of our own artifice are increasingly accurate forgeries of what lies yet beyond our measure.
“In the beginning was the Word,” says The Literature. "We do not first see and then define, we define first and then see," says Walter Lippmann.

Observation following definition rather than the opposite would seem to turn the “scientific method” on its head, but in fact it does not. Thesis and hypothesis within science give limited license to speculation. Unfortunately, we have too long imprisoned science in an "iron cage of rationality," serving factoids of "efficiency, predictability, calculability and control” like freedom fries. Like Art, Science as a commodity can become corrupt.

In light of evolution

Art, too, has been mired in a model, a bird in a gilded cage of beauty defined by classicism. As science grasped the Kuhnian paradigm shift, spandrels and other breakout models, so the arts embraced postmodernism, dada, and other methods of escaping the neoclassical cage. American literature shed the filigree of flowery language, moving toward dialogue and directness in tales and short stories.

Now the question: has the direction in American literature been a form of evolution or simply change? What is the difference? Evolution presumes there is a process at work, even if that process is understood only by an accurate forgery of what lies yet beyond our measure. Change only implies something different. In the physical world, change without causation (or process) is extremely rare. To say “possible” or not baits a Cartesian trap we intend to avoid.

To say, “no change exists without cause” has a tendency to blind us to the random element, the “spandrels” Stephan Jay Gould spoke of (Gould, 1979) in explaining an evolution of fits and starts. Insisting on a “rational” culture exposes a danger of assuming a reasonable and linear chain of events governed by “perceived” self-interest. The spandrel, the random element, the seed of chaos lies in the “perception.” As we know, the senses can be fooled.

The Enlightenment brought us a dream of a rational and reasonable universe. Since then, cracks have appeared in the Newtonian clockwork model. We assumed that it was only a matter of time before we isolated all causes and found all answers. Artists, however, have always been drawn to the random element, “some connection nobody else sees.” In binding the “quick probings” to the chaotic complexity called “culture,” artists have imposed a direction that is yet to be discernable.

Analysis can dump all unanswered questions into the “non-physical” bucket, assume the “mind” and “body” are separate, and that things with no predictable progression are either without consequence or above understanding. If it is “fuzzy” or inadaptable to a database, take it off the table. And if a butterfly in Brooklyn can cause a typhoon in
Taiwan, we fear this ontological oxymoron. Secure in the abstract, “all the gods trembled” when Darwin posited a process for the origin of man neither divine nor above understanding.

Does literature evolve? Does culture evolve? Again, a sticky trap begging for the definition of “literature” or “culture.” But would “literature” or “culture” exist without specific names for them? Certainly the disparate elements of each would exist. Lacking the specific words, could we see literature or culture as a distinct memorable unit? First we define and then we see. Perhaps one of the great values of art is its ability to see without definition.

**Vision without definition**

How does art “see without definition?” Inference can be a conclusion drawn from evidence or reasoning or it can be implied, that is, understood without direct expression. And why is this understanding not expressed directly? It could be “consciously created ambiguity” on the part of the author, or because the words do not yet exist for direct expression. It is the understanding derived from “those short, quick probings at the very axis of reality” mentioned by Melville.

And what is the “very axis of reality?” Is there a totality of “real” things in the universe, independent of our knowledge or understanding of them? The “quick probings” of artists peck at this question like an eggshell. In American literature, from Hawthorne’s mosses, Poe’s gothic, Melville’s allegory to contemporary American works like Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage* or Connie Willis’ *Passages* or bellwether, is there a progression in these “probings?”

If a progression exists in art, culture or literature; and if this direction is indeed discernable; more brightly—even predictable, then we posit here and now that some kind of taxonomical system or name must be devised for ideas. True, these taxonomies do exist now within the balkanized islands of disciplines. But what taxonomy exists to measure the “fitness” or “stickiness” of ideas? Do we know (or can we predict) which ideas will “catch on” and why? Darwin’s evolutionary theory, while biology and biochemistry bears it out, is resisted to this day, especially when applied to text.

Had “Darwin’s Dangerous Idea” been as brutally suppressed as Marx’s “historical materialism,” the human genome would be totally unknown and “biotechnology” would not exist. The “divine right of Kings,” now masquerading as “The Invisible Hand,” cloaked in the pseudo science of “social Darwinism,” blinds us even now, a mutation of Truth and prevailing paradigm, the “accurate forgery” conundrum. How are we ever to sort out the difference between Truth and “prevailing paradigm,” assuming that there may be a difference?

Why do “good” ideas fail and “bad” ideas succeed? Are any ideas totally “good” or “bad?” The Nazis’ National
Socialism proposed general welfare. Christianity has sponsored senseless murders for centuries. Howard Bloom offers a stark and controversial answer in his book, *The Lucifer Principle*: a combination of the Superorganism (culture), ideas (memes), and pecking order (a selection process).

**How Literature defines**

For example (of culture/meme/selection), in Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage*, there’s a fantastic dialogue going on between sea-dog captain and stowaway freedman Negro aboard a walloping window blind of a sinking slave ship, involving Cartesian dualism and bloody whatnot. Do I exaggerate? Not at all. Part of the dialogue goes like this:

> “Fact is, down deep no man’s democratic. We’re closet anarchists, I’d wager. *Ouk agathon polykoiranin eis koiranos estos*. We believe what we believe. And the final test of truth is war on foreign soil.” (97)

Wait a minute. “*Ouk agathon polykoiranin eis koiranos estos*?” Or, as some would say, “Ouk agathon polukoiraniae, heis koiranos esto.” What’s going on here? Something we do not know. Google it and find out it’s a line from the Iliad (ii, 204) allegedly meaning, “the rule of many is no good; let there be one ruler.” Why is the line there and what is Johnson trying to do? Is it a spiderweb non-matter, consciously-created ambiguity?

In the context of this dialogue, Captain Falcon is already tossing names about like “Ancillon, de Maistre, or Portalis,” obviously Falcon is familiar with some hoity-toity philosophers, and perhaps the “informed reader” would even know who they are. But the chances of even an “informed reader” in this day and age speaking or recognizing original Greek text is slim to none. The line is there to underscore the character’s philosophical knowledge and make it believable.

Even if the reader does not notice Falcon’s segue from Rousseau’s Social Contract to Cartesian Dualism, no matter. The Captain’s words stand on their own: “And in each battle ‘tis the winning belief what’s true and the conqueror whose vision is veritable,” says Captain Falcon.

“No—nossir!” objects freedman Negro stowaway Calhoun (who also seems to be familiar with Teresa of Avila and Aristippus) in a voice louder than he intended. “By my heart, sir, if something is true, it can’t be suppressed, can it, regardless of whether all the armies of the world stand ready to silence it?”

“You’re a smart boy,” says Falcon, “What d’you think? Is truth floatin’ round out there in space separate from persons? Now, be frank.”
Preliminary Remarks on The Meme and The Text

“No, but—“

Falcon has sprung his dualist trap on Calhoun. Even with opposing ideas, even if (as Falcon baits the trap) “both are true,” the rule of many is no good; let there be one ruler. It’s a zero-sum game, posits Falcon, even among ideas, for ideas are nothing without heads to hold them. The severed head holds none. Point, game, set. “Close reading” to discern a certain “function” within the text, merely an observation of the author’s style by one reader.

In fact, some truth IS “floatin’ round out there in space separate from persons.” The planet will continue to be an oblate spheroid, not caring a fig how many times flat-earth fundamentalists burn Copernicus at the stake or how many heads they “let’s roll.” Other realities such as justice, freedom, racism or barbarity will ebb and flow in the scheme of things depending on the number and power of the heads that hold them. They are real nonetheless, real as the qualia of the planet’s roundness. And these “abstractions” are just as physical as synapses and neurons.

The ancient roots of literary memes

The context of the Iliad line is Ulysses’ campaigning on his and Agamemnon’s behalf to maintain control of the expedition. A coincidence? This is an example of context within context, nesting like the Russian Matryoshka dolls. Take them apart, and sometimes you find a pearl of wisdom. Most of the time, you have a room full of disassembled parts.

Therein lies the problem. We need a more holistic perspective. “What word will accomplish this reactivation cannot be predicted or guaranteed,” says Marshall. In this publish-or-perish grow-or-die cost-benefit analysis world, we are taught to cut the goose open and get all the golden eggs out at once and save on goose food. Ending up with a handful of goose guts is patently unacceptable. So if we find no pearl of wisdom, we will simply invent one. Predictability must be guaranteed, even if it’s wrong. So stands the pecking order of theory. Captain Falcon echoes the Lucifer Principle; “Conflict,” says he, “is what it means to be conscious.”

“Dualism is a bloody structure of the mind,” continues Falcon. “Subject and object, perceiver and perceived, self and other—these ancient twins are built into the mind like a stem-piece of a merchantman. We cannot think without them, sir. And what, pray, kin such a thing mean? Only this, Mr. Calhoun: They are signs of a transcendental Fault, a deep crack in the consciousness itself. Mind was made for murder. Slavery, if you think this through, forcing yourself not to flinch, is the social correlate of a deeper, ontic wound.” (97-8)

Falcon could see that Calhoun was squirming and smiled.

“Let ‘em put me over the side. Before my dinghy’s out of sight, they’ll be arguing and pitching daggers till
there’s only one tar left alive. Such are my views.” He pushed back the table. “D’you still plan to help the
rebels set me adrift?”
“No.”
“That means you submit, doesn’t it?”
“I guess so.”
“See, ’tis always that way.”

In the text of *Middle Passage*, historicism and pluralistic cultural analysis would likely find no pearl. On the safe side,
they would leave no telltale goose guts either. Johnson skillfully (and perhaps willfully) knocks such critical
approaches into a cocked hat with his willy-nilly anachronisms and crazy-quilt cultural characters. Oh sure, Calhoun
(and Johnson himself) is a “black man,” so there’s your cultural analysis. The Republic is a slave ship, smack, there’s
your historicism.

To be fair, although clear and obvious historical/ cultural lines are obscure in Johnson’s novel, they are quite clear in the
readers’ heads. We all have a picture of the last century, slave ships, sea dogs with parrots and all that perched on our
schemata. Johnson cleverly takes bank shots off these preconceptions and creates elements that “resist immediate
absorption.” Yes, the story takes place aboard a slave ship, Calhoun is running away from marriage, the investors are
both black and white, and there are all the historical/ cultural/ gender preconceptions that invite a “systems of power”
approach.

“The knower’s own being comes into play.” We are greater than the sum of our parts, which cannot be isolated within
static systems of our contemporary worldview (but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t try). As the words themselves shift
shapes, so must the textual interpretation change its flavor. Mix the gestalt and the paper.

**The spandrel: “consciously created ambiguity”**

Henry James’ *Turn of the Screw* spins a memetic web of “consciously created ambiguity” where the mind of the reader
is part of the play. Works that resist or eliminate such ambiguity seldom evolve into the domain of great art or
literature. Popular works tend to favor certainty, although ambiguity does not guarantee “literary” status any more than
predictability makes “pulp.”

“This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, hearing they do not hear, nor do they
understand.” This said in a text more widely read and discussed than any other in the western world. Perhaps meaning
evades understanding to avoid giving to dogs that which is holy. But running afoul of old Pop Culture’s running dogs
is dangerous, so writers are free to posit the most abstract ontological theory in form of plot and character, discussion
and dialogue. That’s where it’s safe. The gods will not tremble.
Harmless enough, it’s only literature; it’s only a story. That is, until theory becomes dogma and the words become flesh and dwell among us. Such is the power of the meme, sifting out the gnat and swallowing the barn door after the camel is gone. Johnson can experiment with mangling mendacity as others mix metaphors. In this primordial soup of thought experiment, in a chaotic fractal universe of text and textuality, thought contagions are formed: mind viruses—memes.

“You don’t get ideas. Ideas get you.” The “Richard the Third humps and Macbeth daggers” were not clichés when Shakespeare created the stories… they became so as “distinct memorable units.” “And so,” said Melville, “much of the blind, unbridled admiration that has been heaped upon Shakespeare has been lavished upon the least part of him…”

And few of his endless commentators and critics seem to have remembered, or even perceived, that the immediate products of a great mind are not so great, as that undeveloped, (and sometimes undevelopable) yet dimly-discernible greatness, to which these immediate products are but the infallible indices. In Shakespeare's tomb lies infinitely more than Shakespeare ever wrote. And if I magnify Shakespeare, it is not so much for what he did do, as for what he did not do, or refrained from doing. For in this world of lies, Truth is forced to fly like a scared white doe in the woodlands; and only by cunning glimpses will she reveal herself, as in Shakespeare and other masters of the great Art of Telling the Truth,—even though it be covertly, and by snatches.

--Herman Melville, *Hawthorne and His Mosses*

To magnify Shakespeare for what he did *not* do? How can this possibly make sense? It makes sense in light of seeing “some connection nobody else sees.” Great authors are idea filters; distillers and mutation points. They violate the pecking order of ideas in some places and follow it in others. Like the old decoy maker who “takes a block of wood and carves off everything that doesn’t look like a duck,” the ideas authors exclude often determine the ones they use.

Artists are allowed a license that scientists can ill afford; speculation without documentation. Scientists enjoy a status that artists often envy; utility and belief. This duality is somewhat unfair to both. Extreme risk-aversion and results-orientation can produce “bad” science, just as ungrounded rambling fantasy is apt to correspond to kitsch. Talented artists and scientists recognize the co-dependency of their disciplines. Mediocrity does not appreciate the flow between the two unless it produces spectacular results.

Memes are part of the web between the disciplines. This is why the “genre” of Science Fiction holds such promise, and more work from this corner of literature should find its way into the canon.

Today we may be seeing a new convergence of explorations of the human condition by artists and scientists—not because scientists are trying to take over the humanities, but because artists and humanists are beginning to look to the sciences, or at least to the scientific mindset that sees us as a species with a complex psychological endowment. (418)

--Steven Pinker, *the blank slate*
From *Bartleby* to *bellwether*

The great amount of reading, research and experience—the great “Art of Telling the Truth” reveals itself in great writers’ works, even if it is “covertly, and by snatches.” It isn’t documented, footnoted, cross-referenced or databased, but it’s there. Follow the “scared white doe” and pick up her trail through Melville’s *Bartleby* to Willis’ *bellwether*. One can see the state. The woodlands’ superorganism,—ideas and pecking order in the memosphere of American Literature.

Is “progressive,” literature evolving toward a “good” thing for a “good” reason? Here in the play we bite the forbidden fruit and make value judgments, a fate that returns men to the ground and women escape through servitude Otherwise, we’re no better than “animals,” (gasp) and save us all from a death like this on the reef of Moral Relativism. So we look for “values”—measuring by distinct memorable units -- from Art to Zeitgeist-- to quantify and critique — maybe using Quantum Mechanics like a weak flashlight to avoid stepping in a Sokal hoax. Are we seeing what we want to see, or what’s really there? What’s the difference?

He shook *A Night To Remember* at them. “They say the dead can’t speak, but they can! The people in this book died over sixty years ago, in the middle of the ocean, with no one around them for miles, but they still speak to you. They still send us messages—about love and courage and death! That’s what history is, and science and art. That’s what literature is. It’s the people who went before us, tapping out messages from the past, from beyond the grave, trying to tell us about life and death! Listen to them!” (Willis, *Passages*, p 544)

Literary Memetics (if it existed), indeed our newly emerging cognitive sciences, confronts a self like Santa Claus. Is there a little man who lives at the North Pole? Red suit? Flying reindeer? Presents down the chimney and all like that? Probably not. At least, not based on replicable, quantifiable observation. Santa Claus is as real as little kids’ dreams. Nothing is more real than that, and nothing is real. Maybe the memetic perspective can do for art what Arabs did for mathematics over a thousand years ago: invent the zero, an essential integer. Yet it means nothing.

“Mr. Briarly, please! This is important.”
“Indeed it is. Well? He said and looked out over the passage as if it were a classroom. “What is a metaphor? Anyone?”
“A metaphor is a figure of speech that likens two objects.”
“Wrong and wrong again,” he said. “The likeness is already there. The metaphor only sees it. And it is not a mere figure of speech. It is the very essence of our minds as we seek to make sense of our surroundings, our experiences, ourselves, seeing similarities, parallels, and connections. We cannot help it. Even as the mind fails, it goes on trying to make sense of what is happening to it” (Willis, *Passages*, p 468)

So we confront the sacred text, “Literature,” and the varying degrees of canonicity, those “immediate products” that “are but the infallible indices.” If fallibility does exist, it is because our mind is “trying to make sense of what is happening to it.” "We do not first see and then define, we define first and then see,” Melville, consciously or
unconsciously, provided a striking metaphor as Willis does with this “meta” metaphor:

“The perfect metaphor.” He said, “looming up suddenly out of nowhere in the middle of your maiden voyage, unseen until it is nearly upon you, unavoidable even when you try to swerve, unexpected even though there have been warnings all along. Literature is a warning, “he said… (Willis, Passages, 492)

Literature warns us as we float like diatoms in the primordial soup of human culture. It enables us to navigate the current time as zeitgeist oozes over our mashed potato memories and flows into the posterity’s prospective peas. Metaphors are our perceptual tectonic plate, served below our memosphere, where memes precipitate like pepper into the sentient salad at our brief supper ego. Perhaps consciousness is an illusion and the banquet goes unattended.

Annie Dillard (a devout believer) says God won’t put a nickel’s worth of sense in any of it. Jesus Christ says look for it and you will find it. Should it be true?

**Terror is not of the soul, but of the meme**

In 1997, Blackmore wrote, “I have shown how a theory of Memetics provides new answers to some important questions about human nature. If I am right, then we humans are the product of two replicators, not just one. In the past hundred years we have successfully thrown off the illusion that a God is needed to understand the design of our bodies. Perhaps in the next millennium we can throw off the illusion that conscious agents are needed to understand the design of our minds.” Therefore: Ideas have their own agency.

Blackmore also says,”We now have a radically new answer to the question "Who am I?", and a rather terrifying one. "I" am one of the many co-adapted meme-complexes living within this brain. This scary idea may explain why Memetics is not more popular. Memetics deals a terrible blow to the supremacy of self.” If Blackmore finds God-isn’t-there a tough sell, our-selves-are-not-there will be on the shelf forever. Unfortunately, like many unpopular human-centric-myth poppers, she’s probably right.

Melville touched the present when “Bartleby” was first published in 1853, and it wasn’t until 1859 that Darwin published On the Origin of Species. Sigmund Freud would not be born for another three years. Marx had just invented historical materialism. How did Melville manage to write such a perceptive ditty involving a personality disorder, a socialist perspective on Wall Street, a perfect example of the neo-Darwinist concept of Memetics posited by Richard Dawkins in 1976? Was Melville probing the axis of reality?
Bartleby’s metaphors dust the Lakoff

Trapped between subject and object, left and right hemisphere, approaching Cartesian Scylla and Charybdis on Mellville’s author ship Cosmic Duality, Bartleby is swept into the story, a tin pan Victorian memosphere of Dickens’ London-on-the-Hudson awash in New York words and characters like Nipper, Ginger Nut and Turkey. But there’s something strange about this character. And whether the watchmaker is blind or not, you wonder-- what is making Bartleby tick with the very first, “I would prefer not to.”

“Prefer not to, “ echoed I, rising in high excitement, and crossing the room with a stride. “What do you mean? Are you moonstruck? I want you to help me compare this sheet here—take it,” and I thrust it towards him.”

Take it Bartleby. Free Will? Self? Illusions. And only illusions for those who can afford them. The rest of us are driven blindly on by the replicators in our systems, chemicals as genes, thoughts as memes, whose totally unconscious purpose is to make copies of themselves. In the end, you must realize we have no choice.

I would prefer not to. Moonstruck. “Luny,” says Ginger Nut. Shuts down, does Bartleby, like a ship with a flooded boiler. Bartleby copies things, that’s what a Scrivener does, a human Xerox machine. First Bartleby “prefers not to” proof his work. Then “prefers not to” copy at all. Then “prefers not to” leave, and eventually Bartleby “prefers not to” to live and wastes away in The Tombs. Preferring not to replicate memes is very much like preferring not to replicate cells. But before that, early in the story we are infected with Bartleby’s meme.

Somehow of late, I had grown into the way of involuntarily using of this word, “prefer” upon all sorts of not exactly suitable occasions. And I trembled to think that my contact with the scrivener had already and seriously affected me in a mental way. And what further and deeper aberration might it not yet produce? This apprehension had not been without efficacy in determining me to summary measures. (emphasis added)

The narrator continues,

…surely I must get rid of a demented man, who already has in some degree turned the tongues, if not the heads of myself and clerks. But I thought it prudent not to break this dismission at once. The next day I noticed that Bartleby did nothing but stand at his window in his dead-wall revery. Upon asking him why he did not why he did not write, he said that he had decided upon doing more writing. “Why, how now? What next?” exclaimed I, “do no more writing?” “No more.” “And what is the reason?” “Do you not see the reason for yourself?” (emphasis added)

He did not. We do not. Mellville’s critics and readers have been speculating on the reason ever since. Did Melville know? Does it matter? Bartleby does not write. He copies. He used to be on the terminus of writing, in the Dead Letter office. The letters had their origin, and Bartleby was their destination for the time being. As a scrivener,
Bartleby is neither origin nor destination but a medium, a cog in the machine that shunts the memes from pointless origin to unknown destination. We are all like Bartleby.

We are afraid to contradict the canned and common answers the cultural milieu and zeitgeist-created memeplexes webbed into our schema. Beyond fear, *Kann nicht anders*, we can not otherwise. And why not? Because the odds are against it. Certainly we can. Probably, we won’t. Science appears to be pressing us toward a world of probability where certainty is unknown. Steven Weinberg is quoted out of context, “The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it seems pointless.” To whom? To meme, that’s whom. Replication is a fearful reason for your self. But, “pointless?”

The Bartleby within all of us can’t handle pointless. We tremble at the thought, as Thomas Gray said, “The paths of glory lead but to the grave,” because our physical manifolds find the outcome uncertain. Even Einstein feared the abyss, saying, “I will never believe that God plays dice with the world,” even after admitting that “Physical concepts are free creations of the human mind, and are not, however it may seem, uniquely determined by the external world.” Recent work by Lakoff, Sack, Ramachandrin, Dawkins, Blackmore and others perpetuate the uncertainty of perception.

**The music of the hemispheres**

New evidence suggests that the right hemisphere of brains (and this is an oversimplification) acts as a kind of junk drawer. From it, the logical left hemisphere extracts only what it can “use,” that is, what fits into our perception of “the way it oughta be.” As the workaday world forces us to be more left-hemisphere oriented, these unordered impressions; these unusable memes become suppressed and invisible. It is the stock in trade of all artists, including authors, to rummage around in that junk drawer, as fearful as it may be.

Blackmore writes:

*Imagine a world full of brains, and far more memes than can possibly find homes. Which memes are more likely to find a safe home and get passed on again?* Imagine a meme that encourages its host to keep on mentally rehearsing it, or a tune that is so easy to hum that it goes round and round in your head, or a thought that just compels you to keep thinking it. Imagine in contrast a meme that buries itself quietly in your memory and is never rehearsed, or a tune that is too unmemorable to go round in your head, or a thought that is too boring to think again. Which will do better? Other things being equal, the first lot will. Rehearsal aids memory, and you are likely to express (or even sing) the ideas and tunes that fill your waking hours. What is the consequence? The memosphere fills up with catchy tunes, and thinkable thoughts. (1997)

It is incumbent on writers like Melville and Willis (and scientists like Einstein and Ramachandrin) to think the
unthinkable. What we call “intuitive” or “emotional” generally resides in our right hemisphere, the junk drawer, the Dead Letter Office. This is our passage to the abyss, we can use Willis as a counterpoint to Melville to try to illustrate how two authors’ visits to that passage did (and may) illuminate their own times in ways that may seem prophetic… but are merely metaphorical observations of a place most of us are driven from by fear… and our own absurd concept of the pragmatic.

Dead letters! Does it not sound like dead men? Conceive of a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters, and assorting them for the flames?

On the errands of life, these letters speed to death.

Ah, Bartleby! Ah, Humanity!

A sign of the times

In the memosphere of 1853, there was a trope of hope. Bartleby’s narrator opens by establishing the “late” John Jacob Astor as an ideal. Astor died in 1848 when Marx and Engels issued the “Communist Manifesto,” Mill published “Principles of Political Economy,” and the California gold rush was underway. Jayne Eyre and Wuthering Heights were on the literary scene, as was David Copperfield, Sonnets from the Portuguese, The Scarlet Letter and Representative Men.

Poe died in 1849. The schooner “America” brought America’s Cup to the U.S. in 1851. Wisconsin became a state in 1848, Uncle Tom’s Cabin was kindling the fire of Abolition in 1853. Astor’s American Fur Company was a monopoly, and at the time of his death Astor was worth $20 million (approximately $78 billion by today’s standards).

The Astor Library opened in New York City in 1849, where Melville lived and worked as a customs inspector for over twenty years after he gave up trying to make a living as a writer in 1857. In a little over a decade (1846-57) Melville produced a body of work that lives larger than it did in his own time. As the rush for gold began, Literature issued its warning. There was something darker than gold in them thar hills.

In he memosphere where Willis wrote bellwether in 1997, there was the screed of greed; dead center in the dot com bubble with unchecked advance of global corporations. Yet bellwether provides a fascinating counterpoint to Bartleby. First of all, what each author did not do. There is no mention of gender relationships in Bartleby, there is no mention of death in bellwether, each central themes in the congruent stories. Why is this? Both stories are reflections of their times; from the Victorian culture of death, from the era of feminism.
Melville’s allegory of Wall Street has proven to be frighteningly accurate. And as Melville argued for Hawthorne to be considered as seriously as Shakespeare, so one must assert that Willis should be considered as seriously as Melville. But alas, she is happy (and quite successful) in her Science Fiction “genre” while the dominant Determinists appear to be winning the “canon wars” as Amy Tan says, “for all the wrong reasons.”

Will the great “Art of Telling the Truth” ultimately endure? “By my heart, sir, if something is true, it can’t be suppressed, can it, regardless of whether all the armies of the world stand ready to silence it?” The Captain Falcon in our culture is yet ready with the counterpoint. For memetic theory asserts that the survivability or success of ideas has little to do with their veracity or falseness. Memetic awareness has the potential to change all that. In *Thought Contagion*, Aaron Lynch writes:

> By now, readers looking at the new model of belief propagation may wonder, will the theory propagate by its own principles, and what if it does? The answer matters, since hopes for more intelligence at the population level depend on knowing why we collectively believe as we do. Much as mental self-awareness plays a central role in the consciousness of an individual, so must memetic self-awareness become central to a more conscious population. Without it, intense ideologies around the world will keep spiraling out of control with reckless abandon—scarcely more self-aware than the planet’s weather. (175)

We come now to the role of Literature, more specifically, the position of Willis’ *bellwether* and “literary Memetics.” Willis’ book lacks the subtitle that *Bartleby* did (A Story of Wall Street), but it could be “a story of fads and fashions,” or “a story of culture” or “thought contagion” or “a sign of the times.” It would be presumptuous to second-guess the author. We assert here that Willis’ gift of prophecy and allegory portends as much for our time and culture that *Bartleby* did in its own position.

**A fire: *bellwether in the night***

Willis sets up her story with a grand pastiche of corporate culture, chaos theory, the role of science and predictability. It is told from the first-person narrative perspective (as was *Bartleby*), in this case, a Dr. Sandra Foster who works for HiTek, the current paradigm of a soulless-brainless corporation run by “Management.” The “river” allegory of variables is underscored in the title of each section; “beginning,” “bubblings,” “tributaries,” “rapids,” and “main channel.” HiTek pays Sandra Foster to research fads… presumably with the goal of starting or controlling them for monetary gain. It is, as Dr. Foster explains, like finding the source of the Nile.

Willis begins in the first-person narrative voice of Dr. Foster:

> It’s almost impossible to pinpoint the beginning of a fad. By the time it starts to look like one, its origins are far in the past, and trying to trace them is exponentially harder than, say, looking for the source of the Nile.
In the first place, there’s probably more than one source, and in the second, you’re dealing with human behavior. All Speke and Burton had to deal with were crocodiles, rapids, and the tsetse fly. In the third, we know something about how rivers work, like, they flow downhill. Fads seem to spring full-blown out of nowhere for no good reason. Witness bungee-jumping and Lava lamps. Scientific discoveries are the same way. People like to think of science as rational and reasonable, following step by step from hypothesis to experiment to conclusion. Dr. Chin, last year’s winner of the Niebnitz Grant, wrote, “The process of scientific discovery is the logical extension of observation by experimentation.” Nothing could be further from the truth. The process is exactly like any other human endeavor—messy, haphazard, misdirected, and heavily influenced by chance. Look at Alexander Fleming who discovered penicillin when a spore drifted in the window of his lab and contaminated one of his cultures. (1-2)

There’s more than one way to contaminate a culture. In his article, “Why Literature?” appearing in *New Republic* and *The Best American Essays*, Mario Vargas Llosa notes; “We live in the era of the specialization of knowledge, thanks to the prodigious development of science and technology and to the subsequent fragmentation of knowledge into innumerable parcels and compartments.” This compartmentalization, asserts Llosa, prevents us from seeing the forest for the trees. The commonality of experience in Literature enables broader connections, even produces descriptions like “Orwellian” or Kafkaesque.”

Literature is also the birthplace of many paradigm shifts. “In all great literary texts, often without their authors’ intending it, a seditious inclination is present,” writes Llosa. Acting as a counter to the “…principal traits of conformism and universal submission of humankind to power,” Literature, the bastion against barbarity. Without it, “Basic instincts would determine the daily practices of a life characterized by the struggle for survival, and the fear of the unknown, and the satisfaction of physical necessities,” sermonizes Llosa. Sounds like a typical day at the cubefarm.

In *bellwether*, Willis treats this very subject with a greater subtlety and precision afforded to the novelist over the essayist. True, the “fragmentation of knowledge” exists, but it has been a factor from the beginning of “civilization.” Science is not the enemy; rather it is our own misinterpretation of the method. We have business euphemisms to mask the “fragmentation” of knowledge as “focusing on core competencies.” Willis’ protagonist, Dr. Foster, is an avid reader. Here she notes that libraries, far from being holdouts against the hordes, can be an open invitation.

One of the nastier trends in library management in recent years is the notion that libraries should be “responsive to their patrons.” This means having dozens of copies of The Bridges of Madison County and Danielle Steel, and a consequent shortage of shelf space, to cope with which libraries have taken to purging books that haven’t been checked out lately. “Why are you throwing out Dickens?” I’d asked Loraine last year at the library book sale, brandishing a copy of *Bleak House* at her. “You can’t throw out Dickens.” “Nobody checked it out,” she’d said. “If no one checks a book out for a year, it gets taken off the shelves.” She had been wearing a sweatshirt that said A TEDDY BEAR IS FOREVER, and a pair of plush teddy bear earrings. “Obviously nobody read it.”
“And nobody ever will because it won’t be there for them to check out,” I’d said. “Bleak House is a wonderful book.”

“Then this is your chance to buy it.”

Well, and this was a trend like any other, and as a sociologist I should note it with interest and try to determine its origins. Instead, I started checking out books. All my favorites, which I’d never checked out because I had copies at home, and all the classics, and everything with an old cloth binding that somebody might want to read someday when the current trends of sentimentality and schlock are over. (21-2)

Here we have the pecking order (selection pressure) at work. Like the “Dickensonian” environment of New York with which Melville sets the stage in Bartleby, Willis does the same with her “Orwellian” setting of HiTech. “Management” is the metonymic personification of misinterpretation of the method. They seek the prestige and position of the mysterious Niebnitz Grant, awarded for “scientific sensibility” and “divergent thinking.” Of course “Management” has no idea what this is. No matter, they have a process for it. They have a process for everything. And the hapless workers, brilliant scientists though they are, adapt in their own way, just like Nippers, Gingernut and Turkey.

“All right, fellow workers,” Management said. “Do you have your five objectives?” Flip, would you collect them? “

Elaine looked stricken. Gina snatched the list from her and wrote rapidly:

1. Optimize potential.
2. Facilitate empowerment.
3. Implement visioning.
4. Strategize priorities.
5. Augment core structures.

“How did you do that? I said admiringly.

“These are the five things I always write down,” she said and handed the list to Flip as she slouched past. (36)

And there’s Flip, who seems to be the antagonist. Whenever Flip locomotes anywhere, she does not walk, stumble, strut or stride. She slouches. Flip is the Foucaultian light Fandango, the postmodern paradigm; piercing, duct tape, branding and all. She slouches through the novel, spreading chaos and disorder. We meet Shirl Creets, a matronly stand-up, competent character that seems to be everything Flip is not. It would be literary indeed to position Shirl as the fuddy-duddy formalist and Flip as the Derrida dancer, Lyotards and all. But that would be contrived. However, to any modern reader imprisoned in the belly of the corporate beast, Management with its acronym-of-the-week rings true… like a fire bell in the night.

Flip as the tip; Shirl as the pearl

The “tip of the iceberg,” the “pearl of wisdom”—so many of the “metaphors we live by” that are webbed in our schema. They join the complex dance of our genes and memes—to make culture what it is and to make our “selves” who we are. These “distinct memorable units” determine our position in the “superorganism” of culture. Within the
world of Willis’ novel, the characters have their complements. Along with the balance of Flip and Shirl, there’s Bennett (Ben) O’Reilly, Sandra Foster’s partner and potential paramour, a chaos theorist studying primate behavior.

The characters can represent greater things. They always have. More recently, the eco-perspective suggests that nature or place or setting itself can be a character. That such “non-human” elements can also represent a “character,” an active element in the story, is a relatively new idea, but gaining acceptance in literature. The idea that “ideas themselves” can be non-human, that is, can exist without brains to think them, is being resisted fiercely (or ignored). But, “By my heart, sir, if something is true, it can’t be suppressed, can it, regardless of whether all the armies of the world stand ready to silence it?” “Truth” is indeed distinct and separate from “the great Art of Telling the Truth.”

By now, Foster believes there is some kind of connection between fads and chaos theory. A larger set of cascading events can indeed have a single source, like a river. But can one consciously choose to be the single butterfly that causes the typhoon elsewhere on the planet? We have not met Shirl Creets yet, and by now Flip is the poster-person for chaos. But in the following passage, we see how ideas themselves become part of the interaction. More importantly, they are ideas formed into distinct memorable units. In this case, Foster embodies the single source of cascading events into a character from a story by Robert Browning.

Friday Flip brought the new funding application. It was sixty-eight pages long and poorly stapled. Three pages fell out of it as Flip slouched in the door and two more as she handed it to me. “Thank you, Flip,” I said, and smiled at her.

The night before I had read the last two thirds of Pippa Passes, during which Pippa had talked two murderously adulterous lovers into killing themselves, convinced a deceived young student to choose love over revenge, and reformed assorted ne’er-do-wells. And all just by chirping, “The year’s at the spring,/And the day’s at the morn.” Think what she could have done if she’d had a library card.

“You can change the world,” Browning was clearly saying, “By being perky and signaling before turning left, one can have a positive effect on society,” and it was obvious from “The Pied Piper” that he understood how trends worked.

I hadn’t noticed any of these effects, but then neither had Pippa, who had presumably gone back to work at the silk factory the next day without any notion of all the good she had done. I could see her at the staff meeting Management had called to introduce their new management system. PESTO. Right after the sensitivity exercise her coworker would lean over and whisper, “So, Pippa, what did you do on your day off?” and Pippa would shrug and say, “Nothing much. You know, hung out.”

So I might be having more of an effect on literacy and left-turn leaning than I realized, and, by being pleasant and polite, could stop the downward trend to rudeness.

Of course, Browning had never met Flip. But it was worth a try, and I had the comfort of knowing I couldn’t possibly make things worse.

So, even though Flip had made no effort to pick up the spilled pages and was, in fact, standing on one of them, I smiled at her and said, “How are you this morning?”

Oh just great,” she said sarcastically. Perfectly fine.” She flopped down onto the hair-bobbing clippings on my lab table. “You will not believe what they expect me to do now!” (48-9)

Poor overworked Flip needs an assistant workplace message facilitation director. A literary memetecist (if there were
such a thing) would need to note here that the works of Browning, specifically songs from *Pippa Passes* and lines from *The Pied Piper*, are used throughout the book as epigraphs and references, are used to show how single source for cascading events and blind following enable the protagonist to form these complex ideas into distinct memorable units. Foster and O’Reilly meet when Flip misdelivers a package. HiTeck is obsessed with the mysterious Niebnitz Grant.

“Nobody knows who gives it, what they give it for, or even when it’s given.” (78)

“**Oh no,**” I murmured. “Management expects us to win a Niebnitz Grant.

“How can they?” Bennet whispered, “Nobody even knows how they’re awarded.”

Management cast a cold eye in our direction. “The Niebnitz Grant Committee is looking for outstanding projects with the potential for significant scientific breakthroughs, which is what GRIM is all about. Now I’d like you to get in groups and write down five things you can do to win the Niebnitz Grant.”

“Pray,” Bennet said.

I grabbed a piece of paper and wrote down:

1. Optimize potential.
2. Facilitate empowerment
3. Implement visioning
4. Strategize priorities
5. Augment core structures

“What’s that?” Bennet said, looking at the list. “Those things make no sense.”

“Neither does expecting us to win the Niebnitz Grant.” I handed the paper in. (79)

And finally, we meet Shirl Creets. Salty and mysterious, she seems far too competent and overqualified to be an assistant for Flip. And the iceberg? It’s “looming up suddenly out of nowhere in the middle of your maiden voyage.”

By now it is obvious that Willis has done an extensive amount of reading, about fads, about scientific discoveries, about chaos. Like Hemingway’s “iceberg,” the characters’ interaction becomes far deeper in the mind of the reader.

The character interaction includes the interaction of unnamed memetic characters—the “artifact and accurate forgery” dynamic. While HiTek is concerned primarily with the prestige and visibility of the Niebnitz Grant, Ben and Sandra are driven by curiosity, their fondness for discovery. Shirl Creets is a smoker—which causes problems in the antismoking corporate culture. How she managed to get hired is anyone’s guess—but here she takes an interest in Sandra’s work:

*Mandelbrot diagrams,*” she said interestingly. “Is that what you’re researching?”

“No,” I said. “Fad origins. I was just reading that out of curiosity. They are connected though. Fads are a facet of the chaotic system of society, with a number of variables contributing to them.”

She stacked *Brave New World* and *All’s Well that Ends Well* on top of the chaos theory book without comment and picked up *Flappers, Flivvers, and Flagpole Sitters.* “What made you choose fads?” she said disapprovingly.

“You don’t like fads?”

“I just think there are more direct ways of influencing society than starting a fad. I had a physics teacher who used to say, ‘Pay no attention to what other people are doing. Do what you want, and you can change the world.’”

“Oh, I don’t want to discover how to start them,” I said. I suppose HiTek does, and that’s why they keep funding the project, although if the mechanism is as complex as it’s beginning to look, they’ll never be able
to isolate the critical variable, at which point they’ll probably stop funding me.” I looked at the dance marathon notes. “What I want to do is understand what causes them.”

“Why?” she said curiously.

“Because I just want to understand. Why do people act the way they do? Why do they all suddenly decide to play the same game or wear the same clothes or believe the same thing? In the 1920s smoking was a fad. Now it’s anti-smoking. Why? Is it instinctive behavior or societal influences? Or is it something in the air? The Salem witch trials were caused by fear and greed, but they’re always around, and we don’t burn witches all the time, so there must be something else going on.

“I just don’t understand what, I said. “And it doesn’t look like I will anytime soon. I don’t seem to be getting anywhere. You don’t happen to know what caused hair-bobbing do you?” (108)

Interestingly… Willis rarely uses “Tom-Swifty” adverbs. Perhaps she does so here to bring Shirl’s character to the fore, to give her some kind of “observer” status. Shirl knows very little about hair-bobbing. What Shirl does know carries us through the “rapids” and into the “main channel” of the novel.

The title goes up in smoke

Ben, like so many others at HiTek, is working outside his field. As a chaos theoretician, work became scarce when the chaos theory fad passed (science has its fads—like everything else) and he found a home at HiTek working on information diffusion. Specifically, he was teaching a new skill to a single macaque and documenting its spread through the troop, working on comparing the spread of utilitarian versus nonutilitarian skills. When “Management” gets apprehensive about adverse publicity from “animal experiments,” Ben loses his macaques, his funding, and his job is at risk.

Sandra, who is casually dating a sheep rancher, gets the idea to combine projects with Ben. Borrow a flock of sheep, teaching any skill, utilitarian or otherwise, to sheep is daunting for the city slickers, resulting in pages of slapstick, more chaos, and more insight into chaotic systems and discovery by chance. There are references to fads behaving like a virus… some seem immune… thought contagion. No one is safe from managerial incompetence. But the paddock outside is the only safe place for Shirl to smoke. There she is, leaning on the fence, watching the scientists trying herd sheep by the book.

She took a long drag on her cigarette. “You need a bellwether,” she said.

“A bellwether?” Ben said. “What’s that? A special kind of halter?”

She shook her head. “A leader.”

“Like a sheepdog?” I said.

“No. A dog can harry and guide and keep the sheep in line, but it can’t make them follow. A bellwether’s a sheep.”

“A special breed?” Ben asked?

“Nope. Same breed. Same sheep, only it’s got something that makes the rest of the flock follow it. Usually it’s an old ewe, and some people think it’s something to do with hormones, other people think it’s something in their looks. A teacher of mine said they’re born with some kind of leadership ability.”
“Attention structure,” Ben said. “Dominant male monkeys have it.”
“What do you think?” I said.
“Me?” she said, looking at the smoke from her cigarette twisting upward. “I think a bellwether’s the same as any other sheep only more so. A little hungrier, a little faster, a little greedier. It wants to get to the feed first, to shelter, to a mate, so it’s always out there in front.” She stopped to take a drag on her cigarette. “Not a lot. If it was a long way in front, the flock’d have to strike out on their own to follow, and that’d mean thinking for themselves. Just a little bit, so they don’t know they’re being led. And the bellwether doesn’t know it’s leading.” (166-7)

The bellwether: a little hungrier, a little faster, a little greedier. The sheep don’t know they’re being led. The bellwether doesn’t know it’s leading. The flock is the superorganism. The pecking order is opaque. The “ideas” are genetic; food, shelter, mating. We even learn the identity of the bellwether. She is Pippa. She is not chaos, but inspiration. She is the butterfly that causes the typhoon. And she has a name: Orliotti, Phillipa J. Why, Flip… of course.

The happy ending: great things

Sandra and Ben are awarded the Niebnitz grant: a million dollars, no strings attached, to continue their research, take a cruise, whatever. And of course they have fallen in love. Willis includes a romantic interest in all of her novellas, not necessarily her short stories. It is as if she is insisting that it’s part of the human fabric. And it is. Genes and memes. The mysterious benefactor? Shirl Creets… naturally: somebody predisposed to wealth, someone extremely competent, someone who thinks for herself and wants others to do the same.

Sandra triumphs over management. “You shouldn’t be looking for the secret to making people follow fads,” she tells the flummoxed faceless villain, “you should be looking for the secret to making them think for themselves. Because that’s what science is all about. And because the next fad may be the dangerous one, and you’ll find it out with the rest of the flock on your way over the cliff.” (226) When we last see Shirl, the fairy godmother, she has finished fixing a copy machine.

Of course Shirl won’t directly admit to being the sole benefactor of the Niebnitz grant. But Sandra offers some advice: “Scientific breakthroughs involve combining ideas no one thought to connect before, seeing connections nobody saw before. Chaotic systems create feedback loops that tend to randomize the elements of the system, displace them, shake them around so they’re next to elements they’ve never come in contact with before. Chaotic systems tend to increase in chaos, but not always. Sometimes they restabilize into a new level of order.” (242)

“What if instead of being hindrances, the noise and the damp laundry and the cramped apartment all combined to create a situation in which new ideas coalesce?” (241) Maybe great things do come out of terrible things. If so, it probably works the other way as well. Is it always the unconscious bellwether or butterfly, unaware of the consequences a world
away, that makes a difference in the chaos beyond our measure?

“Goodbye,” I said, and kissed her on her leathery cheek.
“What was that for?” she grumbled, rubbing at her cheek with her hand.
“Fixing the copy machine,” I said. “Oh by the way,” I called after her. “Who’s the Niebnitz Grant named after?”
“Alfred Taylor Niebnitz” she said without turning her head. “My high school physics teacher.” (242)

I think my friend Paul made a difference like that.

So here in Willis’ novella, we are introduced to the birth of a theory. A fictional theory, perhaps, but with all good fiction, especially good “science” fiction, grounded in what we know… or believe we know…our accurate forgeries, the taxonomies of our own artifice that lie within our measure. Good theories must be testable, must make predictions, and Willis’ protagonist does so in closing:

A theory is only as good as its ability to predict behavior. Mendeleev predicted that the blanks in his periodic table would be filled with elements of certain atomic weights and properties. The subsequent discoveries of gallium, scandium, and germanium bore out his predictions.

…

The bellwether theory of chaotic systems is just that, and Ben and I are still in the early stages of our research. But I’m willing to hazard a few predictions:

…

As to the spiritual, angels are out and fairies will be in, particularly fairy godmothers, which, after all, do exist. Merchandisers will make a killing on them and lose their shirts trying to anticipate the next craze.

…

And in some company or research institute or college, an overqualified mail clerk who is overweight or wears fur or carries a Bible will be hired, and the scientists therein would do well to remember their childhood fairy tales. There will be a sharp upswing in significant scientific breakthroughs, and chaos, as usual, will reign. I predict great things.

This morning, I met Flip’s replacement. I’d gone up to Stats to collect my hair-bobbing data, she was coming out of the copy room, trailing someone’s memos behind her.
She had lavender hair, arranged in a fountain effect, with several strands of barbed wire wrapped around it. She was wearing a bowling shirt, pedal pushers, black patent tap shoes, and orange lipstick.

“Are you the new mail clerk?”
She pursed her orange lips in disdain. “It’s workplace message facilitation director,” she said, emphasizing every syllable. “And what business is it of yours, anyway?”
“Welcome to HiTek”, I said, and would have shaken her hand except that she was wearing a barbed-wire ring.
Great things. (245-7)

**Conclusion: fade to black…**

These are simply more preliminary remarks on literary Memetics, a discipline that does not yet exist, based on a theory that has yet to gain acceptance. As far as I know, Daniel Rancour-Laferriere who bravely offered “Speculations on the Origin of Visual Iconicity in Culture” made the initial preliminary remarks in a 1979 *Ars Semeiotica* article. Therein he
posed the question:

What can semiosis in nature teach the student of culture, whose object of study has been traditionally thought of as artificial, civilized, or otherwise isolated from nature? What can cultural semiosis possibly have to do with natural semiosis which take place in, say, chimpanzee communication, territorial bird calls, the transfer of genetic information, etc.?

--Laferriere, 173

Laferriere closes his article with a specific mention of memes, and much has been done to advance the theory since then. "Memes exist in the brain as neural traces of some kind," speculates Laferriere (184), and recent work is hot on the trail of exactly what kind of neural traces and connections. Much has been done, but not nearly enough.

The prediction here is that, as Lynch says, “intense ideologies around the world will keep spiraling out of control with reckless abandon.” There are more important theories, for example Richard C. Duncan’s “Olduvai Theory” which predicts the collapse of industrial civilization due to the downside of the “Peak Oil” or Hubbert Peak within the next fifty years.

Outside of a few environmentalists and the petroleum industry, the Olduvai Theory receives little notice or attention. The intense ideologies about whose mythical anthropomorphic cloud-being is better and what “He” determines or desires continues to drive the planet toward global war and deaths in the countless millions. A discussion of the relationship between cultural semiosis and natural semiosis seems moot indeed. Maybe not.

Memes have gained some popular purchase, and have managed to cross some disciplinary barriers to become a more accessible handle on culture. In the Michigan Law Review, May 99, Vol. 97 Issue 6, David Charny writes:

The “memetic” conception of culture is a curious echo of the modernist aesthetic of the fragmentary which finds its most prominent exemplars in works such as Eliot’s “Waste Land,” Pound’s Cantos, Stein’s prose poems or Joyce’s Finnegans Wake. In these works, quotations ripped from context and set down with an appearance of arbitrariness or discontinuity provide the basic material for new works of art. This method contrasts sharply with the more traditional methods of allusion or incorporation in which the poet rings his own subtle changes on a familiar image or trope: say, the weary ploughman returning home from a hard day in the fields. Rather, in the literature of the fragment, the form of detachment or discontinuity underscores the sense of a radical break from the past meanings—an inevitable loss of sense of aura. “These fragments I have shored against my ruin”(n25)—the pathos here is that the grasping of the fragment is really an emblem or symptom of the impending cultural disintegration. Memetic analysis seems to look at this fragmentariness in an up-to-date, techno-optimistic, celebratory light. The change of mood may be refreshing, but the intellectual maneuver begs a key methodological question: are these fragments memes that have been successfully transmitted? Or does their context make them new memes that look like old ones but as such are mere imposters or replicants? One can tell only by an act of interpretation which treats the work as a whole, in light of stipulative canons of interpretation or aesthetic judgment.

The hosts of the “intense ideologies” have a distinct selection advantage, as do the ideologies themselves. By
suppressing thinking and science, by encouraging mysticism, belief in faith or superstition, people can be taken out of
definitive reality and into one defined by those who control the Pavlovian bell, the ideas that define under pain of
damnation, reward of salvation. That’s the meme’s struggle for survival, not ours.

But “if something is true, it can’t be suppressed, can it, regardless of whether all the armies of the world stand ready to
silence it.” After the cataclysm, culture may “restabilize into a new level of order.” Out of the fragments of the
“impending cultural disintegration,” we may “shore the fragments against the ruin.” We may yet gain a more conscious
population rather than a few enlightened individuals. Maybe the Renaissance will catch on. Perhaps we can all
become our own bellwether and attain Enlightenment.

Unless, of course, we would prefer not to.

(Freeze frame)

Roll credits:

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**Out Takes:**

When you’re a writer, the question people always ask you is, “Where do you get your ideas?” It’s like asking Humphrey Bogart in *The African Queen*, “Where do you get your leeches? You don’t get ideas. Ideas get you. You see something or hear something or read something, and unlike the hundreds of other things you’ve seen and heard and read, this one triggers something—some connection nobody else sees—and you know you’ll never be able to explain it. So you write a story about it. “Idea” is even the wrong word. It implies something rational, a concept, a thought, and there’s usually nothing rational about it. It’s not a light bulb going on over your head. It’s a tightening of the throat, a shiver down the middle of the back, a stab to the chest. Or the sudden impulse to shout, “Get out! Before it’s too late! Run!”

--Connie Willis, Introduction to *Schwarzchild Radius*

“’Off with his head; so much for Buckingham!’ This sort of rant, interlined by another hand, brings down the house—those mistaken souls who dream of Shakespeare as a mere man of Richard the Third humps and Macbeth daggers,” wrote Melville. “But it is those deep, far-away things in him; those short, quick probings at the very axis of reality,-- these are the things that make Shakespeare, Shakespeare.

--Herman Melville, *Hawthorne and His Mosses* From *The Literary World*, August 17 and 24, 1850

Well, of course he wasn’t an ordinary person. He was Shakespeare. But that doesn’t mean he couldn’t have come from Ordinary Circumstances. Say, a log cabin in Illinois. Or a small town in upstate England.

-Connie Willis, Introduction to *Winter’s Tale*

**The most precise definition of the meme:**

Meme: A memory item, or portion of an organism’s neurally-stored information, identified using the abstraction system of the observer, whose instantiation depended critically on causation by prior installation of the same memory item in one or more other organism’s nervous systems.

(Robert Aunger citing Aaron Lynch in., *darwinizing culture, the status of Memetics as a science*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, NYC. 2000).

* to provide an example to support or explain something

**The harshest critique of the meme:**

Given that the meme concept is nothing more than hip bio-babble, what is interesting about this theory is why anyone would want to believe in such an intellectually dubious proposition in the first place. (Barbrook 1996)

**Our working definition:**

Meme: Complex ideas that replicate by forming into a distinct memorable unit; webbing non-matter.

Intellectually dubious… Allah be praised.

We have invented the zero.
Vita

The author, Geoffrey B. Waldschmidt was born in Fort Wayne, Indiana on September 19, 1948. He attended Indiana University/ Purdue University, Fort Wayne from 1994 to 2001 and received a Bachelor of General Studies in 2001. He began work toward a Master of Arts in English at Indiana University/ Purdue University, Fort Wayne in the Fall of 2001.

EXPERIENCE:
Adjunct Faculty, IPFW, IIT September 2003- present
Graduate Assistant/ instructor, IPFW August 2000- September 2003
Communications Consultant, Lincoln Re., June 1996- June 2000
Free lance writer, student, promoter, touring and recording musician, May 1995- June 1996
Creative Director, WaterFurnace Intl., August 1993-May 1995
Free lance writer, January 1992- August 1993
Vice President, Waldschmidt, Waldschmidt & Associates , 1976-1983
Production Manager, Waldschmidt & Krick, 1973-1976
Free lance writer, student, promoter, touring and recording musician 1966-1973