

world opposite the integrated, harmonious world Marx envisioned. In the end the show promotes the interests of the class that maintains economic power over the masses, selling them T-shirts, key chains, lunch boxes, and video games. Its lack of vision and its equitable distribution of antagonism make it static and immune to criticism; it can absorb and co-opt any dialectical challenge and defend itself by appealing, with a wink and a nudge, to the supremacy of *the joke*. The jokes may be funny, but in *The Simpsons*, where no one grows up and lives never improve, laughter is not a catalyst for change; it is an opiate.⁹

¹ E.B. White, "Some Remarks on Humor." In *The Second Tree from the Corner* (New York: Harper, 1954), p. 174.

² Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1952), p. 199.

³ George Meredith, *An Essay on Comedy and the Uses of the Comic Spirit* (New York: Scribners, 1897), p. 141.

⁴ Michael Ryan, "Political Criticism," *Contemporary Literary Theory*, eds. Douglas Atkins and Laurie Morrow (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1989), p. 203.

⁵ Frederick Engels, Letter to Minna Kautsky. In *Marx and Engels on Literature and Art* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1976), p. 88.

⁶ Richard Corliss, "Simpsons Forever," *Time* (2 May 1994), p. 77.

⁷ M.S. Mason, "Simpsons Creator on Poking Fun," *Christian Science Monitor* (17 April 1998), p. B7.

⁸ W.H. Auden, "Notes on the Comic," *Thought* 27 (1952), pp. 68-69.

⁹ I am grateful to Louis Rader for his many suggestions on the numerous drafts of this essay.

17

"And the Rest Writes Itself": Roland Barthes Watches *The Simpsons* DAVID L.G. ARNOLD

In 1978 the publication of Fiske and Hartley's *Reading Television* solidified the fledgling field of television studies, using as its foundation the concept of semiotics, the methodological examination of signs and sign systems. In making this connection Fiske and Hartley were trying to suggest not only that television shared some of the properties of language and was thus analyzable using some of the same tools, but also that it was worth studying at all, that the close analysis of the things television was showing us was worthwhile, even important. In their introductory chapter they state:

We shall try to show how the television message, as an extension of our spoken language, is itself subject to many of the rules that have been shown to apply to language. We shall introduce some of the terms, originally developed in linguistics and semiotics, that can help us successfully decode the sequence of encoded signs that constitutes any television programme. The medium itself is both familiar and entertaining, but this should not blind us to its singularity. . . In other words, we should not mistake an oral medium for an illiterate one.¹

In the twenty-two years since this seminal work appeared, the field of television studies has matured considerably, though it still faces, surprisingly, a great deal of

resistance from mainstream scholars who consider it lowbrow and beneath the dignity of analysis or even thought. On the other hand, a large part of the serious work currently being done on television still takes as its starting point a generally structuralist approach. Ellen Seiter, in "Semiotics, Structuralism, and Television," suggests that the vocabulary of semiotics allows us to "identify and describe what makes TV distinctive as a communication medium, as well as how it relies on other sign systems to communicate."² She goes on to suggest that "By addressing the symbolic and communicative capacity of humans in general, semiotics and structuralism help us see connections between fields of study that are normally divided among different academic departments in the university. Thus they are specially suited to the study of television."³ The versatility that Seiter describes makes semiotics and structuralism especially useful in the analysis of a complex text like a television cartoon, despite the limitations now generally recognized in the structuralist approach.

In this essay I want to examine the insights semiotic analysis can provide into a complex "text" like *The Simpsons*. This show, like most contemporary TV shows, confronts us with a dizzyingly rapid series of messages, and by breaking down these messages into a simple, repeatable sequence of codes we can begin to see how the show makes meaning. The art of *The Simpsons*, though, lies somewhat beyond what structuralism or semiotics alone can describe, in the way it seems to disrupt the stable, easily-interpretable diet of images and ideas that television viewers generally expect, and that the medium tends to encourage. Part of the show's ability to do this lies in the mechanics of the cartoon itself, a medium that at once suggests and confutes the impression of verisimilitude. Because it frees the writers from the physical and representational constraints involved in the use of live actors, the cartoon encourages both creative and interpretive play. Further, because viewers rightly or wrongly associate cartoons with childish, harmless, intellectually empty entertainment, the medium is well-situated to deliver what Douglas Rushkoff calls a "media virus," a subversive or even revolutionary message conveyed in an apparently innocent, neutral package.⁴

Semiotics -- Images -- Television

Structuralism emerged in France in the 1950s in the works of thinkers such as anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss and philosopher-critic Roland Barthes. Early proponents of structuralism sought to move beyond the subjectivity and impressionism of earlier schools of criticism by insisting that we see texts as a complex intersection of social, political, and textual "structures," often expressed as two-sided or binary oppositions like *high/low*, *self/other*, or *nature/culture*. These structures, they argue, arise from our way of perceiving reality, and some more radical structuralists suggest that they are in fact responsible for how we perceive. The bottom line of this method of analysis is its suggestion that meaning is not inherent in objects themselves but resides outside, in their relationships to other structures.

We can find an early sustained application of these ideas in Roland Barthes's 1950 work *Mythologies*.⁵ In this slender book Barthes lays out the principles of semiotics in an essay called "Myth Today" and applies them to various phenomena of French popular culture like professional wrestling, wine, the new Citroen, and gladiator movies. The central concept of semiotics is the relationship of signs to the objects or ideas they

represent, and the combination of signs into systems called codes. The key to Barthes's method of analysis is the division of every sign (and, by extension, every message or act of communication) into components: the "signifier" and the "signified." The signifier is the element that makes the statement or delivers the message (a word on a page; a note of music; a photograph), and the signified is the content or idea delivered. Although we can separate these two elements for analysis, we normally experience them simultaneously as the "sign." For example, when we go to cross the street we pull up short at the red flashing outline of the hand. The picture itself is the signifier, a vehicle or delivery system for a message. We understand the message itself, the signified, because of previous experience with this symbol. "STOP!" or "Don't cross now!" are the messages the flashing hand delivers to us, though the words themselves aren't used. The picture (and also its red color and insistent flashing) is the signifier, and the message we understand is the signified, but when we come to the crosswalk we don't normally play out this little act of analysis: signifier and signified act on us simultaneously as what Barthes calls the sign.

This formulation draws on the work of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, whose 1915 *Course on General Linguistics* is a model for much structuralist thought. Saussure developed this method of analysis to study language, making the point that the signifier in a system like language is generally arbitrary or "unmotivated"; that is, unlike the flashing red hand, the words we speak or write have no organic relationship to the concepts they denote and function only when the users of the system recognize the codes being deployed. It is our familiarity with these conventions or codes that allows the sign to have meaning for us. Certain signifiers, like photographs or realistic portraits, bear or seem to bear a more direct relationship to their signifieds. These signs are called "iconic" or "motivated" signs; no special knowledge on our part (knowledge of a certain language, or of the conventions of portraiture) is required to understand them. But when making sense of a sign requires an understanding of conventions or codes, the culturally specific aspect of sign systems starts to move to the fore. Saussure used the term *langue* to denote the reservoir of codes in a given system, for instance, the vocabulary of a given language. Each individual use of the codes from this reservoir is called *parole*. Thus for speakers of French the French language represents *langue*, and a discreet work drawing from that reservoir, such as a novel by Hugo or Dumas, is an example of *parole*. These utterances make sense only to people who are familiar with the codes that make up the French language. Because the signifier in a language system has little or no organic relationship with the concept it signifies (except in special cases like onomatopoeia), meaning depends wholly upon convention, upon recognizing the codes that comprise the act of signification.

As suggested above, applying this method to more complex signifiers like photographs or teleplays involves deciphering the ways such images become "encoded" or loaded with meaning. Barthes addresses this question in his 1964 essay "The Rhetoric of the Image." In this essay he examines a print advertisement for a particular brand of pasta to show the ways an image functions on both "denotative" and "connotative" levels. Part of the problem with "reading" images, according to Barthes, is that they function by apparent analogy rather than by the combination of phonemes (as in written language). In other words, they appear to be motivated or iconic signifiers. We understand what a picture "means" partly because we recognize that it looks like something. This is its denotative meaning. However, he contends that "we never encounter (at least in advertising) a literal image in the pure state."⁶ No drawing or photograph in this context comes to us except as

part of a message, part of someone's attempt to communicate something. This is the image's connotative meaning, a culturally specific message superimposed on the image's already-present denotative meaning. To decipher this message one must first determine how it has been "encoded," that is, the degree to which what is otherwise a sign in its own right (a photograph of a bag of pasta) has been pressed into service to suggest things beyond its denotative value (the qualities of the pasta that the advertiser wants to highlight as desirable). Barthes mentions the color scheme of the ad and the presence of green peppers, fresh tomatoes, and garlic, which he reads as denotation of "Italianicity," an important quality, we suppose, in choosing which brand of pasta to buy. He also suggests that the apparent randomness and casualness with which these staples are seen to spill out of their string-mesh shopping bag suggests a kind of profusion and abundance, designed to remind the shopper of happy, prosperous homes and well-stocked tables. These features are part of the constructedness of this photograph, choices made by the advertiser and the photographer that enhance this "natural" image's power to suggest and persuade.

Thus the photographic image gives rise to a kind of paradox, since as Barthes says, "the photograph. . . by virtue of its absolutely analogical nature, seems to constitute *a message without a code*. . . for of all the kinds of image only the photograph is able to transmit the (literal) information without forming it by means of discontinuous signs and rules of transformation."⁷ Written language works because we know that the letters represent sounds and that the sounds, when combined according to certain rules, denote certain concepts. The photograph, on the other hand, *appears to be* a natural, unmediated kind of signifier, a straightforward, unaltered representation of the object or concept it signifies. "In the photograph" Barthes continues,

the relationship of signifieds to signifiers is not one of 'transformation' [as it is in written language] but of 'recording', and the absence of a code clearly reinforces the myth of photographic 'naturalness': the scene *is there*, is captured mechanically, not humanly (the mechanical here is a guarantee of objectivity). Man's interventions in the photograph (framing, distance, lighting, focus, speed) all effectively belong to the plane of connotation.⁸

Thus only when we focus on the way a photograph is in fact a product of human actions and decisions does its coding, its connotative aspect, begin to become clear. And for Barthes, the unique quality of the photographic message is its ability to *silence* its own coding, to make us forget that it has been constructed to bear a message:

to the extent that it does not imply any code. . . the denoted image naturalizes the symbolic message, it innocents the semantic artifice of connotation. . . Although the *Panzani* poster [the photograph advertising pasta] is full of 'symbols', there nonetheless remains in the photograph. . . a kind of natural *being-there* of objects: nature seems spontaneously to produce the scene represented. A pseudo-truth is surreptitiously substituted for the simple validity of openly semantic systems; the absence of code disintellectualizes the message because it seems to found in nature the signs of culture.⁹

The photograph confronts us with a message whose obvious constructedness we somehow (perhaps willfully) fail to recognize. The result is a signifying system, a way of making meaning, that seems to us to spring from nature and therefore to represent truth, as opposed to rhetoric or "semantic systems."

Barthes's purpose in this essay is to reveal the constructedness of what at first

glance seems natural, and to suggest how a constructed image, much like a word or a sentence, can become encoded or charged with meaning. These ideas apply equally to the images we see on television, images that are substantially manipulated, constructed, fabricated, and distorted, but which we tend to receive very passively, as reliable indices of nature and reality.¹⁰

Semiotics and *The Simpsons*

Most television images qualify as indexical signs, as apparently natural representations of something that has actually happened. The fact remains, though, that such images are almost always dictated by convention and are susceptible to extensive modification by their producers. The original physical object may or may not have been photographed, but through sophisticated manipulation viewers can be convinced that it was. According to Barthes cinematic (and by extension televisual) drama functions less like an indexical sign than photographs because the function of narrative, of storytelling, tends to stylize and regularize the images we see; they become less motivated, less "natural," and more mediated by conventions.

This is where our discussion of the signifying aspects of a narrative cartoon like *The Simpsons* begins. Animated television narratives still function to some small degree as indexical signs, but the representations are extensively mediated, fully conventionalized. Nonetheless, a sign system like a cartoon can't work without at least a nod toward verisimilitude. Indeed, *The Simpsons* gets its energy precisely from the conflict between our recognition of the signifiers as highly mediated, as un-realistic, and our understanding that they nonetheless resemble a reality we recognize. The show's satiric power, indeed its very coherence, depends on this sometimes-tenuous resemblance.

This aspect of the television cartoon, and specifically of *The Simpsons*, will come out in our discussion, but I would like to begin our analysis of an episode of the show with a more traditional structuralist approach and demonstrate both what this can reveal about televisual narratives, and what its limitations might be.

As I suggested earlier, the structuralist tends to see in narratives or texts a series of generalized binary oppositions, larger structures of which the individual signs are manifestations, and to make inferences from this about a specific culture's world-view and habits of perception. In the *Simpsons* episode titled "The Front" a number of these binarisms suggest themselves immediately. In this episode Bart and Lisa decide, after watching "a rather lifeless" episode of their favorite TV cartoon *Itchy and Scratchy*, that they could write better cartoons themselves. After having their script rejected they resubmit it under Grampa's name because they suspect that, as children, they aren't being taken seriously. A structuralist would see a number of binarisms operating in this situation. The first is the opposition between reality and fiction. As they register their disappointment with the *Itchy* episode Lisa says, "The writers should be ashamed of themselves." "Cartoons have writers?" Bart asks, puzzled. "Well, sort of," Lisa says. This exchange suggests that the distinction between constructed narratives and experienced reality operates only very limitedly in Bart's mind, a blurring of boundaries that is in fact one of the show's central tropes.

Another binary opposition suggested by this initial setup is that between youth and inexperience on one hand and age, experience, and wisdom on the other. This is, arguably,

the structure on which this particular episode is largely based, and we will explore it in detail. Beyond this, we can also see a fundamental, indeed a classic, binarism at work in the *Itchy* genre itself: the cat-mouse opposition. A genre critic might examine this traditional structure of children's cartoons in terms of its long history, from *Tom and Jerry* through *Pixie and Dixie* and beyond. We might also ask what underlies this conception of the relationship between cats and mice, and why in traditional cat and mouse cartoons the mouse is cast as positive and the cat negative.¹¹ Structuralists, however, are less concerned with the historical or generic implications of these structures, and would likely focus instead on the implied distinction between the natural (animals) and the cultural (speech and human-like emotions) and how the cat and mouse cartoon tends to blur them.

Let us examine the episode's central structure, the opposition between youth and experience. It is evident from the outset that this fairly standard conception is to be offered up for examination and satire. Before Bart and Lisa's foray into cartoon writing is even set up we witness an inverted vision of the traditional, "natural" relationship between parents ("wise," "experienced") and their children ("naïve," "untutored") when we see Homer moaning because he's got a plunger stuck on his head. The basic signifiers being deployed here are the father figure, supposed generally to represent authority and sagacity, and the toilet plunger, clearly reductive of that authority. In fact, the combination of the two signifiers suggests a radical, scatological undermining of the concept of parental authority. No explanation is given for Homer's predicament except that he says "Marge, it happened again." This suggests that this is a recurring problem, and that Homer seems unable to learn from the experience (in fact, the last scene of the episode shows him as an old man arriving at his 50th high school reunion suffering from the same problem). Bart and Lisa, on the other hand, appear to have the situation summed up and dealt with. "What are you changing your name to when you grow up?" Bart asks. The children have determined that the way to overcome the genetic tyranny that identifies them as Homer's experiential inferiors is to opt out of their family heritage altogether. Thus the episode's first scene presents us with a traditional structure and its refutation.

As the children confront the inadequacy of TV writing and storm the citadel of corporate cartoon production, they are faced again with the traditional binary opposition between age and youth that causes the grownups in charge to undervalue their efforts. At every turn the narrative works to undercut this binarism's validity. We discover that Grampa, whose name they use as a signifier of age and authority, doesn't even know his name, and has to check his underwear for confirmation. Again, this pair of signifiers (the wise old man and the underwear) effects a scatological reduction of the traditional age-youth binarism. Once Grampa is (fraudulently) installed as a staff writer at Itchy & Scratchy Studios, the president, Roger Meyers, introduces him to the other writers, whom Meyers excoriates as a pack of Ivy-League "eggheads" with no real-life experience. One pipes up: "Actually, I wrote my Master's thesis on life experience. . ." but Meyers silences him and asks Grampa to expound on his own fascinating life. "I worked for forty years as a night watchman in a cranberry silo," Grampa says. Meyers seems impressed, but we pick up on the implied absurdity of valuing this kind of deadening, definitively tedious labor as educative or empowering.

A structuralist reading of this episode would, then, focus largely on the ironic treatment of this binary opposition and reach the conclusion that the narrative draws satiric energy from the apparent reversal of our expectations about age and youth. As I suggested

above, though, this approach is limited by the scope of the questions it chooses to ask. With a text like *The Simpsons*, we can profit by a more detailed analysis not only of the structural oppositions the signifiers imply, but what those signifiers actually are and how they operate.

The Animated Signifier

Recalling Barthes's comments about the signifying power of the image, we would say that a drawing like a *Simpsons* character displays a high degree of conventionalization; that is, we must supply a fair amount of cultural knowledge for these images to make sense. Despite their similarity to human beings, most of the members of the Simpson family are highly stylized drawings, really only suggestions of the human form. Nonetheless we do recognize them as representations of a certain segment of American society: the drawings and characterizations are accurate enough that they can function as satire. Homer's weight problem and beer consumption and Bart's spiky, bad-boy haircut and skateboard are recognizable features of a late twentieth-century landscape, and they help us understand how these signifiers are supposed to function, what they're supposed to be making fun of. But the fact that the characters are patently not quite human increases their ability to function as satiric signifiers. Physical attributes, habits, and actions we could not accept as possible for a human (or a drawing supposed to represent a human) become a regular part of *The Simpsons'* repertoire, allowing them to venture further into the realm of the ridiculous than human actors or realistic drawings.

One example of this drawn from "The Front" is Grampa's method of verifying his identity. When he whips off his underwear to check on his name he doesn't bother to remove his pants. The children are stunned and ask how he managed such a feat, and he shudders and says, "I don't know." It is frankly difficult to pin down exactly what this combination of signifiers might mean beyond what we discussed above, but what is clear is that the scene moves the status of these signifiers as signifiers to the fore. The narrative is insisting here that we remember that these are cartoon characters. This, I think, is the key to the rhetoric of these images. The writers are having it both ways: by insisting up front that verisimilitude is not an issue, by exploiting the absurd and the fantastic, they can satirize American society more effectively. Because they can dislocate the relationship between signifier and signified, they gain unlimited latitude in what they can depict or suggest, and this renders the show, predictably, more suggestive. Freed from the mundane restrictions of live action or realistic representation, the animation nevertheless retains an always-foregrounded referentiality. Comments about Marge's unfeasible blue hair or the family's yellow skin remind us regularly that the characters aren't real, and this enhances our reception of them as signifiers: their capacity to represent things is never clouded by the impression that they might also be real people. Nothing but the show's own self-referentiality intrudes on our suspension of disbelief.

Beyond this, the very status of *The Simpsons* as a television cartoon affects the way its signifiers operate. Our responses are conditioned because we know it's "only" a cartoon. This is precisely the fate of other "adult" cartoons like *The Flintstones* and *Wait 'Til Your Father Gets Home*. Originally intended as prime-time shows for grownups, these were relegated, to a large extent by an imperceptive audience, to the realm of children's programming. The medium here obviates the message. We also see this in the way old

movie theater cartoons like *Bugs Bunny*, originally short features intended to entertain adults, descended inevitably to Saturday morning. *The Simpsons* (as well as many of the newer generation of "postmodern" cartoons like *Beavis and Butthead*, *Ren and Stimpy*, *Family Guy*, and others) capitalizes on this misperception, flying under the radar, as it were, of our rational minds. Cartoons are safe, childlike, part of the world of play as opposed to more overtly serious television fare like soap operas or newscasts. Virus-like, the show lulls us into lowering our intellectual defenses, then infects us with satiric, subversive ideas.

The way signifiers are used in *The Simpsons* and their apparent dislocation from the kinds of signifieds we expect takes us slightly beyond the realm in which structuralism proper can answer our questions. Barthes, in the later, post-structural phase of his career, discusses this kind of textual play in his 1970 book *S/Z*. In this work, an in-depth semiotic analysis of a short story by Balzac, he defines what he calls a "classic text," one that is closed to the possibilities of connotation. Such a text works on a purely denotative level, and the reader is never encouraged to speculate beyond what the narrator or other authorial voice asserts. According to Barthes, this implies a kind of law or religion of "right" reading: the text cannot be "written" or added to substantively by the reader. Reading it is essentially a passive activity, and hence Barthes calls these "readerly" texts. The opposite of this classic or readerly text is the "writerly" or "plural" text, one that encourages free play on the part of both reader and writer and is richly connotative, is in fact open-ended with regard to its ultimate meaning. "To read," according to Barthes, "is to find meanings, and to find meanings is to name them; but these named meanings are swept toward other names; names call to each other, reassemble, and their grouping calls for further naming: I name, I un-name, I rename: so the text passes: it is a nomination in the process of becoming, a tireless approximation, a metonymic labor."¹² Reading is thus an activity that paradoxically effects its own undoing as the "tireless approximations" compound and are swept away by new associations. For Barthes, in this later phase of his career, the more valuable activity is not making meaning but *forgetting* it:

. . . reading does not consist in stopping the chain of systems, in establishing a truth, a legality in the text, and consequently in leading its reader into "errors"; it consists in coupling these systems, not according to their finite quantity, but according to their plurality. . . : I pass, I intersect, I articulate, I release, I do not count. Forgetting meanings is not a matter for excuses, an unfortunate defect in performance; it is an affirmative value, a way of asserting the irresponsibility of the text, the pluralism of systems. . . : it is precisely because I forget that I read.¹³

The Simpsons, I submit, is precisely an "irresponsible" text, one rich in associations and connotations and perversely unwilling to have those connotations pinned down. It is "postmodern" in the sense that it comes together as a self-parodic, self-referential pastiche of previous texts. It is satiric in that it occupies the signifiers of the culture it wishes to lampoon and amplifies that culture's foibles up to and beyond the point of absurdity. But it is irresponsible in that it cheerfully resists, indeed makes fun of, even the kind of friendly analysis we're attempting here.

To solidify this point, let us take a final look at "The Front," this time specifically the *Itchy and Scratchy* episode that Bart and Lisa write because they find the ones being produced so unsatisfying. They choose a barbershop as the setting and Lisa invents a scenario in which Itchy cuts off Scratchy's head with a razor. "Aw, too predictable," Bart

says: "The way I see it, instead of shampoo, Itchy covers Scratchy's hair with barbecue sauce, opens a box of flesh-eating ants, and the rest writes itself." What happens next, the part that "writes itself," deserves some attention. After the flesh-eating ants have stripped Scratchy's head to a bare skull, Itchy activates the lift on the barber chair, sending Scratchy crashing through the ceiling and through the bottom of a television set on the floor above. An Elvis impersonator is watching the television, and after staring at Scratchy's skeletal head for a beat he says, "Aw, this show ain't no good," pulls out a revolver, and shoots the television.

What I find interesting about this, beyond the plethora of bafflingly rich signifiers, is specifically the idea that such a scene could "write itself," that it could spring as it were unbidden from a reservoir of common, easily accessible cultural codes. That Itchy should ram Scratchy through the ceiling is in keeping with *The Itchy and Scratchy Show's* rhythm of ever-escalating violence, but the presence of the Elvis impersonator seems less predictable. Bart's comment implies, though, that Elvis impersonators using handguns as TV remote controls are an organic part of the culture he's writing from; they are, to his eye, stable, reliable, easily-recognizable signifiers.

Signifiers of what? The television set is a familiar image in *The Simpsons*, and its presence at the forefront of Bart's imagination is not surprising. Each episode of the show, in fact, is preceded by what is called a "couch gag," a scene in which the family rushes into the living room to begin the evening ritual of TV watching. Directly following this scene the final frame of opening credits appears framed by a TV set, complete with VCR and rabbit ears, giving the impression that we and the family are watching the same TV. This occurs, as I mentioned, before every episode, and serves as a kind of index, a reminder that the show is formally concerned with television, and with its own status as television. In Bart's script for the *Itchy and Scratchy* episode the centrality of television is foregrounded when Scratchy becomes a television character (a cat in a cartoon) forced into the role of a television character (an image in/on the Elvis impersonator's TV). The Elvis impersonator's critique of this "program," his judgment that "this show ain't no good" and his decision therefore to shoot his television, takes this act of mirroring one step further by replicating Bart and Lisa's original dissatisfaction with *Itchy and Scratchy*. Our own status as viewers and critics completes this circle and situates the discourse firmly on television and the many ways we consume it.

The presence of the Elvis impersonator is harder to pin down. We can read him, perhaps, as a signifier of our society's willingness to commodify and commercialize personality, an example of the potential of mass-produced star power to sell products across many media. Beyond this, of course, is the aura of obsessive craziness surrounding this icon of American popular culture. Elvis Presley the performer brought the genre of rock 'n' roll to the attention of the nation and the world, making up with energy what its detractors claimed it lacked in cultural significance. His work signaled, in the orgiastic adoration of the fans, some kind of turning point in the battle between high and low cultures. In the decades since his death his continued "presence," in the form of numerous "Elvis-sightings" and of the thriving industry of Elvis impersonators, testifies to the weird energy and durability of his memory.

The King, random handgun use, business-as-usual violence, and the ubiquity of television map out Bart's conception of his culture. He has acquired this culture, the show suggests, as a result of careless and misguided parenting, a slipshod educational system, an

all-encompassing environment of consumerism and commodification, and, of course, television. Ultimately, this new Elvis narrative and its creation invite us to consider the cultural act of creating (televisual) texts: writing is a social activity, a way of having a voice. One of the specific signifieds of this segment is the search for quality television and the logical response to lo-grade TV (either shoot it or write something better).

The fact that we see Bart's text as more sophisticated than the *Itchy and Scratchy* being produced by Ivy-League graduates is itself richly suggestive. Our structural analysis of "The Front" discovered that its aim was to satirize the easy binarism that privileges age over youth, but we must also now question the very signifiers themselves, not just the structures they imply. We might argue that this text satirizes a society in which such signifiers are readily available, where Elvis writes himself. Implicitly, the perfection of an *Itchy and Scratchy* episode has to do with arabesques of violence, specifically creative, intriguing violence. Merely to see a mouse strike a cat on the head with a hammer is too pedestrian, a readerly as opposed to a writerly situation, a classic text. Bart's text is more open to connotation, less stable.

Perhaps, then, we can define the richness of a *Simpsons* text as a matter of openness to connotation, an openness to the allure of free-floating signifiers that coalesce and disperse apparently randomly, "data," as Barthes puts it, "seemingly lost in the natural flow of discourse."¹⁴ The apparent randomness with which *The Simpsons* cites particular signifieds defines its method of signifying. Of this kind of randomness of association Barthes says:

This fleeting citation, this surreptitious way of stating themes, this alternating of flux and outburst, create together the allure of the connotation; the semes appear to float freely, to form a galaxy of trifling data in which we read no order of importance; the narrative technique is impressionistic: it breaks up the signifier into particles of verbal matter which make sense only by coalescing: it plays with the distribution of a discontinuity (thus creating a character's "personality"); the greater the syntagmatic distance between two data, the more skillful the narrative; the performance consists in manipulating a certain degree of impressionism: the touch must be light, as though it weren't worth remembering, and yet, appearing again later in another guise, it must already be a memory; the readerly is an effect based on the operations of solidarity (the readerly "sticks"); but the more this solidarity is renewed, the more the intelligible becomes intelligent. The (ideological) goal of this technique is to naturalize meaning and thus to give credence to the reality of the story.¹³

In a "classic" text, in *The Honeymooners*, in *All in the Family*, even in *The Flintstones*, the signifieds eventually coalesce into "meaning." In *The Simpsons* that coalescence is deferred indefinitely. The classic text loses its plurality because we expect all the actions (eventually) to be coordinated; like an ear trained to hear the predictable cadences and resolutions of western music, the readerly eye demands an eventual uniformity. Like the narrative in a novel by Dickens, the storyline in an episode of *Dynasty* or *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* takes us in a very predictable direction and culminates in a satisfying sense of resolution. The writerly or plural text like *The Simpsons*, however, resists this push to conform. By foregrounding its signifiers and cheerfully dislocating them from stable, predictable signifieds, the show permits a freer, more richly associative kind of reading, and effects a more penetrating social satire. Barthes's "galaxy of trifling data" aptly describes Bart's world of Elvis-impersonators and flesh-eating ants, the world with which *The Simpsons* presents us, the skill of the narrative arising, as Barthes suggests, from the "distance between" the data, between denotation and connotation, between

signifier and signified. It's a random, absurd world; to admit that it is really our own, to admit that we have to this extent lost control of the mechanisms of stability and meaning would be too embarrassing. We find instead that we must laugh, if only in self-defense.

¹ John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television* (London: Methuen, 1978) pp. 16-17.

² Ellen Seiter, "Semiotics, Structuralism, and Television" in Robert C. Allen, ed., *Channels of Discourse Reassembled: Television and Contemporary Criticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), p. 31.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁴ Douglas Rushkoff, *Media Virus: Hidden Agendas in Popular Culture* (New York: Ballantine, 1994).

⁵ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Paladin, 1973).

⁶ Roland Barthes, *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Noonday, 1977), p. 42.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43, my emphasis.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 44.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁰ Barthes makes the comment that applying these ideas about the rhetoric of a photograph to cinema, which is after all just a rapid sequence of photographs, can be more difficult because of the exaggerated sense of immediacy, of "a *being-there* of the thing." We experience cinema (and television moreso, I suggest) as more immediate, more directly involving. Barthes suggests that "the photograph must be related to a pure spectatorial consciousness and not to the more projective, more 'magical' fictional consciousness on which film by and large depends." Although Barthes suggests that this imposes a "radical opposition" between film and photographic images, we can still, I believe, productively apply his ideas about the meaning-power of images to a discussion of animated television shows, perhaps more so because the television cartoon, unlike the large-screen movie drama, in certain tantalizing ways works against the "projective," "magical" suspension of disbelief upon which cinema depends (*Ibid.*, p. 45).

¹¹ We could speculate at great length about *The Itchy and Scratchy Show's* relationship to this genre, and in fact this is a matter of some extended discussion in *The Simpsons*. See for instance "The Day the Violence Died" in which Bart meets Chester J. Lampwick, creator of *Itchy and Scratchy* and self-proclaimed father of cartoon violence; see also "Itchy and Scratchy: The Movie" in which we see a history of *Itchy and Scratchy*.

¹² Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 11.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

18

What Bart Calls Thinking KELLY DEAN JOLLEY

"What is called thinking?" At the end we return to the question we asked at first when we found out what our word "thinking" originally means. *Thanc* means memory, thinking that recalls, thanks.

But in the meantime we have learned to see that the essential nature of thinking is determined by what there is to be thought about: the presence of what is present, the Being of beings.

-- Martin Heidegger

Once more and they think to thank you.

-- Getrude Stein

Cowabunga, dude!

-- Bart Simpson

Introduction

Strange, I guess, to take Bart Simpson as Muse. Stranger still, I guess, is taking Bart as the Muse for philosophy. (There is no Muse for philosophy -- and if there were, it wouldn't be Bart Simpson!)

I take Bart as my Muse because of a feature of Bart's engagement with the world, whether that engagement is reflective or active. Bart's world, the world, just ain't in Bart's head. Bart's world is *out there*. This omnipresent *out-there-ness* (for lack of a better term) is what makes Bart a Heideggerian thinker. Bart's world is a world of faces, not facades; it is a world personified. And Bart's thoughts go out to meet it. But all this needs to be made clear.

I shall begin by discussing a philosophical example that deserves the fame of Socrates's triangle in the dirt, Descartes's lump of wax, or Price's red tomato -- Heidegger's tree in bloom. Discussing the tree will clarify what Heidegger calls thinking. I shall finish by showing Bart Simpson as a Heideggerian thinker.

Since what is to follow is difficult, I want to say a few things by way of setting the stage. Arthur Schopenhauer opens his *The World as Will and Representation* by claiming that the beginning of philosophical wisdom is recognizing that *the world is idea*. Schopenhauer glosses this by claiming that the philosopher recognizes that the world is in his head. By 'the world' Schopenhauer means *everything*. I think Schopenhauer has put his finger on the live nerve of much philosophizing: the philosophical thought *par excellence* is that all I am acquainted with is the insides of my head. Everything else I get to by some type of wishful thinking -- inferring, guessing, postulated causal connections. What I do here is trace out a response to the philosophical thought *par excellence*, a response that looks as radical as what it responds to. I want to trace out a way of thinking about thought itself on which not only is the world not inside our heads, but our thoughts are not inside our heads. Put it this way: when we think, our thoughts are wherever what we are thinking about is.

One helpful hint for following my discussion: the backbone of the discussion is the series of quotations from Heidegger, Schopenhauer, and Frege. And the most crucial of these is the one from Frege. Both Heidegger and Frege are trying to dislodge thoughts from inside the head. I try to show how Heidegger and Frege are akin, and how they are different. Getting clear about that will show both what Heidegger and Frege reject in Schopenhauer, and what Heidegger rejects in Frege. And *that* will lead us back to Bart.

Heidegger's Tree

In *What is Called Thinking?*, Heidegger introduces the tree in bloom:

We stand outside of science. Instead we stand before a tree in bloom, for example -- and the tree stands before us. The tree faces us. The tree and we meet one another, as the tree stands there and we stand face-to-face with it. As we are in this relation of one to the other and before the other,

the tree and we are. This face-to-face meeting is not, then, one of those "ideas" buzzing about in our heads. Let us stop here for a moment, as we would to catch our breath before and after a leap.¹

I will, for now, set aside Heidegger's introductory "We stand outside of science." What I want to focus on is the way in which Heidegger *personifies* the tree in bloom. According to Heidegger, the tree and we both have *faces*: the tree faces us; we stand face-to-face with the tree; each of us is before the other. Why does Heidegger personify the tree in bloom?

I take it that the answer to this question comes in what Heidegger denies about the meeting with the tree: "This face-to-face meeting is not, then, one of those "ideas" buzzing about in our heads." Heidegger personifies the tree so as to *depersonalize* it. What I mean is that Heidegger personifies the tree as a way of insisting that the tree is, indeed, before us, separate from us. The tree is not our idea.²

To better understand what I take Heidegger to be doing, consider the following famous passage from Schopenhauer (Heidegger prefaces his tree-in-bloom-passage with a parallel passage from Schopenhauer):

"The world is my idea": -- this is a truth which holds good for everything that lives and knows, though man alone can bring it into reflective and abstract consciousness. If he really does this, he has attained to philosophical wisdom. It then becomes clear and certain to what he knows is not a sun and an earth, but only an eye that sees a sun, a hand that feels an earth; that the world which surrounds him is there only as an idea, i.e., only in relation to something else, the consciousness, which is himself. If any truth can be asserted *a priori*, it is this: for it is the expression of the most general form of all possible and thinkable experience. . . . No truth is therefore more certain, more independent of all others, and less in need of proof than this, that all that exists for knowledge, and therefore this whole world, is only object in relation to subject, perception of a perceiver, in a word idea. . . . The world is idea.³

Schopenhauer personalizes the world: the world is *our idea*. And so, too, of course, would be the tree in bloom. The tree, like the field in which it grows, the earth of which the field is part, the sun that shines -- all are our ideas; all are buzzing about in our heads. Schopenhauer personalizes the tree, makes it ours. Heidegger personifies the tree, makes it an other, other than ours. And he treats doing this as requiring a great leap: after doing it we must pause to catch our breath. Heidegger explains the need for rest:

For that is what we are now, men who have leapt, out of the familiar realm of science and even, as we shall see, out of the realm of philosophy. And where have we leapt? Perhaps into an abyss?⁴

Heidegger thinks that standing face-to-face with the tree requires that we leap from psychology and science, and even from philosophy. Evidently, in science and philosophy, trees lack faces.⁵ (Personalized trees are not personified.) But where do trees have faces? Where *have* we leapt? Where is there to be. . . besides in the realm of science or the realm of philosophy? Into what Looking-Glass World is Heidegger asking us to leap? Surely, beyond science and philosophy there is only the abyss.

Heidegger responds to his question, perhaps we have leapt into an abyss?, by replying

No! Rather onto some firm soil. Some? No! But on that soil upon which we live and die, if we are honest with ourselves. A curious, indeed unearthly thing that we must first leap onto the soil on

which we really stand.⁶

Heidegger's claim is that we have leapt onto the firm soil of our lives. What is striking here, and what Heidegger underscores as "curious, indeed unearthly" is that we have to leap from the familiar -- science, philosophy -- onto the unfamiliar, the firm soil of our lives. We have to leap to get to where we always already are.

Thinking Outside the Head

I want momentarily to step away from the tree in bloom. What I take Heidegger to be doing in this passage is battling a commitment shared by our familiar science and philosophy, namely a commitment to psychologism. Psychologism, briefly, is best thought of as a family of views. Each such view maintains that a subject-matter, say logic or morals or thought, is a branch of psychology. As a result, the laws of that subject-matter are rightly understood as generalizations over the goings-on in the human head. So, for example, a psychologistic logician would treat the laws of logic as generalizations over the inferential goings-on of the human head. Also, Heidegger's objection to the claim that the tree in bloom is an idea buzzing *in our head* is an objection to a psychologistic claim.

Psychologism personalizes trees -- it personalizes the fields, etc. It does so by treating them as ideas, buzzings in the head, psychological. Heidegger hints at this in the passage immediately before the discussion of the tree in bloom, when he comments that in order to understand thinking we must leave psychology to one side. Of course, given his indebtedness to Husserl, Heidegger's anti-psychologism is not exactly surprising. But what is surprising is the way in which, and the depth at which, Heidegger battles psychologism. To make this clear, I want to compare Heidegger's anti-psychologism with Frege's. The comparison will also serve as a bridge from the tree in bloom to what Heidegger calls thinking.

Frege waged a lifelong war with psychologism. Frege over and over again engages the psychologistic thinker, showing her that psychologism so misshapes her ostensible topics as to render them unrecognizable. For example, in his famous paper "Thought," Frege turns on the same notion that Heidegger turns on when discussing the tree in bloom, the notion of ideas. (Interestingly, Frege, too, uses a tree as an example.) Frege's argument is lengthy (but I quote it in full):

Yet there is a doubt. Is it at all the same thought which first this and then that man expresses?

A man who is still unaffected by philosophy first of all gets to know things he can see and touch. . . such as trees, stones and houses, and he is convinced that someone else can equally see and touch the same tree and the same stone as he himself sees and touches. Obviously a thought does not belong with these things. Now can it, nevertheless, like a tree be presented to people as the same?

Even an unphilosophical man soon finds it necessary to recognize an inner world distinct from the outer world, a world of sense impressions, of creations of his imagination, of sensations. . . For brevity's sake, I want to use the word 'idea' to cover all these occurrences. . .

Now do thoughts belong to this inner world? Are they ideas? . . . How are ideas distinct from the things of the outer world? First: ideas cannot be seen, or touched, or smelled, or tasted, or heard.

I go for a walk with a companion. I see a green field, I thus have a visual impression of the green. I have it, but I do not see it. Secondly: ideas are something we have. . . An idea that someone has belongs to the content of his consciousness.

The field and the frogs in it, the sun which shines on them, are there no matter whether I look at them or not, but the sense impression I have of green exists only because of me, I am its owner. . . The inner world presupposes somebody whose inner world it is.

Thirdly: ideas need an owner. Things of the outer world are on the contrary independent. . . My companion and I are convinced that we both see the same field; but each of us has a particular sense impression of green. . .

Fourthly: every idea has only one owner; no two men have the same idea.

For otherwise it would exist independently of this man and independently of that man. Is that lime tree my idea? By using the expression 'that lime tree' in this question I am really already anticipating the answer, for I mean to use this expression to designate what I see and other people too can look at . . .⁷

Frege is trying to accomplish two things here: first, he's trying to show that the denizens of the inner world, ideas, are not thoughts. Ideas play no role in logic, as thoughts do. The things buzzing in our heads are not thoughts, nor are they parts of thoughts. Buzzings in our heads are not thoughts, since thoughts -- like lime trees, fields, and frogs -- are sharable and have no owner.

By 'thought' Frege means such ordinary, garden-variety things as "There are lime trees" or "Tigers are animals" or " $2 + 2 = 4$." Frege's denial that thoughts have owners needs to be understood in light of the act-content distinction: of course my *thinking* (act) of the thought (content) that tigers are animals is owned -- I do the thinking; it's my thinking. But the thought is not mine: any number of different people could have it; the thought is sharable. If we both think that tigers are animals, then we share a thought.

Second, Frege is trying to show that ideas are not things, denizens of the outer world. Schopenhauer's claim that the world is my idea would be greeted with the same sort of response that the Frege gives to the question "Is that lime tree my idea?"

Now Frege goes on from this discussion of ideas to argue that thoughts, although they are like lime trees, fields, and frogs, are also unlike them: thoughts are not perceptible -- they are grasped or thought, not seen, heard, touched, or tasted. Frege then takes this to show that thoughts are neither in the inner world nor in the external world. Instead, he takes thoughts to be in the Third Realm:

So the result seems to be: thoughts are neither things in the external world nor ideas.

A third realm must be recognized. Anything belonging to this realm has it in common with ideas that it cannot be perceived by the senses, but has it in common with things that it does not need an owner so as to belong to the contents of his consciousness.

So an integral part of Frege's anti-psychologism is his Third Realm. What is important here is that Frege's war with psychologism shares Heidegger's tactic of showing that ideas do not have any role to play of the sort we think when we do science or philosophy (they are neither things nor thoughts). However, Frege's war differs from Heidegger's in requiring that to avoid psychologism we must leap from psychology or science into a Third Realm -- not onto the firm soil of our lives.

For Frege, thoughts are not in the head. But since they are not in the outer world, either, they must be in some third place, The Third Realm. Heidegger shares Frege's conviction that thoughts are not in the head. But he does not share Frege's conviction that there must be a Third Realm -- or, better, Heidegger does not share Frege's conception of the Third Realm. Explaining this will take some effort.

What Is Called Thinking

Perhaps the best way to begin is by giving the game away: Heidegger thinks that the firm soil of our lives is the Third Realm. But what could this mean? The inner world is not the firm soil of our lives. Is the outer realm the firm soil? No, the outer realm is the realm of causation, science. When we stand on the firm soil we stand outside both psychology (inner world) and science (outer world) -- so we stand in the Third Realm. But Frege's Third Realm seems a strange land, and, as fleshly creatures, we seem strangers in it. So how can the firm soil of *our* lives be the Third Realm?

Answering this requires thinking back to Husserl and then forward to Heidegger. Famously, Husserl called thinkers to philosophy (phenomenology) with the cry, "Back to things themselves." The way back to things themselves was methodologically strait -- it required mastery of a new kind of seeing, mastery of *epoche*⁸ and it required mastery of a bizarre new vocabulary in which to communicate the results of the new kind of seeing. If Husserl's descriptions of the new kind of seeing and of what is seen by it are looked at closely, we recognize how much the intentional realm (what is looked into in *epoche*) resembles Frege's Third Realm. Indeed, although there are particular problems with saying so, it makes useful sense to say that looking into the intentional realm just is looking into Frege's Third Realm.⁹

By the time of his later writings, Heidegger has brooded over every feature of Husserl's method. In fact, Heidegger has internalized the method to a remarkable degree. But Heidegger wants the method to yield what Husserl promised -- a pathway back to things themselves. From Heidegger's perspective, any method that takes me to the intentional realm is not a method that takes me *back to things themselves*.¹⁰ (Husserl ends up sounding too much like Schopenhauer, despite Husserl's struggle not to sound idealistic, psychologistic. Things in the intentional realm show us facades merely, not faces.¹¹) Heidegger contrasts Husserl's *epoche* with his own (which will become *the clearing*):

For Husserl, [*epoche*]. . . is the method of leading phenomenological vision from the natural attitude of the human being whose life is involved in the world of things and persons back to the transcendental life of consciousness. . . in which objects are constituted as correlates of consciousness. *For us*, [*epoche*] means leading phenomenological vision back from the apprehension of a being, whatever may be the character of that apprehension, to the understanding of the being of this being. . .¹²

In Heidegger's terms, the problem of Husserl's method is that in *epoche* "objects are constituted as correlates of consciousness" -- they are ideas. In my terms, the problem is that in *epoche* objects are personalized.

Heidegger responds to this problem by personifying the method itself and what the method shows us. The method, since in Husserl's hands it took us to the intentional realm, shows us what is personal, seemed itself to be personalized. Heidegger depersonalizes it by personifying it. How?

Heidegger takes the key features of the method and finds a way to bring the practitioner of the method into a different relationship with those features, a different way of conceptualizing them. So, Heidegger takes *epoche* out of the intentional, personal realm and personifies it -- the *epoche* becomes *the clearing*. In the clearing, we can apprehend the being of a being, apprehend the being as it is, where it is. In the clearing, the objects that we

face, and that face us, are not correlates of consciousness. No, since they and we stand face-to-face, the objects are others -- they are personified. It is in the clearing that we can come face-to-face with a tree, for instance, or with a Greek Temple. The *epoche* provides only the tree-in-brackets, only the Temple-in-brackets. The *epoche* moves them, so to speak, from the soil on which they stand into the intentional realm; the *epoche* personalizes them. But the clearing lets the tree and the Temple stand where they stand, allows us to come face-to-face with them, while standing on the soil with them. In brackets, the tree and the Temple seem to be all facing surface -- seem to lack backs. But anything without a back is something that cannot really be confronted face-to-face. Only in the clearing do the tree and the Temple have backs, only there can I confront them face-to-face. In the clearing, the tree and Temple are personified. To replace the *epoche* with the clearing requires us to leap back to where we already stand. In the clearing we can come back to the things themselves.

In *What Is Called Thinking?*, Heidegger struggles to find a way to situate thinking so that we can find a way not to psychologize thinking -- but also so that we can find a way not to put thinking into the Third Realm as Frege understood the Third Realm. To do so, Heidegger works back to Parmenides, and to Parmenides's famous and famously obscure lines -- "One should both say and think that Being is"¹³ and "For it is the same to think and to be." Now, I do not propose to follow the torturous windings of Heidegger's examination of these lines. All I propose to do is to characterize the motive behind the examination. What Heidegger is after is thought personified, not thought personalized. The attraction of Parmenides's line is that it seems to place thought in the clearing -- it puts thought before us, so that we can stand face-to-face with it. For Heidegger, Parmenides is attempting to do for thought what Heidegger does for the tree. Parmenides is attempting to show us how to meet our thoughts and not merely how to have them. For Heidegger, correctly following Parmenides is a matter of thinking of our thoughts as themselves such as to be what we are thinking of. To borrow a line of Wittgenstein's, thought so understood would be thought that "does not stop anywhere short of the fact."¹⁴ To think such thoughts would be to think outside the head. Fully articulating such an understanding of thought is more than even Heidegger tries to do. *What is Called Thinking?* ends by pointing us in the direction of Parmenides's pointing, and by helping us to understand why we should want to be pointed that way. (As I will try to make clear below, and as I hinted at the beginning, what Heidegger struggles to articulate is something that Bart manages effortlessly to live.)

Back now to a question that I may seem to have forgotten: How can the firm soil of *our* lives be the Third Realm? The short answer is this: we have to see the firm soil of our lives *in the clearing* -- we have to personify the soil. Doing so requires that we leap to where we already are, doing so requires us to stand outside of psychology, outside of science. Put it this way: to see the firm soil of our lives *in the clearing*, to personify it, is to see (nothing other than) the spatial and temporal phenomena of our lives. But it is to see these phenomena as we see a chess piece when we are playing chess, and not as we see a chess piece when we describe its physical properties.¹⁵ So seen, the soil stands before us, it stands where it stands. And we stand before it: we come face-to-face with where we stand.

By personifying the firm soil of our lives, by seeing it in the clearing, we see it as fit for thought, as fit to be the content of thought. The things we think about no longer seem alien to our thoughts, cut off from us, veiled by ideas. The things we think about are now things that our thoughts reach out to and embrace. Our acts of thinking have the spatio-temporal phenomena of our lives as their content. *The world is all the things that are*

fit for thought. Or, to quote Wittgenstein once more, "The world is everything that is the case."¹⁶ And, *what is the case is what we can think*.

What Bart Calls Thinking

Bart Simpson helps to clarify what anti-psychologistic, personified thinking is. Bart is, in all that he thinks and does, face-to-face with things. He stands outside of science, but squarely in front of whatever engages him, present to it as it is present to him. For Bart, nothing is merely in his head. There is no psychological, personal intermediary between him and the world. For Bart, everything is personified. Everything is in the clearing.

When Bart gets something right, he does not take that to be a matter of having something intermediary (between him and the world) correspond with the world. No, he takes that to be a matter of having taken the world in hand or in mind.

That he does so puts Bart firmly among things, a being among beings. Bart's thinking is determined by what there is to think about. That it is so determined makes Bart's thinking peculiarly responsive to what there is, to what presents itself to him. This, I think, is the source of many of Bart's singular existential powers: his mighty resourcefulness, his preternatural knack to court and avoid danger and trouble, his oracular gift for predicting the path of events. (I do not claim Bart always uses his powers for good!) Unlike the rest of us, the rest of Springfield, who are saddled with the personal, who take ourselves to be screened from the world by intermediaries -- by ideas buzzing in our heads -- Bart is undistracted by buzzings, he is without screens, he is unsaddled.

Bart's thinking is intrinsically directed to the world. Bart is not stymied by philosophical puzzlers like "How does thought hook onto the world?" A quick glance at Bart in action shows that Bart would reject that question, if he were asked it, with a blank stare. Bart takes the world to be in his thoughts, he takes his thoughts to be world-involving. Since he does, there's no philosophical hooking of thought to world needed. It is Bart's lived rejection of this question that makes him appropriate to begin and end this paper. To his Heideggerian thinking I attribute Bart's powers to amuse, to bemuse, to be a Muse.

Now, can I prove that Bart is a Heideggerian thinker? No -- at least not as proving is normally understood. The best I can do is what I have done: elucidate Heideggerian thinking and then lay the elucidation alongside Bart, hoping that an internal relationship (a relationship such that standing in it is essential to each relatum) between the two shows itself. (Think of this procedure as roughly comparable to the following: I make clear to you what ducks are, provide pictures of them, then present you with Jastrow's Duck-Rabbit. If all has gone well, an internal relationship between the duck pictures and the Duck-Rabbit should show itself.) No example I might provide from *The Simpsons* will clinch my claim -- any example of that sort I might provide would be imponderable evidence at best. The relationship between what Heidegger calls thinking and what Bart calls thinking is something that I can help someone to see -- and I have tried to do so. But the relationship is wrongly conceived if it is taken to be something that could fall out, consequentially, from a syllogism.

¹ Martin Heidegger. *What Is Called Thinking?* trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), p. 41.

² Since I shall use these terms, and since they may not be made completely clear in my use of them,

let me say that to *personify* something is to treat it as an other, as independent of me, as something that is and does on its own and in its own way. Hence the importance of *faces* -- something regarded as having a face is something personified. (Think here of C.S. Lewis's novel, *Till We Have Faces*, part of the point of which is that here -- short of heaven -- we are not fully personified, we do not have faces.) To *personalize* something is to treat it as mine, as dependent on me, as something that is and does dependently on me. So, for example, *ideas* as they figure in the coming quotations from Schopenhauer, Heidegger, and Frege, are *personal(ized)*. As Frege puts it, ideas are something we have, something we own. (Something personified is not something that we have or own.)

³ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation* Vol. 1, trans E.F.J. Payne (Indian Hook, Colorado: Falcon Wing Press, 1958), p. 1. I use this passage instead of its parallel since I think it is clearer. (The parallel passage can be found in Vol. II, pp. 3-4.)

⁴ *What Is Called Thinking?*, p. 41.

⁵ By 'philosophy' Heidegger means philosophy as it has been and is done by others -- not philosophy as he does it.

⁶ *What Is Called Thinking?*, p. 41.

⁷ Gottlob Frege. *Logical Investigations*, trans Peter Geach and R. H. Stoothoff (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), pp. 13-16.

⁸ Here are Husserl's instructions for *epoche*, for bracketing: "We put out of action the general thesis which belongs to the natural standpoint, we place in brackets whatever it includes respecting the nature of Being: this entire natural world therefore which is continually 'there for us', 'present to our hand', and will ever remain there, is a 'fact-world' of which we continue to be conscious, even though it pleases us to put it in brackets. If I do this, as I am fully free to do, I do not then deny this 'world', as though I were a sophist, I do not doubt that it is there as though I were a skeptic; but I use the phenomenological [*epoche*], which completely bars me from using my judgment that concerns spatio-temporal existence. Thus all sciences which relate to this natural world, though they stand never so firm to me, though they fill me with wondering admiration, though I am far from any thought of objecting to them in the least degree, I disconnect them all, I make absolutely no use of their standards, I do not appropriate a single one of the propositions that enter into their systems. . . -- so long, that is, as it is understood in the way the sciences themselves understand it, as a truth concerning the realities of this world. I may accept it only after I have placed it in the bracket. That means: only in the modified consciousness of the judgment as it appears in disconnexion. . ." Edmund Husserl, *Ideas*, trans. W.R. Boyce Gibson (New York: Collier, 1962), pp. 99-100. When Heidegger personifies *epoche* as *the clearing* he (putting this picturesquely and oversimply) takes the framing brackets of *epoche*, which enclose a screen filled with two-dimensional intentional items (ideas), tilts the brackets down to lie on the ground, and removes the screen -- so that the things themselves, and not their intentional counterparts, can stand in the brackets, which now frame the clearing.

⁹ I will side-step the problems with saying this, since they are not stumbling-blocks in my path.

¹⁰ Whether Heidegger is right about this is a difficult question. For now I will ignore the question, treating Heidegger as if he were right, without arguing that he is.

¹¹ For Heidegger, the tree in bloom that we stand before is not a two-dimensional section of our bracketed visual fields -- it is not in our heads, a mere correlate of consciousnesses. Nothing in our heads could stand before us, meet us, face us. We cannot stand before, meet, or face an idea.

¹² Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 21.

¹³ By the time Heidegger finishes with this line, it has become: "Useful is the letting-lie-before-us, so (the) taking-to-heart, too: beings in being". Cf. *What Is Called Thinking?*, p. 228.

¹⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: MacMillan, 1953), 95. For more on this conception of thought, see John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 27ff. See also his "Putnam on Mind and Meaning" in *Meaning, Knowledge, and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 275-291.

¹⁵ Compare *Philosophical Investigations*, 109.

¹⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Mineola, New York: Dover, 1999), p. 1.

Episode Titles