

HAROLD FROMM

O, Paglia Mia!

NOT SO MUCH ELEGIAC AS APOSTROPHIC—but a little elegiac too: Oh, Camille Paglia, how long can you keep this up? Even manic Italians are mortal, Dionysian as they may happen to be. Even wellsprings of energy must run dry. Even radical intelligences, when all is said and done, remain (to use a Paglism) “chthonic,” sprung from earth’s double-crossing clay.

But there are actually a number of Camille Paglias, one of whom sounds like this:

But this blaming anorexia on the media—this is Naomi [Wolf]’s thing—oh *please!* Anorexia is coming out of these white families, these pushy, perfectionist white families, who all end up with their daughters at Yale. Naomi arrives in England, and “Gee, all the women Rhodes scholars have eating disorders. Gee, it must be . . . *the media!* Maybe it’s that *you* are a parent-pleasing, teacher-pleasing little kiss-ass! Maybe you’re a *yuppie!* Maybe *you*, Miss Yuppie, have figured out *the system*. Isn’t it interesting that Miss Naomi, the one who has succeeded in *the system*, the one who has been given the prizes by the system, she who is the princess of the system, *she’s* the one who’s bitchin’ about it? *I’m* the one who’s been poor and rejected—shouldn’t *I* be the one bitching about it? *No*—because I’m a scholar, okay, and she’s a twit!

Another one sounds like this:

Everything great in western culture has come from the quarrel with nature. The west and not the east has seen the frightful brutality of natural process, the insult to mind in the heavy blind rolling and milling of matter. In loss of self we would find not love of God but primeval squalor. This revelation has historically fallen upon the western male, who is pulled by tidal rhythms back to the oceanic mother. It is to his resentment of this daemonic undertow that we owe the grand constructions of our culture. Apollonianism, cold and absolute, is the west’s sublime refusal. The Apollonian is a male line drawn against the dehumanizing magnitude of female nature.

And yet another, like this:

The cutesy treatment of clerical dress as drag, with Tallulah Bankhead cited as an authority, sets a new low for cheap vulgarity and exposes the spiritual emptiness of academe. Even a passing familiarity with anthropology or comparative religion would have helped here. But [Marjorie] Garber's interdisciplinary skills are amateurish: one of her principal sources is Vern Bullough, a contemporary archivist and unreliable popularizer. She treats history like cake batter in a swirling Mixmaster. Romanticism, the birth of modern sexual identity, is never mentioned, even apropos of Byron.

The first specimen, a transcription of a talk at MIT (in *Sex, Art, and American Culture*), represents PopStar Paglia, the testosterone-driven rocker manquée; the second, from *Sexual Personae*, exemplifies Dr. Paglia, the archetypal/psychoanalytic polymath social philosopher; and the third, a review of a book on cross-dressing, introduces Professor Paglia, the imperious no-nonsense scholar, scourge of shoddy scholarship and screwball scholars. PopStar Paglia does not always come off well. There's too much weighty stuff in her head for a pop icon to convey without seeming loopier than pop icons usually do. During a five-minute interview on TV, one can see behind her eyes those tumultuous oceans of thought surging for an expression even *she* can't negotiate in the allotted sound bites. So she seems frustrated, impatient, an explosion of half-inarticulate emotion, a barrage of "Excuse me!" "OK?" "Absolutely absurd!" "Gimme a break!" "Pull-eeze!" And thus the comic-strip effect she produces on innocent viewers: a motormouth (as the Brits call her), a crazy. With Paglia, more is better; she needs lots of expansion time; she has an immensity to say.

This need for *Sprechensraum* was marvelously well-demonstrated on November 15th, 1994 in a performance Paglia gave in mobbed Mandel Hall at the University of Chicago shortly after the publication of her latest book, *Vamps and Tramps*.¹ In anticipation of the boeing and riotous behavior that sometimes take place at her appearances, placards were handed out to willing members of the audience as they arrived in the vestibule, inscribed with "RESPECT CAMILLE" and similar injunctions to silence that could be held aloft if the going got rough.

Paglia appeared onstage wearing an outfit evoking Dracula in drag, starting off extremely mannered, very uptight, all her characteristic facial and verbal tics ticking away like mad. She seemed to be anticipating immediate antagonism and was prepared to meet it by

¹ VAMPS AND TRAMPS: New Essays, by *Camille Paglia*. Vintage Books. \$15.00p. *Sexual Personae* was originally published in hardbound by Yale University Press and is now a Vintage paperback (\$16.00). *Sex, Art, and American Culture* is an original Vintage paperback (\$13.00).

slapping the audience's faces with a whole haberdashery of gloves. Though she told us she was a lesbian and that her favorite people were gay men, she attacked the feminists, she attacked the gays, she attacked the lesbians, she even attacked the English Department of the University of Chicago. But no antagonism was displayed. No RESPECT CAMILLE's were necessary. The audience went wild with cheers and applause in what turned out to be an orgy of love and admiration. The effect on Paglia was pronounced: she became more brilliant by the minute, speaking at a furious pace with never so much as a second's pause over the course of at least two hours. Her OK?'s and all right?'s were spurs to Pegasus. Her knowledge of ancient civilizations, English and European literature, American pop culture—these provided a fecund reservoir of images, metaphors, illustrations, and anecdotes, all milling so close to the surface of her consciousness that she could draw upon them instantly, as the split-second shifts of her wildest improvisations required. No prompts, no notes, no nothing! Dizzying, stunning, it left one gaga.

The PopStar and the Professor were nicely fused at Mandel Hall into an amalgam not often found either in the media or in academia. For all Paglia's passion for pop stars like the revolting Madonna, compared to her writings about them they seem vacuous and boring. Chthonia may be her thing, but there's no real substitute for the brains she has in such abundance. This is not to say that Paglia is without her faults, which her enemies are quick enough to attack. But their backbiting is often little more than the customary guarding of professional turf. Although other scholars are surely entitled to criticize Paglia, their narrow purview often prevents them from acknowledging her powerful accomplishments as a synthesizing public intellectual. There is, after all, a sort of general mediating knowledge more valuable than specialist scholarship, but academics are trained to disparage it. Another tactic is to dismiss *Sexual Personae* on the grounds that Paglia's treatments of major Western figures repeat things heard before or fail to reflect the very latest scholarship. Even granting its extreme repetitiveness, monomania, and need for pruning; its unconvincing overstatements; and its often suffocating projection of mythic meanings onto literature, people, and the universe at large in the now unfashionable manner of psychoanalytic criticism; even granting all of these flaws, cavils of this type minimize the astonishing synthesis, provocative philosophical foundations, polyphonic prose, and piercing intelligence required to bring off such a comprehensive performance.

Paglia's real faults are disappointing or irritating rather than fatally compromising and to some degree they are hard to pry loose from her strengths. In *Vamps and Tramps* as in *Sex, Art, and American Culture*, she refers incessantly to *Sexual Personae* as though it were the Parthenon or Stonehenge or some monumental artifact of civilization: "my 700-page scholarly study, *Sexual Personae*"; "*Sexual Personae*

is a Roman omnibus, a gazetteer of points of cultural transfer"; "The two volumes of *Sexual Personae* [only the first has been published so far], with the author as Amazon epic quester, may be the longest book yet written by a woman." She herself seems awed by it, a Leda slammed by a Swan of Transcendence, whose issue is somehow this remarkable book. Her megalomania is stupendous: "In the four years since I arrived on the scene (after an ill-starred career that included job problems, poverty, and the rejection of *Sexual Personae* by seven major publishers), there has been a dramatic shift in thought in America." Much of her reference to her work has the defensive quality of an autodidact, constantly emphasizing its *scholarliness* as opposed to everyone else's schlock. But given her knowledge and writing skills, one can only wonder why—since her work speaks for itself. (And for all her apparent megalomania, she has a very accurate estimate of her capabilities.) Puzzling too are her rivalries and putdowns, typified by the remark she made to James Wolcott for his article about her in *Vanity Fair* (Sept. 1992): Speaking of Susan Sontag, she exclaimed, "I've been chasing that bitch for twenty-five years, and at last I've passed her."

And yet these ego trips are essential components of Paglia's larger-than-life persona, even a reflection of her unusual honesty and candor, which easily coexist with the manic and hyperbolic style. She says what she feels and believes. (Are there many other gay intellectuals who would publicly assert that AIDS is a legacy of gay promiscuity in the sixties? No one at Mandel Hall booed when she said it.) She lets everything hang out, admits her past mistakes, claims not to take large fees for her lectures, continues to earn a low salary at an obscure university (still grateful for its help when she was jobless), rejects bourgeois decorum and conventional sex roles. Even as a lesbian she's not a lesbian. She tells us over and over how uncertain she finds her sexual identity and how she disbelieves in the newstyle sexual essentialism that enforces its own tyrannies (i.e., you're either gay or straight and you'd damn well better admit it). She likes men, sings paeans to virility, defends patriarchy, tells the gays she admires that their public behavior is nevertheless outrageous (their disruptions of services at St. Patrick's Cathedral, their throwing blood on the altar, their pretense that AIDS is not foremost a gay disease, for her it's all disgusting). To other lesbians, whom she is apt to regard as undersexed and overly "caring," she says, "Why stop at dildoes? If penetration excites, and if receptive female genitalia are so suited to friction by penis-shaped objects, why not go on to real penises?" To her, political loyalties mean very little.

In 1990, with the publication of *Sexual Personae*, Paglia miraculously emerged from twenty years of obscurity into a mythic notoriety. She has transformed her past into the very substance of this myth, whose components have now been repeated so many times that they have come to seem objective facts of nature, like Mount St. Helens: her

Italian Catholic origins, her rootedness in an extended family, her sexual ambiguity, her fistfight at Bennington (where she was fired as prof), her inability to get jobs or dates (Who wants a pipe bomb as a colleague? Who wants to date Mount St. Helens?); her manic sixties persona, her mentoring by Harold Bloom (her depressive Other), her riotous lectures, her battles with feminists. To think of her as a mere "person" is like thinking of the Mississippi as just a river. Her writing, of course, is suffused with a mythic mentality:

Italians invented opera. It is our way of living in and reacting to the world. In opera, emotion fills the body. Italians experience emotion in sensory terms, as if it were something eaten, drunk, or poured over the flesh. Long ago on TV, Dick Cavett said he didn't like opera; he didn't "get it." As I looked at his small, thin body and large, smirky, Ivy League head, I said: yes.

(Sex, Art, and American Culture)

The point is not that all of this is literally true. The generalizations are too large and sweeping to be "true." Yet it is all true enough. The question to ask is, Is "not literally true" the same as "off the wall"? I don't think so. Paglia's mythic style, like Kierkegaard's or Nietzsche's, is an effective vehicle for a certain type of intellectual work, an emotionally charged transvaluation of values, a melodramatic counterrevolution against political correctness. And beyond intellectual "style" there is her wild and outrageous behavior, heroic for a professor, since she admits to and lives it as part of the whole paraphernalia of her mission—it's not a secret life like Foucault's—thereby revealing how purely conventional is the outrageousness of most "radical" professor types, for whom outré dogmas are requisites, not bars, to professional advancement.

Vamps and Tramps, Paglia's newest collection, is a bargain book by any criteria. Not only does one get more than five hundred pages of the most vital and adroit writing, including material not previously published (not just lint-sweepings from her cupboards, as some critics have claimed), but there are TV scripts, photographs, cartoons and comics about Paglia, and a huge annotated bibliography of writings—also about Paglia—that appeared during the two years since her previous collection. All this for a paltry fifteen dollars. Since the annotations are obviously by Paglia herself, they are often pretty hilarious.

In one sense there is nothing really new in this book. Paglia's outlook had already been made perfectly clear on page one of *Sexual Personae*:

Society is an artificial construction, a defense against nature's power. . . . Civilized man conceals from himself the extent of his subordination to nature. . . . Sexuality and eroticism are the intri-

cate intersection of nature and culture. Feminists grossly oversimplify the problem of sex when they reduce it to a matter of social convention: readjust society, eliminate sexual inequality, purify sex roles, and happiness and harmony will reign. . . . For Sade, getting back to nature . . . would be to give free rein to violence and lust. I agree. Society is not the criminal but the force which keeps crime in check. . . . Sex is power. Identity is power. In western culture, there are no nonexploitative relationships.

But in another sense the contents of this book are as fresh as ever because of Paglia's unflagging vivacity. The new essay "No Law in the Arena" attacks once more the prevailing truism among feminists and Foucauldians that human beings are socially constructed. Reaffirming that nature runs the show and that women's lives are tied to the ineradicable (and terrifyingly gory) processes of their bodies (whose psychological manifestations are unsuccessfully repressed by the corporate WASP office life many women are taught to pursue), Paglia takes the position most abhorrent to feminists that Apollonian male ratiocination and civilization-building are resistances to nature and to women (the more powerful sex) as secret agents of nature. What feminists call patriarchy is civilization itself, which protects women from raw, predatory nature (like rapists and serial childbearing) by means of laws and technology (e.g.: birth control pills) devised by men. If women have any chance of minimizing the grip of nature it is through male institutions, particularly those of the West. Paglia believes that resistance to nature—particularly through the arts—is humankind's chief mission, however doomed, and that the contemporary failure to acknowledge nature's power over us has led to an arrogant Rousseauist badmouthing of social institutions. This can only entrap women more deeply by treating them once again as fragile Victorian vessels needing protection against the society that is actually sustaining them.

Despite her unbelief, it is always Catholicism that broods over her psyche. Her "conservatism" is not the neoconservatism of politics but the conservatism of Original Sin. Her pet word "chthonic" is a constant reminder that to be of the earth is to be a product of nature, which some Christian churches never liked because nature, corrupted by sin and intertwined with death, is seen as the locus of all our woe. A Christian's goal is to get out of fallen nature, to become as purely spiritual as the flesh will allow. But for Paglia, steeped in the ambivalences of an eroticized, paganized, *Italian* Catholicism, the civilized "self" fights nature not by resisting it (which is virtually impossible, in any case) but by wallowing in it and then transforming it through art and artifice (in the manner of de Sade). For Paglia, it is the "unnatural" drag queen who symbolizes spirit fighting nature's totalitarianism (by giving in to it—but definitely not to the point of procreation—and then transmuting it into camp). The best that the

rest of us can do, our own more genteel method of giving nature the finger, is to respect society as our strongest defense, while never forgetting that nature will claim us in the end.

Seen in this light, feminists who blame society for what they detest about maleness are dupes of nature, their *real* enemy. So Paglia aims her guns at Gloria Steinem and the National Organization of Women for their “juvenile, jeering attitude toward men and masculinity.” She remarks the irony that “the legal and media world inhabited by Steinem and her coterie is filled with bookish white-collar men who are the only ones in society who actually listen to feminist rhetoric and can be guilt-tripped into trying to obey it.” Or, as she puts it more succinctly, these are the only male office workers who have been successfully enjoined against saying, “Hey, babe! You got great tits!” (“Sensitivity-training” and the fear of lawsuits, however, may in fact have extended their own insensitive reach further than she is willing to allow.) Though Paglia thinks society should prevent men from engaging in vicious sexual harassment, she does not believe that it should (or really could) androgynize the entire human race. Without testosterone there wouldn’t *be* a human race.

In later sections of *Vamps and Tramps*, Paglia goes on to consider pornography, homosexuality, and other explosive subjects with a frankness and insight that have almost disappeared from public discussions caught in the strangle hold of political correctness. In “The Culture Wars,” Paglia amplifies these issues through shorter pieces collected from an impressively wide range of periodicals. Her ability to relate both classical and contemporary figures to pop culture is her distinctive signature:

MacKinnon and Dworkin have become a pop duo, like Mutt and Jeff, Steve and Eydie, Ron and Nancy. MacKinnon, starved and weather-beaten, is a fierce gargoyle of American Gothic. With her witchy tumbleweed hair, she resembles the batty, gritty pioneer woman played by Agnes Moorehead on *The Twilight Zone*. Or she’s Nurse Diesel, the preachy secret sadist in Mel Brooks’s *High Anxiety*.

Dworkin is Pee-wee Herman’s Large Marge, the demon trucker who keeps returning to the scene of her fatal accident. I see MacKinnon and Dworkin making a female buddy picture like *Thelma and Louise*. Their characters: Penny Wise and Pound Foolish, the puritan Gibson Girl and her fuming dybbuk, the glutton for punishment.

These identifications, not as frivolous as they seem, are “objective correlatives,” concrete instantiations of Paglia’s belief that pop culture artists and artifacts are contemporary versions (*personae*) of perennial nature-driven types, types she delineated in demonic detail in *Sexual Personae*. In practice this means her intuitions of public utterances and their speakers reinterpret them as archetypes, desta-

bilizing the “socially constructed” foundations on which their speakers think they are standing.

Not only does Paglia criticize feminists like MacKinnon for their failure to recognize the natural, bodily imperatives that underlie human behavior and belie doctrines of social constructivism, she is engaged almost single-handedly in trying to rescue art from its subservience to feminist politics. “We will never get great art from women if their education exposes them only to the second-rate [i.e., to minor women writers, composers, and artists rescued by the feminist agenda] and if the idea of greatness itself is denied. Greatness is not a white male trick. Every important world civilization has defined its artistic tradition in elitist terms of distinction and excellence.” Paglia’s conception of art, however, includes not only high culture’s elite creations but low culture’s mass media, as well as pornography—often intermixed and far from “pure,” since they all strive to transmute irreducibly “chthonic” human needs. So it figures that she sees ballet and art museums as soft porn for the educated middle classes and she defends sexy pinups in blue collar lockers as working-class forms of art.

There is too much in this book for a cursory survey to sample. Articles on Princess Di, Madonna, Elizabeth Taylor, Anita Hill, Hillary Clinton, Edward Said, the Bobbitts, D. H. Lawrence, Susan Sontag reveal Paglia’s extraordinary ability to make popular culture seem chthonic, complex, and “metaphysical” even to an audience as hostile to it as I am. As a book reviewer she has few peers when it comes to accurately and distinctly conveying a book’s contents in clear, animated prose. Of course, her own ideologies can sometimes lead to very questionable conclusions, as when she extols the bizarre world of bodybuilding in a review of Samuel Wilson Fussell’s *Muscle*, a book that minutely describes the drug-taking, eight-meals-a-day, 5000-plus calorie diets, and grotesque pumpings-up that characterize the daily lives of professional bodybuilders. For Paglia, their defiance of nature is enough to warrant her approval—though in reality it is ultimately *through* nature that such tortured bodies and demented personalities are produced (but this opens another complex subject). Yet nonplusing as her devotion to drag queens, bodybuilders, and rock stars may be, and joltingly raunchy as her TV scripts and video capers can appear, she comes off as a person of integrity nonetheless, with a mission defined more by Catholic saints than by the professional bottom line.² (What was “God” to them is “Nature” to her, and her relation to it is strongly driven by an ambivalent mixture of hatred and love.) Her writing is heavily epigrammatic, hopelessly quotable, recalling Nietzsche’s in ironic reductions that expand one’s insight.

² See Paglia’s interesting interview in a special issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly: Catholic Lives/Contemporary America*, 93 (Summer 1994): pp. 727–46. “People said to me early on, ‘Oh, what can you do? One person can’t do anything.’ And I said, ‘Excuse me, one person can move mountains.’ That’s the example of the saints.”

Far from being a flake, she represents a rare type of sanity—but one would not necessarily want to live in the same house.

Although he might spin in his grave to hear it, I think that Paglia—manic, hyperbolic, plugged into deafening electronic media (she watches several TV's at loud volume while composing at the computer, unable to write in silence), frequently "talking trash" (to use her expression for street language), violating every convention with impunity as she speaks nonstop the unspeakable—now occupies (perhaps with Henry Louis Gates) the cultural space once inhabited by Lionel Trilling, that oblique, understated, courtly, formal, elitist public intellectual of a past whose ethos seems already remotely distant. Antithetical to Trilling as her sensibility may be, her moral seriousness is as weighty as his (she shares his nature/culture and Freudian stances) and her influence on this generation is bound to be as substantial and far-flung as anything *can* be in an era in which intellectual and moral trends turn over as rapidly as materialist consumer styles. She speaks with a voice that exactly catches the air and aroma of contemporary life, more hectic than Juvenal's, a life in which (for good or for ill) academic decorum like Trilling's has been thrown to the winds, as a corrosive capitalism turns daily life into twitchy MTV videos and democracy's freedoms threaten to undermine democracy itself, reinforcing our subservience to feral nature. In keeping with times like these, her style is indecorous, and her emphasis is more on nature—and nature-in-culture—than Trilling's. She loves the products of "spirit" as much as he but insists more concretely that spirit grows from mud and mud must have its due. The startling accomplishment of her work is its relentless exposure of how much mud underlies spirit, even in the sublimest artworks, which we are likely to experience somewhat differently because of her. But whether any descendants of Trilling can learn to love the hated mud as much as she remains an open question.

Coexisting with her role of public-intellectual-as-stand-up-comedian is her scholar's instinct to conserve what has been of value in Western culture through gestures of "veneration and respect" for spiritual warriors whose victories are nevertheless forms of defeat in a battle that can't be won. Her Italian Catholicism, her defense of literature against politics, her recognition that without men there wouldn't be any women (and vice versa), her capacious aesthetic umbrella for the arts, her respect for plebeian consciousness and primitive needs—these things and more distinguish her from the MLA crowd and contribute to the fame that she richly deserves.³

³ I am indebted to John V. Walker for an interesting twist that I derived from his essay, "Seizing Power: Decadence and Transgression in Foucault and Paglia," in *Postmodern Culture*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (Sept. 1994), an electronic journal on the Internet. I am also extremely grateful for repeated help from Donald Marshall (University of Illinois at Chicago) and Bill Shuter (Eastern Michigan University).