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Riding Homer Out on a Rail

One of the great pleasures of watching the dark, loopy, always intelligent, and at times heart-breakingly beautiful movies of Joel and Ethan Coen is seeing the high old time the brothers have in flaunting their own unoriginality. The Coens are adepts at the film school game of “homage” (pronounced frenchly without the “h”: what the rest of us know as literary allusion), and behind each of their movies stands a set of other movies (or stories or books) whose contours are clearly visible, nudging, poking, and prodding *this* one into a shape the audience understands because it has seen it before. But more important, they are at heart makers of genre movies—indeed, it is hard to know how to take even such a masterpiece as their *Miller’s Crossing* (taken from Dashiell Hammett’s *Red Harvest* and *The Glass Key*) except as an essay in generic composition—and genre depends on repetition. “Play it again” is the real name of the game.

Their favorite genre is also one of the world’s oldest—the quest—which they replay also in the familiar Hollywood modes of the crime movie and the episodic chase. What makes a Coen quest so special is the passionate attachment their characters have to objects of only the most thorough ordinariness—bland creature comforts, the hackneyed sentimentality of travel posters, or the banal domesticity of home and children—that is, to the utterly familiar. But familiarity is just the point here: the quest is for repetition, and the passion driving it is a deep but unreflective nostalgia. Some of the movies’ most stunning moments come when the call of the conventionally desirable makes itself heard even against the din of the most outrageous situations: in *Raising Arizona*, for example, when Holly Hunter and Nicolas Cage swear their undying love for the baby they have just kidnapped; or in *Fargo* when Frances McDormand’s pregnant police officer

Review

O Brother, Where Art Thou?

A film by Joel Coen
& Ethan Coen

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returns home after wrapping up a bizarre and brutal case to coo over her stay-at-home husband who has just won a contest for the design of a new postage stamp; or in *Miller's Crossing* when Albert Finney's Irish gangster wreaks tommy-gun havoc on an entire neighborhood to the swelling strains of "Danny Boy," or when John Turturro explodes into desperate pleading for his life in the midst of what has to be the loveliest forest glade ever put on film. A token of the Coens' mastery over the medium is that what is invoked as beautiful in these scenes never loses its power even amid all the tumult. The stretch between nostalgic desire and its circumstances certainly is great enough that the effects here can be mistaken for mere wackiness; yet these characters—and their creators—appear less as simple wackos than as role-players, working out deep but arbitrary wants in a script that someone else has written for them (which is literally true), but still they persevere. Occasionally, the Coens reveal what happens when the longing to return plays itself out to the end: faced with a blank page, the Broadway writer turned Hollywood hack in *Barton Fink* can only rewrite the same script he has just finished, and in *Blood Simple* the body of a murder victim turns up again and again but remains dead.

With their latest movie Joel and Ethan Coen have raised their concern with genre, repetition, and nostalgia to a new level and have greatly expanded its scope. *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* is in a number of ways their most serious movie (it is, I think, an Important Film) and at the same time one of their silliest. Its silliness is on an epic scale, though, a magnificent rampage throughout the entire movie, deploying an army of devices drafted from the ranks of familiar silly movie possibilities: loony dialogue, capricious tonal shifts and plot twitches, red herrings, wild coincidences, and a legion of unmotivated character quirks right down to the paltriest set of false beards since the Marx Brothers donned the disguises of the Three Famous Aviators in *A Night At the Opera*. And—as in Marx Brothers' movies—the silliness is directed against the widest range of targets: individuals, politicians, domestic bliss, rural electrification projects, the criminal justice system, mass media, the father of the Western Tradition of high culture (I'm not kidding), the Confederate flag, and, of course, old movies. In this jumble, there is little in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* that can be anticipated, but also little that has not been seen many times before.

In genre, *O Brother* is an unlooked-for hybrid. By its title, it suggests itself as a movie of social comment, in fact as the very one left unmade in Preston Sturges' *Sullivan's Travels*, a comedy about a successful director of Hollywood froth who sets out on a trek through depression-era America in search of material for a new conscience-driven project he calls, yes, *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* Sullivan's travels take him through soup kitchens and hobo jungles to the chain gang of a southern penal farm, where he discovers that what America needs is more light comedies, and he returns to Hollywood duly enlightened. The Coens' movie reverts to the time (1937), the place (rural north Mississippi), and at least a wisp of the plot: Ulysses Everett McGill (George Clooney) and two companions (Tim Blake Nelson and John Turturro) escape from a chain gang to go on an episodic quest whose object shifts as

the movie rolls along—first, it is something they call “treasure,” then Everett’s home. With police bloodhounds in hot pursuit, the three adventure their way across a Southland steeped in historical reminiscence: they run into a wildly bipolar Babyface Nelson (Michael Baldaluccio) and a thinly disguised Robert Johnson, King of the Delta Blues Guitar (Chris Thomas King); they entangle themselves with the political campaign between incumbent Governor Pappy O’Daniel (Charles Durning) and challenger Homer Stokes (Wayne Duvall), bungle into a Klan lynching, and manage (don’t ask how) to break into the region’s still makeshift commercial radio with a hit recording of “I Am a Man of Constant Sorrow” under the pseudonym of The Soggy Bottom Boys. In the end it is their fame as *artistes* that saves them—that, along with floodwaters conveniently provided by the dams of the newly constructed TVA.

The flimsiness of these connections with *Sullivan’s Travels* is likely to expose the Coens’ title as only another of the movie’s false beards. But the single scene the Coens reproduce relatively intact from the Sturges exemplar helps nail down a different generic identity. At one point in *O Brother*, as in *Sullivan’s Travels*, a group of chained convicts is marched in a particularly grim form of R & R into an auditorium to join some civilians already assembled to watch a movie. In *Sullivan’s Travels*, what they’re watching is a toss-off Disney cartoon, exemplifying Sullivan’s own once-and-future ambitions; in *O Brother*, it is a Busby Berkeley number, declaring *this* movie’s status as a musical. And, of course, that’s just what it has been all along, a showcase for performances, both on-screen and off, of assorted results of that glorious fusion of African, English, Scotch-Irish, and commercial traditions known as the “old-time” music of the American South. It is hard to overstate the beauties of the music presented here, vividly and impeccably realized by a host of traditional performers and some of their best younger avatars. The songs are done just the way they’re supposed to be done, with

love and leisure, always insisting on the long version which includes every verse, every chorus, and every instrumental break in between; and the outcome is thoroughly persuasive. Norman Blake's elegant "You Are My Sunshine" reveals all the forgotten appeal of that old chestnut. Ralph Stanley's otherworldly rendition of "O Death," rising over the hellish Klan gathering, soars to majestic heights, even as it freezes the blood. The traditional lullaby, "Didn't Leave Nobody but the Baby," as sung here by Alison Krauss, Gilian Welch, and Emmylou Harris, would make anyone long to be an infant again. And when a cotillion of Baptists, white-clad for full immersion, floats in from all directions through the woods, softly chanting in close harmony as they go down to the river to pray, this single aching lovely moment is enough to justify the whole noisome apparatus of Dolby surroundsound. The Coens aim at the sublime here, and they hit their target.

Music is the mark and the vehicle of nostalgia in *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*—the point is made long before the refrain of "Angel Band" comes over the closing credits: "Oh, bear me away on your snow-white wings to my immortal home"—and it is powerful enough to seem able to carry everything in the vicinity along on a redemptive ride. Even the movie's stumblebum cons are so en-

thralled by the Baptists' "studyin' about that good old way" that they pronounce themselves saved and want it all to continue just as it is forever. But as the movie insists, the vicinity it depicts is not only the South of lovable clowns and fabulous string bands. It is also the South of chain gangs and lynch mobs, of official brutality and corruption, of stupidity, religious bigotry, poverty, and staggering ignorance; and these ghosts demand blood. Those who may know the music of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* only from the soundtrack CD should be warned that, as often as not, in the movie itself the on-screen performers are only lip synching in the clumsiest and most obvious way. The music retains its call, and that call is authentic and deep, but the attempt to play it again can ring irredeemably false.

The master text behind *O Brother, Where Art Thou?*, however, is also the master narrative of nostalgia in the West, and the Coens announce it plainly and early in the opening credits: "Based on the *Odyssey* by Homer." After this, they are rarely less subtle in driving the point home, even going so far as to share screen-writing credit with Homer, a gracious gesture, but a safe one since Homer is unlikely to pick up his check. The Coens are well-versed in the *Odyssey*, aware, for example, that its protagonist is only as much a hero as he is also a vain, fast-talking sharpie whose famed strategies often amount to little more than desperate improvisations (they present his slickness literally here by giving him an obsession with Dapper Dan Men's Pomade), and also that "man of constant sorrow" is a pretty fair translation of the Greek name Odysseus. But for the most part their play with the *Odyssey* is not a scholar's game; it is in the public domain of Western culture, open to anyone who has even glanced at the comic book. Ulysses Everett McGill is going home to wife Penny (Holly Hunter) and the kids, and along the way, he runs into versions of all the familiar episodes. There are Lotus-Eaters, a blind prophet Tiresias, a king of the winds, a giant Cy-

clops, and a spectacularly sexy combo of Circe, the Sirens, and the Princess Nausicaa washing clothes by the rocks in the river. There is even a stop-off in the land of death. As the Coens replay the *Odyssey*, the journey home becomes a journey to well-known cultural origins.

For a while, the game is good fun, not so much in guessing what signifies which—that is too easy—as in seeing what outrageous stretch the Coens will make next to send up their original. The movie treats Homer with much less reverence than it does old-time music, and in any case classical and southern mythologies do not mix easily here. Not that they couldn't: the *Odyssey* is anything but resistant to cultural transposition, as Virgil and Joyce, Janet Lewis and Charles Frazier all bear witness. But for most of the movie the Coens keep the two on essentially separate tracks so that the pleasure is all the giddier at unforeseen junctions. Most of the Homeric connections, in fact, appear as gratuitous shtick—most, but certainly not all—little illuminating what is going on here or in the *Odyssey* itself, products only of the Coens' caprice and the movie's thorough-going silliness. Why in the world should the Cyclops become a corrupt Bible salesman (John Goodman, by the way)? Why should Penelope be such a shrew? Or, a better way of asking it, putting first things first: Why should *this* shrew be called Penny? Why indeed, if not for the assertion of a pre-existing pattern, unmotivated except by the fact that it *is* pre-existing and by Homer's unique claim to cultural authority? At times in *O Brother*, Homer is felt not so much as an inevitable presence or even a congenial collaborator, but as an arbitrary and tyrannical paterfamilias demanding accommodation. As the movie's yokels step out of character more and more often to mouth actual lines and phrases from the *Odyssey* (or at least from the familiar translation by Robert Fitzgerald) and even unaccountably drop in a bit of Latin, their classicizing gets more and more intrusive, but still they persevere. And when, toward the movie's end, the Homeric paradigm gets bossy enough

to push Ulysses Everett into hapless fisticuffs with Penny's boyfriend—whom everyone around pointedly insists on calling a "sooter"—even a committed classicist in the audience was ready to stand up and shout, "Enough, already!"

The southern shtick and the classical shtick come most uncomfortably together near the movie's climax, when Homer (Stokes, that is, the pretender to gubernatorial power) is unmasked as the murderous Klan leader and, spouting the poisonous claptrap about traditional values and southern heritage still heard daily on the evening news, is mobbed by the populace and ridden out of town on a rail. Such treatment is certainly unfair for the author of the *Odyssey*, but mobs aren't always so nice when it comes to making distinctions, and it is easy to imagine our man shouting, "But I am Homer the poet! I am Homer the poet!" as he is carried off. Still, the point has been made: there comes a time when nostalgia must end, when the Siren of historical continuity must remain unheeded, when the power of the past over the present must be broken. Soon after this scene, the ominous Charybdis of modernity waiting in the wings, the great floodwaters of the TVA come roaring through the landscape, purging, purifying, cleansing the whole mess and drenching it all under one vast, deep, new lake. The shattered remnants of the movie

drift at random across the screen like particles in a primordial soup waiting to be organized anew, and water is all around. But this same water is just Odysseus' element, and he is nothing if not a survivor. And when suddenly Ulysses bobs up to the surface, now buoyed not by a Homeric spar but by a coffin (Queequeg's coffin!), the saga blithely continues as if it had been *Moby Dick* all along. The past, it seems—one or another version of it—isn't so easily drowned after all: Homer may be out, but Pappy (O'Daniel, that is, the sitting governor) is still in.

At the end of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* nostalgia will have its way by hook or crook. But by now, it is a jury-rigged nostalgia for a jury-rigged past, and that is just what saves it from the slavery of mechanical repetition. Long before the movie comes a close, the powerful engine of historical reminiscence has already begun to slip its cogs: Pappy O'Daniel was indeed a southern governor, but of Texas, not Mississippi; "You Are My Sunshine" was the campaign song (and composition) of Gov. Jimmy Davis of Louisiana; Babyface Nelson's crime spree took place in Illinois and he himself was dead three years before the movie is set; and the TVA...well, come on. These gaffes are small, but they do indicate who's in charge here. By just such arbitrary shifts, the Coens have declared their independence from any one pattern of the past, and therefore from them all. For them, the past is less the inevitability of authoritative example than it is a reservoir of discrete possibilities offering themselves freely to anyone who wants to fish them out and fry them up, something as fluid as the primordial soup displayed at the movie's climax. Fishing out these possibilities—with all the random sequences, gratuitous connections, willful combinations, and eclectic hybridization it entails—is the nostalgic work of this movie, and the Coens fish entirely at their own pleasure. If at times they even get downright silly about it, in the end, who's there to stop them? Not only won't Homer pick up his check, he won't even sue.