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Tootsie, Feminism, and the Modern Self

C. Roland Wagner

Watching *Some Like It Hot* for the third time the other night on television, and having originally enjoyed the movie (1959) considerably, I was disappointed. I did not laugh much, nor was I moved, nor was I particularly interested in the phenomenon of Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis disguised as women in an all-female jazz band. Will the same thing happen to *Tootsie*? Will it become dated? Perhaps. But for now the film appears to me to be a cultural document of considerable importance. Raw and unfinished as it certainly is, somewhat compromised in its artistic integrity, it nevertheless not only entertained but also moved me deeply. It possesses a magic that captivates the eye, but, as in the greatest art, the sources of its magic are deeply rooted and far from obvious—at least while we are under its spell.

Even the obvious in the film is interesting as well as entertaining. As many critics have noted, Americans are more at ease today with androgyny. Michael Dorsey (played by Dustin Hoffman) can perform as Dorothy Michaels without a swish and without the slightest titter from the audience. This is a recent phenomenon, but not unique, as John Lithgow's fine portrayal of the transsexual in *The World according to Garp* indicates. What complicates the situation in *Tootsie* is that the sexual theme is enhanced by the theme of aggression, and both are finally subordinated to the central theme of the discovery of self. Michael is working out his hidden relationship to his own femininity and at the same time expressing the not-so-hidden masculinity of the women in the film. He becomes a culture hero to women because of the great difficulty they have in coming to terms with their anger. As he himself discovers, comprehends, and finally integrates into his evolving self some of his own feminine impulses, he becomes a role model in helping the women in the film—in particular Julie (Jessica Lange, playing the lead



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opposite Hoffman)—clarify their own confused passivity, submissiveness, and fatalism. Michael's courageous exploration of his own "negative identity" (in Erikson's language) helps the women explore further *their* negative identity.

Michael also becomes a touchstone for the hidden femininity of the male characters, the delicious variations on the theme of *their* repressed femininity. He is a true hero and a complex one, for everything is happening at once: his own self-exploration, his exposure of male fakery, his encouragement of female assertiveness. I find it puzzling that Pauline Kael, whose thoughtful review of the film discusses these aspects, fails to appreciate the splendid unity of this triple symbolic action. She notices but repudiates as sentimental and unworthy an "undercurrent" in the film "that Michael, through playing a woman, becomes a better man—more in touch with himself and all that."¹ Although she responds with enthusiasm to the excitement of Michael's hidden thought processes, his fine passion for his role, his "charm" as a woman in contrast to his "knotted personality" as a man, she fails to draw the inevitable conclusion: that Michael appears to become a better man precisely because of his special experiences in his role as a woman. She closes herself off from the possibility that the suggestions of lesbianism and homosexuality in the film are more than merely "farcical" and not also contributions to human self-discovery, a self-discovery which she recognizes ("even in a hospital soap he's on a quest for the truth of his character") but does not, I think, sufficiently understand.

1. *The New Yorker* (27 December 1982), 68-72. All subsequent citations from Kael are to this review.

The movie pays greatest overt attention to Dorothy's powerful effect on the women. In his own persona as acting teacher we see Michael attempting to do explicitly but with little success what he more effectively accomplishes in his role as Dorothy. The comic scenes with Teri Garr in which Michael, as Method coach, attempts to encourage his pupil to express her anger artistically ("Have the anger. Don't show it to me.") contain within their limited scope a modest pictorial parody of the two-sided view that men have had of women and that women have had of themselves in Western culture. One stream of images flows from Judeo-Christian, Greek, and European suspicion of woman as Seducer and Destroyer, the other from idealizations of woman as Virgin, virtuous companion, and "Angel in the House." The contradictory images have never really been lost but have been, to use Nietzsche's word, continually "revalued," or displaced to suit the fashions of the day.

But the images are not merely images. Neither is literally true, yet both together reveal not only male (and female) prejudice but also the inward tensions of many women. Tolstoy, an extreme victim of the traditional dual view who became increasingly ensnared by its corrosive consequences, still managed to understand its nature and its effects on the female (as well as the male) psyche. Even as he gradually succumbed to outrageous visions of femininity, a part of him saw women steadily and saw them whole. In *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1889), Tolstoy's hero, Pozdnyshev, shows compassionate recognition of the disastrous consequences of unresolved feminine duality:

"You know, . . . [the] domination of women from which the world suffers all arises from this."

"What 'domination of women?'" I asked. "The rights, the legal privileges, are on the man's side."

*"Yes, yes! That's just it," he interrupted me. "That's just what I want to say. It explains the extraordinary phenomenon that on the one hand woman is reduced to the lowest stage of humiliation, while on the other she dominates. . . . As it is at present, a woman is deprived of [those rights] while a man has [them]. And to make up for [those rights] she acts on man's sensuality, and through his sensuality subdues him so that he only chooses formally, while in reality it is she who chooses. And once she has obtained these means she abuses them and acquires a terrible power over people."*²

2. *The Death of Ivan Ilych and Other Stories*, trans. Aylmer Maude and J. D. Duff (New York: New American Library, 1960), p. 178.

Is Michael a radical Dionysus liberating women from their chains of servitude? At one level, yes, but here the comical and farcical are in the ascendant. The violence and the ecstasy are muted, though not eradicated. Michael is more fundamentally a conservative revolutionary, closer to Aeschylus than Euripides. At his best he would transform women from the Furies into the domestic "kindly ones." He would teach women to verbalize their resentment directly and not misuse their power in harmful substitutions. Although Michael is infected somewhat by clumsy neo-Freudian ideas of *expressing* what you really feel, the movie is far from teaching that expressing resentment openly is simply a matter of "letting go." This knight in shining armor comes not to idealize—although some idealizations remain—or to demean—although (as Pauline Kael remarks) some "self-congratulation" and "self-aggrandizement" is visible in his role as Dorothy—but to release the prisoners from their jails. Still, Michael is not a god, with a Tolstoyan mastery of the feminine, only a rather self-absorbed, self-indulgent young man whose metamorphosis moves him to some insight into women's conflicts.

In his role as Dorothy, Michael's relationship with macho men, although challenging to traditional American values, is not very disturbing to the present generation. The women make him a heroine because of their own frustrated, yet partly conscious masculinity, the men because of their mostly unconscious femininity. But the susceptible men in the movie are "old-fashioned," the men in the audience more up-to-date and less frightened of their own femininity; still the link between characters and audience is close enough to keep both comedy and pathos in proportion. Charles Durning, as Jessica Lange's father in the movie, is touching and not altogether ridiculous as he makes love to Michael; George Gaynes, vaguely effeminate as the "old ham" whose declining energies are renewed by his attraction to the disguised Michael, plays expertly upon our conscious and unconscious presuppositions about male identity; while Dabney Coleman, as director of the television soap opera, finely caricatures the exploiting male who draws all our contempt perhaps more for his own not very hidden underlying weakness than for his misuse of power.

The third component in *Tootsie*, which grows naturally out of the other two, is the theme of self-exploration, Michael's "quest for the truth of his character." This, the most ambitious theme, has as its focus the construction of a self. It derives from a coming into

touch with repressed potentials and a drawing on a new capacity for control. It is as old as human culture and as new as the latest fashion in child rearing. It requires us to bring into balance the two sides of our contradictory nature through the magic and the ordinariness of maturation.

There have always been in the past two broad avenues to the achievement of selfhood, two ways that youth has taken on adult responsibilities. Erikson's *Gandhi's Truth* has brought home to me the enormous difference between these two ways—and their intimate association with each other. One is the standard way, the pattern of orthodoxy in human culture, the movement from dogmatic rigidity to flexible openness, the other the central variation within the pattern, the movement from fragmentariness to wholeness. An instance of the first is seen in Indian culture, the second in American culture. The self in a tradition-directed society often finds its way to autonomy through some sort of radical reconstruction (not necessarily rejection) of traditional values; the self in an other-directed society is likely to gain autonomy through a finding, or a refinding, of an integrating discipline, a path of order in a maze of contradictory impulses. Yet in both societies before the self can be truly integrated it must confront and internalize what it sees as its not-self, its polar opposite. In discussing Gandhi's youthful choice of a friend, the dubious Mehtab, Erikson writes that Gandhi "unconsciously tested himself in order to prove to himself that he *could* sin—and test the limit of that experience, too." Not very startling, and familiar to us in our own culture. But the power of Erikson's general conclusion transcends his loving acceptance of youthful experiment: "It is unthinkable that a man of Gandhi's ethical stature could have remained (or remained only) a moralist who would never face his negative identity."³

3. *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence* (New York: Norton, 1969), p. 136.

The other road is Michael Dorsey's, a road many have been on since the romantic movement. Before Michael disguises himself as a woman, we have an extraordinarily narcissistic not-so-young man, who finds it "very depressing to be disagreed with" and, as his agent observes, is unconcerned with others save as he uses, and misuses, them to fulfill his own needs. Michael talks like the man on television advertising Crazy Eddie's entertainment centers—his is a one-dimensional, hysterical hard sell. But something happens to him when he becomes a woman. As most critics have noted, he becomes charming, even attractive—though hardly good-looking; he understates, even when he expresses anger. He seems to be freer than when he was a man. Altogether, as he says in the final scene, he appears to be "a better man as a woman" than he ever was as a man.

Well, what is the source of Michael's new charm and new freedom? I have already suggested that he has come more closely into touch with his femininity, his negative, or, better, one of his negative identities. But this is only a step, and it is one that as an audience we have already accepted. It is not an enormous challenge to us today to see reflected back to us what we have already become—somewhat less fearful of our opposing, inward, sexual selves, somewhat more tolerant of feeling. But the movie takes the cultural achievement one step further. It projects an ideal beyond our present selves. It tells us about the capacity to *control* feeling, not merely

to express it.

In contrast to Gandhi, Michael is in need of a positive identity of control, a synthesizing structure bringing some harmony to those narcissistic impulses. After all he is an American, and an American male to the bargain. He needs to make friends not only with his anger, which is relatively easy for him; not only with his femininity, which his polymorphous nature makes not particularly difficult, even occasionally delightful; but also with the stern principle of self-discipline and self-mastery. He needs a severe conservative principle of control, a principle, almost archaic, of objectivity in a radically subjective world. And that is provided by his art, his devotion to acting. Richness and rightness of feeling are what entrance us in Michael's performance as Dorothy, and they stem from both the control and the expression of feeling. The challenge of the role of Dorothy is more of a challenge to self-limitation than to self-expansion. Michael is a model of liberation to the oppressed women of our culture not so much because he can throw a pot of flowers against the wall in righteous wrath, or because he can answer back when the director of the soap calls him "Tootsie," but because he can do these things within the limits of the part he is playing. (Throwing a man out of a taxi who jumps in ahead of him is *not* such an example, but it is very funny.) The discipline we in the audience know Michael is undergoing by seeing it, as Kael writes, "in his intense glittering eyes"—is visible to nobody within the action of the film, but it is the most important thing happening to him.

Almost from the first, Michael begins to appreciate that the maintenance of his disguise requires a deeper commitment than he had anticipated. When he enters the dressing room that he must share with a scantily clad fellow actress, he immediately begins to recognize that the implications of his commitment transcend mere theatricality. As Stanley Kauffmann observes, "Michael's split-second summoning of extra determination is funnier than any 'take' could have been."⁴ It is also profounder, profounder, for example, than Jack Lemmon's struggle to maintain his disguise when he finds himself in a berth with Marilyn Monroe in *Some Like It Hot*. Both actors appeal to the audience's knowledge that they *really are men*, with the normal man's desires that need to be controlled in the arousing situation. But Dustin Hoffman responds in a way that suggests the more general challenge of the role as a mode of self-discipline, even a renunciation, a discipline and a renunciation that are more complex than the control of immediate physical desire. His character's identity, not simply his manhood, is at stake.

Physical sexuality and the need to control it are of great significance in the film, but it is almost always sexuality in the broadest sense that is suggested. If it is true that Michael is freer as Dorothy than he ever was as Michael, it is not because he is letting himself go but because he is reining himself in. This is beautifully symbolized in the film by the girdle Michael wears when he dresses for his role as Dorothy. His bodily restrictions are steps to spiritual freedom. They are his way of learning to accept what Lionel Trilling calls "the inescapable conditions which the actual and the trivial make for" the spirit.⁵ Indeed, I would suggest that the implied sexual restriction in the wearing of the girdle is supremely relevant here. Only as a man, as Michael, can he perform sexually (as he does once, but not with the woman he loves,

4. *The New Republic* (24 January 1983), 24–25.

5. *The Opposing Self* (New York: Viking Press, 1959), p. 75.

when he is caught during the period of his masquerade with his pants down); as a woman he must be cautious, he must be strict with himself, and the sacrifice seems to provide him with what Freud might have called a bonus of desexualized energy, an energy that contributes to his assertive yet civilized behavior.

Again the analogy with Gandhi is enlightening, but here the differences and similarities are far more complex. In one respect the contrast is still maintained between Michael's movement from self-indulgence to self-control and Gandhi's from rigid sexual standards to a richer, freer use of sexuality. But there is also the similarity between the Indian's progress toward a more masterful sublimation—"the sense of humor which can mark the triumph of self-mastery"⁶—and Michael's progress in more civilized control. Finally, however, Gandhi's far from successful struggle with "a traditional Indian model of a theory of sublimation"—"that higher brain power is enhanced by the physical sexual substance which is lost in ejaculation but can be saved in continence and pumped up to the brain"⁷—is a caricature of the psychoanalytic view of sublimation. Certainly Gandhi paid an extreme penalty in personal relations for his uncompromising need to excise the sexual drive from his own life and the lives of his followers.

For Michael the temporary limitations on immediate sexual satisfaction are symbolic of a movement toward reality. Self-gratification for Michael is bound up with his infantile fantasy of limitless control, while the limitations of his desires are in fact steps toward real, adult control. A wonderful example occurs after Julie agrees with Michael that she prefers the refreshing candor of a man openly asking a woman, without preliminaries, to sleep with him if he so wishes. And in fact the undisguised Michael naively tries this direct approach at a party when they first meet as man and woman and has a drink thrown in his face for taking her too literally. The necessary hypocrisy of social life, the need for forms, is an aspect of reality that Michael has not wished to recognize in his life as a self-absorbed man. Only as Dorothy does he begin to appreciate that forms and roles and disguises are needed to keep civilization intact. It is of course a cliché that rebellious youth, often ignoring its own intense need for masks, is traditionally intolerant of the masks and falsities of middle-class, indeed of all, social life. How delightful the irony of an immature male—an actor, no less—coming to realize the need for masks—losing his innocence, as it were—by disguising himself as a mature woman. Is this the first example in history of such an initiation ceremony? A new, comical, symbolic castration that teaches the initiate to delay gratification and accept those "inescapable conditions" of adult life?

Perhaps. What seems important is that *Tootsie* echoes an ancient archetype of initiation in a special modern way. Hidden within the gaiety and charm and triumphant manner of Michael's role as Dorothy is the lesson of the modern—the lesson of victory through defeat, of spiritual mastery through suffering. Stephen Spender formulates it in his classic essay "Moderns and Contemporaries" as follows: "The faith of the moderns is that by allowing their sensibility to be acted upon by the modern experience as suffering, they will produce, partly through the exercise of critical consciousness, the idioms and forms of new art."⁸

6. Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth*, p. 121.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

8. In *Literary Modernism*, ed. Irving Howe (New York: Fawcett World Library, 1967), p. 44.

The intensity of Michael's critical self-awareness has been noted by the critics as well as his appreciation of the severe restriction society places upon women. By incarcerating himself in the prison of femininity he begins to overcome himself. He becomes a liberator of imprisoned women only as he recognizes the prison within which he himself—within which all of us—must live. As so many others have done, he undergoes an experience of defeat—though in his case hardly intended as such—and achieves thereby a measure of victory in a widening of consciousness.

The modernist is interested primarily in consciousness, not in social reform, but the experience of identifying with the weak and the oppressed is the same for reformer and modernist. Critical awareness develops through the experience of vulnerability, of powerlessness. Those who have been defeated in war, children in relation to all-powerful parents, the South in relation to the North, blacks in relation to whites, women in relation to men—all teach the same lesson: Failure brings depth to life in a way that success can never do. "Defeat is good for [man]. . . . Victory requires no explanation. It is itself sufficient: the fine screen, the shield; immediate and final: it will be contemplated only by history. While the whole contemporary world watches the defeat and the undefeated who, because of the fact, survived."⁹ It is a familiar theme in different sorts of writers, in Hemingway and Faulkner, in Orwell and Kafka, in Proust and Mann. I am reminded of Kafka's characteristic view of traditional Jewishness: "Around us anti-semitism increases, but that is all to the good. The Talmud says that we Jews only yield our best, like olives, when we are crushed."¹⁰ How different from the contemporary Israeli and the American Jew's view of Jewishness!

I am also reminded of Freud's remarks somewhere about the growth of the reality principle in the mind of a child who suddenly finds, with the birth of a second child, that he is no longer the center of parental concern. He becomes serious. He grows reflective. Opportunities expand for both sickness and greater health.

How distant the foregoing seems from the surface of *Tootsie!* The hard-headed realism (even pessimism) which I find at the core of the movie is in marked contrast with its surface. The presupposition of the modern suffering psyche—the "ache of the modern," in Hardy's words—is well hidden but cannot be denied if we want to explain the power and complexity of the movie at its best. It is certainly a happy piece of art, superficially at odds with much of the modern movement. But there is modernism and modernism. There is classic modernism and existentialist (or romantic) modernism. There is Proust and Mann and Svevo, and there is Strindberg and Kafka and Beckett. Classic modernism is more truly reconciled to the positive as well as the negative, more capable of living forever with unreconciled opposites and with partial graces and partial fulfillments. Existentialist modernism is not satisfied with dialectical conflict and partial resolution. It is still a form of romanticism and in unacknowledged quest of the unspotted Absolute. It still cries in its beer. *Tootsie* is a small branch of classic modernism.

It is especially modernist in its respect for the role of art and the ar-

9. Quoted by Michael Millgate, in *The Achievement of William Faulkner* (New York: Random House, 1966), pp. 169-70.

10. Gustav Janouch, *Conversations with Kafka* (New York: Frederick Praeger, 1953), p. 98.

tist for success in life. For the classic modernist, art is a game, but a serious game. It is ironic about the very process of art itself, sometimes piling irony upon irony, to a bewildering extent, but the classic modernist is unironic in his belief in partial human progress, in his commitment to the real changes that are necessary for spiritual advancement in the world. He is Aristotelian rather than Platonic. Thus Michael is not simply a sometime acting teacher and occasional actor, a theatrical person in extremis. He is a lover of his art, art as technique and as vocation. As Kael writes, he “loves his characters more than he loves himself.” He transcends his narcissism in his art, for his art is his completer self, his positive identity of control, external and internal voices of culture that dialectically oppose Trilling’s “opposing self.” This orderly self has become harder and harder to affirm in our day. In their distorted form, our attempts at such affirmation often take the form of a nostalgia for Victorianism, a reactionary demand for orderliness—a yearning, indeed, for a return to the prisons of the past. (They become a violence of order projected to meet what is perceived as the more terrible violence of disorder.) In their balanced form, as with Michael and in classic modernism, our affirmations are simply of the reality principle, negative in countering the superficially happy, falsely hopeful self, positive in a sane, practical hopefulness, a modest sort of heroism. Michael’s excessive idealism, his inappropriate anger, and his unfocused sexuality are all subordinated to the art of life. In Santayana’s words, he learns to sing in his cage.

Or does he? Is Pauline Kael right when she scoffs at the idea “that Michael, through playing a woman, becomes a better man—more in touch with himself and all that?” Perhaps he is just a very good actor. Or perhaps he grows the way narcissists often grow, in spurts, with no accumulation of power. (The point of greatest weakness in the movie—when it becomes more like the television soap it satirizes—occurs when Michael is wildly withdrawing from his role as a woman, and may betray his failure of real growth. It is barely possible, of course, that the loss of comic depth may have formed some part of the director’s intention, to keep things from becoming ponderously moral.) At any rate, the concept of growth as limited to the world of make-believe, the world of art—the antiromantic separation of art from life—is consistent with modernism and its celebration of art as the only place where ideals are wholly fulfilled. As E. M. Forster once declared: “Works of art, in my opinion, are the only objects in the material universe to possess internal order, and that is why, though I don’t believe that only art matters, I do believe in Art for Art’s Sake.”¹¹

11. *Two Cheers for Democracy* (London: Penguin Books, 1965), pp. 102-3.

Perhaps my own latent romanticism is struggling to deny the fact that Michael is really no more mature at the end of the movie than at the beginning. Perhaps I should be satisfied with the *image* of maturity projected by the exceptional performance of Dustin Hoffman. A Proustian metanoia may be too much to ask for from this fine but minor piece of work.

Still, the image is there and is fundamentally at odds with current American trends. The ideal of self-transformation or even self-sacrifice is certainly no longer an American ideal, if it ever was. Perhaps I should say that it is no longer an ideal for the American male. It is especially not so today, for either sex. Today both men and women

appear to subscribe to the notion of a lasting relationship as a state in which one's existing needs should be fulfilled, not as a state in which one becomes a different kind of person, with new needs. The former might be called the romantic, the American view, the latter, the classic and tragic, the older European view. It is startling to realize that *Tootsie*, in its ambience so much a part of our current American scene of frenetic, self-absorbed gratification of impulse, more deeply suggests the reverse, the ideal of self-renunciation. It celebrates a positive identity that insists on sacrifice. Or, better, it may suggest an ideal synthesis of several components, including the American, for that special American hopefulness is not to be denied a place here. The ideal that emerges from the movie thus suggests elements of two of the great forms of life: the tragic, in its modernist realism about the limits of the human condition, and the comic, in its down-to-earth, American hopefulness—for is not the truly tragic always the truly hopeful? *Tootsie*'s feminism is the occasion for a complex investigation of the human condition.