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LITERATURE

MEDUSA'S HEAD: BOSS RATTLERS, RATTLESNAKE QUEENS, AND GODDAMN TRUE LOVE IN HARRY CREWS'S *A FEAST OF SNAKES*

KEN R. HANSSEN[1]

Nord University, Norway

ABSTRACT

After his death in 2012, there has been a notable resurgence of both popular and critical interest in the fiction of American writer Harry Crews. Frequently discussed in the context of Southern gothic, Crews's novels are notable for their grim and darkly funny tales of life among the rural poor in the worst hookworm and rickets part of Georgia, USA. Still, while the regional identity of Crews's fiction is strong, his subtle and deeply sympathetic creative imagination tackles questions of universal significance.

In the novel *A Feast of Snakes* (1976), Crews's finest and most multi-layered work, we are introduced to former high-school football quarterback Joe Lon Mackey on the eve of Mystic, Georgia's annual Rattlesnake Roundup. Through his sensitive and deeply-felt portrayal of Joe Lon's failed struggle to reconcile with the traumas of the past and establish meaning and a sense of purpose in life, a development culminating in the liquidation of a snake-handling preacher, a sheriff's deputy, his own high-school sweetheart, and a random bystander, Crews not only explores the deterministic cultural and socio-economic attributes of the rural south, but also gives articulation to a reflective consciousness far more individuated and multifaceted than allowed for in recent critical discourse.

This sombre ending is perhaps what Todorov would term "the realization of an order always preordained," but it would be a mistake to dismiss it as merely the inevitable outcome of yet another southern boy's unarticulated rage against modernity. Struggling endlessly like the pit-fighting dogs his daddy breeds, Joe Lon, entangled in the determinants of his existence, comes to give mimetic shape to a contemporary American identity both utterly strange and jarringly familiar.

Keywords: Harry Crews, Southern fiction, gothic, trauma, mimesis, naturalism, determinism, psychological realism

[1] Department of English, LUKK/PHS, Nord University, 8049 Bodø, Norway, e-mail: ken.r.hanssen@nord.no.

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On the morning of the annual Rattlesnake Roundup in Mystic, Georgia, Joe Lon Mackey recognizes what *it* was, the thing that had lain rank and fascinating in his brain, and in one of the most abrupt and jarring conclusions to any American novel, he reaches into the cab of his pickup truck for his twelve-gauge pump-action shotgun, throws it to his shoulder, and in the space of seven or eight seconds, during which he "felt better than he had ever felt in his life" (Crews, *A Feast of Snakes*, 176), shoots Victor, the snake-handling preacher, Luther Peacock, the sheriff's deputy, Berenice Sweet, his high school girlfriend, and a random hunter before pulling down on an empty chamber and, to the single raging cry of "Git that crazy bastard!" (*Feast*, 177), being rushed by the crowd, raised high into the air, and pitched into the plywood and chicken-wire snake pit. Perhaps it is all a bit indulgent, though it should be noted that the alternative ending, that other kind of 'dying fall', had already been written by F. Scott Fitzgerald in *Tender is the Night*. Grim and often darkly funny, *A Feast of Snakes* (1976) is aptly described by the customary adjectives – bizarre, macabre, grotesque, weird – on which Harry Crews's critical reputation rests, but it would be a mistake to dismiss the novel as a gothic account of yet another southern boy's unavailing rage against modernity. Critical interest in *Feast* has understandably centred on how we are to understand the character of Joe Lon Mackey and the impetus behind his murderous rampage, the answer, sought in internal or external determinants, revealing either "the essentially violent primordial nature of man" (Jeffrey 1986: 53), or the victimization of the individual by "the meat-grinder of competition" (Lynskey 1987: 197). In an influential article, Tim Edwards, leaning heavily on the theoretical framework of Donald Pizer, developed the latter line of inquiry by locating *Feast* "as essentially emerging from the naturalist stream of American literature" (Edwards 1998: 42), claiming that it presents "perhaps the darkest vision yet rendered in the American canon of determinist fiction" (Edwards 1998: 43), while at the same time making an interesting attempt at subsuming the former by arguing not only that the inherent brutality of man, his animalistic nature, was always a generic attribute, but also that the ultimate indeterminacy behind Joe Lon's motivation should be read in the context of how, within naturalism, "the forces of causality is radically transformed in the postmodern era" (Edwards 1998: 51), leaving the mental processes leading up to his final act of mass murder a kind of irresolvable aporia. There is much to be said for such a reading. That sudden, seemingly inexplicable violent outbursts proceed from the deleterious effects of a stifling, repressive social environment, is not just a recurring idea in Crews's fiction, it is also a question he has addressed explicitly in his non-fiction. In a (1984) essay for *Playboy*, Crews recounts his acquaintance with three brothers from South Georgia and reflects on what lay behind their legendary eagerness to fight:

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> I understand it imperfectly, but I have come to believe the reasons are centered in the fact that they were locked into social circumstances that resulted in a kind of raging frustration that found its outlet in rank violence. They were men of great native intelligence but no education. They were natural leaders with nobody to lead. And, perhaps worst of all, they were sensitive and perceptive enough to see that they were in a cul-de-sac from which there could never be an escape.
> (Crews, "The Violence That Finds Us", 192)

To read Crews's work as an extension of American naturalism seems useful, and certainly, in his depiction of the crippling effects of marginalization, dispossession, and privation, in his insistence that poverty has a cause and his refusal to sentimentalize its ineluctable consequences, Crew's unwavering commitment to the denizens of 'the other America' offers a welcome contrast to much of present-day American fiction, set in a notably non-specific suburbia, in which the various tensions and conflicts are psychic, not socioeconomic, and working-class characters act out what are fundamentally middle-class concerns. There is a sense of outrage in Crews, largely absent in other contemporary writers, that aligns him with the reformist naturalists of the 19th century and helps justify and explain the centrality in his work of an ugliness that is often mislabelled gothic, a quality noticed already by Seelye, who in an early article on Crews maintained that "his novels seethe with anger, which takes the form of a relentless emphasis on the ugliest aspects of life" (Seelye 1980: 619). Not to suggest that Crews is an overtly political writer, only that, as a number of critics have noted, his particular brand of social criticism emerges from reading his novels as an extension of naturalist allegory. And yet, whether the bitter disillusionment of the individual ground down by malignant circumstance offers an adequate interpretive framework for *Feast* is open to question. While the structuring themes and predominant tropes of the novel, as Edwards has shown, are naturalistic, the critical discussion of Joe Lon's process of self-discovery remains undeveloped, and in spite of the considerable critical efforts expended on the question of free will and individual responsibility against the determining forces of Mystic, our grasp of the specific psychological conflicts that incline Joe Lon towards violent action is tenuous; it seems, then, that an attempt to read *Feast* as a novel with a strong naturalistic impulse, but one which nevertheless opens up on the genre of psychological realism, is apposite. However obliquely, it is through our access to Joe Lon's internal processes – in his response to the various external processes he is labouring under, in his struggle to reconcile with the traumas of the past and establish meaning and a sense of purpose in life – that we may find if not a definitive answer to what went wrong then at least a point of view that allows us to consider the novel's action and import from within rather than without, yielding a work that, far from being frigid, is both intimate and subtle. Rather than the iron laws of a deterministic universe, it is

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Joe Lon's own emerging self-consciousness, actuated by Berenice's arrival at the snake hunt, that leads to his downfall, revealing to him not just how he has failed to establish a meaningful existence beyond the high school football field, but how it is love, the very thing that could redeem him, that must destroy him. Grappling with the socio-economic, cultural, and psychological attributes of the rural south, Harry Crews's subtle and deeply sympathetic creative imagination has as such created a novel that is less thesis-bound and more sophisticated and multifaceted than allowed for in recent critical discourse.

"What the hell ails you anyway?" Big Joe asks his son (*Feast*, 163), and since Joe Lon does not offer an answer, this is probably the question that should be immediately addressed if we are to come to terms with a protagonist who, in spite of being a wife-beating mass murderer, does seem to strike a chord with readers and critics alike. "Bipolar affective disorder", David Buehrer argues cogently (Buehrer 1996: 37), prescribing Prozac to help Joe Lon remake his self (Buehrer 1996: 40), and making the perceptive point that "a view of self, predicated on both environmental *and* biological components of personality development, is remarkably honest, as it flies in the face of contemporary notions of the individual's 'victimization' by society or, conversely, his hope for 'self-actualization/realization' *after* he somehow overcomes life's obstacles" (Buehrer 1996: 41). Still, Big Joe's own diagnosis, "It's just Buddy's dick cut off got you upset" (*Feast*, 163), is shrewd enough in its own way, especially within the realm of Crews's expressionistic, mythopoeic Mystic, Georgia, where torch-bearing dancers, not so much singing as screaming, circle the idol of a thirty foot *papier mâché* rattlesnake, coiled to strike. This is snake country, its predatory ethos pervasive, like the dry, vibrating rattle of the football fans' gourds. Scott Romine, evoking Girard's observation that nonhuman sacrificial victims typically observe a principle of resemblance to the object they replace, notes that "the snake … resembles the phallus, the generative source of violence within a community where sexuality and violence are inseparable" (Romine 1998: 79), and, indeed, in the course of the novel, there is an insistent conflation of serpentine and phallic imagery, from Joe Lon's nightly fantasy of "Snakes and dicks … Sweet slick dicks and snakes" to the longhairs peddling snake dildos at the fair (*Feast*, 31), from the camper trying to stuff a two-foot black snake down the blouse of a screaming woman to poor Shep accepting Buddy's toy snake and finding that it was his severed member, a conflation so pervasive and sustained as to transcend the category of literary symbol and amount to a kind of narrative immanence, a malevolent fallen world of the flesh in which "what came to [Lottie Mae's] ears again and again and again from mouths on every side, shouted, said, whispered, sung, was the word: SNAKE SNAKE SNAKE SNAKE SNAKE SNAKE" (*Feast*, 68).

Michael Spikes, writing fluently about "the serpentine, phallic law" Joe Lon obeys (Spikes 1995: 418), notes with disapproval that "His 'romance' with high school sweetheart Berenice, consisted almost entirely of drinking and loveless

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fornicating" (Spikes 1995: 413), a description that, at the end of the day, does not sound *all* bad. To the young lovers, at least, the sexual gymnastics were terribly satisfying, though we should note the radical divergence in how they conceptualize their shared world temporally: "Don't seem like to me this goddam year will ever be over", Joe Lon says as they walk towards the snake pit at the opening of their senior year (*Feast*, 29), and "That's nine months away … Anything that long might as well be never" (*Feast*, 29), while Berenice, in her mind, is already gone: "I'll miss you", she says (*Feast*, 29), and "Anybody that's known a Boss Snake'll never forget him" (*Feast*, 29). In other words, Berenice situates their time together, their story, within the larger narrative progression of her life, containing it, contextualizing it, while Joe Lon clings to a solipsistic world, an *idyll* in the true sense, that does not imply development in time. This crash of time frames implies an unbridgeable gap between Joe Lon and what he desires, but also something more: not only will the indifferent world leave him behind, but his engagement with it was fairly tenuous in the first place. Distant as a dream, Joe Lon's experience with Berenice has shaped him profoundly, but yet there is no contiguity between the past and the present, no causation, and this is why her letter, a year-and-a-half down the road, announcing her arrival at the annual Rattlesnake Roundup, topples his somewhat shaky sense of equilibrium. Unable to break bones for Bear Bryant at the University of Alabama for reasons of illiteracy, Joe Lon had eventually resigned himself of sorts to a life "selling nigger whiskey and watching Elfie's teeth fall out" (*Feast*, 114), while the aspirational Berenice went on to the University of Georgia, "where she was still distinguishing herself with cheerleading and the football team and other achievements" (*Feast*, 59–60). These divergent paths should not surprise us. Berenice, through her transformation from fine-grit to Cream of Wheat, is merely confirming her own middle-class identity, substituting a sleek, English Austin-Healy roadster[2] for that white Corvette squatting with power, the preppy, debate-playing Shep Martin for the best high-school football player that ever put on a jockstrap. This is scripted, as is the return to the native soil at rattlesnake time, but it confuses Joe Lon. "I wonder what it is she wants?" he muses aloud, and it is a fair question (*Feast*, 74). It is worth recalling, here, what several critics have termed Crews's problematic view of women; writing about Crews's macho hostility and apparent fear of females,

2 Moment of pedantry: The novel is set in November 1975 (*Feast*, 136) – not, as Lynskey erroneously notes, 1971 (Lynskey 1987: 195). As such, the reference to the "new" Austin-Healy (properly: Austin-Healey) is problematic, as the production run of the iconic 3000 Mk. III ended in 1967 and of the rather lackluster Sprite Mk. IV in 1969. As such, we may infer either that Berenice's new car was a Jensen-Healey (1972–76), more specifically a Mk. II (73–75), or that Crews had begun drafting the novel at an earlier date than previously known. One for *The Explicator*, I suppose.

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Patricia Beatty notes that “if they are not *Playboy* centerfolds, they are devouring monsters or pathetic victims of abuse” (Beatty 1983: 112), while Elise Lake observes that “women set in motion turmoil and tragedy, but most of them remain enigmatic figures, incompletely drawn, their thoughts and motivations largely unknown” (Lake 2001: 84). His buddy Willard’s stab at rationalization – “Wouldn’t surprise me if it weren’t nothing more pressing than a good fucking” (*Feast*, 74) – is a reasonable enough conjecture, the letter to her former beau considered, but then why bring Shep, with his delicate digestion, along for the ride? It is in many ways easy to feel sympathetically inclined towards the pretty, insecure college sophomore, former small-town beauty-queen at a university full of former small-town beauty queens, who just wants to be the centre of attention, but Berenice, for all her amiable and endearing chatter, can also be both self-serving and callous. Having shown Elfie the tell-tale evidence of her romp with Joe Lon, a confession that leads to a heart-rending outpouring of grief worthy of any Medea – “I cain’t look at the babies any more. I tried this morning after she showed me and I cain’t look at the babies any more. I’m too shamed. You shamed me so I cain’t look at my own babies” (*Feast*, 156) – Berenice crisply informs Joe Lon that, “I made a clean breast of it … Shep said he understood and he’d always love me” (*Feast*, 156–157). There are no consequences for her, as she was essentially never part of his world in the first place – the life of an Elfie in her double-wide was never really a viable option to her – merely yet another spectator to a game in which she had no real stakes. “Joe Lon Mackey carrying shine for a carload of niggers. Who would have thought it?” (*Feast*, 18). Well, perhaps it was never such an unlikely outcome, a diminution certain to repeat itself in the spring for Willard, as, for Crews, social class remains what decisively settles the outcome of people’s lives. Twenty year-old Joe Lon’s state of suffocating anger and frustration derives in no mean part from his entrapment in a narrowly circumscribed, downward-bound world in which the enormous flaps of his wife’s breasts contrast unfavourably with Berenice’s “super-star titties” (*Feast*, 73), her lips clamped shut over a ruined mouth with Willard’s “even, perfect teeth” (*Feast*, 22). The vitality and natural grace of youth is a currency that rapidly depreciates, but as Joe Lon consoles himself, “There were other things in this world than getting to step on somebody” (*Feast*, 8). Still, as Romine pithily points out, “Precisely what those things *are*, Joe Lon has been unable to determine” (Romine 1998: 76).

Stepping on those weaker is an integral element in the formation of these young men’s sense of self. Big Joe knew it. Dispassionately bringing out Old Tuffy for the final sharpening of his son and the future stud of the line, he observes that feeding a fighter inferior opponents was simply necessary; it gave him a taste for blood and made him feel invincible (*Feast*, 95–96). Like Tuffy, Joe Lon and Willard are bred for the pit, for domination, for the moment of

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victory, and this distorts their character, the ego rampant, unrestrained: "You been running over too many grunions and reading about it in the *Wire Grass Farmer*", Buddy tells Willard (*Feast*, 25), his sense of perspective deriving not just from the larger world of college ball, but his tour in Vietnam and subsequent Purple Heart. With the keen awareness of the individual brushed by the ploughshare of history, Buddy both articulates and gives mimetic shape to the old truth of all such stories, that *machismo does not last*. "I've heard a lot about you", Shep tells Joe Lon as they first meet, "what a great athlete you were" (*Feast*, 61), the past tense indicating Joe Lon's failure to establish a significant identity beyond high-school football. In a sense, Joe Lon's emerging self-consciousness is impelled exactly by his own recognition of this fact. Whether facing off with Willard after benching three-twenty or watching Susan Gender and Hard Candy almost come to blows after their contested twirl-off, the relentless competitive drive, what Lynskey called "the modern ethic of achievement" (Lynskey 1987: 195), has begun to lose its appeal to Joe Lon, unmooring him from his supplied identity. "*What the hell ails me?*" he asks himself (*Feast*, 101), expressing his nagging sense that something is wrong, that things should somehow be otherwise. He is unhappy, yet he also knows there is no reason why he should be unhappy, a paradox that overwhelms him with feelings of alienation, anxiety, and despair: "'I feel like the end of the world', Joe Lon screamed above the noise of the whining engine. 'We git up here', Willard screamed back at him, 'we'll press a little beer to you face, you'll feel better'. But he would not feel any better and he knew it" (*Feast*, 102). We should note Willard's complete lack of surprise at this rather alarming declaration. There is no need for a gloss or a footnote. They both *know*. And their problem, in as far as it pertains directly to the Mystic mystique, is the problem that has no name. The almost Homeric joy Crews takes in the physical splendour of his violent protagonists – and their athleticism is a real thing – could easily come across as a form of nostalgia for a more authentic, more immediate, more vital world of the body, a world that we desire and yet no longer truly believe in, but there is a terrible sense of pathos, here, and it is not lost on Crews, to whom, arguably, the fetishized human form – the "bronzed images of muscled young men" in Joe Lon's old room (*Feast*, 49); the prizes for beauty won by Hard Candy, Berenice, and Susan Gender – comes to represent the focal point of society's narrative self-definition, the triumphant expression of its own high-capitalist will to power. These supermen transcend conventional morality, and it may well be, as ursine Coach Tump observes of Willard, that "this was the Boss Snake of the team. He ran over anybody, everybody. As long as he did that, he could do whatever else he wanted to" (*Feast*, 153).

It is in this regard interesting to note the convenient orthodoxies of the townspeople, their sense of propriety like that of a Greek tragic chorus, to

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whom Joe Lon, in spite of having drowned a traveling salesman (his mother's lover?) in July Creek in front of the entire first string, is known as the most courteous boy in the county. It is not curious that everyone closes their eyes to the depraved activities of Sheriff Matlow, as long as it is contained within its prescribed bounds. "Goddammit he'd paid his dues, and now it was his turn", he asserts (*Feast*, 15), the toleration and license extended to such predation (of the coloured, of the poor, of the weak) but a natural expression of a world red in tooth and claw. "That hurts. God, it hurts, that everthing is eating everthing else", catatonic Beeder interposes in an oft-cited passage (*Feast*, 47), the post-Darwinian sense of existential struggle qualified by a keenly felt outrage at the suffering of those living in what Jerrilyn McGregory aptly termed "a marginalized space within a larger liminality" (McGregory 1998: 66). Lottie Mae's mother may as such *know* what has happened to her daughter where she lies in her bloody dress, but she also knows there is nothing she can do about it and so it is better not to acknowledge it. The excruciatingly human, helpless gesture that follows, the mother telling Lottie Mae to go back to bed while she sends Brother Boy out for some ice cream, is perhaps the most extraordinarily painful moment in the novel, highlighting not only the repressive socioeconomic perspective in Crews's work, but also his sensitive rendering of the psychology of trauma. The tenor here is far removed from the gothic, that shibboleth of Crews criticism, nor is it, like the routine of the Mexican comedian on *The Johnny Carson Show*, "just funny as shit" (*Feast*, 47); it is Crews's considerable achievement that he manages to balance an objective depiction of the essential sordidness of existence with an intense sense of identification with those marginalized and obtruded upon, which is to say pretty much every character of the novel. Not to say that Crews's people do not exhibit a disturbing propensity for violence and destruction (and there is pleasure in hurting those weaker than ourselves, as Harry Crews knew so well), but that individual acts of brutishness play out against the backdrop of a society whose own triumphant organizing principle seems to be a transcendent *bellum omnium contra omnes*. Beyond Mystic's ubiquitous, ravening crowds balancing on "the final brink to madness" (*Feast*, 168), whose faceless members are liable to "eat each other alive" (*Feast*, 127), who "frantic, jerking, and howling" are clawing at the ground in their hunt for snakes (*Feast*, 173), and who, "their mouths open, teeth bared, moved with a single raging voice upon Joe Lon" (*Feast*, 177), there are the flickering images of a larger world, a world of barbarous, elemental energies, in which destruction and violent death occurs on an epic scale: "NBC Nightly News went straight to the robbing and killing, the crying and the blood, burning buildings and mashed cars. Them NBC Nightly News sumbitches was mean. Soon kill you as look at you. Killed somebody ever night. Sometimes drowned whole towns in the ocean" (*Feast*, 130–131). Eighteen hours a day of devastation, mad babble, and

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canned laughter; there is no escape, no sustaining pastoral, no happily ever after. As Joe Lon wakes up at his daddy's house after his collapse at the pit, he hears Beeder's television, "the slashing abrupt sound of dogs fighting … and over the sound of the dogs the awesome roar of people screaming" (*Feast*, 170). This is the sound the world makes.

Still, in spite of the pronounced naturalistic strain in Crews's Mystic, and the apparent degree to which the characters are shaped by their environment and its physical, social, economic, cultural, and familial energies, it would be a mistake to assume that Crews does not concern himself with the autonomous, transcendent self; indeed, neglecting how he turns away from determinism towards an exploration of individual psychology would be to radically impoverish the complexity of his moral vision, leaving him a more thesis-bound and less significant writer. That this issue was central to Crews himself can be seen from his resistance to admit purely sociological or medical explanatory models in his non-fiction,[3] as well as his frank admission, in an interview with Jeffrey and Noble, of pain at being understood as a writer of tract novels: "That hurts … Because I don't think it's fair and I don't think it's true. I believe it comes out of a superficial reading" (Crews, "Harry Crews: An Interview", 143). But if reading Joe Lon as the necessary product of his deprived and violence-prone world is superficial – and, granted, not all frustrated former All-American high school running backs commit mass murder – then how do we account for why he does what he does? The most sophisticated (and successful) attempt at reconciling a naturalistic sense of inevitability with the discontinuity of Joe Lon's violent actions was made by Tim Edwards, who, in his "postmodern rethinking of naturalism", spends some time considering "the mysterious indeterminacy behind Joe Lon's decline" beyond any clearly delineated determining forces (Edwards 1998: 51), and grounds his conclusion that "we do not and cannot know" in a discussion of Civello's thesis that the twentieth-century collapse of any sense of cosmic order has shifted our conception of the forces of causality itself, leaving "heredity and environment … merely two factors in a warren of factors" (Civello 1994: 123). That man is no longer a mere victim but an interacting agent hard at work shaping and being shaped by his own environment is certainly a reassuring thought and one that allows for a more dynamic understanding of human agency, but this outlook is one that applies equally to most contemporary realist fiction, and the term postmodern naturalism seems, in my view, more germane to a discussion of the systems novels of DeLillo and Pynchon than one of Crews's work. Edwards, in all fairness, admits as much when he states that "I am not suggesting that Harry Crews is a postmodern writer; in fact, he follows a realist aesthetic" (Edwards 1998: 52), but the thrust of his

[3] Cf. Crews, "Climbing the Tower", 441–442.

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argument, that the ultimately unresolvable ambiguity in Joe Lon's character should be considered in the light of a postmodern extension of naturalism, seems a bit like an attempt at forcing a square peg through a round hole. As such, noting the lack of apparent narrative causality, Edwards may make the incisive observation that "The forces that shape our lives – and our deaths – are more bewilderingly complex and aloof than we can imagine, and yet so close to us – perhaps emanating from within us – that we do not even realize they are there" (Edwards 1998: 52), but unless one admits a critical vision of Joe Lon's character as an empty space, an accidental and provisional nexus of linguistic and cultural codes, which I do not get the sense that Edwards does (and which Crews, certainly, would find abhorrent), the successful fictional representation of such a struggle of self against circumstance, when centred on the affective properties of consciousness, is an expression not so much of naturalism as of psychological realism.

Very much in line with the concerns of realist fiction, Crews balances his examination of the underlying external forces shaping Joe Lon with an exploration of his tangled and confused internal makeup, the deployment of a third-person limited point of view allowing an intimate view of Joe Lon's highly individuated conscious and unconscious mental processes. Consider, for example, the rapid expansion that takes place in the shift from Joe Lon's articulated response to Lummy's confidence that Lottie Mae is hexed, to the italicized internal monologue, to the subsequent authorial commentary, which reaches an almost Kafkaesque magnitude: "'Hexed?' said Joe Lon, thinking: *Just nigger talk. I spend half my goddam life listening to nigger talk and the other half of it totin whiskey to them. God knows what I did to deserve it.* Believing as he did, though, in the total mastery, power, and majesty of God, Joe Lon assumed he had done *something*, and that he would never find out what it was" (*Feast*, 57).[4] It is exactly in the articulation of the perceiving and reflective consciousness, the insistence on the metaphysical subject as the site of narrative meaning-making, that we may locate a humanist spirit in Crews very much alien to the precepts of postmodernist naturalism. Consistently, Joe Lon's experience, and even his own repellent acts, translates into at least a rudimentary form of self-knowledge – he recognizes both that he is treating Elfie like a dog and that it is wrong to treat her like a dog – and this moral awareness, frequently expressed as a keenly felt sense of shame, along with his surprising attunement to the distress and want of everybody around him – from Elfie to his mother, from Beeder to Lottie Mae, from the betting snake to the fighting dog – as well as his re-

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4 In an interview with Erik Bledsoe, Crews offers a pithy rundown of his own particular brand of faith: "I believe, but there ain't nothing to believe" (Crews, "An Interview with Harry Crews", 164).

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peated (and eventually frustrated) attempts at getting them off the hook, generates a considerable amount of readerly sympathy. "How much longer you gone leave Tuff on the wheel?" he asks his daddy, suddenly wanting everybody "to feel good, to get a break" (*Feast*, 43). But there is no retirement from the pit of Mystic, Georgia, no breaking free from the cycle of brutality and abuse; the only escape is through death, an inexorable outcome Joe Lon finally resigns himself to after having hauled the mangled Tuffy out back behind the field where the buzzards roost. There is no ultimate reward, no final salvation. "Things'll be different tomorrow", Elfie says, but "he knew and accepted for the first time that things would not be different tomorrow. Or ever. Things got different for some people. But for some they did not" (*Feast*, 170). There can be no future, as the future can only be a repetition of the present, the present extended and undifferentiated, and what Joe Lon faces is not just a Hobbesian existence solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short, but the more profound horror of a world in which such suffering "don't matter" (*Feast*, 173), a world opening up on nothingness. Like the *thing* the dying Buddy Matlow futilely wanted to convey to him, any meaning and sense of purpose will always remain elusive, and it is this vertiginous lack of moral *consequence* that elicits a response beyond articulation: "Joe Lon was screaming, not with joy, not with anger, just screaming" (*Feast*, 100). Violence becomes the inevitable and blind response to a state of confusion and uncertainty, a kind of inverse negative capability, akin to Willard's report that "I didn't know what was happening. I hit the first thing I could see. It happened to be the debate player" (*Feast*, 161), as well as an extension of what Leslie Fiedler argued was a violence-as-means-of-deliverance paradigm in American proletarian fiction, "a desire for some utter cataclysm to end the dull dragging out of impotent suffering" (Fiedler 1960: 484).

It may well be, as Jeffrey points out, that the victims of Joe Lon's shooting spree are not random targets, that they represent the forces – religion, law, love, and the faceless mob – that are aligned against him from the outset of the novel, though such an elaboration of the essentially irrational act of mass murder can only have, as Jeffrey allows, a "literary appropriateness" (Jeffrey 1986: 50). Still, we should not neglect our utter lack of surprise at how Joe Lon, once he starts shooting people, should add Berenice to his tally, though Lynskey's suggestion, that it was because she "upset his domestic tranquility and spoiled their high school romance" (Lynskey 1987: 200), rings rather off-key. *Odi et amo*, I love her and I hate her, Catullus wrote of his Lesbia, and Berenice explicitly evokes this same contradictory emotion in Joe Lon (*Feast*, 27). Perhaps you cannot have one without the other, as any cop will tell you, and perhaps there is, ultimately, nothing to understand about such outbreaks of violence, as Nail asserts in the final lines of Crews's own *Body*. But within the larger narrative logic of the novel, Berenice's murder is inevitable; indeed, Crews makes a point

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of noting how Joe Lon's bead swung right past his ostensible rival, Shep, before holding on the honey-legged young woman whose appearance in Mystic had forced him to remember "how it used to be with her … everything the world had promised him and then snatched away" (*Feast*, 55). In this sense, Berenice Sweet, his youthful love, her name beautifully derived from the Attic Greek *Phereníkê*, the bringer of victory, comes to represent the impetus behind Joe Lon's death drive. And like the raving, deranged, snake-bite speckled Victor, rather worryingly upheld by Spikes as a man who "illustrates the positive power of Christian good and the New Testament message" (Spikes 1995: 420), she terrifies him; on his back in the dirt and tarpaulin receiving pit, as fitting an image of the human unconscious as there ever was, she twists and writhes over him in the supple windings of a snake: "I'm freezing full of snakes … All in my blood. Crawling through my heart" (*Feast*, 31). Recalling, then, that Berenice was once Rattlesnake Queen to Joe Lon's Boss Rattler, and considering the pagan idolatry of newly crowned Novella Watkins at her place of honour at the head of the dog-pit, "wearing her little gold-gilt crown of snakes" (*Feast*, 163), we come to the realization that when Joe Lon shoots Berenice's neck away – and Crews is very specific about that – he is replicating the act of Perseus, who decapitated the serpentine-tressed Medusa.

Freud, in his brief (1922) exploratory essay "Medusa's Head", proceeding from the postulate that the terror of Medusa is a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something, argues that "Numerous analyses have made us familiar with the occasion for this: it occurs when a boy, who has hitherto been unwilling to believe the threat of castration, catches sight of the female genitals, probably those of an adult, surrounded by hair, and essentially those of his mother" (Freud 1922: 273). That the hair upon Medusa's head is frequently represented in the form of snakes is to Freud "a confirmation of the technical rule according to which a multiplication of penis symbols signifies castration", and he further observes that while the sight of this head, while making the spectator stiff with terror, "becoming stiff means an erection" (Freud 1922: 273). As such, the child's simultaneous discovery and denial of maternal sexuality fuses into a powerful and frightening image of castration, which nevertheless, according to Freud, mitigates the horror by reassuring the spectator that he is still, in spite of everything, in possession of a penis (Freud 1922: 273): "You goddam right, [Joe Lon whispered as] his cock stood curved in front of [Berenice's] face. She hissed and he felt her hot breath. Her tongue, black in the shadow of her hair, darted in and out of her mouth" (*Feast*, 32). To Joe Lon, this member is all that stands between him and the dread of the Medusa. As Freud observes, "The erect male organ … has an apotropaic effect … To display the penis … is to say: 'I am not afraid of you. I defy you. I have a penis'" (Freud 1922: 274). It is in this light we must read Joe Lon's perturbed fascination with (the signifi-

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cantly named) Mother Well's apocalyptic mosaic, in which the "three-thousand dollar, thousand snake deer with the razor hooves kept killing and killing the already mutilated diamondback" (*Feast*, 64), an apt figuration of the novel's themes. What Joe Lon is ultimately afraid of confronting, what drives him to seek escape through his final murder-suicide, is not Buddy's severed member or Elfie's sagging breasts, not Berenice's uncoupling or Victor's deranged sense of purpose, but rather his own emergent self. Driving Berenice in her four-point stance up against the headboard of his bed, he perceives how, with all her insistent talk of love, she represents less a revival of his heyday than the return of the repressed, something hidden deep inside him now come to light: "He did not know what love was. And he did not know what good it was. But he knew he carried it around with him, a scabrous spot of rot, of contagion, for which there was no cure. Rage would not cure it. Indulgence made it worse, inflamed it, and made it grow like a cancer. And it had ruined his life. Not now, not in this moment. Long before" (*Feast*, 117–118). Joe Lon is referring to his mother here, but not directly to the trauma of her suicide. Unlike his sister Beeder, whose breakdown is brought about by finding their mother in a rocker with a plastic bag cinched around her head, Joe Lon is concerned with its fundamental moving causes, his realization that the flesh is a thing of the spirit: "And the bitterest, most painful thing [he] ever had to do was admit to himself that his mother had been fucking that little shoe salesman for reasons of love when she had a house and a husband and children and a flower garden and friends and a hometown" (*Feast*, 119). What troubles, what causes pain, is not the image itself but what it evokes, what Freud termed fear of castration. This is not merely a matter of simple abandonment with its attendant feelings of inferiority, guilt, and resentment, though being left behind is certainly a recurrent theme in Joe Lon's life; rather, what he precipitously comes to understand is that the Boss Snake of all the snakes cannot shed his skin and must therefore perish.

It is this awareness that informs Joe Lon's notorious attempt at a definition of love and the subtle, Augustinian delineation he draws between *love* and *goddamn true love*, a definition which seems to abnegate any notions of love as the kelson of creation in favour of an ostensibly earthbound and disabused view of the human condition, perhaps ineludible given the amount of evidence overflowing from the chemical toilets on the campground. Citing Brown and Becker's thesis that anality reflects the tragedy of man's dualism, Jeffrey notes that the shit piling up in Joe Lon's life serves as a constant reminder of "the impossibility of transcendence" (Jeffrey 1986: 47), and it is consequently not difficult to see why declarations of love – Berenice's late-night confession, "I think I'll always love you" (*Feast*, 30); Elfie's pitiful cry, "Me'n the babies love you, Joe Lon, honey!" (*Feast*, 65) – should inspire in Joe Lon not hope of a better tomorrow but despair at his own emotional vulnerability. Love – and it is worth not-

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ing that love, in the larger context of Crews's work, has a powerfully redemptive quality – to Joe Lon represents the ultimate failure exactly because it gives birth to the introspective consciousness that destroys him, because it, in the ultimate sense, *negates* him. When Joe Lon succumbs to climbing the tower, to lift a phrase from one of Crews's most memorable essays,[5] he does so because his human potential is thwarted by circumstance, he does so to alleviate, if only momentarily, his own sense of existential helplessness, he does so because violence is the only language through which he can, in the larger sense, make himself significant to a society for which, in the elegant phrase of Nathanael West, "violence is idiomatic" (West 1932: 399), but he does *not* do so because for him the end could never be otherwise, because it was always there waiting for him and all he had to do was find it. It did not have to end this way, and it is Crews's accomplishment that, beyond any schemata of naturalistic determinism, he is, through a sensitive and deep-felt representation of Joe Lon's internal landscape, able to convince us why it nevertheless did.

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[5] The congruence of Joe Lon Mackey and Charles Whitman, the University of Texas shooter and subject of Crews's 1979 essay, was suggested by Jack Moore and Frank Shelton; the presence of a glioblastoma pressing on the amygdalae regions of Joe Lon's brain will have to remain conjectural, however.

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