



FOLON

AUGUST PLINTH reads selections from DEEP SLEEP

THE ANGUISH OF THE CARTOON

by
Robert Chetkin

Deep Sleep reads beautifully aloud. My ex-wife read it to me all the way down from Greenville, North Carolina to Key West, Florida, about four years ago. We were going down there one Christmas. She laughed uproariously through snow-falling Georgia and bleak northern Florida. She thought it was one of the funniest books she'd ever read. I couldn't help wondering at her laughter. It seemed to me one of the saddest.

It still seems to me a very sad book, although now I can see how really funny a book it actually is. When we got to Tampa we stopped in to see the author. He was staying with his aunt and some old people she was taking care of, over the holidays. He had all sorts of stories about how funny the old people were, and when I met them, I could see what he meant. They were funny. They talked about kicking the bucket and pushing up daisies as if it were the most normal thing in the world. "You're going to be pushing up daisies tomorrow" one of the old men would say to one of the old women, and this was their banter, their gay repartee. I was not surprised later when the author said he had written great portions of the book here among these people in 1963-64.

Deep Sleep looks like an unlikely hybrid of the Marx Brothers, Krafft-Ebing and Sartre. The plot, which defies both description and belief, is a charade on the general subject of consciousness, its manifestations, problems, and the different levels it lives on. What seemed most original and unsettling to me at the time was his use of cartoon characters, and not just cartoon characters but cartoon style, cartoon landscape, cartoon life, to portray human life. His conisseurship of Popeye, Wimpy, Olive, Bluto, Sweetpea, O.G. Wot-snozzle S.J., Foxy Grandpa, Wilfred Hyde-Whyte, Patootsie Wassil, Myrtle, and other such stick people, is the very denial of human consciousness; and that is what he is at such hilarious pains to portray, the denial of consciousness in its very presence, its very omnipresence. The characters seem very sad to me because they are at one and the same time real human characters and stick people, cartoons pretending that consciousness does not and could not exist.

It is the false naivete of Plinth's extraordinary style which gives to this work its paradoxical power in the very face of the denial of it; consciousness denied is consciousness obsessed, consciousness intensified in the very effort to repudiate it. The "voice" that comes through is the voice of a "ronin", the wizened little old man in the body of a child, or a "fake child" in the body of a little wizened old man.

His description of consciousness as a hot, dirty wind, like a simoon, which comes out of nowhere, or out of the hot deserts of Mexico, to beleaguer the poor stick people of Alcofrabas, making them insomniacs who have to pretend to sleep at night, meanwhile curiously walking about like the night owls they are, deaf to human speech and mute, self-absorbed in the wind which had given to them

eyelids heavy with grit, and hearts heavy with remorse, second thoughts, regrets, this description is like nothing else I know of in American fiction. I suppose it is European and even French in its intense interest in consciousness; but it is wholly American, I think in showing how everyone attempts to deny it exists, tries to go on living, as if nothing had happened. There is a conspiracy of silence in regard to consciousness which strikes me as typically American.

I believe the Insomniac as a type is wholly Mr. Plinth's territory, as I have never come across another writer quite as keen on the minutiae of "the insomniac's profession, his calling". The Insomniac is very much like a hunger artist, except for the fact that he must pretend to be able to sleep no matter what; the very idea of Insomnia is taboo to the community. And yet everyone is sleepless. And so we have the curious landscape of creatures denying their very torment, their wakefulness, and carrying on as Mr. Wimpy, Mr. Popeye, Mr. Sweetpea, Miss Olive Oyl, Miss Myrtle Ann Dumpkins, Mr. Bluto; and when they retire behind their doors, they are apt to put a gun to their head, or slice a gash in their wrist as if it were baloney.

Their wish to become the perfect unconscious dancing puppets of their dreams come true in the novel which forms the second part of the book. All the harsh absurdity of the sketches is here softened in the novel into perhaps one of the tenderest of love stories in modern fiction. Here people are finally able to sleep, and they become giants of sleep, gluttons of sleep. In the most beautiful and suggestive part of the book, the opening of the novel, where sleep falls upon everything like heavenly grace, we have at the same time the cartoon characters relaxing at last into their true ease, their true human dimension, the irrational and unconscious levels. They become truly human, reversing, in a most hilarious way, the usual human equation: man equals consciousness. The further these cartoon types get from the intellectual and the structured, the closer they get to the totality of the Unconscious, that level on which the novel closes.

The first edition of the novel ended much less happily. The 1965 edition ended with the death of Popeye, after his seduction of Myrtle Ann. In the 1972 edition this forms the last sketch in the first section of the book. There is a new ending to the novel, and a far more satisfactory one, to my mind. The last chapter never seemed quite a part of the novel; in style or in spirit it had always seemed to me a sketch. It is too much like the marionette shows of the sketches to be part of the longer and quieter, far less electric but much warmer novel. "The Deep" which now serves as the last chapter, I find to be an almost perfect ending, and wholly in keeping with the rest.

Mr. Plinth's achievement in *Deep Sleep*, as in *Pope Art*, *Gravy for the Navy*, and *Total Mobil*, is the co-habitation within one style of a slapstick comedy and a bone deep sorrow. This particular mixture seems to work best, to most fully triumph, in *Deep Sleep*, a book which ought to make us see the comics with new eyes.

VOX RECORDS

New York, 1972

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DEEP SLEEP**

9888 - 3A

Mono

33 1/3 R. P. M.

DEEP SLEEP

Side 1

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Side 2