Leyner on Love

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Reading Mark Leyner's fiction is like entering an elevator where every button is labeled in menacing gibberish.

Here's a typical paragraph of self-referential Leyner deconstruction from his new book, *Last Orgy of the Divine Hermit*: "We often have the eerie feeling, as we traverse the text, that the Chalazians themselves (among the most literate peoples on earth) are reading aloud along with us. Or, put another way, there's a mirroring reciprocity at play here: we're reading what the characters are reading and the characters are reading what we're reading."

S. J. Perelman (1904–1979) was a writer whose arch command of erudite language much resembles Leyner's. But Perelman wrote real jokes, and was so funny that the Marx Brothers hired him. Leyner also works for Hollywood (he wrote the screenplay for the 2008 film *War, Inc*., among other things)

and he is just as smart as Perelman, but normal jokes bore him and he much prefers to torment his readers by folding, spindling, and mutilating language and the very act of reading.

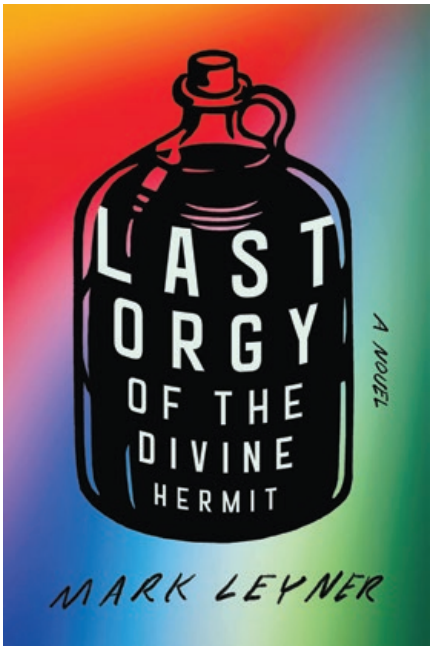
Leyner, a writer's writer if ever there was one, can entertain writers with writer-jokes: "In late medieval chivalric romances, Chalazian Mafia Faction street soldiers were frequently portrayed as miniaturized mechanomorphic vermin, scurrying behind the toilets in the men's rooms of bars."

This quip is chuckleworthy to us novelists because a sentence like this can never actually be "written." It's impossible for a human being to actually sit down and think and type that sentence. That sentence has to be architected through some postmodern method of splintering and splicing.

It's also funny because of its car-crash of discourses, that violent, bathetic change of tone from dusty old "medieval chivalric romances" into horror sci-fi "mechanomorphic vermin" with no transition at all, just pure verbal jolt. If you're a sci-fi writer, like me, who has to waste a whole lot of time persuading people to believe in far-fetched stuff like "miniature mechanomorphic vermin," it's a thrill to see that rubbish just catapulted into the text.

Leyner's work is about language as a system for exploring and conveying meaningful truth, and like most postmodernists, he thinks it doesn't have much. The reason is that words are not scientific instruments that can test, measure, and verify. Instead, words are mushy, polyvalent symbols that socially construct a consensus that mostly serves the interests of the powers-that-be.

Now, if you're a philosophic realist, you'll strongly dislike this idea that "reality" is socially constructed from politically freighted semiotics. However, Leyner has made a long career out of demonstrating just that—and in the most extreme and exciting ways, too. He's something like a gaudy, raucous Donkey Kong rampaging through pages where battling discourses blast into each other in riotous bursts of verbal pixels.



Last Orgy of the Divine Hermit
by Mark Leyner. Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 2021, 288 pp.

Leyner especially likes the professional discourses of medicine and physics, because they sound so solemn, serious, and fully rooted in objective reality. So he goes after 'em like a guy sculpting Jell-O with a chain saw.

Optometrists, for instance. Optometrists are specialized medical professionals with elaborate technical hardware to examine subtle eye defects. Everybody's visited optometrists, everybody knows what they do. Leyner's optometrists read like this:

> A gentle, dignified man in his mid-sixties with a good-natured, ready smile, crow's feet accentuating the glint in his eyes, the optometrist's life had been a harrowing one. Both his parents were killed in a horrific home invasion (they were the invaders, not the occupants)…. After losing everything during the Night of the Broken Glasses, when neo-Nazis targeted Jewish optometrists, smashing all their lenses and frames, he refused to allow rancor to detract from the conscientious care of his patients (many of whom were themselves neo-Nazis). He methodically rebuilt his practice and, in 2023, was voted "New Jersey's Most Optimistic Optometrist." In his spare time (evenings and weekends), he's involved with a group of optometrists from all over the country who are working to provide MS-13 with nuclear weapons….

You can glide through that torrent of abrasive, storm-gathering verbiage, from the "good-natured, ready smile" downhill to the nuclear weapons for terrorists, and it's a semantic marvel, really. It's not a joke; there's no punchline. It's not satire; he's not making fun of optometrists. It's not word-play, because those aren't puns or double-entendres. It isn't nonsense, because the sentences are grammatical and follow one another legibly. And it's not surreal, because it's not based in dream-life or unconscious promptings. It's even sinister and disgusting, because it's got a big glob of Nazis in it.

It's semiotic-play: it's a mutated corrosion of textual meaning, a literary creation almost like kinetic-art. It's like tearing a car to pieces and building a robotic, flailing artwork out of the components. The aesthetic pleasure of it is in watching it wind up and go.

It resembles a form of science fiction where there's no hope of rational understanding within the science, and the fiction is devouring itself—and cannibalizing the science, too. That's why I read Leyner's books, and why I find them so useful.

Suppose you're not a cyberpunk sci-fi writer like me, but an actual, functional scientist. Let's consider the august figure of the late Sir Ernest Rutherford (1871–1937), a Nobel Prize-winner who is famous for saying "All science is either physics or stamp collecting."

In my opinion, this assertion is a great, nail-it-to-the-masthead thing for any scientist to say. Because there's so much metaphysical rigor to it; it's not the mush-mouthed rhetorical doubletalk that us creative humanistic writers are so fond of using. It's about the stark virtues of physics: precise measurement, experimental verification, mathematical rigor, and the discovery of natural law and cosmic order.

However, this thing you're reading now is an essay in a magazine. We're not in a lab. Even though I can talk fluently about physics, this isn't physics. There's no firm evidence that Ernest Rutherford ever really said that famous quote about stamp collecting. It sounds catchy, but it's also dismissive and mean to his colleagues in other fields—and why would he be so boorish? Also, Rutherford's own Nobel Prize was in chemistry, not physics.

So our language about Ernest Rutherford is not identical to the truth of Rutherford. Rutherford didn't merely say or write that atoms have a nucleus. Rutherford demonstrated experimentally that atoms have a nucleus by creating his famous gold foil experiment, which other scientists could replicate in their own laboratories.

But we still have to tell each other about the science, which is why magazines like this exist, and that's where the postmodern "social construction of science" starts oozing in like sulfurous lava from hell.

The Rutherford gold-foil apparatus is a machine; it's not made out of words! Right now we don't have Rutherford's instruments. They're old-fashioned, they're gone. We just have the words—that's the problem! To read a Mark Leyner book is to be plunged into a nightmare language-centric world where the gold foil can never help you. There is no physical anchor.

Last Orgy doesn't even exist as a "novel." It's a text that calls itself "ethnography," and it does a lot of cruel, weird mimicry of ethnographic talk, but it consists of characters reading texts aloud to each other. Sometimes they read karaoke prompts. Sometimes they read political posters. Most of the book is a patient reading her optometry eye-tests aloud to her hapless optometrist.

It's hard to find any book that makes it so clear that a book is a verbal contraption. Maybe William Burroughs, the maestro of the cut-up method who famously said that "language is a virus from outer space." Leyner resembles Burroughs in his fondness for larding big ice-cream scoops of meaningless violence and depraved squalor into the text, at near-random.

This is Leyner as philosopher:

> As another glassy-eyed cadre slurs (a chemical odor on her breath from the butter-flavored no-stick cooking spray she continuously huffs): "The reality we perceive is a mere epiphenomenon arising from the underlying structure of the brain, which is itself an epiphenomenon arising from purely mathematical properties—topological homogeneity, supersymmetry, stochastic dynamics, etc., etc. In other words, reality is a surface effect of mathematics."

But why are mathematicians trapped in the same verbal sump as glue-huffing lunatics? Well, they're not really, because mathematicians have the rigor of the Queen of the Sciences on their side. However, human intelligence is embodied and time-bound. The infant mathematician can neither speak nor calculate. The adult mathematician feels like a rational, conscious being, but the elderly, senile mathematician can no longer tackle hard proofs. He can still speak, though: a corroded babbling that might soothe the pangs of a wounded brain but is no longer nailed to reality.

It's good that we know this about ourselves, and our dependence on language and its many treacheries.

Mark Leyner, my contemporary, has become an old man now. Throughout his literary career, Leyner has been a tensile, keyed-up, gym-rat character verging on machismo. But time has changed him. This *Last Orgy* book is haunted by the decaying male body, and by a deep fatherly regard for the new generation. This is Leyner's Dorothy-in-Oz text, where the curtain is pulled aside for the young girl from Kansas, and it's revealed that the Specter of Postmodernism has a not-so-modern little old man in there.

Leyner's critics used to claim that his texts were clever but not "novels." When you read Leyner's fiction, you felt bemused and bewildered, but you came out of the last page much as you were at the first page. His books were not comedies or tragedies; instead, they were just acrobatics. Leyner wrote what reviewers called "experimental" prose, but his experiments lacked practical applications. He liked to write about the nature of writing, but his bravura stunts were astrally detached.

Last Orgy of the Divine Hermit is a different kind of book, though. Somehow, elements of human wisdom have seeped in. There's an unspoken, between-the-lines tenderness to it that transcends its verbal tricks. The book is still not a novel and it has no plot—but it does have moral messages, about mortality and love.

The moral is that all orgies end, and a father's love for a daughter is beyond all language. No amount of verbal acrobatics can hide the warmth of affection; the love between the generations glows through the passage of time. There's some primeval mammalian beauty of flesh-and-blood within all of us, which science can't quantify and fiction can't express.

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