

Ring Lardner's "The Love Nest": Illusion, Reality, and the Movie Mogul

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Ring Lardner criticism has come a long way since Clifton Fadiman's comprehensive denunciations in his essay of 1933, "Ring Lardner and the Triangle of Hate" ("Except Swift, no writer has gone farther on hatred alone")¹ and James T. Farrell's equally sweeping accolades eleven years later in "Ring Lardner's Success-Mad World" ("no other American writer has achieved the mastery of satire which Lardner had")² More recently, Webb (1960)³ Bordewyck (1982)⁴ and Gilead (1985)⁵ have helped to redirect the focus of Lardner commentary, with the result that we are now able to view the author in a more subtle light, as also deeply concerned with "the abusive potentiality of cultural codes and discourses, verbal and written texts, and speech-acts."⁶ Within this context, I wish to consider "The Love Nest," Lardner's short story of 1926, both as an instance of the "abusive potentiality" of the speech act and, through analysis of the protagonist's linguistic performance, as another variation in Lardner's A to Z of idiosyncratic pseudo-communicators.

Lou Gregg is a one-time movie director who has risen to the position of President of a motion picture company. As a power behind the silver screen, Gregg fulfills an influential social role. He is concerned with making popular culture profitable, by the manipulation of audience response through carefully contrived cinematic imagery, or, to be precise, by the retailing of illusions. The "great man" has granted an "in-depth" interview to Mr. Bartlett, a young reporter on the grandiosely titled "Mankind" magazine. "I'll tell you what I'm going to do with you, Mr. Bartlett," he says. "I'm going to take you right out to my home and have you meet the wife and family; stay to dinner and all night. We've got plenty of room and extra pajamas, if you don't mind them silk. I mean that'll give you a chance to see us just as we are. I mean you can get more that way than if you sat here a whole week, asking me questions."⁷ Through Lardner's characteristic use of dialogue as unintentional self-display, we are alerted immediately to Gregg's urge for self-advertisement, his social pretentiousness, and his loud materialism. Less amusing is the indication that

¹ Clifton Fadiman, "Ring Lardner and the Triangle of Hate," *Nation* 22 March 1933: 315-17.

² James T. Farrell, "Ring Lardner's Success-Mad World," *The New York Times Book Review* June 1944: 3,18.

³ Howard Webb, Jr., "The Meaning of Ring Lardner's Fiction: a Re-evaluation," *American Literature* 21 (1960): 434-45.

⁴ Gordon Bordewyck, "Comic Alienation: Ring Lardner's Style," *The Markham Review* 11 (Spring 1982): 51-57.

⁵ Sarah Gilead, "Lardner's Discourses of Power," *Studies in Short Fiction* 22 (1985): 331-37.

⁶ Gilead 331.

⁷ "The Love Nest," in *The Best of Ring Lardner* (London: J.M.Dent 1984) 169-80. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.

the movie mogul is more used to doing things to people than for them. True to his professional function, he is accustomed to "directing" others rather than engage in equal acts of communicative exchange (he prefers to project an image of himself through the "happy family" scenario rather than expose himself to Bartlett's unscripted questioning.)

As Gregg's Rolls "turned in at an *arc de triomphe* of a gateway and approached a white house that might have been mistaken for the Yale Bowl" (170), Lardner presents a domestic scene which is as elaborately contrived and as fundamentally inauthentic as the studio "sets" that both Gregg and his wife once worked on. Indeed, the mansion is Gregg's private "set," with his apparently doting wife, Celia, as costar in the sickly marriage charade they put on for the young reporter. Celia's opening appearance is clearly intended to resemble some dramatic theatrical entrance: "Bartlett rose to greet the striking brunette who at this moment made an entrance so Delsarte as to be almost painful. With never a glance at him, she minced across the room to her husband and took a half interest in a convincing kiss. 'Well, sweetheart,' she said when it was at last over" (171). Celia's "half interest" captures the dissembling reflex of the professional actress (before marriage she had been a budding starlet with the potential of a Swanson, she claims later), while her self-conscious "never a glance" at Bartlett relegates him to a spectatorial role. In the Delsartian style, Celia attempts to coordinate voice and gesture in order to demonstrate her wifely emotion, but the carefully placed "at last" hints at the basic insincerity of the performance. Celia is quite clearly role-playing, to her husband's direction. Lardner underlines the fact shortly after this when Gregg refers to marriage and maternity as having given Celia "a kind of pose" (174), when he means "poise."

Inarticulateness is usually no barrier to Lardner's abusers of language. Gregg is no exception. Without the slightest interest in linguistic communion per se, he seeks to enforce his own version of reality onto Bartlett's "neutral" ear. As a man of "money and power" (179), Gregg employs language in order to control and coerce, to subject his listener to a carefully stage-managed representation of reality. His speech is ludicrously manneristic in its continual need for redefinition, littered with the repeated use of "I mean." For instance, take his response to Bartlett's comment that as a younger actress Celia had been "'very pretty and vivacious': 'She certainly was!' declares Gregg. 'And she is yet! I mean she's even prettier, but of course she ain't a kid, though she looks it. I mean she was only seventeen in that picture but that was ten years ago. I mean she's twenty-seven years old now. But I never met a girl with as much zip as she had in those days. It's remarkable how marriage changes them. I mean nobody would ever thought Celia Sayles would turn out to be a sit-by-the-fire. I mean she still likes a good time, but her home and kiddies come first. I mean her home and kiddies come first'" (170). If the linguistic style is almost ridiculous in its rambling repetitiveness, the "concealed" content is significantly less so. It becomes clear that it has been marriage to Gregg which has robbed Celia of her old vitality, but he cannot allow this account of her deterioration to be exposed for Bartlett's viewing. The repetition of "I mean," as Gregg labors to capture the image of Celia he is after, is appropriately analogous to a succession of cinematic retakes, as the vision is revised until finally the desired illusion is achieved. Gregg's final "take" shows Celia as a still lively woman happily dedicated to "home and kiddies." The other, rejected "takes," though, suggest

the very different alternative view of a young woman of potential tempted too early into an advantageous marriage, and whose girlish verve has been all but extinguished by the drudgery of the wife and mother roles. What distinguishes Gregg's verbal style from the cinematic process, however, is that the discarded "takes" remain suggestively visible, and enable Bartlett to perceive the chasm separating the illusion of marital bliss from the unedited actuality of what Celia calls her "torture."

When Gregg leaves for a business appointment, Celia disillusiones Bartlett about "all that apple sauce about the happy home and the contented wife" (178). Celia departs from her script (in her only unexpurgated utterance in the story) and for the first time speaks with "no affectation in her voice," as Bartlett is quick to notice. Lardner gives an edge to Celia's words which contrasts sharply to her earlier saccharine sweetness. "'I never did love him!' she exclaims, 'I didn't know what love was!' 'I'd change places with the scum of the earth just to be free!' she declares. 'I fought at first,' she continues, 'I told him marriage didn't mean giving up my art, my life work. But it was no use. He wanted a beautiful wife and beautiful children for his beautiful home. Just to show us off. See? I'm part of his chattels. See . . . I'm just like his big diamond or his cars or his horses'" (178). Celia's words presumably present the reality of the situation, although Lardner does not appear to have much more sympathy for her than he shows for the obnoxious Gregg. Lardner's choice of maiden name (she was Celia Sayles when single) suggests that she had acted opportunistically in a business where human beings routinely "sold" themselves in the hope of a faster route to stardom.

With Gregg's reappearance at the close, Lardner allows the couple's theatricals to resume, as if Celia's alcoholic outcry had been only a brief intermission between reels. As Gregg and his guest prepare to leave, the opening "sweetheart" sequence is replayed for the reporter's benefit. To the end, in his personal life as in his professional activities, Lardner's picture magnate remains the purveyor of false images and bogus emotions. But the story leaves us with some more troubling conclusions. For all his linguistic ineptitude, it is Lou Gregg and his version of reality that the narrative closes on. (Bartlett may see through the sham, but will his editor—an old crony of Gregg's—conceivably allow him to report on it? Will Celia ever allow herself more than the occasional alcoholic outburst?) Emphatically, the ex-director continues to direct. If discourse really is "responsible for reality and not merely a reflection of it,"⁸ then in "The Love Nest" Lardner presents another illuminating case study in how the "abusive" manipulator of discourse effectively succeeds in imposing his own interpretation of reality.

⁸ Jane P. Tompkins, "An Introduction to Reader-Response Criticism," in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980) xxiv.