

Napoleon Dynamite, Priesthood Skills, and the Eschatology of the Non-Rational: A Nonwarranted Physiotheologic Analysis

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Napoleon fever has struck. Thousands of young girls are adorning their walls with posters of the nerdy hero in the sweet brown suit and scrambling to learn the womanly art of weaving key chains from plastic cord. Thousands of young boys are adorning their rides with "Vote for Pedro" bumper stickers and reasserting their native right to wear chapstick and be nice. Sales of hip-hop instruction videos have tripled and beef consumption is down by two-thirds over the previous quarter. What does it all mean?

The wild popularity of the movie among members of the Church as well as the general population should come as no surprise to alert theologians. No better theological statement has come out of tinsel town since *The Ten Commandments*. For postmodern Christian theologians who have looked on the antifoundationalism of the times as an opportunity to reinstate a Christian order but who have found themselves shipwrecked on the rocks of dogmatism, this movie is a quiet, if radical, answer to prayer.

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In the introduction to his book on the work of Protestant theologian Karl Barth, Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar explores the sentiment, poignantly expressed in both his own and Barth's theology, that the current state of schism among Christians is "a sin."¹ The division of the household of God that occurred during the Great Eastern Schism and the Reformation/Counter-Reformation, as well as the continued splintering of Protestant sects, is a serious matter that puts all parties at odds with the Founder of the faith. The inability to offer a unified front in the effort to reestablish a Christian society has led to spotty results. Alas, what has happened cannot unhappen, and there is no way out but through. Many theologians' hearts fail them at the thought.

Underlying the historical bickering over dogma are fundamental differences in perception and cognition. Catholic theology as a general rule favors a right-brain approach. Meaning is mediated by subjective sensory and extrasensory experience with attention to pattern and relationship. The individual is a microcosm of the whole of creation and the whole of creation is a revelation of the divine. By participating in a revolving cycle of multi-sensory rituals, the believer reconciles himself to the whole, becoming one with the cosmic pattern. Through a tempero-spatial reality (the Eucharist), the believer assimilates the perfect tempero-spatial embodiment of that pattern, the flesh of the Word, the gestalt of eternity-in-time, Jesus Christ.

Thinking of Catholic theology in terms of right-brain preference allows us to understand many Roman and Orthodox peculiarities: the doctrine of transubstantiation; the high value placed on mysticism and the nonanalytic, nonactive surrender of contemplation; expressions of cyclic time, such as "Christ is born" instead of "was born," along with timeless theological entities such as "the Christ Child"; the use of art as worship and worship as art; the importance of the visual and tactile presence of icons, statues, relics and rosaries and the use of incense; the employment of right-hemisphere, alpha-wave-inducing chant harmonics and the empty and reverberant qualities of the cathedral; the insistence of the Council of Trent that tradition is coequal with scripture in determining doctrine; the Catholic cult of the feminine; and Catholic reverence for the order of the natural world.

1. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 4.

Protestant theology as a general rule favors left-brain functions. As opposed to the givenness of the Catholic appositional-holistic model, Protestantism takes the heuristic approach of the propositional-analytic. Meaning is mediated by written and spoken language and reason (however faulty) rather than through intuition or proprioceptive/spatial relationship, and processing is sequential rather than parallel. Hence, the Reformation emphasis on the Bible as sole determinant of doctrine and the insistence that text conveys objective truth. God is experienced more in the abstract or the formulaic than in the concrete and the particular. In contrast to the Catholic priest's enacting of rituals, the Protestant preacher mediates the divine by stringing together a succession of words. The divisive nature of left-brain rationalism cannot but result in splintering as first one and then another attempt is made to construct an internally consistent system based on partial data and partial cognitive tools. In other words, not only is the Bible partial but so, typically, is our usage of the human brain. Protestant sects that have reacted against the stoicism of a reasoned approach or the intellectual fascism of a historical-critical one have only replaced them with an equally partial and unbalanced emotionalism. Selective use of the limbic system is no better way to access God than selective use of the frontal cortices.

Enter Napoleon on a winged horse.

The sign on Napoleon's bedroom door is both a warning and a prophecy: "Pegasus X-ing." The sign of the cross here does not suggest a negating, but a meeting of trajectories, a kind of optic chiasm. Pegasus, as we will remember from our grade school days, is the symbol of earthly strength (and specifically male virility), elevated and purified by heavenly strength. The gods, lest man in his hubris should ascend too high, sent the mighty and loyal Pegasus to tramp down the top of Mount Helicon. Out sprang a fountain, to drink of which would make a man's right cerebral hemisphere become dominant and interface symbiotically with his left, with a simultaneous neogenesis of neuronal pathways between the cortices and the limbic system—that is, he would become a poet, the quintessential artist-priest.

Napoleon has had to taste of this water to produce his drawings of magical beasts. His is not the draftsmanship of military-industrial mechanization nor is it the romanticized portraiture of Enlightenment sophists. One cannot say that he paints his prospective prom date as inherently good in the tradition of the Transcendentalists, but neither does he paint

her as inherently evil in the style of certain mystical ascetics. His is a child-like vision that may simply be termed "frank"—in a manner reminiscent of Catholic novelists like Flannery O'Connor whose characters have sometimes been referred to as "grotesques." He would save Nessie from nuclear fission but resents feeding that bourgeois beast of leisure, Tina the "fat lard." He is neither silent nor verbose, neither passive nor aggressive, neither leader nor follower. He is unselfish yet fully endowed with selfhood. We can make sense of the figure of Napoleon only by using both sides of our brains at once and in concert with our hearts; and for many of us raised in western modernist culture, that may mean learning to use the right half for the first time.

The culture in which Napoleon finds himself represents the bitter last gasp of Marx, Freud, Darwin, Nietzsche, and Descartes—but not only that. It also represents the bitter last gasp of Babylon, of ancient Greece, and of the land of Nod. It is a culture emptied of all sense of mystery and reverence, a culture in which the physical and the emotional have been desacralized and made the slaves of utility. A cow is shot without conscience. Chickens are kept without reverence, without care. Boys are beaten while witnesses walk by on the other side. Manhood has been perverted into competition, intimidation, aggression, and consumption. The school principal lusts after young girls as he watches Summer's "skit." Rex of Rex Kwon Do preaches the gospel of enmity. Uncle Rico longs to return to the ignorant bliss of the Enlightenment dream that man is self-sufficient and capable of succeeding on his own terms. He longs for the imagined day when men could irreverently consume and compete with and intimidate whatever and whomever they wanted without having to count the long-term costs or consider their responsibilities to the rest of creation. He longs to be his own boss, his own creator, to be the sole actor in a video made solely for his own pleasure and judgment. Napoleon instantly recognizes the futility of such a plan—"This is pretty much the worst video ever made"—but the left-brained Kip disallows intuition and insists on objectivity—"Napoleon, like anyone can even *know* that."

Perhaps Kip does not consciously admit it. Perhaps in his compartmentalizing and decontextualizing, he can temporarily forget the analogical significance of his life. He can miss the metaphor, the parable, the alphanon and the eschaton. But the psyche of man today is faced with the collective guilt of the long, sad history of the race because this is the end-time. Our souls, somewhere deep down, cannot help but know it.

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The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints arose out of two complementary cultural forces: the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the nonrationalism of the American visionary tradition. Historians have written much on the former but little on the latter, so that some may even be unfamiliar with the term. It refers to the mystical current in American religious experience that bubbled up most noticeably in the First Great Awakening of 1720–50, and again in the Second Great Awakening of the early 1800s. These were times when nonrational avenues to truth and God were pursued widely in the culture: dramatic emotional and physical conversions, healings, natural dietary and herbal practices, visions and dreams, speaking in tongues, prophesying, and angelic visitations, among others less savory. Right-brain holism manifested itself in utopianism and millennialism. That these values and practices formed a large part of the religious experience of Joseph Smith and the early Saints is a matter of record.

In the ensuing decades and up through the 1950s, what we saw both in American popular culture and in American LDS culture was the devaluing of the nonrational in favor of the rational as scientific positivism came into vogue. In the 1960s, nonrational avenues once more began to be widely sought as humanist social programs and rationalist theories in the physical sciences began to break down. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, nonrational approaches to truth and God—spiritualism, herbal healing, vegetarianism, interest in angels, yoga, meditation and other Eastern practices, etc.—are once more flooding the American experience to the extent that some scholars are on the verge of christening a Third Great Awakening.²

Astute observers of Mormon sociology note a corresponding trend. They mention, for instance, that in the 1980s, emphasis on a “personal relationship” with deity and salvation by grace began to enter the rhetoric, supplanting the former emphasis on works and salvation by Church

2. Eugene Taylor, *Shadow Culture: Psychology and Spirituality in America* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1999), 4.

activity.³ About the same time, the Church changed its logo to emphasize “Jesus Christ” over “Latter-day Saints,” and there was an increase in nondiscursive mediation of the gospel message—specifically, images of the Savior—in Church publications. There has also been an increase in talks by General Authorities advocating for women and emphasizing their status as “equal partners” with men. This last is significant because women are associated with the nonrational realms of emotionality, physicality, and intuition. The focal point of the Atonement is beginning to shift from the Garden of Gethsemane to the Cross.⁴ The new missionary program which replaces rote memorization of text with “teaching from the heart”⁵ is further evidence of a left-to-right modal shift. All of this is fairly obvious.

Astute observers of Mormon theology (what few there are) note what is less obvious: that this change does not represent a step forward, but a step back. That is, it represents a return, or the beginning of a return, to Mormon doctrine as it appears in the Church’s canonical “standard works” of scripture and the teachings of its founding prophet, Joseph Smith. Chief among these teachings is that God has “a body, parts, and passions,”⁶ a statement that radically restores the cracked foundations of Christian theology. If indeed “the glory of God is intelligence” (D&C 93:36), then it is a comprehensive and cohesive intelligence involving body and emotions as well as intellect. The major theological and philosophical contribution of the Book of Mormon and other latter-day revelation is in showing that concepts previously held to be mutually exclusive—one being rational and the other nonrational—are in actuality complementary: justice and mercy, faith and knowledge, physical and spiritual, time and eternity, male and female, the letter of the law and the spirit of the law, works and grace; even (as testified by Moses 7) omniscience/omnipotence and physiologically expressed grief. The fulness of

3. Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), 191–92.

4. Gordon B. Hinckley, “The Symbol of Our Faith,” *Ensign*, April 2005, 3–6.

5. “Teaching from the Heart,” *Ensign*, June 2004, 6–11.

6. Joseph Fielding Smith, comp. and ed., *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith* (American Fork, Utah: Covenant Communications, 2002 printing), 185; see also 357–58.

the gospel of Jesus Christ clearly promotes the marriage of rational and nonrational aspects of experience and the balanced utilization of the full brain, left to right as well as top to bottom. The fact that the scriptures themselves do not follow a linear logic but are a pasticcio of historical, literary, and theological elements is itself a testament to the metahuman order issuing from the mind of God.

I have been using “nonrational” to distinguish it from “irrational,” which has connotations of destructive chaos. If God and his doctrines encompass the nonrational and if he is a God of order, then it follows that the nonrational has order. It is simply a different kind of order with which many of us have not become familiar. It represents, if you will, a constructive form of “chaos.” As if the story of Nephi slaying Laban were not enough, Joseph Smith explicitly taught the nonformulaic aspect of righteousness: “That which is wrong under one circumstance, may be, and often is, right under another. God said, ‘Thou shalt not kill’; at another time He said, ‘Thou shalt utterly destroy.’ This is the principle upon which the government of heaven is conducted—by revelation adapted to the circumstances in which the children of the kingdom are placed. Whatever God requires is right, no matter what it is, although we may not see the reason thereof till long after the events transpire.”⁷

Napoleon Dynamite, the movie as form and the character as microcosm of the form, exemplifies a nonformulaic order. There is a distinctly nonlinear aspect to the plot. There is not much in the way of logical nexus; the left brain searches in vain. Yet there is one thread in the movie—the one on which Napoleon maintains Adam, pulling him along the rough road of history unbeknownst to all the drivers of all the buses. Napoleon also pulls Kip, his brother, the autoless embodiment of postmodern techno-impotence, tethered to his muscle- and sweat-powered bike by a thread, a bond, a seal. This is because Napoleon without them cannot be made perfect. What is it that can save this post-everything society of high school students and people who never matured beyond that age (Kip, Rico, the dune-buggy Grandma)? Certainly not Napoleon, the nonhero. Providence must intervene.

Can it be an accident that Mexicans and African Americans are moving into Utah and Idaho? Can it be an accident that Mexicans are predominantly Catholics and African Americans are predominantly Bap-

7. *Ibid.*, 263.

tists? Can it be an accident that these two cultures have been the most successful of all Christians at retaining their native nonrational approach to religion and sustaining the values of the American visionary tradition?

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In the school for the training of the left frontal lobe, Napoleon and Pedro are two of a kind: bench-warmers. Yet Pedro is the one with the skills. He has a sweet bike in order to act and not be acted upon; and if someone should dare to act upon him, he has two male relatives endowed with even greater agency (an animated and viscerally pulsating low-rider) who stand by him in solidarity. Contrast this situation with Napoleon's abandonment by his two male relatives. Pedro, because he knows the ways of the heart (his cognitive centers communicate with his limbic system, probably somewhere in the vicinity of the cingulate gyrus), is really good at hooking up with chicks. Third, and perhaps most important, Pedro possesses the capacity to grow a moustache, signifying his capacity to mature as a male. When Napoleon attempts to ride Pedro's potent "Sledgehammer," he is pained in his manhood. He has a few things to put under his feet before he can fly. Maturity requires patience. With statues of Mary and Jesus looking on from the front porch of Pedro's home, he (and we with him) is reminded of the emasculation he suffers at the hands of his own artless culture. He is again reminded to stay away from technology's false promises of power when he tries out Rico's time machine. Time is God's prerogative. A real man humbly takes it as it comes.

The culture of Greece/Babylon/Preston High wishes to subjugate Time and its maddening relativity, to be, in the words of the song playing at the dance, "forever young," to avoid the cosmic cycle of death and rebirth and have "summer all year long." (When Napoleon and Deb dance, the song is a cyclically responsive "Time after Time.") It is a culture that has substituted the quantitative values of survival for the qualitative values of life. Summer promises glitter and pop dispensers. Rico and Kip peddle plastic for money. Even when Napoleon makes an effort to enter the military-industrial value system, his right-brain dominance prevents him from succeeding. He is concerned with the God-created concrete particulars of the chickens (their talons), a matter unintelligible to the survivalist farmers. Their artless, survivalist food, consisting of quantities of chickens-before-they're-hatched and entirely lacking in the qualities of taste and smell that "please the eye and gladden the heart" (D&C 59:18) gags him. He

cannot understand their garbled, partial language. Despite his hard work, the artist-priest in such a society must be content with the loose change that falls from Master Mahan's table.

Napoleon cannot fit in, not so much because he doesn't desire to become a Babylonian—witness the tall tales of Alaskan wolverine hunts and hot blonde girlfriends and being able to make hundreds of dollars in, like, five seconds—but seemingly because he cannot be untrue to his nature. Perhaps he has sipped the waters of Helicon from before his birth and is foreordained to this calling. Deb, too, it turns out, has sipped the waters. She, however, by virtue of her substantial corpus callosum (larger in the female brain than in the male), is able to put left-brain technology (a camera) to use for right-brain ends (visual art). She would redeem the commercial images of Rico and Kip with tiny little sea horses and pink billowness. Unlike the appearance-oriented Summer and Trisha, she accepts her body just the way it is and has no desire to buy in to Babylonian sexonomics.

Pedro begins to suffer the adverse effects of living in a Nietzschean power web. In a reenactment of the Iconoclast Controversy, he is reprimanded by the principal for creating a piñata in the image of Summer, and using it vicariously to win the election. It is the way of things in Mexico. The concrete and the particular, the physical and the emotional, will make him a winner there. But here he is forced into abstraction. With no culturally acceptable outlet, the godlike passion begins to build. Pedro feels his heat now as it stands out in contrast to the cold white way. He wants to be a winner. Unwilling to relinquish his FFA medal—after all, it is a symbol of the task given to Adam to maintain stewardship over nature and of his tie to Napoleon—the conflicted Pedro tries to bathe his heat away, surrounded by the purifying magic of holy candles. But they are not magic enough. He must remove part of his identity.

Napoleon transcends the cultural mandate to ridicule another to exalt oneself, and together Napoleon and Deb repair the damage society has collectively wrought and restore Pedro to respectability. Pedro stands now as the New Peter, ready to reassume his role. He dons the coif of a medieval warrior, defender of an age of passion and unified faith. The drums announce his prophesied return.

Napoleon has been thinking about Deb ever since she left her crap on his porch. It was the devalued crap of womanhood, womanhood reduced to salesmanship and trinkets or, as in the case of the spartanesque Starla, androgyny. Deb has no keys but provides the necessary means of se-

curing others'; without her, all keys would be forever lost. She will use this talent in the service of the New Peter, who will distribute the sacrificial gift ecumenically to all the faithful. As male and female link hands to restore the rightful Law to their society, we recognize that Napoleon has skills too. They aren't bowhunting skills or numchuck skills or computer hacking skills, which would enable him to control and dominate others of God's creatures. They are priesthood skills: kindness, long-suffering, gentleness and meekness, and love unfeigned. He is the leading man in this movie by virtue of his bold decision to act from a higher law than his fellows. The two acts of violence he commits—throwing to the ground the campaign button of the whore of all the earth and returning Rico's steak-upside-the-head with an orange-upside-the-van and an elbow to the chest—serve mainly to make a statement and indicate a righteous indignation. In the swing of his arm, we can almost see the arc of a braided cord.

Meanwhile, Kip is about to have his god/manhood restored through the mutual love and acceptance of his "Soul" mate LaFawnduh and the culture she represents. She will divest him of his intellectual trappings (glasses, ugly clothes) and bless him with the gifts of beauty and physicality. He is freed from the prison of his left frontal and parietal lobes and awakened to the deeper reality of occipital lobes, cerebellum, pons, medulla, the whole nine yards—he is in love. What his soul had lost in the apostasy of a man-made, text-based, virtual reality is now restored through facial expression, gesture, and physical touch in the eternal *pas de deux*. The experience of the nonrational cures him of his self-defeating self-consciousness and opens him to the plight of others ("Napoleon, I'm sure there's a babe out there for you, too.") Though LaFawnduh's brother is less than enthusiastic about the wedding—can a thousand years of culture be healed overnight?—and Kip admits his lingering love for technology, there is hope for better days.

As for temporal lobe involvement, music enters the soundtrack infrequently, because emotion enters the culture infrequently. Napoleon becomes associated with music early on in the movie as the only male in an all-female group. The Happy Hands Club represents the female cross-brain function. Sign is a language that is not processed solely in one hemisphere but requires coordination between the two. Sign is a visual, tactile, kinetic language, and Napoleon handles it with grace, as entranced as St. Teresa of Avila. But even this power can be prostituted, as in the campy cheerleader skit, as herbal products can be made to serve baser

instincts. Visions can lie, tongues can deceive, and angels of darkness can masquerade as angels of light. As Hagrid explains to Harry Potter in *The Sorcerer's Stone*, "Not all wizards are good."

It would seem that, in addition to foreordination, there is an element of choice involved in erecting and utilizing one's priestly neuronal circuitry, and perhaps this is why we never see or hear of Napoleon's father. Napoleon must utilize the right-hemisphere dishabituation function and discover today anew, as if he were not the last man on earth but the first. It would also appear from the transformation of Kip and Rico that neither biology nor history is necessarily destiny. The final ego blow comes to Rico in the form of Rex, king of Sparta, who renders his right arm useless, thereby forcing him to develop the left arm, which, as we well know, is controlled by the right half of the brain. As he attempts to develop his left throwing arm, his estranged girlfriend visits him in his field of loneliness and his illusion of independence; and soon, if garters can be relied upon, he will follow Kip to the altar. Even Tina is redeemed by love, by an act of love that sets all others in motion and makes the world alive with music.

Although we witness the spark of inspiration light Pedro's eyes as he looks up from the fountain of the knowledge of good and evil, we do not see Napoleon's first taste of paradox. But we do witness him slug down more of it in the form of gatorade (red, for sacrifice) as he practices for his ritual rain dance, his laying down of his life for his friend. It is the act which will seal his election—his own as well as Pedro's. When the disheartened novitiate hesitates to give his speech, Napoleon advises, "Pedro, just listen to your heart. That's what I do." He also listens to his body and speaks with it to the cerebrally self-conscious, partial-brained masses, who decide to throw waking reason to the wind and vote for the man who will make all their wildest dreams and visions come true. This dance of dreams, primitive in its longing, universal in its scope, perfect in its innocence, brings the history of enmity triumphantly to a close. In this show of true priesthood power, Napoleon transcends his megalomaniac namesake and explodes his monstrous legacy. Deb, the unsanitized and innocent new Eve, lets her hair down and plays. Behind their tethered game is the jubilant spray of fountains.

History scrolls its credits. But the end is not yet.

In the final scene, man will face his Maker in the clear light of dawning day. Napoleon rides into the middle of this marriage of the lion and

the lamb on the wild horse of passion which he has bridled. He rides it as he rides his life, with dignity and with the clumsiness of humility. And what does he do with the horse he has rightly earned? He gives it to his brother. He blesses someone else's life with it, even someone who has refused him comfort (the chapstick incident) and has taken pleasure in his pain and humiliation (the time-machine episode). He does this as a matter of course and doesn't even take credit for his magnanimity, ascribing it instead to the Divine Order. ("Luck-y!") He does nothing but what he sees the Maker do.

It is doubtful that the writers of this movie have ever read Urs von Balthasar or Barth. It is unlikely that its director is familiar with split-brain research or Gödel's incompleteness theorem. But as Albert Einstein said, "The problems we face will not be solved by the minds that created them." It is up to the artist-priests among us. *Napoleon Dynamite* has taken the greasy, nutritionless, factory-processed monotony of corndogs and tater tots and fed us with loaves and fishes. Let us give thanks and praise, and—with a deep and patient exhale—go and do likewise.