

TO STATE THE PROBLEM CORRECTLY: FACING THE BLACK TICKETS IN JAYNE ANNE PHILLIPS'S *MACHINE DREAMS*

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ABSTRACT

Jayne Anne Phillips's novel *Machine Dreams*, a family saga strongly grounded in its southern sense of place, intimately interrogates why the trauma of the Vietnam War was so devastating to America and why it ravaged, on many levels, the potent modernist dreams of this country. She wrote this novel—which is fraught with loss, mourning, and remembering—to counter the cultural and historical amnesia that she often found in America; to examine once again the “machine in the garden” theme that has so often energized American writing; to examine how the Vietnam War challenged the confidence of the “The Greatest Generation” that had endured the Depression and won World War II; and to recover, through her writing, some kind of faith out of this historical wreckage.

KEYWORDS

Jayne Anne Phillips; *Machine Dreams*; “The Greatest Generation”; Vietnam War; World War II; twentieth-century American literature; twentieth-century Southern literature; memory in American literature; trauma in American literature; violence in American literature; West Virginia

Jayne Anne Phillips, one of the most underappreciated southern writers, could be writing about herself when she talks about Chekhov in her essay “Violence in American Myth, Imagination & Lit”:

Chekhov once replied to an irate reader by asserting that it was the writer's responsibility not to see a problem, but to state the problem correctly. That is our responsibility. It is our concern that Americans have little understanding of their own history, that Americans don't read by and large American literature, or feel they need to, that Americans are preternaturally isolated on an assaltive sea of information.¹

With her deep faith in literature and in the writer's important ethical role in society, with her skill in fusing realism, modernism, and postmodernism within her rich literary imagination, and with her persistent recognition of the possibilities of redemption, Phillips has always been an astute examiner of contemporary American culture. Her first three novels, *Machine Dreams* (1984), *Shelter* (1994), and *Motherkind* (2000), especially fulfill Phillips's vision of the writer, for they create time-ridden, weary, and dangerous worlds, taking the reader into what Stendhal calls “the dark fissures” of life where in

1. Jayne Anne Phillips, “Violence in American Myth, Imagination & Lit,” in *Jayne Anne Phillips: American Writer*, 2000, <http://www.jayneannephillips.com/esviolence.htm>.

intense flashes, Phillips reveals the terror latent, and too often erupting, at the heart of the human condition. She invites her audience not to turn away from the darkness, but to fill in and connect the threatening silences and gaps within her narratives, for only then can one discover if any hope exists in her fictional world. As Phillips stresses, “I work inside silence; every writer does.”² This working inside, in fact, defines her richly etched, intimate portrayals of daily life “afflicted with extraordinary pressures.”³

Machine Dreams is perhaps Phillips’s best-known novel: a family saga, deeply grounded in its West Virginia sense of place that intimately conveys why the trauma of the Vietnam War was so devastating to this area and why this war ravaged the potent modernist dreams of post-World War II America—turning these dreams inside out and exposing with a cruel clarity what was false, weak, and dark within them. Phillips wrote it to counteract “a country awash in amnesia and ignorance, a country in the habit of distancing itself from its own history or context as quickly as possible.”⁴ Phillips wanted to historicize the rootless postmodernism she felt around her, which she had objectified so fully in her early short story collections. This novel, therefore, was her effort to look back at “what engendered [the 1970s]; so it was a larger world view [than in her stories], and probably a more compassionate, or a more forgiving one.”⁵ Phillips wanted not only to recover the past but to meditate on it, to re-dream it; as a result, she begins *Machine Dreams*—which is filled with loss, mourning, and remembering—with the provocatively simple sentence, “It’s strange what you don’t forget.”⁶ As Sarah Robertson rightly notes, this is what Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt term *counterhistory*. The novel takes the reader into what has been lost within traditional historicism, finds again what has been forgotten or displaced, focuses on longings and possibilities not realized.⁷ Memory, probably a more potent force in southern literature than in any other American literature during the 20th century, is the hinge that allows this novel, as few other novels do, to get at the full cultural catastrophe of the Vietnam War. It helps Phillips achieve the authenticity that she praises in the writings of Raymond Carver: “What we know and feel, how things fall apart, and what is left when they do, what holds in the purity of emptiness—these mysteries are Carver’s

2. Jayne Anne Phillips, “An Interview with Jayne Anne Phillips,” by Sarah Robertson, *European Journal of American Culture* (2001): 72.

3. Paul Gray, “Matters of Life and Death.” *Time*, May 15, 2000: 84.

4. Jayne Anne Phillips, “Violence in American Myth, Imagination & Lit,” in *Jayne Anne Phillips: American Writer*, 2000, <http://www.jayneannephillips.com/esviolence.htm>.

5. Jayne Anne Phillips, “An Interview with Jayne Anne Phillips,” by David M. Stanton, *Croton Review* 9 (Spring–Summer 1986): 42.

6. Jayne Anne Phillips, *Machine Dreams* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1984), 3. Hereafter cited in text as *MD*.

7. See Sarah Robertson, *The Secret Country: Decoding Jayne Anne Phillips’ Cryptic Fiction* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), 91.

concerns, and he takes the reader into them.”⁸ Phillips, like Carver, takes the reader into some tough spaces in *Machine Dreams* as she contemplates the possibility that there is no sanctuary for her characters (a constant theme within her writing).

Ranging from the 1920s through the 1970s, *Machine Dreams* is built around Phillips’s description of how she writes a novel: “I tell them it’s like serial dreaming. . . . Those layered distortions of recent or long-ago realities can be startling or nearly magical; still, something stays true.”⁹ Phillips’s serial dreaming in this novel circles around “the machine in the garden” theme that has energized so much of America’s lasting literature—or more specifically around how three generations of the Hampson family have been damaged by the increasingly mechanized violence of the 20th century. The Hampsons try to survive in a landscape that seems like a war zone at times: it is scarred by alienation, endangered families, gutted traditions, daily miscommunication, and the costs of a distant war.

The novel opens with the alternating voices of Jean and Mitch Hampson, the primary father and mother figures of the novel, their perspectives emerging out of growing up amidst the traumas of the Great Depression and the Second World War. They are products of a generation that actively, from the 1930s through the mid-1960s, embraced the machine dreams of modernism. Males especially believed in them—before these dreams disintegrated into the nightmares of economic dislocation and domestic/foreign violence in the late 1960s and the 1970s.

To put it another way, Jean and Mitch are part of what former American news anchor Tom Brokaw has praised as “The Greatest Generation” in his bestselling non-fiction book by that name. As he wrote, and as many of his readers enthusiastically accepted as the unadulterated truth, “It may be historically premature to judge the greatness of a whole generation, but indisputably, there are common traits that cannot be denied. It is a generation that, by and large, made no demands of homage from those who followed and prospered economically, politically, and culturally because of its sacrifices. It is a generation of towering achievement and modest demeanor”¹⁰ Brokaw pays honor to this generation by reverently letting his subjects “modestly” speak about how they held fast and how they lived decent, moral lives while and after they fought the “good wars” against the Depression and the Axis Powers. Indeed, there is much to admire in their stories, and many baby boomer readers recognize this generation’s quiet, conservative endurance in their own parents.

At the same time, Brokaw sometimes respects his subjects’ habitual silences about the dark spaces in their lives too carefully; his narrative usually

8. Jayne Anne Phillips, “The Secret Places of the Heart,” *New York Magazine*, April 20, 1981: 77–78.

9. Jayne Anne Phillips, “Dreaming of Beauty,” in *Jayne Anne Phillips: American Writer*, 2000, <http://www.jayneannephillips.com/esdream>.

10. Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Random House, 1998), 11.

rides the surface as it nurtures its pervasive celebratory tone. For many who grew up with the respectable but repressed representatives of this generation, there is often too much left unsaid in *The Greatest Generation*. It slides over the dark realities that undeniably were tangled within this generation's real strengths.

Phillips's *Machine Dreams* is not so reticent about her characters' "black tickets" (the title of one of her short story collections), as she portrays the "fractured nature of the blood-knowledge that passes from generation to generation" in the Hampson family.¹¹ It would be wrong to say that Phillips does not respect this generation with its "get on with life," pragmatic, often non-introspective approach to problems. Certainly, like the Hampsons' daughter Danner, Phillips sees much that is admirable in Jean's no-nonsense response to the dark spots in her family's past and to her children's desperate experience-seeking during the 1960s and 1970s:

We had the Depression and then the war; we didn't have to go looking for something to happen. And the things that happened were so big; no one could question or see an end to them. People died in the war and they died at home, of real causes, not what they brought on themselves. Living with that was enough. (*MD* 14)

In this novel of many competing voices, Phillips is trying to be faithful to the frustration and bewilderment that this "greatest" generation felt toward the social rebellions of their children.

That one must try to live with fortitude, without complaint, at least publically, are the values objectified in Jean and Mitch's "respectable" but thoroughly mismatched marriage. The couple does everything possible to mask the reality of their deep troubles with one another. The habitually angry Mitch never speaks about the bitter experiences of his poor childhood or the unspeakable things he endured in the Pacific during WWII or the breakdown of his business. That is not what a man who believes in "machine dreams" does. At the same time, this endangered couple tries to find protection for themselves—and especially for their children—by doing what their generation relentlessly did. They put the past away, or at least try to, as something not important, even if it is clearly impinging on their present lives. They do this while diving deep into the prosperous world of post-war America. As Jean remembers during the 1970s, now with the insight of tragedy informing her vision:

People had lost whatever was taken in those years [the WWII years] and survived, and a lot of them married, had children quickly. It was denying what had happened in a way, saying that life had started again and you could trust it. . . . People were relieved. There were jobs and money and no more catastrophes. (*MD* 19)

The Hampsons could buy a lovely home, send the children to good schools, make sure the kids had positive summer activities, drive a comfortable car, and be certain that the husband could find a good job that allowed the

11. Robertson, *The Secret Country*, 42.

wife to stay at home. One knew that the children were clean, well-fed, and secure. The Hampsons truly believed that they lived in a safe West Virginia town—away from the turmoil of the world—where everyone would find a sense of community. It was a place where one could maintain a trust in the future, in progress, and in one's good character, although this sense of safety often depended on a denial of the pressures roiling under the placid surface.

In *Billy Budd*, Herman Melville calls his novella the “inside narrative” of a tragedy that happened aboard a warship during the Napoleonic Wars. He stresses that it will resist the instant surface descriptions and analyses of newspapers. In the same way, in her fictional world of ambivalence and violence, Phillips's inside narrative, in contrast to the celebrations of this generation, takes the reader into the often repressed spaces of Mitch and Jean's generation to show why the chaos of the 1960s and the Vietnam War consume their values and their sense of safety.

When their son Billy dies in the war, nothing holds for the family, and everything that has been tenuously repressed floods them with terror, failure, and insight. As Jean tells her daughter after this loss, “I only kept going [in her marriage to Mitch] to make you safe. It turned out I couldn't keep anyone safe. Not you. Not Billy” (*MD* 22). Jean's hard-edged awareness is, according to Danner, like an excavation, as if her mother is finally digging up all that has been hidden and needing exposure; Jean is facing the “subterranean dominance of pipes [in their house], their silent twists and turns in the dark . . .” (*MD* 299). This questioning of the past, with its recognition that the present has been built upon many false or rotting planks, reveals why this “salt of the earth” family is so vulnerable. They have made everyday endurance an end in itself, stunting and denying too many other things in the name of order, decorum, and safety. The grieving Jean, therefore, must eventually question this way of life: “still, she didn't see much to admire as she got older. Pointless, really, a lot of what happened. Didn't people have to do more than just endure? Didn't they have to be smart, as well, and know what things meant?” (*MD* 112). This contrasts with her earlier assertion that one should live without questioning things, especially after having children. Here is one of Phillips's essential themes: that generations must be self-interrogating; if not, they will not be able to pass down to our children the tough truths about life that they need to live fully and even survive.

On one hand, Mitch does pass along his love for the machine to Billy: his love for well-built cars, his fascination with airplanes, his proud ownership of the trucks at the concrete plant. It is part of his passing down the masculine ethic of the novel's locale and of his generation.¹² But Mitch cannot pass along the darker knowledge entangled within his machine dreams because he is unable to ask, much less face, the tough questions arising out of

12. See Karen Wilkes Gainey, “Jayne Anne Phillips's *Machine Dreams*: Leo Marx, Technology, and Landscape,” *Journal of the American Studies Association of Texas* 21 (October 1990): 80–81.

his own war experiences, for example. How could anyone's romance with the machine remain the same in the light of Mitch's experience with its destructive potential during World War II? What might have happened to Billy's persistently romantic view of war and of the machine if he had been told about Mitch's nightmare memory of using the machines to bury "mashed," "rotting," shit-smelling dead soldiers on New Guinea—soldiers killed by human beings' persistent use of machines to kill? What if Billy knew of this memory that causes Mitch to wake with his fists clenched beside his jaw, which in part rests behind his drinking problem and his abiding fear of the indeterminate?

Too little is passed down to all the Hampson children. But it is Billy who is most susceptible to the embracing and ethically flawed masculine dreams of America that have invaded his little community. For he grows up believing in the war romances of John Wayne and in television shows such as *Twelve O'Clock High* and *Combat*; as a result, there is little in his training that keeps him from drifting thoughtlessly into the Vietnam War, even though his sister argues against it. His parents' silent fortitude—which Phillips also suggests comes from their mountain insularity and determinism—does not protect Billy, but propels him toward a disastrous, machine-driven fatalism. As Billy says to Danner, "Bad things can happen anywhere! You don't reason through these things. The best way to be lucky is to take what comes and not be a coward" (*MD* 267). And if a bad thing comes, he just wants to be flying in a machine, not on the ground: "I want to be up, moving over it with my own gun in front of me. If I get hit I want to get hit with plenty around me . . . there is no way to play it safe . . . I'm scared as shit of lying in some jungle all fucked up . . ." (*MD* 286). In the end, Billy is shot down, probably survives the crash, and then ironically dies in just the situation that has always frightened him so much.

As the Hampsons face their son's death, Phillips recovers the uneasiness that the Vietnam War brought to American life—the moral queasiness that no amount of political sloganeering or revisionism or economic prosperity or new warring has been able to put totally at rest. Danner especially verbalizes this awareness as she questions an America that she sees as ill, as wallowing in Bad Faith. She agrees with a character in Phillips's short story "El Paso," who harshly says that the world is "One Goddamn big lie," where people are like "a squirrel on a wheel" underneath a sky that "opens like a hole."¹³ No one is safe, and the traumatic rhythms of Danner's life are caught in the dissonance of Jimi Hendrix's version of *The Star-Spangled Banner*: "She shut her eyes and heard the loud song: a translation into a language deciphered in darkness. How could anyone play an instrument like that? Even the silences between the notes were full" (*MD* 239). Danner is now staring at the gaps that her parents refused to face for so long.

13. Jayne Anne Phillips, "El Paso," in *Black Tickets* (New York: Delta, 1989), 85, 95.

At the same time, the ambivalence in Danner's question, while appreciating Hendrix's courage, also sees the risk in confronting the void. This explains her uncertainty over her mother's sudden, very personal remembering/storytelling. She wonders how her mother can face the silences of the past now. For Jean, while still yearning for the simpler times of World War II (a yearning that Ronald Reagan, for instance, played upon so successfully during his presidency), is compelled after Billy's death to examine her life story ruthlessly, complete with its long repressed dark spaces. There is no more leaving out things to protect the children. No one can be protected anyhow. She must tell the truth, face everything if she is to save the future for her despairing daughter. In this torturous interaction between mother, daughter, and their familial past, Phillips meditates on the problems of memory and history, with the complexity that so many southern writers have brought to these themes. The Hampson women, so burdened by the past, now remember their men's wars not as romantic and patriotic journeys, but as horrible wastes. As they dream with increasing desperation about any kind of redemption for their men, for their family, and for their country, they wonder if they have enough faith or energy to escape the general emotional/spiritual/ethical paralysis of their culture. Danner especially wonders if facing the past will finally hamstring her and Jean too much, leaving them too much baggage to carry, with too little hope that anything can be salvaged. Still, she must go on talking with her mother, who is relentlessly questioning everything, so she can understand and reconcile herself with the present.

Their act of memory is essential to the stubborn search for human connection that tenuously counterpoints all the sadness of *Machine Dreams*. For Phillips, connection is nourished through the power of memory and storytelling, through the ability of serious fiction to rescue and hold experiences long enough, so that we can process them again. This, according to Phillips, is a

recovery of what was lost—by making it up. Fictional territory can't be considered real, and is certainly not history, yet certain places or geographical features are etched in light. Place, within a novel as in real life, is far more than what can be described or astutely observed: is atmosphere itself, absorbed by (spiritual) osmosis and somehow rendered whole.¹⁴

Jean and Danner, therefore, persistently try to stitch together their memories of Billy, to link the scattered past and present parts of their torn domestic world, and to try to find some kind of coherence within their war-stunned country. In short, they demonstrate repeatedly how "it's strange what you don't forget" (*MD* 3).

In their refusal to look away, the Hampson women are a reminder of the chance America lost in the late 1970s and early 1980s, when the aftermath of the Vietnam War, in its humbling of American pride, led to a time of

14. Phillips, "Dreaming of Beauty."

self-criticism and reevaluation in general. There was a new uncertainty and sense of limitation; people like Jean and Danner were thinking about the validity and worth of their cultural dreams. Some saw this as a time of drifting, a betrayal of America, a defeatist aberration, a pathetic hangover or malaise. They welcomed the conservative geniality and optimism of Reagan, even if it sometimes sounded anachronistic and hollow. Jean and Donner's acts of memory, however, suggest the time held the potential for an alternative vision, for America achieving a more mature national sense of itself grounded on something like Jean's desperate faith that when "suffering seems reasonless, people come together and want to understand" (*MD* 100). This is the faith that keeps Jean and Danner *aware*—even when any kind of illumination or reconciliation with the past seems, at best, a flickering response to all they have lost. Danner's final fantasy of Billy somehow falling forever in his airplane, heading toward a crash but never crashing, may seem like such a reconciliation to her. But she needs to move beyond it, too, to move to a more healthy and fuller awareness of what all the machine dreams have done to her family. As Richard Godden rightly notes, "Billy, according to the dream, is not lost: he falls without falling and dies without dying. In effect, Danner mourns but cannot complete her mourning."¹⁵ In other words, Danner must still risk more in the present by facing the terror embedded in her dream vision of the past. Only then can she find some kind of future.

Americans, as Phillips stresses, too often lack or shy away from such risk-taking because they are not interested in the past, but only in mobility, possibility, and individualism.¹⁶ But Phillips is a Southerner, with a keen sense of history, which shapes her writing as it works against any reduction of culture, any kind of convenient, expedient escape that can romanticize, simplify, or remove her culture from historical responsibility.¹⁷ Thus, at the novel's end, as Danner walks into the future, remembering Billy's childish machine dreams of the past, while creating her own new "machine dream" of Billy's suspended death, Phillips commingles different shades of time. It is here that, as Owen W. Gilman, Jr., writes,

Vietnam joins history—history with a long sweep—just what one would expect from a writer with a South As the Vietnam War figures in *Machine Dreams*, it is not an anomaly. Instead, it connects naturally with an enduring impulse by men to rise over the earth, a quest with dramatic linkage to the South, given the flights of Orville and Wilbur Wright at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina . . .¹⁸

Phillips makes these connections without sentimentality because she persistently interrogates this impulse for the machine and for transcendence

15. Richard Godden, "No End to the Work? Jayne Anne Phillips and the Exquisite Corpse of Southern Labor," *Journal of American Studies* 36, no. 2 (2002): 258.

16. See Phillips, "Violence."

17. See Phillips, "Violence."

18. Owen W. Gilman, Jr., *Vietnam and the Southern Imagination* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), 69.

—a yearning so linked to America’s ever-popular dreams of technology and power. It is also an impulse that remains profoundly attractive, even though it is so often predatory and doomed, because Danner knows, even as she dreams about slowing time, that inevitably her brother will someday crash because of her awareness.

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