Riding Homer Out on a Rail

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One of the great pleasures of watching the
dark, loopy, always intelligent, and at times
heart-breakingly beautiful movies of Joel and
Ethan Coen is seeing the high old time the broth-
ers have in flaunting their own unoriginality. The
Coens are adepts at the film school game of
“hommage” (pronounced frenchly without the
“h”: what the rest of us know as literary allu-
sion), and behind each of their movies stands a
set of other movies (or stories or books) whose
contours are clearly visible, nudging, poking, and
prodding this one into a shape the audience un-
derstands because it has seen it before. But more
important, they are at heart makers of genre mov-
ies—indeed, it is hard to know how to take even
such a masterpiece as their Miller’s Crossing (taken
from Dashiell Hammett’s Red Harvest and The Glass
Key) except as an essay in generic composition—
and genre depends on repetition. “Play it again”
is the real name of the game.

Their favorite genre is also one of the world’s
oldest—the quest—which they replay also in the
familiar Hollywood modes of the crime movie
and the episodic chase. What makes a Coen quest
so special is the passionate attachment their char-
acters have to objects of only the most thorough
ordinariness—bland creature comforts, the hack-
neyed sentimentality of travel posters, or the
banal domesticity of home and children—that is,
to the utterly familiar. But familiarity is just the
point here: the quest is for repetition, and the
passion driving it is a deep but unreflective nos-
talgia. Some of the movies’ most stunning
moments come when the call of the convention-
ally desirable makes itself heard even against the
din of the most outrageous situations: in Raising
Arizona, for example, when Holly Hunter and
Nicolas Cage swear their undying love for the
baby they have just kidnapped; or in Fargo when
Frances McDormand’s pregnant police officer
returns home after wrapping up a bizarre and brutal case to coo over her stay-at-home husband who has just won a contest for the design of a new postage stamp; or in Miller's Crossing when Albert Finney's Irish gangster wreaks tommy-gun havoc on an entire neighborhood to the swelling strains of "Danny Boy," or when John Turturro explodes into desperate pleading for his life in the midst of what has to be the loveliest forest glade ever put on film. A token of the Coens' mastery over the medium is that what is invoked as beautiful in these scenes never loses its power even amid all the tumult. The stretch between nostalgic desire and its circumstances certainly is great enough that the effects here can be mistaken for mere wackiness; yet these characters—and their creators—appear less as simple wackos than as role-players, working out deep but arbitrary wants in a script that someone else has written for them (which is literally true), but still they persevere. Occasionally, the Coens reveal what happens when the longing to return plays itself out to the end: faced with a blank page, the Broadway writer turned Hollywood hack in Barton Fink can only rewrite the same script he has just finished, and in Blood Simple the body of a murder victim turns up again and again but remains dead.

With their latest movie Joel and Ethan Coen have raised their concern with genre, repetition, and nostalgia to a new level and have greatly expanded its scope. O Brother, Where Art Thou? is in a number of ways their most serious movie (it is, I think, an Important Film) and at the same time one of their silliest. Its silliness is on an epic scale, though, a magnificent rampage throughout the entire movie, deploying an army of devices drafted from the ranks of familiar silly movie possibilities: loony dialogue, capricious tonal shifts and plot twitches, red herrings, wild coincidences, and a legion of unmotivated character quirks right down to the paltriest set of false beards since the Marx Brothers donned the disguises of the Three Famous Aviators in A Night At The Opera. And—as in Marx Brothers' movies—the silliness is directed against the widest range of targets: individuals, politicians, domestic bliss, rural electrification projects, the criminal justice system, mass media, the father of the Western Tradition of high culture (I'm not kidding), the Confederate flag, and, of course, old movies. In this jumble, there is little in O Brother, Where Art Thou? that can be anticipated, but also little that has not been seen many times before.

In genre, O Brother is an unlooked-for hybrid. By its title, it suggests itself as a movie of social comment, in fact as the very one left unmade in Preston Sturges' Sullivan's Travels, a comedy about a successful director of Hollywood froth who sets out on a trek through depression-era America in search of material for a new conscience-driven project he calls, yes, O Brother, Where Art Thou? Sullivan's travels take him through soup kitchens and hobo jungles to the chain gang of a southern penal farm, where he discovers that what America needs is more light comedies, and he returns to Hollywood duly enlightened. The Coens' movie reverts to the time (1937), the place (rural north Mississippi), and at least a wisp of the plot: Ulysses Everett McGill (George Clooney) and two companions (Tim Blake Nelson and John Turturro) escape from a chain gang to go on an episodic quest whose object shifts as the movie rolls along, now called "treasure," now bloodhounds in their way across a rural remiscent of Babyface Nelson, now thinly disguised as Delta Blues Greats. They entangle themself in the in-between inquirers, (Charles Durning) (Wayne Duval) manage (don't they?) still makeshift recording of "I'm sitting under the pseudo-Boys. In the end, saves them—the conveniently provided TV architecture.

The flimsiness of Sullivan's Travels' title as only an after they single more positively intact from down a different path in O Brother, a chained convicts form of R & R, civilians already off Disney cartoon once-and-future Busby Berkeley status as a musician, it has been all performances, both results of that good Scotch-Irish, and as the "old-time" It is hard to overlook what presented here, all by a host of truly their best you
The flimsiness of these connections with *Sullivan’s Travels* is likely to expose the Coens’ title as only another of the movie’s false beards. But the single scene the Coens reproduce relatively intact from the Sturges exemplar helps nail down a different generic identity. At one point in *O Brother*, as in *Sullivan’s Travels*, a group of chained convicts is marched in a particularly grim form of R & R into an auditorium to join some civilians already assembled to watch a movie. In *Sullivan’s Travels*, what they’re watching is a toss-off Disney cartoon, exemplifying Sullivan’s once-and-future ambitions; in *O Brother*, it is a Busby Berkeley number, declaring this movie’s status as a musical. And, of course, that’s just what it has been all along, a showcase for performances, both on-screen and off, of assorted results of that glorious fusion of African, English, Scotch-Irish, and commercial traditions known as the “old-time” music of the American South. It is hard to overstate the beauties of the music presented here, vividly and impeccably realized by a host of traditional performers and some of their best younger avatars. The songs are done just the way they’re supposed to be done, with
love and leisure, always insisting on the long version which includes every verse, every chorus, and every instrumental break in between; and the outcome is thoroughly persuasive. Norman Blake's elegant "You Are My Sunshine" reveals all the forgotten appeal of that old chestnut. Ralph Stanley's otherworldly rendition of "O Death," rising over the hellish Klan gathering, soars to majestic heights, even as it freezes the blood. The traditional lullaby, " Didn't Leave Nobody but the Baby," as sung here by Alison Krauss, Gillian Welch, and Emmylou Harris, would make anyone long to be an infant again. And when a cotillion of Baptists, white-dad for full immersion, floats in from all directions through the woods, softly chanting in close harmony as they go down to the river to pray, this single achingly lovely moment is enough to justify the whole noisome apparatus of Dolby surround sound. The Coens aim at the sublime here, and they hit their target.

The master text behind O Brother, Where Art Thou?, however, is also the master narrative of nostalgia in the West, and the Coens announce it plainly and early in the opening credits: "Based on the Odyssey by Homer." After this, they are rarely less subtle in driving the point home, even going so far as to share screen-writing credit with Homer, a gracious gesture, but a safe one since Homer is unlikely to pick up his check. The Coens are well-versed in the Odyssey, aware, for example, that its protagonist is only as much a hero as he is also a vain, fast-talking sharpie whose famed strategies often amount to little more than desperate improvisations (they present his slickness literally here by giving him an obsession with Dapper Dan Men's Pomade), and also that "man of constant sorrow" is a pretty fair translation of the Greek name Odysseus. But for the most part their play with the Odyssey is not a scholar's game; it is in the public domain of Western culture, open to anyone who has even glanced at the comic book. Ulysses Everett McGill is going home to wife Penny (Holly Hunter) and the kids, and along the way, he runs into versions of all the familiar episodes. There are Lotus-Eaters, a blind prophet Tiresias, a king of the winds, a giant Cyclops, and a siren-song by the Sirens, among the clothes by the stop-off-in-the-town-where-they-play-the-Odyssey journey to weep.

For a while, in guessing which way it is easy—as in saying the Coens will make the movie treacherous to reference than it does allusions classical and soft. No, nothing but a more or less as Virgil and Frazier all bear in mind that the Coens keep the tracks so that the unforeseen junctures, in the movie's theatre, even unanticipated themselves, product of the movie's theatre, world should the salesman (John Goodman) should Penelope the way of asking if not for the unmotivated effort, existing and by authority? At any rate, not so much a: a congenial collaboration, tyrannical pate, and translation. As the more and more and more phrases from the familiar translated, even unaccounted classicizing get, as they persevere through the end, the Homer

William Levitan
out that good
selves saved
it is forever.

ality it depicts is
brutality and
bigotry, pov-
and these ghosts
the music
that, as often


matters, a blind
_clops, and a spectacularly sexy combo of Circe,
the Sirens, and the Princess Nausicaa washing
clothes by the rocks in the river. There is even a
stop-off in the land of death. As the Coens re-
play the _Odyssey_, the journey home becomes a
journey to well-known cultural origins.

For a while, the game is good fun, not so much
in guessing what signifies which—that is too
easy—as in seeing what outrageous stretch the
Coens will make next to send up their original.
The movie treats Homer with much less rever-
cence than it does old-time music, and in any case
classical and southern mythologies do not mix
easily here. Not that they couldn't: the
Odyssey
is
anything but resistant to cultural transposition,
as Virgil and Joyce, Janet Lewis and Charles
Frazier all bear witness. But for most of the movie
the Coens keep the two on essentially separate
tracks so that the pleasure is all the giddier at
unforeseen junctions. Most of the Homeric con-
nections, in fact, appear as gratuitous
shtick—most, but certainly not all—little illumi-
nating what is going on here or in the
Odyssey
itself, products only of the Coens' caprice and
the movie's thorough-going silliness. Why in the
world should the Cyclops become a corrupt Bible
salesman (John Goodman, by the way)? Why
should Penelope be such a shrew?
Or, a better
way of asking it, putting first things first: Why
should
this
shrew be called
Penny?
Why indeed,
if
not for the assertion of a pre-existing pattern,
unmotivated except by the fact that it
is
pre-ex-
isting and by Homer's unique claim to cultural
authority? At times in _O Brother_, Homer is felt
not so much as an inevitable presence or even a
congenial collaborator, but as an arbitrary and
tyrannical paterfamilias demanding accomoda-
tion. As the movie's yokels step out of character
more and more often to mouth actual lines and
phrases from the _Odyssey_ (or at least from the
familiar translation by Robert Fitzgerald) and
even unaccountably drop in a bit of Latin, their
classicizing gets more and more intrusive, but still
they persevere. And when, toward the movie's
end, the Homeric paradigm gets bossy enough

to push Ulysses Everett into hap-
less fisticuffs with Penny's
boyfriend—whom everyone
around pointedly insists on call-
ing a "sooter"—even a
committed classicist in the audi-
cence was ready to stand up and
shout, "Enough, already!"

The southern shtick and the
classical shtick come most un-
comfortably together near the
movie's climax, when Homer
(Stokes, that is, the pretender to
gubernatorial power) is un-
masked as the murderous Klan
leader and, spouting the poison-
ous claptrap about traditional
values and southern heritage still
heard daily on the evening
news, is mobbed by the popu-
lace and ridden out of town on
a rail. Such treatment is certainly
unfair for the author of the _Od-
yssey_, but mobs aren't always so
nice when it comes to making
distinctions, and it is easy to
imagine our man shouting, "But
I am Homer the poet! I am
Homer the poet!" as he is car-
ried off. Still, the point has been
made: there comes a time when
nostalgia must end, when the
Siren of historical continuity
must remain unheeded, when
the power of the past over the
present must be broken. Soon
after this scene, the ominous
Charybdis of modernity waiting
in the wings, the great floodwa-
ters of the TVA come roaring
through the landscape, purging,
purifying, cleansing the whole
mess and drenching it all under
one vast, deep, new lake. The
shattered remnants of the movie

William Levitan
drift at random across the screen like particles in a primordial soup waiting to be organized anew, and water is all around. But this same water is just Odysseus’ element, and he is nothing if not a survivor. And when suddenly Ulysses bobs up to the surface, now buoyed not by a Homeric spar but by a coffin (Queequeg’s coffin!), the saga blithely continues as if it had been *Moby Dick* all along. The past, it seems—one or another version of it—isn’t so easily drowned after all: Homer may be out, but Pappy (O’Daniel, that is, the sitting governor) is still in.

At the end of *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* nostalgia will have its way by hook or crook. But by now, it is a jury-rigged nostalgia for a jury-rigged past, and that is just what saves it from the slavery of mechanical repetition. Long before the movie comes a close, the powerful engine of historical reminiscence has already begun to slip its cogs: Pappy O’Daniel was indeed a southern governor, but of Texas, not Mississippi; “You Are My Sunshine” was the campaign song (and composition) of Gov. Jimmy Davis of Louisiana; Babyface Nelson’s crime spree took place in Illinois and he himself was dead three years before the movie is set; and the TVA...well, come on. These gaffes are small, but they do indicate who’s in charge here. By just such arbitrary shifts, the Coens have declared their independence from any one pattern of the past, and therefore from them all. For them, the past is less the inevitability of authoritative example than it is a reservoir of discrete possibilities offering themselves freely to anyone who wants to fish them out and fry them up, something as fluid as the primordial soup displayed at the movie’s climax. Fishing out these possibilities—with all the random sequences, gratuitous connections, willful combinations, and eclectic hybridization it entails—is the nostalgic work of this movie, and the Coens fish entirely at their own pleasure. If at times they even get downright silly about it, in the end, who’s there to stop them? Not only won’t Homer pick up his check, he won’t even sue.