

Prologue

The Day the Wall Came Down (American Surreal)

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On the College Station campus of Texas A & M University, in the courtyard of the George Bush Presidential Library and Museum, stands what must be one of the oddest monuments in the world. A plaque on the plinth informs us that Veryl Goodnight's sculpture commemorates 'the sudden and unexpected collapse of the Berlin Wall' on 9 November 1989, a 'moment of joy, felt around the world, when Berlin was reunited.'¹ Thirty feet long, eighteen feet wide, and twelve feet high, the seven-ton memorial is made up of 'five horses, one stallion and four mares, running through the rubble of the collapsed Berlin Wall' (Goodnight 2013).² The sculpture incorporates graffiti copied from the western side of the wall, and according to the plaque 'At President Bush's request, the names of 15 people killed at the Berlin Wall are written on the "Dove of Peace." These names represent over 900 people who were killed trying to escape to the West.' The gender of the animals, the artist's website tells us, is not incidental: the wall 'had separated families and loved ones for over 28 years. Veryl represents this separation by placing the stallion, symbolic of man, entirely within what would have been East Berlin. The mares, symbolic of family, are passing the "death strip" and entering the

¹ Personal observation, August 2010.

² Unless otherwise noted, all information on the monument is taken from 'The Day the Wall Came Down; The History behind the Sculpture' article on the Veryl Goodnight website (Goodnight 2013). No author credited. Photographs of the other sculptures discussed in this article may be found on the same site.

West—to a new life of freedom...’ (Goodnight 2013). Goodnight is known and loved in and around Texas for her ‘traditional realism style’ (Western Art Collector 2008), but here 'realism' serves as a vehicle for transmuting the imaginary into the symbolic. “'The Day the Wall Came Down,'” her website continues, ‘is not about horses. It is about Freedom’ (Goodnight 2013). No shit.

The sculpture was lent to the state of Georgia and publicly unveiled at the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games before being moved to its present location, where it was officially dedicated on 11 October 1997. What home could be more fitting for such a monument than this presidential museum, in which Goodnight’s liberty horses take pride of place in a collection documenting the elder George Bush’s term in office that was described in 2010 as including ‘more than 100,000 artifacts ranging from a White House dog house for Millie, to solid gold palm trees, to the Kuwaiti Door located in our Gulf War exhibit’ (Bush Library 2010)? ‘President Bush’s diplomatic skills,’ the plaque goes on, ‘enabled the hole in the Berlin Wall to become so large that all of Eastern Europe was set free from Communist rule. The Cold War was ended.’ The East Germans, Czechs and Slovaks, Poles, Hungarians, Bulgarians, and Romanians whose home-grown revolutions toppled their communist governments in the weeks after the wall fell might be somewhat surprised to read this version of their recent history, but in Texas, I remind myself, they call it walking.

A second casting of the monument was meantime gifted by the United States government to the people of Germany, flown in by US Air Force C-17 cargo plane on the fiftieth anniversary of the Berlin airlift, and dedicated at the Allied Museum in Berlin by former President Bush (as he had by then become) on 2 July 1998—that is to say, during

Bill Clinton's second term as president. Goodnight and her husband were 'thrilled' to accompany the sculpture on the plane for the ceremony (Roberts 2005). According to the opening address on its website in 2010, 'The Allied Museum tells a unique story full of excitement and drama. Almost like in a fairy tale, the forces of Good win in the end.' To avoid any confusion as to which forces of Good are meant, the site made it clear that 'since the Soviet blockade in 1948/49, the Berliners meant the Western forces when they spoke of the "Allies." The Soviet Union had withdrawn from the circle of war allies' (Allied Museum 2010).³ It was, of course, the Soviet Red Army, not the western forces, that liberated Berlin and ended the war in Europe on 8 May 1945, but no matter.

In October 2000 Goodnight was awarded the CIA Agency Seal Medallion, inscribed with the words: 'For your vision of freedom, patriotism and expression of the human spirit' (Goodnight 2013). The Agency Seal is reserved 'For non-Agency personnel, to include U.S. Government employees and private citizens, who have made significant contributions to the Agency's intelligence efforts' (CIA 2013a). The CIA later purchased one of the maquettes for "The Day the Wall Came Down" for its offices in Washington D.C. It is currently on display in the exhibition 'The Cold War: Fifty Years of Silent Conflict' at CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, which 'showcases many of the 7,000 clandestine espionage artifacts from the United States, the former Soviet Union, and East Germany ... [and] comprises the world's largest private collection

³ One of the perils of citing material from the internet is that—in a high-tech realization of the 'memory holes' in George Orwell's *1984*—older versions of web-pages disappear without trace as they are updated. In this case, as in that of the George Bush Presidential Library and Museum cited (from 2010) above, the descriptions on the respective websites have since been rewritten. I am afraid you will have to take my word that I am quoting accurately.

of spy gear' (CIA 2013b). Another maquette adorns the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, California. Was it not President Reagan, after all, who stood at the Brandenburg Gate on 12 June 1987—on the same spot where President John F. Kennedy had proclaimed '*Ich bin ein Berliner*' twenty-four years earlier—and demanded: 'Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall'?

The choice of Veryl Goodnight for such a commission was in some ways a surprising one, since the artist was known not as a designer of grandiose monuments but (in her own words) as 'a sculptor of Western women and animals' (Coyner 2001). It was also, in its way, a stroke of genius, for 'The Day the Wall Came Down' manages to conjoin the most irreconcilable of realities on the most inappropriate of planes and yet makes their conjunction seem the most natural thing in the world. One West comes effortlessly to stand in for another. 'I was born loving animals and the American West, this has been the focus of my art for over three decades,' Veryl tells us. 'Working from life was initially an excuse to be outdoors and near the horses, birds, and many other animals that shared my life' (Goodnight 2013). She declined a scholarship to study art at the University of Colorado in Boulder because she had no interest in abstract art, preferring instead to attend business school and use her spare time to learn from the individual artists whom she admired (Coyner 2001).

Goodnight's work soon found an affectionate place in both public and corporate collections though not, it has to be said, in the nation's great museums of art.⁴ Clement

⁴ Institutions holding Goodnight's work are listed on Goodnight 2013 (under the Public Collections section of the site) and the Medicine Man, Tucson AZ website at <http://www.medicinemangallery.com/bio/verylgoodnightbio.lasso> (accessed 10 January 2013).

Greenberg would have dismissed her longhorns and elk, burros and bison, wolves and coyotes, cowgirls and Indians as the epitome of kitsch—‘ersatz culture,’ a formulaic compound of ‘vicarious experience and faked sensations’ that is ‘destined for those who, insensible to the values of genuine culture, are hungry nevertheless for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide’ (Greenberg 1965: 10). Interestingly, in the present context, Greenberg chose to illustrate his argument with the work of Ilya Repin, a painter held up by the Soviet government as a model for the socialist realist school. He does remark that ‘It is lucky for Repin, however, that the [Soviet] peasant is protected from the products of American capitalism, for he would not stand a chance next to a *Saturday Evening Post* cover by Norman Rockwell’ (1965: 14).

Certainly this is not an art that could be described as *difficult*; there is nothing in Goodnight’s work to challenge either eye or brain. ‘Team Ropers,’ a boy playing with a border collie, graces the Pro Rodeo Hall of Fame at Colorado Springs and the Houston Astrodome. ‘American Warrior,’ a Cheyenne Chief, rides tall at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian in Washington D.C. ‘Paint Mare and Filly,’ a life-size horse and colt, greet visitors to the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum in Oklahoma City. Goodnight feels a particular affinity with the women of the West, seeking to portray ‘their courage, determination, and fulfillment’ (Coyner 2001) in ways that allow them to ‘seem so capable and yet remain feminine’ (Western Art Collector 2008). ‘Passing Times,’ two women riders, one sitting sidesaddle and one astride, passing one another adorns the National Cowgirl Hall of Fame and Museum at Fort Worth. This is not Goodnight’s only foray into equine metaphor. Set in 1910, ‘Ready to Ride’ portrays ‘a confident young woman in a split skirt ... ready to do anything.’ ‘One of

the biggest controversies in Washington during the real push for women's voting was by riding in a split skirt," Veryl explains (Western Art Collector 2011). 'No Turning Back' depicts a pioneer woman standing proud and upright beside a wagon wheel in the Frontier Days Old West Museum in Cheyenne, Wyoming. 'Too young and naive to think they could fail/Too full of visions for the end of the trail/They stored their silk dresses and donned calico/To join in the cry of Westward Ho' begins the poem—one of Goodnight's own—beside the figure on the artist's website (Goodnight 2013). 'Another fun sculpture,' according to *Western Art Collector*, is 'titled *Daydreaming*. Here, a teenage girl is standing next to a dairy cow she should be bringing in from the field, but her faraway look, arm draped over the cow's back, and rope hand on her hip clearly convey that she has other things on her young mind' (Western Art Collector 2008).

We are a very long way from Berlin, though quite where is uncertain. Goodnight's sculptures may be as down-home as peach pie, but her world hovers on uneasy borderlines between past and present, waking and dreams. 'Roger [her husband] is a pilot, and sometimes we fly over Western trails,' Veryl told Barbara Coyner, an interviewer for *Art of the West*, in 2001. 'I'm familiar with history, and I'm in the air seeing it all from a distance, but in my mind and heart, I'm in a wagon going across the prairie. Physically, I'm in one century and mentally I'm in another.' 'Twenty miles down a dirt road stands an isolated rustic log cabin, its sole occupant busily painting and sculpting,' the interview begins. 'In her mind, [Goodnight] sees images of the past, passionate hardships and triumphs, partnerships forged of adversity, people toiling, with animals sharing the load. She embraces the images, gets her hands around them, and casts them in bronze, paying emotional tribute to the nameless faces of the Old West.'

But Coyner cautions: ‘That scene exists only in Veryl Goodnight’s mind. Instead of a log cabin at the end of 20 miles of dirt road, she lives and works with husband Roger Brooks and a virtual menagerie of animals just miles from the city lights of Santa Fe, New Mexico’ (Coyner 2001).

A similar transmutation of times and places was evidently at work in ‘The Day the Wall Came Down,’ which is the product, if the artist is to be believed, of pure coincidence. ‘The idea developed,’ says Goodnight’s website, ‘as Veryl was sculpting small studies of five horses during November of 1989. At the same time, vast historical changes were unfolding in Eastern Europe. On the night of November 9th, Veryl was transfixed by the television accounts of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the scenes of East Berliners as they surged through the openings and into the West. That night, she had a dream that her sculpted horses, representing these people, were galloping through the rubble of the fallen Berlin Wall’ (Goodnight 2013). What right *her* horses had to stampede through these ruins—to represent *these* people—is a question that seems to have occurred neither to the artist herself nor to anyone else involved. Emotional identification was justification enough for incorporating Berlin into a script written just a few miles out of Santa Fe. ‘I work from my heart ... I have to feel it to do it’, Veryl explains, catching us up in her palpable sincerity (quoted in Coyner 2001). It was only a year later that she traveled to Berlin ‘to better understand the wall in a political, emotional and physical sense’ (Goodnight 2013). What reason was there for her to have visited the city any earlier? She had long since embraced the images, gotten her hands around them, and decided how to cast them, guided by her western dreams.

Whatever may be thought of its artistic merits, 'The Day the Wall Came Down' is a striking sight, especially if you see it at sunset, silhouetted against that endless Texan sky. But there is something decidedly surreal about it—a 'fortuitous meeting of two distant realities on an inappropriate plane,' to quote André Breton quoting Max Ernst, that does indeed induce a 'systematic bewildering' (Breton 1972: 275). Though the purported subject of the memorial is a pivotal event in the history of twentieth-century Central Europe, its references are all-American. Wild horses are few and far between in Germany; the free, flowing lines of Goodnight's mares and stallions trampling the ruins of communism beneath their hooves may be intended to symbolize universal human aspirations, but they also emphatically remind us that we are in the land of Jim Bowie and Davy Crockett, Hoss Cartwright and Rooster Cogburn, the land of the free and the home of the brave. So does the graffiti copied from the western side of the wall that Goodnight chose to incorporate in her sculpture. Much of it ('FREE FREE SET THEM FREE') is in English, including the word 'VISION'—which might bring to mind George Bush's 'thousand points of light' speech to the 1988 Republican Convention—and the sentence 'And the people let out a loud shout and the wall fell,' a Biblical allusion that needs no explanation in this state where there are Christian churches on most every block and the bumper stickers proclaim 'It's a child not a choice.' The visual language of the monument transports the Berlin Wall to the vast open spaces of the American frontier, reinscribing it in a landscape of American dreams. 'Republic. I like the sound of the word,' growls John Wayne in *The Alamo*. 'Means that people can live free, talk free, go or come, buy or sell, be drunk or sober, however they choose. Some words give you a feeling. Republic is one of those words that makes me tight in the throat' (IMDb 1960).

It is a fine story, a grand narrative. But it remains an American narrative, which has about as much to do with what actually happened in Central Europe in 1989 as *The Alamo* does with events at the Mission San Antonio de Valero in 1836.

‘There is no such thing as American history, only a frontier,’ Don Draper famously remarked in *Mad Men*, a hit TV series devoted to Madison Avenue in the nineteen-sixties.⁵ This remarkably insightful observation was made in the context of selling the image of American Airlines following a disastrous plane crash that the company would like everybody to forget. Draper himself might be considered the ultimate self-made man; he has no baggage, no past, to detain him because he buried his old identity in a foxhole in Korea and minted a brand new one out of the ID tag he removed from the body of a fallen lieutenant. It could be said that Draper dreamed himself into existence. ‘The Day the Wall Came Down’ works in exactly the same way, only without the black humor of *Mad Men*. The space in which Goodnight's dream is realized is the ground zero cleared by the erasure of the Central European history in whose place the eternal American frontier comes to stand—literally so, in the case of the second copy of the monument that was shipped back to Berlin so the Germans should never forget *which* Allies retrospectively saved their asses.

As for the Disneyland storyline of that dream, Milan Kundera’s definition of kitsch may be more pertinent than Clement Greenberg’s—that is to say, ‘the need to gaze into the mirror of the beautifying lie and be moved to tears of gratification at one’s own reflection’ (Kundera 1988: 135). ‘I didn’t own a horse as a youngster,’ Goodnight told Honi Roberts in an interview published in *The Trail Rider*. ‘Instead, I sculpted horses in

⁵*Mad Men*, Season 2, Episode 4, ‘Three Sundays,’ first aired on US TV on 8 July 2008.

the snow, then cried in the spring when they melted' (Roberts 2005). Veryl had longed for a horse of her own ever since she was a little girl.

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