

"FRIED GREEN TOMATOES": FRIENDSHIP AS GOD

ELLIOTT THINKSHEETS

309 L.Eliz.Dr., Craigville, MA 02636

Phone 508.775.8008

Noncommercial reproduction permitted

His first sermon was on **tolerance**. "All in the Family"'s Archie Bunker was a paragon of the opposing vice. He was the virtue's antihero in this sermon-story on what not to be & do. The value-field was social, the goal being a more amicable, multicultural common life. The downside of the sermon was its downputting of (1) the family & (2) fathers. Social philosophers continue to debate which it did more of, good or harm. It certainly pandered to the anti-institutional mood of the rising generation.Lear's second sermon was on **freedom**, its value-field political. It was his creation for People of the American Way, his version of "the American way" being radical secular humanism....His third sermon is on **friendship**, its value-field personal. Based on Fannie Flagg's feminist novel, "Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café." Lear's current film completes the sermon trilogy & rounds out his theology, such as it is. My review of it is unpolluted by other reviews: I haven't read or heard any yet....Why bother? Because Lear is the most powerful living individual shaper of American life.

1 Theotropism, turning to God, is Lear's central anti-value. Tolerance, freedom, friendship are alternative tropisms. What his next will be is anybody's guess. But this seems certain, barring a radical religious conversion: his virtues-list will always be secular; God in any traditional piety will not make it.

2 Set in a tiny, whistle-stop Alabama hamlet in the 1930s, Flagg's novel had to deal with religion, could not avoid mentioning God. I've not read the novel, but my guess is that Lear reduced the God-references--eg, in reading Ruth 1.16 without "your God will be my God," & in eliminating "so help me God" from the court oath. At least in Lear's film, religion is at best marginal & inept, at worst mendacious & self-promoting (the preacher lies in court to free an accused, then puts the bite on the ex-accused to come to church--who, out of the preacher's hearing, says to her friend, "I don't know which would be worse, going to prison or going to church"). As usual in the secular media, institutional religion is used for laughs & groans.

3 No mysticism, no depth. Lear's three central characters, all women, have secular depth. For them, it comes entirely from the surrogate god, **friendship**. "What is the most important thing in life? Friendship." But this mysticism is given no cosmic grounding such as it has in Christianity, Judaism, &--America's third religion--Stoicism (wherein "Providence" is to be praised & thanked by name for undergirding & supporting the good). The shallow mysticism of friendship is both less powerful & less destructive than the shallow mysticism of sex, which the film sniffs at & rejects. Our current culture has sex-burnout, but not yet friendship-burnout. And we probably won't get to friendship burnout, as friendship takes more time than sex. Since "time is something I just don't have anymore," friendship will remain, for most folks, eschatological, an elusive never-never-but-longed-for future.

4 A wan, sentimental nostalgia pervades the film. Friendship is the sermon, but it has a fundamentalist, yesterday quality. Most of the people seeing the film (1) are not small-townners & (2) were not alive in the 1930s. But rural yesterday is the film's seedbed of friendship: is it really possible for 1990s urbanites?

Put it this way: the film has an old-lady-in-a-nursing-home quality. Nothing wrong with old ladies or nursing homes as such. But as everybody knows, nursing homes are living-in-the-past institutions. The great Jessica Tandy (who, I predict, will get an Oscar for her role) is the film's central character, anticonformist Idgie. The story's continuity is her telling of her past, especially of her friendship with Ruth, a preacher's daughter. At film's end, she's put a note to "Ruth," together with a comb of honey, on Ruth's grave--a remembrance of the time when, as a girl, she gave her sweetest, dearest friend Ruth the same gift, having robbed a tree-nest, & explaining to the horrified Ruth, "bees don't

sting me"--symbolic of her disdain for conventional opinions & conformists.

The irony here does not escape me. Lear, noted for disdain for the past, here falls into a bathos God has nothing to fear from.

5 Conventional Ruth is family-sent to convert wild Idgie to conventionality. Idgie taunts Ruth for, among other things, Sunday-school teaching, & lures her into minor crime against an institution, viz the railroad. But Ruth is seduced off into another institution, viz--horror!--marriage, which turns out to be what Idgie predicted, a calamity relieved only by pregnancy. For Lear, marriage-family & church are wasteland institutions: put all your bets on friendship, which--utopianly, in this film--never fails.

6 Unfailingness is an aspect of the sacred, & it is--along with that other aspect of the sacred mentioned above, viz mystery--a requirement for depth. What is sad here is the fact that friendship cannot be said to be unfailing, can hardly be said to seldom fail. It's no joy-insurance policy. A wag said yesterday that in addition to unemployment insurance, America needs unenjoyment insurance: there's not enough happiness to go around in this anxious time, & most of the ways Americans are spending their hours & dollars won't buy anything but temporary surcease from the pain of being unhappy....By contrast, I think of a joyful conversation I had in 1933 with "Jesus Never Fails" Luther. Yep, he got his first name from having authored the popular gospel song that often sings itself in my heart though it's been years since I've had occasion to sing it in public.

7 Romantic resistance to technocracy, the economic if not also political rule of technics, is another of the film's notes. As its metaphor, the railroad kills child Idgie's only trusted human being, her brother; & then cuts an arm off Ruth's only child. Flagg/Lear are no help in coming to terms with the blessing-cursing monster science has scioned.

8 The film exploits the current battle of the sexes, the male/female polarization taking the form of males (except for one black man) as conventional bad news for human relations & females as good news (a black woman, the great Cicely Tyson, murdering the most repulsive white man). Since men are enemies of friendship, women will just have to find their friends among themselves--the message of much other feminist fiction. Some truth here, but no healing-health. A self-defeating word, too, against the cultivating of female-male friendships. Idgie, it turns out, was married for 40 years; but this is passed off in one sentence, with flat affect. I would not disparage the warmth & beauty & healing in the two improbable, female-female friendships. That's the film's *humanum*. Those friendships display Lear's two other sermons, viz tolerance & freedom (the latter, in the cry "Towanda!" meaning freedom--uttered, to laughter, in a Cape Cod women's group yesterday).

9 The film puts me in mind of a current phrase it consciously exposit without using, viz **women's spirituality**. Now it's become women's theology, as before it black spirituality became black theology. Theology is, on one side, the intellectualization of how people are feeling about things. (Theologians, take no offense. I said "on one side"!). Excess is the temptation. When we get Afro-centric curricula & gynocentric ("women's studies" ideologized) curricula, difference (partial solidarity) has overwhelmed sameness (human solidarity), & the costs have overwhelmed the benefits.

10 The film's positive message is unexceptionable: friendship provides unique & essential soul-&-society nourishment, & its bridges ("fried green tomatoes") must not be left to fall into disrepair & ruin. But given the Baby Boomers' have-it-all-&-do-it-all perfectionism, who in America's largest-ever generation has time for friendship? & if not, what can we expect of their children? Joseph Proccacini, co-author of PARENT BURNOUT: "The word 'trade-off' to them sounds like selling out." He defines parent burnout as "a downward drift toward physical, emotional and spiritual exhaustion," from high stress in their work-&-family worlds. The USDHHS says today's parents spend 40% less time with their children than parents did in 1965. How trim expectations to allow for friendship?