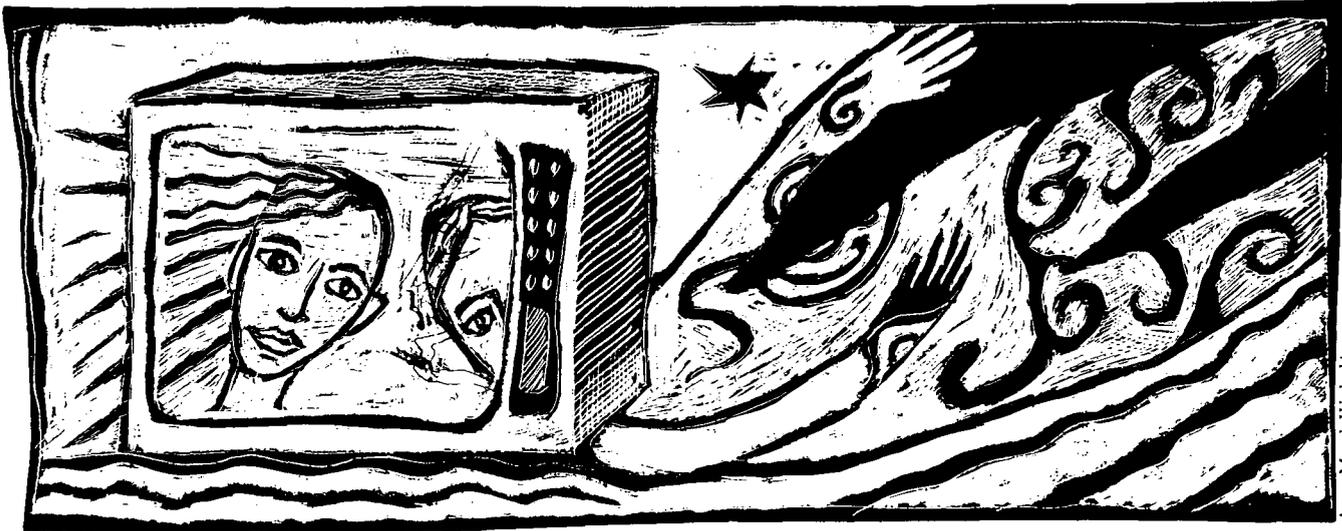


Nick at Nite, TV, and You

by Josh Ozersky



Anna Mycek-Wodecki

Every night, in prime time, a changeling can enter your living room, an inhuman creature secretly usurping a human's place. It's an unnatural presence, an electronic phantom with vast and secret motivations; but its presence is so enjoyable and comforting, as well as so familiar (it hastens to assure you), that you really don't mind its hanging around. In fact, you are uneasy when the bogey is absent.

As the two of you watch TV, you enjoy a flattering nudge in the ribs, as you and it chuckle at the simplicity and triteness of television. You watch for several hours, including all the commercials. But when, later in the evening, you go into the kitchen for Mystic Mints and beer, you turn the set off, and the silence is visible. "Where are you?" you ask. There is no response. Your friend was a projection of television all along. Your friend, in fact, *was* television. Your "friend" was Nick at Nite, a service of Nickelodeon, a subsidiary of MTV Networks, Inc., which has discovered a secret of marketing by which we can finally be *absorbed* into the brightness and vacuum of television.

This is a heady claim to make for any TV programming, especially programming as conspicuously lightweight as Nick at Nite's. But it is because of this mask of unseriousness that Nick at Nite can insinuate itself so easily into one's half-attentive mind.

Nick at Nite was launched on July 1, 1985, the result of a decision at MTV Networks to expand its children's network, Nickelodeon, to 24 hours. "We needed to do something fast," said Debby Beece, the senior vice-president in charge of programming at Nickelodeon/Nick at Nite. "We had already stumbled across a way to treat classic programming . . . when we put *Lassie* on Nickelodeon." The success of an old black-and-white show on the MTV-modern Nickelodeon suggested a course for the new night hours. A decision was made to buy up old television shows, packaging them as "classic" for a TV generation audience. There would be no

production costs, and a slick modern veneer would be put on by an in-house advertising campaign. Tom Shales, complaining about the "Re Generation," said of cable TV's reruns, "There's no now now. Just . . . Television Land. Cable has made this even worse . . . there is an explosion of outlets for program sources, but since not enough new programming can possibly be produced . . . watching cable TV is like wandering through the network's burial ground." This is precisely what has happened. Nick at Nite now draws a very respectable three to five share nightly, and their award-winning "TV Land" campaign is prodigiously creative, ironic, and sophisticated.

This campaign defines the network. The programming itself is merely a string of defunct TV shows, unconnected by era or genre, which play in loose rotation from 8 P.M. to 6 A.M. nightly. The list extends from the 70's to the 50's: *Laugh-In*, *My Three Sons*, and *The Donna Reed Show* can be seen in succession any night (as could until recently *SCTV*), with only the Nick at Nite promotional campaign to bind them. They are all small terrorists in "TV Land," the concept that Nick at Nite presents itself as a guide to. In the schedule spots, for example, a TV screen is shown with still pictures of *SCTV* characters moving back and forth in different directions, in the form of a window display. "10:30, *SCTV*." The TV screen remains but the characters change. Now *Laugh-In* figures move back and forth, up and down. "Then, at 11, *Laugh-In*." The *Laugh-In* regulars, Ruth Buzzi, Arte Johnson, etc., disappear and are replaced with Fred McMurray, William Frawley, and cut-out figures from *My Three Sons*. "Followed by *My Three Sons* at 11:30."

The scheduling promotion is the briefest and crudest on Nick at Nite. I only present it as an illustration of what seems to be an underlying premise of the network. The shows themselves, taken as shows, are treated as the cartoonish nullities they usually are. But TV as an element in life — its omnipresence, the childhood spent with it, its unassailable status as a lifetime mate — this is what Nick at Nite concerns itself with. Marshall McLuhan's assertions about the negli-

Josh Ozersky is a freelance writer living in Hoboken, New Jersey.

gibility of television's content would not sit well with the makers of TV Land, but their concept remains McLuhanine nevertheless. Every show gets the full TV Land treatment in its individual spot; but no show is sold straight on its own merits. Nick at Nite presents itself as something other than television: hip, ironic, condescending. It abuses its programming in order to ingratiate itself with the viewer. The psychological effect of this media ploy is subtle and devious. The shows are not chosen perfectly for strategy; only occasionally is Nick at Nite's programming as ridiculous as they make it out to be in their ultrahip campaign. Nick at Nite commercials in a sense contain the shows they describe, mastering them with sarcasm or affectionate distortion. For example: blackout, white titles, portentous voice-over:

"Your boss is a butthead."

"The Sun is a dying star."

"You stink at bridge."

Joe E. Ross, patrolman Gunther Toody of *Car 54, Where Are You?*, appears onscreen mugging "Ooh! . . . Ooh!" for an identifying instant, and then the blackout and mock gravity returns. "Car 54 can help." The Nick at Nite logo appears in the corner, and the real commercials begin. In another spot, several shows are treated in this facetious, superior way: "Behind these suburban homes lies a hidden world of passion and shame . . ."—Dick York is shown dancing—"See the ad man as you've never seen him . . . [Donna Reed] the domestic goddess unveiled . . ."—shot of Fred McMurray, from *My Three Sons*—"in a house without women, will a father lose his grip? Learn the shocking truth about the young and the restless of TV Land tonight and every night on Nick at Nite." Nick at Nite definitely appears to see through the banality of these shows. Or has it?

As David Marc has pointed out, "The distinction between taking television on one's own terms and taking it the way it presents itself is of critical importance." But the attitude of Nick at Nite towards its TV Land territories is ambiguous. Is there such a thing as affectionate distortion? The people at Nick at Nite give only mixed signals. Debby Beece, in *Advertising Age* magazine, says, "We treat the shows with reverence." Yet Nick at Nite's press release describes the network as "an irreverent and fun environment."

This contradiction might be ascribable to miscommunication between executive and middle management on a point of public relations, but for the fact that it extends to the creative element. Will McRobb, the head writer for Nick at Nite's TV Land campaign, stresses Nick's affection for TV. People who misunderstand Nick at Nite, McRobb insists, "think it's black comedy—all edge." Which isn't true.

"We basically like TV."

"Sure, it's ridiculous, but it's also valuable—it can make you happy," he says. McRobb, however, is aware of the importance of irony in his TV Land spots. "The best promos come from the dorkiest shows."

"The best promos come from the dorkiest shows" is the key to Nick at Nite, in both its conscious goals and its function in the context of television in general. With a dorky show, Nick at Nite is able to offer the viewer a way to make

an ostensibly individualistic or creative contribution to the watching of television. By constantly talking about TV Land to the TV generation, Nick at Nite attempts to in some way legitimize watching TV to a set of people who, as a cultural defense, usually keep their TV habits and their self-respect separate, except when they are watching Emmy-winning NBC "dramadies." *Donna Reed* is a dated and vacuous sitcom, which almost any TV-aware person would admit, and it is not sold by Nick at Nite as nostalgia. Instead, the viewer is invited to watch it as an affectionate joke, one that he can feel literate and respectable about, while at the same time enjoying the comforting formulaicism of the TV of his childhood. "We take the burden of guilt off people," explains Will McRobb.

Such a strategy suggests that by watching television critically, one can somehow rise above or subvert it. All a cynical viewer has to do, Nick at Nite suggests, is watch a show from a certain distance, and redemption is at hand. This is the posture offered by David Marc, in his book *Demographic Vistas*: "The viewer who can transform that cynicism into critical energy can declare the war with television over and instead savor the oracular qualities of the medium."

In his book, Marc takes this position to an extreme. He calls TV "American Dada," "a flow of dreams," and "montage in the cubist sense." TV shows are "texts" that can be read creatively (*Lucy* as proto-feminist, *The Beverly Hillbillies* as "a noble possibility conjured from America's cultural unconscious," etc.). These inflated claims are far in spirit from Nick at Nite, which is, after all, a TV network. This is not merely because, as a TV network, it can't get too intellectual; Nick at Nite rarely denies itself educated in-jokes. "Make room for dada," was slipped into a promo for *Looney Tunes*, with the assurance that no one who noticed would object. What could be more flattering than picking up an in-joke inside an in-joke? No, Nick at Nite has to be considered differently as an attitude toward television because it also happens to *be* television. It is the most visible precipitate of "metatelevision," or TV about TV, yet to appear.

Nick at Nite is a Marcan appreciation of TV, absorbed by a TV network for its own purposes. But David Marc, as a viewer of television, may be functioning as an unwitting fink, inviting TV into the critical minds of real human beings, where it's real identity will only be found out after the damage is done. Mark Crispin Miller, in his essay "Deride and Conquer," stresses the use of irony and self-deprecation by all television as a tool to protect itself from any real criticism. "The history of this subversive irony has reached its terminus," he writes. "For now the irony consists in nothing but an easy jeering gaze that TV uses not to question the exalted, but to perpetuate its own hegemony. Over and over, the spectator recurs within the spectacle, which thereby shields itself from his/her boredom, rage, or cynicism."

Nick at Nite, by taking a Marcan posture, may function as Miller suggests. "No matter how bad TV gets, it cannot easily be deplored or criticized as long as it manifests its own unseriousness." If "unseriousness" is expanded to include "self-consciousness," or rather, a false projection of self-consciousness, a few hours of Nick at Nite will confirm this,

and suggest some answers to the confusion at 1775 Broadway, Nickelodeon's corporate office.

At 8 P.M. Nick at Nite begins its broadcast night. Its prime time lineup begins with *Mr. Ed*, followed by the newly acquired *Bewitched*, which, along with the also new *Green Acres*, has been receiving the heaviest rotation of all Nick spots. At the time of this writing, *Bewitched* is being promoted in four different spots. Two are "Smart TV shoppers compare" commercials. In the first, a promotional still of the cast of the NBC sitcom *Who's the Boss?* is shown and dismissed for having "no Dick York." Cuts to shots of Dick York's "dorkiness," and the spot ends with a typically flattering Nick message: "More of what you watch TV for!" Advertising gets mocked and propagated simultaneously; and so, coincidentally, does TV. "You" are not someone who watches the stupid sitcom *Who's The Boss?*. "You" are a discriminating TV connoisseur, watching *Bewitched* instead. Now watch the real commercials. In this and other mirthfulness, the joke is made by Nick at Nite, your friend and fellow TV viewer.

The mechanism by which Nick harmlessly gives advertising and television their affectionate knocks is a common bond among its target generation: superior irony. With a bottomless source of obsolete inanity in 50's and 60's television, McRobb's generational peers are able to reassure themselves of their cultivation with no intellectual effort. Thus, Nick at Nite can produce "mock" jingles in its "mock" commercials—"Whether you like color or black and white / you get good TV with Nick at Nite—Brand reruns!"—and assure its viewers not only of their Houyhnhnm superiority, but of their lofty distance from commercials and what they represent.

TV viewing is not witless, Nick insists. For example, another promo for *Bewitched* depicts the "Nick at Nite answer man" above an imaginary correspondent's question on the given topic, "How Powerful is Samantha?" "Dear Answer Man," writes Iris, "Could Samantha create a boulder so heavy even she couldn't lift it?" To this once-theological dippy-doodle, the answer man replies, in a perfectly acceptable non sequitur, "No" (shot of car floating into tight parking spot), "but can she ever parallel park!" The Nick at Nite announcer, whether in his natural form, or disguised as the answer man, is always in a position to make fun of the shows, and, incidentally, his own uselessly extratextual knowledge.

The *Bewitched* spot runs in heavy rotation, but not the heaviest. That honor is reserved for *Green Acres*. Selling the show's location, "Hooterville," as "TV Land's Hometown," Nick scrolls a list of TV Towns: New Rochelle, Mayberry, Bedrock. The list is too fast to read on first viewing, and the towns' corresponding shows are never given, but the point is made: "Hooterville" is just one name on a list of TV towns, and Nick at Nite is the one with the list. And what does Nick at Nite do with shows that aren't as stupid as *Green Acres*?

Car 54, Where Are You?, which ran until March, and *Mr. Ed* both have a sense of burlesque about them; both are conspicuously designed to provoke honest mirth. *Mr. Ed* knows why it's funny. It's about a talking horse. But to sell *Mr. Ed*, Nick has to play up the joke even further, taking

Mr. Ed's lines out of context, surrounding them with zanier or broader zingers. Mr. Ed, at one time on the show, says jokingly, "Why couldn't I have been born a woman?" Nick takes it out, shows it, and meanly jokes, "*Mr. Ed*—it's not just for kids anymore." In another, Wilbur, Carol, and Ed are presented as a "love triangle." One can easily laugh at this stuff, but it has nothing to do with enjoying the show; in fact it brazenly subverts it. But, as all kids know, making jokes at somebody else's expense is a great way to make friends, and it makes little difference whether the jokes are true.

The fantastic contrivances, ridiculous characters, and constant mugging of almost the entire cast of *Car 54* is too obviously deliberate to be made to look silly, but Nick tried. The Nick at Nite announcer sells Toody and Muldoon as "the Enforcers," patrolling a dangerous New York City that has nothing to do with the show. Nick sarcastically points to their "serious" problems: cut to Fred Gwynne, as Muldoon, telling the captain, "We need more people for Joel's bar mitzvah." But the sarcasm doesn't work. No one would put Joel's bar mitzvah on TV as a real problem. Nick at Nite here has its face against the glass wall of an equal hipness, and, like all faces so pressed, it takes on an unpleasant expression. Will McRobb, an apparently sincere man, would protest against this reading of the spot, and did remark on the difficulty and lack of necessity of repackaging *Car 54*. But it was done nonetheless. TV Land can't have its borders compromised.

The shows themselves, taken as shows, are treated as the cartoonish nullities they usually are. But TV as an element in life—its omnipresence—this is what Nick at Nite concerns itself with.

Unless it happens by accident. Take, for example, *Saturday Night Live*, which Nick has not developed any good way to promote. One spot opens with sentimental music and a montage of famous SNL bits. "Good friends . . . Good times . . . Landsharks."

This is a funny enough satire of a beer commercial, but not of *Saturday Night Live*, which spent a great deal of its time producing exactly this kind of parody. As a Nick at Nite-style promotion, it is a complete failure. The reason is that if "the best promos come from the dorkiest shows," then SNL has to have some of the worst promos. The same is true of SCTV, which up until February 1990 followed SNL, and (to an extent) *Laugh-In*, which up until August followed SCTV. Nick at Nite had a crack at *Laugh-In*, which is dated enough to seem "dorky," or unhip. These shows had a pioneering effect on the kind of satire that Nick at Nite does so brilliantly; but they (especially when they satirize television) are competitors when on Nick's airtime. If anyone is going to master television on Nick at Nite, it is going to be Nick. As a result, it is forced to compromise its TV Land idea. "SCTV doesn't really fit into the hard-line

TV theory,” said Will McRobb. Which is probably the reason *SCTV* was recently moved to Ha! (on VH-1), and why *SNL*’s days are also numbered.

In this 90-minute period, one can make out the evolution of televisual sarcasm. The most visible changes are in the phony newscasts that not only the three comedy shows but also Nick at Nite produce. By watching the four different versions of TV parodying itself, one can trace the grain of the finished product, the pedigree possessed by Nick at Nite’s own *Global Village News*. Starting with *Laugh-In*, the phony newscast more and more comes to exclude everything outside of television.

In *Laugh-In*’s newscast, there is really no attempt to simulate a newscast. Occasionally one of the semi-regulars on the show, like Tim Conway, will play an interviewee on the screen, but there is no pretense that a real interview is happening. Conway does a skit with answering the phone, whispering into it, hanging up, having it ring again. The newscasters, the tuxedoed Dick Rowan and Dan Martin, uncommitted to any one joke, giggle at Conway’s bit. The next joke may have nothing more to do with TV news than setting up a simple visual one-liner (“Now we go to our correspondent for an in-depth interview” — cut to a well, with a voice coming from the bottom). *Laugh-In* is not really metatelevision; it only uses a TV form to keep its incessant stream of jokes varied. The jokes that are not broad comedy owe more to Steve Allen’s “Man on the Street” than real TV news.

The definitive phony TV newscast came with *Saturday Night Live*. *SNL*’s anchor didn’t wear a tuxedo, kept a straight face (albeit with occasional knowing takes), and reported topical issues. Although the *SNL* newscast was considered (and considered itself) political satire, it isn’t. Political satire has for its object politicians. *SNL* had TV as the object of its satire, and not even TV news at that, but rather TV celebrity. The jokes about Gerald Ford usually involved his public persona, or, more conducive to *SNL*’s sealing-out process, his clumsiness, which could refer back to anchorman Chevy Chase’s pratfalls. In any case, the great improvement was that the newscast was simultaneously more believable and less realistic than *Laugh-In*’s, in the sense that reality, in the form of comedy—the extratelevisual stand-up and improvisational and vaudevillian comedy of *Laugh-In*—was no longer present. TV had moved ahead once again, purging itself of older genres and sealing the airlock behind them.

Nick’s viewers are resultantly much fonder of *SNL* than they are of *Laugh-In*. *Laugh-In* is a forgotten show; *SNL* not only spawned many of today’s biggest stars, but, more importantly, spawned the style that they and their imitators live on. The phony show-business chatter of Bill Murray’s Nick the lounge singer can be heard everywhere today, as a joke, but as show-business chatter nonetheless. Paul Schaeffer, Nick’s sidekick, is now David Letterman’s. And Nick at Nite understands the implications of this. Their series of 15th anniversary spots for *SNL* suggest the only glimmers of “reverence” or, less euphemistically, direct promotion, to be seen anywhere. They compromised TV Land, and their days were numbered, but while they existed they revealed large areas of superstructure. A person is

stopped in the street. “Where were you when you first saw Nick the lounge singer?” the Nick at Nite representative asks. “I was watching television,” the person proudly answers back. It is the only time that Nick at Nite ventures into the real world, and it is only to confirm the prison of television, which, as Nabokov said of time, is spherical and without exits. The *SNL* irony is Miller’s irony, the irony that mocks and lives off the unifying chumminess the mockery produces. “TV is pervasively ironic, forever flattering the viewer with a sense of his/her own enlightenment.”

So Nick at Nite showing *SNL* is a revealing mistake. And it gets worse, from TV Land’s perspective. Also scheduled in this 90-minute block was *SCTV*, and it was *SCTV*, more than anything else on the network, that threatened TV Land. For *SCTV* is another TV Land, and a more cohesive one than Nick at Nite’s TV Land for not having made the mistake of including rival sensibilities. “We’re a living version of *SCTV*,” points out Will McRobb.

SCTV’s newsdesk is in a sense more primitive than *SNL*’s. There is no steady artifice, no integrity to the parody. The newscasters, Floyd Cramer and Earl Camenbert, look into the camera and read the news, but they make their own contributions, quarrel, Earl gets stoned, and many other things happen that no one has ever seen or imagined on a news show, network or local (it is never clear which it is supposed to be). Worse still, from the point of view of parody, the network president, Guy Cabellero, will berate the network employees on the phone or offstage, or occasionally come right on and speak to them on-camera. Or, to make matters even crazier, we will see him speaking to the camera, as if it were an *SCTV* cameraman behind it, and then also watch as he sits in a room by himself talking to Hank Bain (*Different Strokes* star Conrad’s brother) on a walky-talky; he is recorded by the real *SCTV* cameras, those operated by the Canadian comedy troop. As parody, this represents an almost bottomless crudity. But as “the spectator recurring within the spectacle,” it is a giant step beyond *Saturday Night Live*. When the camera, which was working for *SCTV* news of Melonville (the fictitious home of the network) pans off the news soundstage to reveal Guy Cabellero conferencing with a writer or producer Johnny LaRue, it is now working for *SCTV* of Chicago and Toronto. But when Guy Cabellero addresses the camera, it is back to working for Melonville. The line between life and television is becoming very blurred, which for television is a good thing—all business seeks to expand and merge.

SCTV goes off the air. Its credits roll, belatedly acknowledging the artifice of the whole enterprise. And at this point Nick at Nite takes over, and presents a phony newscast of its own. After a comedy troupe has done its version, we are ready for the end of the road: *The Global Village News*, Nick at Nite’s imitation of a newscast. *The Global Village News*, with anchorman Chuck Bruce, is a perfect example of TV’s powers of gobbling. McLuhan used the phrase in *Understanding Media* to describe television, and Nick at Nite has absorbed his criticisms, and used them to its own advantage, simultaneously making fun of them and admitting their powerless truth. Chuck Bruce comes onscreen, reads a few short and forgettable gags, and disappears behind the closing logo that is the real joke, along with the motto: “If we don’t cover it, it doesn’t matter!” The power of TV to

exclude anything not in its agenda has reached such dizzying victorious heights as to allow out-and-out gloating, crass and sarcastic and half-serious, like most everything else on TV. Our resistance to such an ugly assertion is negated by the inclusive irony with which it is made. Or is it?

Nick at Nite, Will McRobb said, is a real version of SCTV. McRobb meant this to mean a bunch of people who started their own network and put on what they liked. But it is a true statement in a deeper sense. Like SCTV, it subverts the outside world, talking about "TV" while blending, in dark glasses and false whiskers, surreptitiously into the audience. TV Land, Nick at Nite says, is a different place than where you and I live. But the "I" is television, and including the "you" with that "I" commits us to an existence that is half televisual.

When Will McRobb uses the corporate "we" in "we like television," he is not speaking in terms of individual taste. "We" are television. Particular programs do not concern television in the long haul. The good ones, like *Car 54*, *Where Are You?*, get covered with the same blanket of protective mockery as the rest. It doesn't matter in the slightest that *Car 54* is as hip and witty and self-aware as Nick at Nite itself. "We" don't like or dislike particular shows. "We" cancel them the second their ratings drop.

So Nick at Nite expands Miller's thesis: "TV solicits each

viewer's allegiance by reflecting back his/her own automatic skepticism toward TV. Thus, TV protects itself from criticism or rejection by incorporating our very animus against the spectacle into the spectacle itself." Nick at Nite pushes the inclusive sphere beyond animus, and into identity. Miller writes about TV that flatters "boredom and distrust," but Nick at Nite does not inspire these feelings. It inspires jocularly and warm fellowship with TV, and a sense of being at one with it as it laughs at itself. You are not, of course, at one with hokey *Donna Reed*, but with the commercial that pokes fun at her, affectionately. Debby Beece was wrong. The P.R. people knew their jobs. Irreverence is what TV is all about.

The success of this mechanism is already spreading. Now the Family Channel is advertising *Batman* in a kind of campy, it's-so-bad-it's-good spot, selling it as camp, when in fact it is only recycling the strenuous camp of the original show. If the past means anything on television, and it does, other networks will follow MTV's lead, in the form of its archly likable Nick at Nite. Nick at Nite has introduced a new mode of seduction, that of ingratiation not by self-abasement (TV is too powerful for that) or even of Miller's subtle irony, but of out-and-out self-love, cooed to itself while wearing a mask of the viewer's face. What will the real face look like, as a result? 

Seeing Double

by Rudolph Schirmer

He who prefers street corners to offices,
Forest nooks to oratories, copses to cathedrals,
And was the apple of his mother's eye,
Not the pilewort in his father's closet,

Will not be devastated if he reads
That one so very like him it astounds
Prefers a marble terrace with a lawn
So like a meadow it could pass for one

Beneath him to a lodgment anywhere
That offers nothing to step out on
Or run off to, only surly hindrances
To all unpolarized activity.

Nor should a vagrant fail to postulate
In every cornered homebody his peer,
Like him in all except mobility,
Identical in everything but whim.

The world is made of opposites, we hear,
But it is also true, and maybe even truer,
That think-alikes and feel-alikes are in
The manifest majority. Who knows

But someday we'll attest the fact it's time
To curtsy to the obvious, eliminate
The rancors that proliferate deep down
And spend the day conversing cheek to cheek.