Review Article: Why Men Desire Muscles

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Muscle is by any standard, literary or sociological, an unlikely and extra-ordinary book. 'Part ditty, part dirge,' as Samuel Fussell puts it, couched in the form of a diary but infused with the tone of a moral tale, it recounts with pointillistic acuity and a razor-sharp sense of irony the author's 'solitary pilgrimage' in the world of bodybuilding.[1] The points of departure and arrival of this odyssey are pithily recorded by the two shockingly antipodian pictures that feature Sam before and after. It is hard to believe that the frail, lanky, and slightly nerdy blond student on the first photograph is the same person as the colossus of protruding muscles, sinews, and veins who literally bulges out of the second. The jarring contrast between them sums up better than words the veritable transmutation undergone by Fussell in his four years of iron pumping.[2] The text of *Muscle* offers a moving, often hilarious, yet in other ways tragic, account of this alchemical transmogrification, as well as a disturbing disquisition on the existential dialectic of insecurity and masculinity.

Seduction and Security

To say that Sam Fussell was neither inclined nor well equipped to embrace this profane religion of physicality that is bodybuilding is no small understatement. Reared amongst books in the sheltered and scholarly atmosphere of Princeton, groomed in the best schools of America and England, the 26-year old son of two distinguished university professors[3] had nothing in his background to predispose him to weight-lifting. His implausible journey originates, it appears, in his consuming terror at daily life in New York City. Upon moving to the Big Apple to take up a job in a publishing house, the young graduate of Oxford finds himself thoroughly overwhelmed by the Big Apple, its hustle and bustle, its manifold dangers and constant tension, to the point of sickness. One day, in a bookstore, he comes across *Arnold: The Education of A Bodybuilder* by muscle prophet Arnold Schwarzenegger (now of Hollywood fame) and the idea suddenly hits him: why not build a muscular armour as a means of self-defence, erect a 'human fortress' to take refuge in? After all, isn't the promise of bodybuilding that you

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can defy both nature and culture and transform yourself into that potent and self-assured manly being (*vir*) that you've always dreamed of being?[4]

From the moment he signs up at the weight-room of the local Y, Sam is hooked. Far from being repelled by the atmosphere of violence, humiliation, and harassment of the gym, he is seduced by the security and predictability of the existence it procures. There the intolerable complexities of life are whittled down to a simple equation of dumb bells and squats, 'reps' and power lifts. With one clear goal, getting bigger, and one unambiguous evaluative standard, muscle size, that ultimate index of manhood. The 'new meat,' as novices are called in the vernacular, is swallowed whole by the culture of pump. Sam does not merely submit to its order, he embraces it wholeheartedly. For bodybuilding is not only a set of physical exercises but a complete *masculine cosmogony* that promises to allay his innermost anxieties by funnelling all his vital energies into the construction of a virile carapace of muscles[5]

The gym, we learn, is no place for sociability: 'You don't come to the weight room to make friends, you come to make gains,' barks the Portuguese Rambo,[6] one of the regulars who initiates Sam to the arcane techniques of sculpting one's body and who helps him make the subtle 'attitude adjustments' required for success in the world of weight-lifting: 'You need to attack the weight, you ain't with the sheep no more.' Sam quickly learns how to apply the 'Arnold visualization principle' — known among mere mortals as the faculty of imagination. He practices and masters 'the Walk,' the fine art of carrying oneself as a 'big man' by flexing and tightening all muscles while projecting an outward air of utter insouciance. And he promptly adopts the 'geneticspeak' of bodybuilding magazines and other 'gym rats.' Restructuring his life according to 'the Three D's' of dedication, determination, and discipline, entails, among other changes, going on a rigorous diet of five meals a day, supplemented by special protein milkshakes and 'BIG chewables' (tablets of vitamins, minerals, and amino acids designed to lower the metabolism of the body), and a vigorous regimen of 'double-split, three on, one off' (translation: two daily workouts for three days followed by one day of rest). It also implies abiding by the rigid moral code of the bodybuilder, as enshrined in such stereotypic one-liners as 'that which doesn't kill you only makes you stronger,' or 'there is no such thing as overtraining, only weak minds.' Thus does Sam begin to 'pay his dues.'[7]

The objections of his mother and the puzzlement of his friends only add to the fuel of Sam's new-found passion. The desire to 'fill out' burning inside of him shall brook no hindrance. The efflorescence and hardening of his flesh are reward enough to offset the permanent pain and extreme boredom of training. Indeed, heavier doses of pain serve well to numb whatever doubts might linger in his mind, and more lifting pushes aside the question of why lift in the first place.[8] Soon there no longer is time left in Sam's life for anything that does not further his project of somatic expansion. Including his job: he resigns from his

publishing company and severs his ties to kin and kith so as to concentrate more intensely on his weight-lifting. He even trades his Upper-East-Side apartment for a Queens 'basement-bunker' and retreats fully into the gym. The latter provides a refuge from the unending solicitations and requests of both other and self — a *sanctuary from sociality* and its attendant demands of emotionality, responsiveness, and openness:

> The gym was the one place I had control. I didn't have to speak, I didn't have to listen. I just had to push or pull. It was so much simpler, so much more satisfying than life outside. I regulated everything . . . It beat the street. It beat my girlfriend. It beat my family. I didn't have to think. I didn't have to care. I didn't have to feel. I simply had to lift. (p. 62)

Sam's whole existence comes to revolve around chiselling his prospering anatomy. The days of the week themselves are identified by a specific body part: there is the dreaded 'leg day,' followed by 'chest day,' and then this apotheosis of dolor, 'back day.' His organism itself now seems to function as *an Other within himself*, an autonomic entity endowed with separate needs and urges, and with the growing ability to dictate its own agenda. Like an addict thirsting for his shoot of dope, Sam craves the high of pumping, the 'illumination' in a world of drabness brought on by total immersion in the peculiar sensual world of weight-lifting.[9] 'The more I trained, the more I needed to train. My body ached for the pump. I couldn't live without it, that burning sensation acquired through bombing a muscle area' (p. 80).[10] Outside the gym, the rest of Sam's day is consumed by the nourishment, servicing, and care of his luxuriating body: stacking up the two ceiling-high refrigerators with food, cooking and eating gargantuan meals, dutifully resting, and processing mountains of laundry to replenish his daily supply of fresh jocks, sweat pants, and tank tops. Because body hair threaten to ruin his labour in the gym by obscuring muscle separation, an hour of work and ten razor blades are expended every day to shave his entire body. Fussell comes out of the bathtub all bloody but without feeling a thing. His organism has become a 'shell to be polished and plucked with regularity,' the hanger on which to peg the new Sam-in-the-making.

Soon the pupil exceeds his teachers: 'We've created a monster,' quips a bemused Portuguese Rambo upon sizing up the wondrous transformation of Sam's physique. The 170-lbs ('soaking wet') weakling has metamorphosed into a 230-lbs behemoth crackling with muscles. More importantly, Sam is no longer playing a role, he *is* a bodybuilder. Proof, he dresses, feels and thinks, walks, talks, and acts like one. Without fully realizing it, he has imperceptibly turned into a bully and his pre-iron life is quickly fading into the blurred memory of a former self joyously discarded. His devotion to the gym is total. But by the close of the second year of his new life, just as he passes the point of no return, Sam

hits that most abhorred stage in the bodybuilder's early career: 'plateau' — his body growth is stymied. Drastic action is called for and is instantly taken: Sam will relocate across the continent to join the booming cult of muscularity in sunny Southern California. 'I'd found shelter in a body too large to feel and aimed to find even more in a body that was even bigger. It didn't occur to me then that too big might not be big enough' (pp. 85–86).

Engulfment and Escalation

Upon landing in the Mecca of Muscle, Sam signs up at the Shangri-La Fitness Centre, 'a cross between a cathedral and a singles bar' where, as he deftly phrases it, 'the men [are] dressed for building, the women for breeding,' and whose members customarily introduce themselves by trumpeting their percentage of body fat. There, our hero wastes no time teaming up with three real pros with whom he enters into a munificent rooming and training partnership. Ensues a massive escalation in Sam's degree of simultaneous social isolation and engulfment in the world of iron.[11] With the help of his new pumping mates, Vinnie, Nimrod and Bamm Bamm, Sam is well on his way to becoming a 'human piston.' Their method of training, of which Fussell offers vivid vignettes, is appropriately labelled 'intensity or insanity':

> Vinnie quickly flexed [his calf muscles] in the mirror and caressed them with a loving hand, before snatching an ammonia capsule from my open palm. Breaking it directly under his nose, he inhaled deeply, looked as if he'd just seen God, then rushed to the squat bar, where he tightened his belt and settled under it.
>
> At this point, he rocked on his feet, head-butting the steel bar several times in an effort to initiate an adrenal spurt. Finally, with his mind focused from the ammonia and his forehead gushing blood, he performed the exercise.
>
> On his heaviest set, 645 pounds even, he asked me, as his training partner, to 'do the right thing.' From my acquaintance with *Powerlifting USA* magazine, I realized what he meant. After his knee wrap, his walk, his talk, his ammonia intake, his belt ritual, I nailed him twice with a closed fist and clean shots to the face. The result was a bloody nose, a black eye, and a successful lift. (p. 113)

More than exercise, however, what jumpstarts the renewed augmentation of Sam's body is getting on 'the juice.' Drugs are an essential item on the physique agenda and there too Sam leaps into an altogether different dimension. For, at Shangri-La as in other pro gyms, the use of anabolic steroids and assorted

human growth hormones is both commonplace and massive,[12] as are their resultant physical ailments, from premature baldness (which has Nimrod wearing blond nylon hair extensions to match his coloured contact lenses), bouts of diarrhoea and increased body hair, to spells of dizziness and chronic rectal bleeding (necessitating the wearing of Huggies), not to mention the less visible but no less consequential lowered sperm count, thyroid, kidney and liver malfunction, hepatitis, gallstones, and cancer.[13] But the most disconcerting fallout of never-ending cycles of 'juice' are the epidemics of acute acne that ravage the lifters' bodies and the crater-like trenches of scar tissue they dig in their behinds through repeated injections, which can create knots the size of pomegranate that have to be removed by surgery every so often. 'Hell, you play the game, you pay the price,' philosophizes Vinnie, 'but no problem, you can't see the scars when I'm wearing my posin' trunks, so the judges can't take off no points' (p. 123). None of this deters Sam: a bodybuilder's gotta do what a bodybuilder's gotta do. And is there a viable alternative left at this point, another way of getting from 20-inch biceps to 22-inch, and thence to 24 and on higher, once bulk has been instituted as the sole yardstick of one's existence? A late-bloomer in the sport, Sam cannot afford the luxury of several more years of working out to acquire the 'muscle maturity' that defines the *bona fide* bodybuilder. And thus he delves in this strange chemical experiment that promises ontological transcendence through hormonally-induced growth of muscular mass.

As the daily headaches and side-effects of steroids become ever more intrusive, Sam realizes that his muscle motive is no longer mere self-defence: now it is the 'need to rule,' a need fuelled by a seemingly unquenchable inner anger and further aggravated by the 'roid rages' that periodically erupt out of the seething cauldron of his body. Yet again his response is to press ahead in his somatic crusade. 'ISOLATE!' is the battle cry and 'EAT BIG, SLEEP BIG, TRAIN BIG!' the iron edict that lords over the life of Sam and his partners. In their 'muscle stable,' the lifting buddies gorge themselves with drugs and nutrients — to such excess that they must throw up part of the food ingested every morning before setting out for the gym. When not pumping, they crawl about in a lethargic state, sleep half of the day, and pose before the mirror of their living room. Even their income-generating activities are contained within, or derivative of, the cosmos of bodybuilding. Vinnie is grossing forty thousand dollars a year from his retail business of steroids, most of which he farms out to yuppies in search of muscular serenity, while Nimrod trains older women one-on-one and Bamm Bamm moonlights as a collector for loan sharks. Sam, too, takes up personal training, at home and in the gym, and models for medical calendars. When this changed schedule forces him to part ways with his training partner, he discovers that he can work out even harder on his own and scale new heights of muscle ecstasy. He is now a veritable human tank of hardened flesh and taut muscles, 257 pounds heavy,

with a neck wider than his head, arms 18 inches wide at rest, and a 52-inch chest mounted on a 36-inch waist and 29-inch thighs. There remains but one mountain to climb — or one last outlet of escape: competition.

Apotheosis and Apostasy

This is where the magic of the world of bodybuilding paradoxically begins to unravel for Sam. What should bring him to the peak of musculous *jouissance*[14] sows the seeds of doubt in his heart and eventually cracks his seemingly steel-hard commitment to the religion of iron. Aside from Olympic lifters, who execute two standard moves codified by international regulations, the snatch and the clean-and-jerk, there are two different categories of lifters. On the one hand, bodybuilders *stricto censu* pump iron with the ultimate goal of sculpting their bodies for ritualized competitive display, public shows at which they parade their musculature on stage, going through 'mandatories' and a three-minute choreographed routine that incorporates set poses and moves. Judges on these contests look for muscle size, definition and striation, pleasing bone structure, symmetry, charisma and tan or 'competition colour,' usually achieved by repeated coatings of special oils and ointments. Powerlifters, on the other hand, are in for exhibitions of sheer animal strength on the benchpress, deadlift, and squat. For them there is one goal only, heave more weight, which first requires vanquishing one's fear of heavy poundage, and one query suffices to divulge one's most intimate identity: 'What's your bench?' Their motto makes crystal clear what powerlifting is all about: 'Strong enough to bear the strain, man enough to take the pain.' Bodybuilders and powerlifters belong to two different, rival planets of the iron pumping galaxy because their training patterns are diametrically dissimilar. While the former strive for muscle definition and gain mass through smooth, endless repetitions, the latter seek to generate raw power by subjecting their musculature to brutal shocks with fewer 'reps' at much heavier weights. For this reason, powerlifters commonly hold bodybuilders in contempt and consider them a fraud — all show and no strength. Because of these technical and cultural differences, no one has held professional expertise in both types of lifting. So obsessive is Sam's quest for muscular recognition that his competitive forays will embrace the two styles in short succession.

Fussell first enters the 'Ninth Annual Rose City Bench-Press Extravaganza,' a powerlifting contest, with rather anticlimactic results. In spite of strenuous training and special dieting leading to a swift twelve-pound loss, and notwithstanding enduring the torture of his Inzer Blast Shirt (a special nylon jacket that compresses the body and is said to increase the personal best of its user by thirty-some pounds), he places a bitterly disappointing third . . . out of three contestants. But there is little time to commiserate as he must immediately switch to readying his strapping physique for a bodybuilding contest. Now the goal is not to get bigger

but to *appear* to be bigger by losing fat, some twenty pounds of it. For five weeks, Sam's caloric intake is abruptly cut from 5,000 to 1,000 calories a day; his steroid program is momentarily suspended, so as to show up 'clean' for the contest; and because he cannot afford the luxury of rest days, he goes on a merciless 'seven on, none off' program of higher reps with lower weights in order to achieve the 'shrink-wrap' fit that will catch the judges' eye. Vinnie and Nimrod teach him the fine points of the posing trade — what parts of his anatomy to hide, what curves to accentuate, how to swivel with grace, move in rhythm, and smile. Three days before the contest, his body is flushed with carbohydrates and when Sam steps onto the stage of the San Gabriel Valley contest, the illusion of ease, the fantasy of self-control, the 'joyful and spontaneous' image of brawny serenity and potency is perfect. He has finally become one of these bronzed, muscle-bound, manful statues that grace the pages of his glossy bodybuilding magazines. Yet, when handed the first place trophy, Sam cannot but be jarred by the discrepancy between the elated bodily façade of radiant might he presents and the crushing physical reality behind it:

> Thanks to the rigors of my training, my hands were more ragged, callused and cut than any longshoreman's. Thanks to the drugs and my diet, I couldn't run 20 yards without pulling up and gasping for air. My ass cheeks ached from innumerable steroid injections, my stomach whined for sustenance, my whole body throbbed from gym activities and enforced weight loss. Thanks to my competitive tan, my skin was breaking out everywhere. Vinnie and Nimrod explained that all this was perfectly normal . . . 'Big Man, this is about *looking* good, not feeling good.' (p. 193)

Inch by inch, Fussell is coming to the irksome realization of the hoax he has been playing on himself all along. Far from serving as the vehicle of his liberation, his body has turned into yet another, more pernicious, jail: 'I'd become a bodybuilder to be comfortable with a self I'd invented. I had counted on the security, the simplicity of the mask, the armour. But once I'd manufactured all the muscles and the puffery, I felt trapped inside this colossal frame' (p. 194). To keep from feeling bad, Sam keeps himself from feeling at all. One last time, he steels his muscular sheathing and gears up for what will prove to be his last contest. This time, the diet is even harsher, murderous almost: he is allowed a mere 630 calories a day so as to shed an additional ten pounds in six days on a body that already has under ten percent of fat left. Through hallucinations, nervous crying, half-comatose sleep and worse, Sam sails toward his closing moment in the iron limelight. When he finally finds himself on stage again, too dazed and weak to walk or talk except for the stimulation of a final boost of drugs, it matters no longer that he takes only second place.

After four years spent slaving at the weights and adding eighty pounds of muscle onto his gangly frame, it dawns on Sam not simply that he is still raw and unfinished by professional standards but, more critically, that there will be no end to his scrambling for the next fix of muscle high. Suddenly the whole enterprise seems patently absurd, the sacrifice exacted pointless, his very presence there incongruous. 'I wanted out of that body, that mind, that regimentation. The 'thousand-mile stare' I'd seen . . . in the eyes of so many of my fellow iron casualties, I saw in my own eyes in the mirror the day of the show.' *In fine*, Sam comes to admit that the object of his inmost dread was not located outside of him but deep inside. New York City was but a metaphor for his internal turmoils, a projective revelation of his inner inability to take the risk of human connectedness, to love and be loved. And the carapace he patiently fashioned was meant to safeguard him not so much from involvements with others as from his own doubts and fears. And it is all too clear that the latter still have the best of him as long as he keeps running away from them:

> The physical palisades and escarpments of my own body served as a rocky boundary that permitted no passage, no hint of a deeper self — a self I couldn't bear . . . But self-hatred is its own form of egotism. As long as I hated myself, I still believed that I mattered. My deepest fear was that I didn't matter . . . But behind that huge frame and those muscular sets, I felt shut up in a kind of claustrophobic panic. Not flexing but drowning. I felt like an actor victimized by his own success, condemned to play a role again and again . . . The inflated cartoon I became relieved me from the responsibility of being human. But once I'd become that caricature, that inflated cartoon, I longed for something else. As painful and humiliating as it is to be human, being subhuman or superhuman is far worse. (pp. 248–249)

Sam walks away from the gym, 'cold turkey,' and the best efforts of his iron friends to lure him back to the benchpress will fail to prevent him from returning to his former life and taking to the writing of the present book.

The Predicament of Masculinity

Muscle is a brilliant novelistic self-analysis and catharsis of and by Samuel Wilson Fussell. But it is much more than that and its pertinence extends well beyond the private circumstances of its author. The latter's declared topic is the fascination and deception of bodybuilding, not men as a social category. Yet, unwitting it seems, he has written a penetrating treatise of the 'hidden anxiety'[15] that punctures, not his personal life alone, but the core of conventional masculinity. And the literary form and voice adopted by Fussell allow him to disclose dimensions

of men's sense of vulnerability that might be intolerable if expressed in the more objectifying idiom of sociology or cultural theory. So that he has produced an unusually perceptive exploration of the constitutive predicament of masculinity.

Bodybuilding forms a unique prism through which to examine this predicament because muscles are *the* distinctive symbol of masculinity, the specific armamentarium of an embattled manhood. Their wilful acquisition and exhibition serve to establish or repair a damaged sense of oneself as a properly gendered being, i.e., a virile individual. Surveys have shown time and again that men's self-esteem correlates highly with having a muscular upper body, that males with slight or 'soft' physical makeups have lower levels of life satisfaction than their more athletic peers. The quest for muscles reveals men locked in a 'passionate battle against their own sense of vulnerability' (Glassner, 1989: 315). And bodybuilding stands as the prototype of this existential *Angst* of masculinity because, by reducing the agonistic engagement of sportive competition to a battle with and against one's body, it strips athletic avocation down to its purely manhood-generating and manhood-affirming functions. So much so that Pleck (1982), for instance, sees in it 'the archetypal expression of male identity insecurity.'[16]

Sam's misadventures illustrate what we may call the founding *irony of masculinity*: that its dutiful pursuit leads to results nearly opposite to those it promises but with the paradoxical effect of fuelling the continued search for its elusive accomplishment. Whereas bodybuilding claims to portend health, it leads in fact to the rapid erosion, if not destruction, of the body; whereas it publicly signals heterosexual prowess and a sense of security and achievement pregnant with expanded social involvement, in reality it leads to a grotesque impoverishment of the span and intensity of relations with the other gender — one cannot but be struck by the near-total absence of women from Sam's diary — as well as to practices of quasi-institutionalized homosexuality known as 'hustling.'[17] And, in the place of an enriched social bond, it brings at best affiliation denuded of attachment. In the homosocial and homophobic universe of weight-lifting, the body functions not as a vehicle of sociality, and thus humanity, but as a wall between men as well as between men and women. Bodybuilding ushers in a life premised on a closure of the self that go as far as to border on *social death*. Pushed to its limits, the making of the body over into a temple of worship of muscularity results in turning it into a tomb for the self.[18]

Muscle contains graphic experiential testimony to the significance of sport as a 'primary masculinity-validating experience' (Dubbert, 1979)[19] and to the built-in insecurities that plague conventional manhood. It also indirectly raises the question of the sources of these insecurities. Feminist theorists influenced by the psychoanalytic school of 'object relations' insist that masculinity is an inherently frail identity because it is anchored in a positional (as opposed to relational) sense of self built on the fear of attachment and therefore in need of constant

reaffirmation (Chodorow, 1978; Epstein, 1991). Certainly, the manic building of ramparts of muscles fits well with this conception of men as endowed with fragile self boundaries and a deep ambivalence toward intimacy that make manhood a tensionful, permanently unfinished project — a view also amply supported by comparative ethnography (Gilmore, 1990). But we should not too hastily attribute the *Angst* that devours Fussell *solely* or wholly to the problems of gender identity formation, as distinct from dilemmas generic to the modern human condition or from the social contradictions lodged in the project of class reproduction. Half-a-century ago, German phenomenologist Martin Heidegger (1962) proposed that existential anxiety is an *ontological condition* rooted in the inescapable experience of human life as fundamentally ungrounded. More recently, British social theorist Anthony Giddens has contended that advanced societies undergoing rapid change tend to generate low levels of trust, defined as 'the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of their surrounding social and material environments of action' (Giddens 1990: 92). We do not know enough about Fussell's childhood experiences to rule out as an independent or aggravating cause of his feeling of the unreliability of things and persons, including himself, an insufficient endowment in 'basic trust' in his earlier years, due for instance to family instability and the painful divorce of his parents (which his mother mentions as a possible motive for his musculous venture).

Alternately, Sam's panicky fears could be an expression of the affective burden, nay trauma, entailed not (only) in 'achieving' appropriate masculine status but (also) in realizing his *social inheritance*, that is, in upholding or betraying the class position bequeathed to him by his parents and the array of socioeconomic-cum-cultural expectations attached to it. Perpetuating the social location of one's family is fraught with tension and suffering because, whether one succeeds or not, it necessarily involves at once accomplishing their desire for social continuity and denying it by affirming one's separate social existence. To perpetuate the social being of the father requires of one to kill him.[20] Thus Fussell's mad plunge into the world of iron could well be a strategy designed to shun having to confront the social heritage that already inhabits him, as indicated by his elite academic credentials and initial occupational insertion. And, in his case, the difficulty of reproducing his family's membership in the intellectual patriciate is redoubled by the fact that both of his parents belong to it so that success will demand a *double* symbolic murder of father *and* mother. That such a dynamic may be at work is suggested when Fussell's father writes him 'all is forgiven, literature is bigger than people' (p. 251) after Sam informs him that he has finally abjured the religion of iron to write a book about it.[21] And hints are dispersed throughout Fussell's narration that the tensions which split apart and drive Sam find a distinctly social root in his individual and family trajectory in the class structure.

Obviously, these three forms and bases of insecurity, ontological, class, and gender-related, need not be exclusive nor causally independent of one other. For instance, we may conjecture that both masculine and existential anxiety in patriarchal households are reinforced by the fact that it is sons who bear chief responsibility for the social (class) continuity of the lineage. Most likely, all three are intermixed in Fussell's predicament, as they are in those of the great many men who will recognize themselves in his account, however grudgingly.

Embodying the Manly *Illusio*

Yet another invaluable contribution of *Muscle* is to supply a dense and convincing 'thick description' of the active *embodiment* of a particular manhood complex, of the multisided process through which the masculine *illusio* — i.e., the shared belief in, and collectively manufactured illusion of, the value of the games (real) men play — becomes progressively instilled and inscribed in a particular biological individual.[22] With precious few exceptions, the 'constructivist' analyzes that have dominated recent social studies of the body are so concerned with its representation or its status as a 'surface' on which social forces 'inscribe' themselves that they invariably end up reducing it to an epiphenomenon of symbolic practices — a target and object, or 'effect,' of discourse in the exemplary (and enormously influential) case of Michel Foucault (1981).[23] This has resulted in an abysmal gap in our understanding of the concrete practices and organizational arrangements through which real bodies are actually produced. Thanks to his biographical focus on the lived experience of bodybuilding, Fussell avoids this logocentric trap. By displaying how one gets 'caught up in a solipsistic game of tag with [one's] own muscles' (p. 186) — and, surely, if *he* did any man can! — he lays out the powerful *moral and sensual dynamics* that works upon and through the body so as progressively to transform the mental and corporeal schemata through which the individual perceives reality and endows it with meaning and value.[24] Here Fussell offers prime raw materials for analyzing the encoding, onto the body, of the series of homological gendered oppositions that organize the universe of bodybuilding: among them, soft/hard, small/big, light/heavy, relaxed/tense, affectively involved/affectively neutral, weak/strong, passive/active, follower/leader, and pleasure/pain. It is all too obvious that such oppositions play a central role in the structuring of other male-dominated social worlds, such as those of professional politics, scientific research or corporate management.

Unravelling this process of embodiment, in turn, enables Samuel Fussell to capture the *positive* moment of bodybuilding and to acknowledge the fact that, even as it damages the organism, the cult of muscularity also leads to an expansion of its powers and gives its owner a (partly false but partly genuine) sense of 'agency.' Alienation from one's body, in this case, simultaneously makes possible a form of self-appropriation, if one that appears significantly truncated from the

standpoint of an outsider. Indeed, one of the attractions of competitive weight-lifting, as of other sportive activities that demand a thorough subjugation of the organism and colonization of the self, lies in the *heroization of everyday life* it effects.[25] By turning the most mundane ingredients of ordinary existence, including nutrition, sexuality and sleep, emotional and social relations, into obstacles to be vanquished, dangers to be thwarted and forces to be domesticated, the commandments of the bodybuilding ethic transform life into an endless series of tests of moral will and excellence through which a transcendent self may be constructed. The bodybuilder is the producer of his embodied self; he makes himself — if under conditions not entirely of his own choosing.

Crucially, this process of heroization is simultaneously a process of *masculinization*. As cultural history and comparative ethnology abundantly reveal, the heroic moral is the manly moral *par excellence*, 'extolling the masculine virtues of sacrifice, distinction, discipline, dignity, self-denial, self-restraint, and commitment to a cause' (Featherstone 1992: 174), as contrasted with feminine values such as attachment and reciprocity, emotional bonding and identification. Bodybuilding 'compresses' the span and depth of the lifeworld, reducing it to the sole management of one's muscular endowment, but it also thereby turns the body into the means of acting decisively upon and in that world, to seize one's fate and to remake it according to one's wishes or fantasies. It is crucial to understand this Janus-faced character of bodybuilding and the 'creative destruction' (as Nietzsche would say) it entails if one wants fully to account for its drawing power.

What is much less clear in *Muscles* is how and why exactly Fussell loses his belief in the value of the stakes of bodybuilding. Is it having completed the full cycle of his initiation with the experience of the crush of official competition? Is it becoming a trainer, a move which leads him to take up a contemplative and therefore distancing posture towards the world of iron, as suggested in the following passage: 'Observing my clients and fellow gym members, eight hours in which I saw nothing but iron casualties . . . it was beginning to dawn on me that I was one of them' (p. 153)? Is it that he has reached his biophysical limits, as when he says that the regimentation and strain of training are no longer tolerable? Fussell also lists as a solvent of his faith his outside knowledge of the unsavoury 'business' side of professional bodybuilder. But neither of these factors satisfactorily account for the sudden turning off of his weight-lifting desire and the denouement of the story leaves Sam's apostasy unresolved.

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In his classic study *Inner Asian Frontiers of China*, Owen Lattimore (1962) showed that the Great Wall was constructed not so much to repel assailants from without as to keep the Chinese contained within. Likewise, the muscular glacis

built by Fussell functioned to protect him less from the dangers of the outside than from his own internal frailties and doubts, to muzzle his inner fear of feeling and his dread of emotional engagement and vulnerability. In the end, though, it is not Sam who fills the reader with an abiding sense of pathos but the Portuguese Rambos, the Vinnies, and the Nimrods consigned to weight-lifting rooms and trapped in their casings of muscle as in so many self-imposed ghettos of flesh and blood. For Sam, after all is said and done, is rather the privileged one: he has other skills, competencies, and dispositions, and he can turn to alternative worlds — starting with that of writing — in which to realize them and snatch his life from the jaws of absurdity. One surmises that he will find elsewhere other, less mutilating, forms of masculinity easily within his reach. Not so his former lifting mates: switching from the benchpress to the typewriter is a luxury beyond their means and one wonders what social theatres might furnish them with a stage on which to achieve this Pascalian sense of *existing* that bodybuilding paradoxically gives them even as it condemns them to the manly solitude of iron.

Notes

1. *Muscle: Confessions of an Unlikely Bodybuilder* by Samuel Wilson Fussell, New York, Poseidon Press, 1991, 253pp. Page references to this book are included parenthetically in the text.

2. For a comparison with tattooing as another technique of 'permanent bodily alteration' that allows one to (re)define one's identity and position in social classifications, read Sanders (1989).

3. His mother is the noted author Betty Fussell, his father the literary critic Paul Fussell.

4. One is immediately reminded of the ads for the Charles Atlas method of bodybuilding that started appearing in American magazines in the 1940s: 'I turn weaklings into MEN.'

5. For contrast, see Joseph Alter's (1992) account of the 'somaticity' of Indian wrestlers as a masculine political theology-in-action. Practitioners of traditional wrestling (*Bharatiya kushti*) in North India see themselves as moral reformers who defend a somatic conception of society and incarnate a powerful living ideology of public health set against the 'impurities' and moral deficiencies of the existing social order.

6. Fussell (p. 154–155) writes: 'I loved the iron not for its offering of a community, but for its promise of solitude, for the chance to escape from everyone and everything.' The extreme social atomism of bodybuilding gyms is well attested by ethnographic studies such as Klein's (1986: esp. 117–119). Weight-lifting is a quintessentially solitary practice framed by a pervasive individualistic ethos actualized in relations of interpersonal competition and suspicion that exclude social bonding and collective loyalty. This is in marked contrast with the equally manly sport of boxing: the pedagogy of pugilism is interactional and collective, and the boxing gym is a central locus of male (sub)proletarian sociability as well as the support of a rich oral culture highly valued for itself (Wacquant, 1992).

7. For an interesting variation of this life organization, see the daily routine of the Australian 'Iron Man' described by Connell (1991). In a different realm, compare also with the ascetic regimen of Buddhists in Korean monasteries as depicted by Buswell (1993).

8. This is consistent with Don Sabo's analysis (1989) of socialization to voluntary pain as a badge of masculinity. For a different, more differentiated, exploration of pain as a an 'elementary human experience' and 'archetype of subjectivity,' consult Morris (1992).

9. There are many similarities here between the sensuous experience of bodybuilding and that of chronic drug addiction as described for instance by Williams (1992).

10. Bodybuilding star Arnold Schwarzenegger provides the following gloss in *Pumpin Iron* (Columbia Pictures Home Entertainment, 1980, videotape): 'The greatest feeling you can get in the gym or the most satisfying feeling you can get in the gym is *the Pump*. Let's say you train your biceps: blood is rushing into your muscles and that's what we call 'the Pump'. Your muscles get a really *tight feeling*, like your skin is going to explode any minute. You know it's really tight like somebody is blowing air into your muscles. It just blows up and it feels different, it feels fantastic. (pause) It's as satisfying to me as *coming is*, you know, as having sex with a woman and coming. So *can you believe how much I'm in heaven?* (pace and pitch picking up with a beaming smile, proudly) I'm like getting the feeling of coming in the gym, I'm getting a feeling of coming at home, I'm getting a feeling of coming backstage when I pump up, when I bow in front of five thousand people, I get the same feeling — so *I'm coming day and night*, I mean, that's *terrific*, right? (chuckles) So I'm in heaven.'

11. For an account of the 'role engulfment' of college basketball players that has many parallels, though it is less extreme, see Adler and Adler (1990).

12. During his four-year study of bodybuilding gyms in Venice, Klein (1986: 122–124) found that 'steroid use is virtually universal among male competitors and increasingly frequent among women and other competitors . . . Drug peddling is so common among bodybuilders that conversations about drugs and drug deals are barely concealed.' Indeed, he notes that it provides just about the only topic of lively social transacting among the athletes.

13. On the development of a 'parallel science' devoted to the rationalized chemical stimulation of the body in weight-lifting and other sports, read the thorough (and frightening) study by Hoberman (1992); see also Gutman's (1989) remarks on the upsurge in physical wreckage in recent competitive athletics more generally.

14. Sam's training partner Vinnie says of his own recent performance at a bodybuilding contest that 'it was as good as an erection' (p. 132). Recall the quote of Schwartzenegger likening 'the Pump' to sexual intercourse in note 10 above. Boxers also frequently compare the feeling of triumph in the ring to sexual climax.

15. To borrow the title of Lesley Hall's (1991) fascinating historical monograph of men's hidden fears of sexual inadequacy in Victorian England.

16. Using the Thematic Apperception Test, Harlow (1951) found that bodybuilders suffered from greater gender-insecurity than non-bodybuilders, as revealed by items scoring for narcissistic tendencies, faulty identification with a significant male figure, and emotional dependency. This is confirmed by Klein (1986), who reports that, in their adolescent years, most Southern California bodybuilders suffered from some physical or psychological ailment; they were often skinny, short, stuttering, or dyslexic youngsters who had disappointed their parents and with an above average need for acknowledgement and admiration.

There are, of course, female bodybuilders (as there are female boxers) but with two significant differences. First, they are widely regarded, and sometimes regard themselves, as deviants, if not 'freaks.' Second, women who pump iron have a significantly different conception of the sport. In a survey of 205 competitive female bodybuilders, Duff and Hong (1984) found that they did not desire to evolve bodies similar to those of men. They engaged in weight-lifting primarily as a means of enhancing their femininity (as conventionally defined) and their sex-appeal to men. A majority was quite wary of 'overdeveloping' or 'bulging' and none wished to emulate men in their frenzied quest for sheer bulk. Only a small minority (roughly one fifth) had an androgynous orientation to bodybuilding. Other studies have suggested also that female bodybuilders are of a significantly higher class provenance and status than their male counterparts. For further reflections on the built-in contradictions of female body-building, see Bolin (1992).

17. This is an aspect of the bodybuilding world, well analyzed by Klein (1990), on which Samuel Fussell is curiously silent.

18. According to Anthony Synnott (1992), the temple and the tomb are, along with the machine, the key analogies of the body in history.

19. A point well documented by recent historical and sociological research on masculinity (e.g., Messner and Sabo, 1990; Messner 1992; Therberge, 1991: 129–130). We know that the rise of sport as a modern, mass-based institution was closely bound up with the restructuring of gender relations throughout the twentieth century and a response to the manifold threats that this transformation posed — and continues to pose — to hegemonic definitions of masculinity. See also Loy et al. (1993) and Bloch (1987) for a broader synopsis of contemporary works on the body in culture and sport that touch on this issue.

20. Among the traumas of social inheritance, writes Pierre Bourdieu (1993: 715), 'the most unexpected is no doubt the *tearing* [*déchirement*] born of the experience of success as failure or, better, as transgression: the more you succeed (that is, the more you accomplish the paternal will to see you succeed), the more you fail, the more you kill your father and separate yourself from him; and, conversely, the more you fail (thus actualising the unconscious will of the father, who cannot fully wish his own renouncement), the more you succeed. It is as if the position of the father represented a limit not to be exceeded which, by being internalized, has become a sort of interdiction to differ, to distinguish oneself, to renounce and break from him.' Bourdieu goes on to note that this effect of 'ceiling of ambitions' is operative in cases where the father has been exceptionally successful in his occupational life.

21. Note that, whether ironically or not, Fussell's father claims for literature the very yardstick that bodybuilders use to establish the value of their craft: 'bigness.'

22. A vivid explication of the masculine *illusio* is Bourdieu's (1990) exegesis of Virginia Woolf's dissection of it in her novel *To The Light House*.

23. See Dews (1987) and Shilling (1993: 75–81) for detailed critiques of the paradoxical vanishing of the body in Foucault. Other recent instances of such poststructuralist (or is it modern?) un/veiling of the body, that is, its simultaneously designation as a paramount theoretical operator and near-total disappearance as an empirical object, are Gilman (1991), Mascia-Lees and Sharpe (1992), and Probyn (1992). For a wider discussion of the persistent inability of a sociology of the body to constitute itself as such, Berthelot (1992) and, in a more optimistic vein, Shilling (1993).

24. In a different context, a similar dynamic might lead one to embrace another masculine *illusio*, that of 'action,' which is at the basis of the criminal lifestyle, as Jack Katz's (1989) showed in his pathbreaking analysis of the sensual attraction of crime.

25. I tried to demonstrate this through an analysis of the 'body work' and occupational ethics of 'sacrifice' of professional boxers (Wacquant, 1995) on which this paragraph draws.

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