WOODY ALLEN'S BLINDNESS AND INSIGHT:
THE PALIMPSESTS OF CRIMES AND MISDEMEANORS

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Popular history, and also the history taught in schools, is influenced by this Manichaean tendency, which shuns half-tints and complexities: it is prone to reduce the river of human occurrences to conflicts, and the conflicts to duels—we and they, . . . winners and losers, . . . the good guys and the bad guys, respectively, because the good must prevail, otherwise the world would be subverted.

—Primo Levi in The Drowned and the Saved

You know, it's very important to have—to have some kind of personal integrity. You know, I'll—I'll be hanging in a classroom one day. And—and I wanna make sure when I . . . thin out that I'm well thought of!

—Ike Davis (Woody Allen) in Manhattan

In this essay, I wish to explore Woody Allen's postmodern interrogations of ethics, art and religion in our post-industrial society. I have therefore started with a postmodern turn, juxtaposing a quotation of high seriousness with one of comic intent, to show that both Allen and Levi, driven by visions of death, establish the classroom as a locus for cultural transmissions of morality. My epigraph creates what Fredric Jameson would pejoratively describe as a “pastiche” which eviscerates history through the parallel between lived experience and fiction (Jameson 65). After all, Levi witnessed death while imprisoned by the Nazis at Auschwitz, in an historical moment recounted in many classrooms; Allen, however, speaks as a comic character standing in a fabricated classroom next to an abstraction of death—a skeleton, clinically clean and framed by a blackboard, white against black, like Ike's statement of “personal” morality. For Ike, immorality is represented by Yale (Michael Murphy), to whom he speaks, saying “you cheat a little bit on Emily, and you play around with the truth a little with me, and—and the next thing you know, you’re in front of a Senate committee and you’re naming names!” Ike's
ethic totalization differs significantly from that of Levi, who, having lived with death—and its attendant pain and suffering in the most degenerate of manifestations—deconstructs a black/white, we/they, good guys/bad guys morality. In *The Drowned and the Saved* Levi focuses instead on "the grey zone of . . . collaboration," stating that "the enemy was all around but also inside, the 'we' lost its limits." As the boundaries were violated between one interpretive community and another—between Nazis and Jews—the ability to transmit, let alone see, the truth was undermined: "the survivors are not the true witnesses"; instead, the "complete witnesses" are those who "have not returned to tell about it or have returned mute"—mute as a skeleton, the presence of which signals absence, the absence of plenitude, of a black and white answer. 1

While Allen's fictional character maintains a black and white morality, his real life, re-exposed in Mia Farrow's recently published autobiography, manifests a "grey zone of collaboration" in his sexual relationship with Soon-Yi, Farrow's adoptive daughter (see Farrow). When the story of this skeleton in Woody Allen's closet broke several years ago, the uproar was reminiscent of that over the dead body of Paul de Man, the one-time guru of deconstruction at Yale University. I do not wish to open the well-documented case about de Man's collaboration with the Nazis 2 so much as to say that, in Woody Allen, de Man's skeleton took on new flesh through the reincarnation of an old issue: the interface between praxis and lexis, between physical positions and philosophical positionings. Though de Man was criticized for activities as a twenty-one-year-old and Allen for activities with a twenty-one-year-old, the ethics of both men were placed under scrutiny because of their celebrity as writers. Ironically, both, it seems to me, were merely living out the implications of the writings that had garnered them so much worshipful attention. Jon Wiener makes this point about de Man, noting how, in *Allegories of Reading*, de Man writes that "it is always possible" to "excuse any guilt" because:

> experience always exists simultaneously as fictional discourse and as empirical event and it is never possible to decide which one of the two possibilities is the right one. The indecision makes it possible to excuse the bleakest of crimes. 3

The popular media also focused upon the conflation of fictional discourse and empirical event as they described the Woody/Soon-Yi affair as a repetition of the December-May relationship between the middle-aged Ike