Apart from his published fiction since 1967 Pynchon has been writing promotional statements for various novelists some of whom were his personal friends.\(^1\) The works which he has endorsed have the value of shedding more light on the themes and concerns of his own fiction even when their methods diverge quite widely from his own. By expressing interest and approval for these books Pynchon in effect is creating a context for himself, locating his own novels in relation to those of his contemporaries. His earliest support went to Richard Farina’s *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up To Me*, a novel whose comic methods closely resemble Pynchon’s own. We have already seen how both Farina and Pynchon picked up on the Beats and popular culture. A similar path has also been pursued by the comic novelist Tom Robbins whose works suggest a direct influence from Pynchon as well as a common background.

Robbins’ first novel, *Another Roadside Attraction* (1971) expresses a reaction against what he calls ‘economic totalitarianism’, the reduction of all life to economically measurable quantities. The narrative divides into two main strands. The first centres on John Paul Ziller (an elusive combination of artist, magician and con-man) and his wife Amanda, the sexual focus of the novel, who both establish a wild-life preserve in what was a roadside diner. The second strand forms a sacrilegious comedy in which one Plucky Purcell steals the mummified body of Christ from the Vatican cellars. In reality the two narratives cannot be separated because while Amanda embodies reverence for Nature Plucky penetrates the institutions of Christianity. In his burlesque of an adventure story Robbins directs his irony against Christianity as a political force; Plucky, for instance, infiltrates an order of armed monks working for the CIA in south-east Asia. Even the myth of the Fall becomes rewritten as a triumph of censors and ‘the Management’. Like Pynchon Robbins turns towards Zen in revulsion against a discredited Christianity which has become a means of control and repression. Amanda’s celebration through
enjoyment of sexuality and fertility acts against the entropic downward drift of this Christianity.

Robbins’ second novel, *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (1976), like his other works takes its bearings from the 1960s, this time from the Beats. Its protagonist Sissy Hankshaw (like Robbins and for that matter Pynchon) grows up in the Eisenhower years afflicted with elephantiasis of the thumbs. This abnormality – which we are later guided to see as a difference – is an unavoidable physical sign of Sissy’s inability to fit into her parents’ lifestyle; and, true to their decade, they treat it as a social embarrassment. So Sissy takes the time-honoured way out by going on the road. Robbins naturally is aware enough to realize that without any explanation he would just be producing a pastiche of earlier American fiction here, so he explicitly locates Sissy’s action in the context of a national literary tradition and of recent pop culture: ‘From Whitman to Steinbeck to Kerouac, and beyond to the restless broods of the seventies, the American road has represented choice, escape, opportunity, a way to somewhere else.’ Escaping from her parents, Sissy meets and gets to know the Countess, a homosexual cosmetics tycoon and on her travels ends up at his Dakota ranch, a kind of health farm run by the cowgirls of the novel’s title. One of these cowgirls, a feminist called Jelleybean, takes over the ranch in a kind of coup but is shot down during the dénouement when law-enforcement officers surround the ranch. Robbins lightly and humorously touches on a whole series of issues here. The West – specifically Dakota – is contrasted with the claustrophobia of New York. The latter (the home of the Countess represents big business, confinement, repression. The ranch represents space and freedom. Jelleybean’s ‘revolution’ revises the sexism of traditional Western images. The arguments which she and Sissy have with the Countess question the assumption behind female cosmetics; they promote acceptance whereas the Countess is driven by disgust and revulsion. And so on.

The ludicrous plays an important role here in testing the reader’s sense of humour. Now Robbins is far more successful because his narrative is both comic and politically alert (one of the cowgirls is a ‘revisionist’; Richmond, Virginia at midday ‘felt like the inside of a napalmed watermelon’). Basically Robbins is an intense moralist and the besetting weakness in his fiction has been a tendency to the garrulous, to offer opinions about