

An Occasional Publication of the Babbington Press

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At right: "Plywood, Tagged and Annotated, July 24, 2012"

## Class Stratification in Bumblebee Hives

Peter Leroy

Plywood interests me. I don't know why it interests me. It just does.

I've had a lifelong interest in plywood as a building material and as metaphor material.

The top of the desk in my bedroom when I was a boy was made of plywood. Working at that desk initiated a lifelong interest in the stuff. It's strong and versatile. You can build desktops with it—and you can build metaphors with it.

I have a deep interest in plywood. When I was a boy, I did my homework at a desk with a plywood top. Working there, I began to understand plywood and appreciate its strength and versatility. I've made furniture out of it. I've made metaphors out of it. As metaphor-material it may not be as rich as clam chowder

or a woven sword-mat, but it has strengths that they do not.

My abiding interest in plywood began when I was a boy in the fifth grade, doing my homework at a desk with a plywood top. My assignment was to "write an essay on any topic that interests you." There I sat, trying to think of a topic that interested me, when I suddenly realized that it was staring me in the face. Plywood! Inspired, I wrote feverishly. As I wrote, exploring my thoughts about plywood, I began to appreciate its strength and versatility. In the many years that have passed since then, I've made furniture out of plywood, and I've made metaphors out of it. As metaphor-material it ranks third among my favorites, behind clam chowder and woven sword-mats.



# Class Stratification in Bumblebee Hives

(continued)

“Write an essay on any topic that interests you.” That was the fifth-grade homework assignment that inspired my lifelong interest in plywood.

After school on the day the assignment was given, I asked my classmate Spike what she was going to write about.

She popped her gum, cracked her knuckles, and said, “Class stratification in bumblebee hives, focusing on *Bombus terricola* viewed through the lens of classical Marxism. How about you?”

“I’m not sure,” I said. “I’ve got a lot of ideas.”

“Yeah, well, don’t go stealing mine,” she said, and she gave me the steel-eyed stare that made Babbington’s elementary school population tremble.

“I wouldn’t think of it,” I said.

That night I sat at my desk trying to think of a topic—other than class stratification in bumblebee hives—that interested me. While I thought, I amused myself by idly tracing the grain pattern in the plywood top of the desk my father had made for me. Chance, free will, and necessity conspired to deliver a topic, the one that was closest at hand. “Plywood!” I said in the manner of Archimedes.

Inspired, I wrote feverishly. As I explored my

thoughts about plywood, I began to understand it and appreciate its strength and versatility. In the many years that have passed since then, I’ve made furniture out of plywood, and I’ve made metaphors out of it. It is, currently, my third-favorite source of metaphor material, following clam chowder and woven sword-mats.

When my fifth-grade teacher, Miss Kendall, told me and my fellow students to “write an essay on any topic that interests you,” my first thought was that I would write on class stratification in bumblebee hives, focusing on *Bombus terricola* viewed through the lens of classical Marxism. I didn’t know much about bumblebees, and I knew nothing at all about class stratification or Marxism, but I was curious about all three, and even at that early age I was more interested in writing to learn something new than in writing about something I already knew.

After school on the day the assignment was given, I asked my classmate Spike what she was going to write about.

She popped her gum, cracked her knuckles, and said, “I’m not sure. I’ve got a lot of ideas. How about you?” Something in her manner made me think that she was fishing. She wanted my idea. She wanted to steal it.

Near right:  
“Chair with  
Plywood Back  
and Seat,  
November 21,  
2016”

Far right:  
“Plywood Siding,  
February 17,  
2012” (detail)







“Plywood in the Park, December 31, 2015”

“I’m undecided,” I said. “I’ve got a lot of ideas, too.” Then I chuckled and said, “Wouldn’t it be funny if we wound up writing on the same topic?”

“No,” she said. “That would not be funny at all, especially if you steal one of my ideas.”

“How could I do that?” I said. “You haven’t told me what your ideas are.”

She gave me the steel-eyed stare that chilled the hearts of my coevals. I shuddered.

That night, convinced that Spike had somehow seen into my mind, stolen my *Bombus terricola* topic, and was at that moment making it her own, I sat at my desk trying to think of a new one. While I thought, I idly traced the grain pattern in the plywood top of the desk my father had made for me. Something, perhaps a raised bit of the grain, drew my attention to the desktop, and there I found my topic, right at my fingertips.

Inspired, I wrote feverishly, exploring as I wrote, trying to uncover the source of my new admiration for plywood, searching for the secret underlying its strength, beauty, economy, and versatility.

I discovered the secret behind plywood’s strength, beauty, economy, and versatility in the fifth grade, when

I wrote an essay about it for my fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. Crandall.

As “plywood” implies, plywood is made of plies. It’s stratified. The outer plies, or strata, are the source of its beauty (a surface quality, superficial, “skin deep”), but if a sheet of plywood were nothing but an outer ply, it would not be strong, economical, or versatile. Plywood’s strength, economy, and versatility are emergent properties arising from its entire system of stratification.

Let’s look below the surface. The inner plies are usually made of poorer quality wood, less attractive, but much cheaper. These plies lower the overall cost, making plywood economical.

Alternating layers of wood are oriented so that the grain of each ply runs at an angle to the grain of adjacent plies. A single ply is strong along the length of the grain but weak across the grain. The alternating-orientation scheme makes plywood strong in all directions, and that multidirectional strength is the key to its versatility.

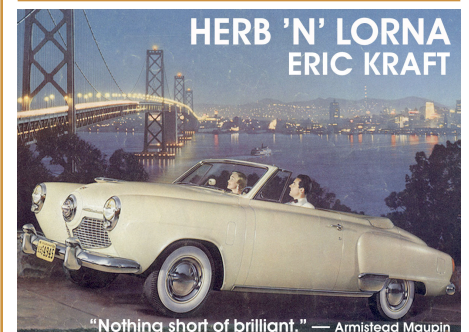
The layers collaborate. They reinforce one another. They improve one another. Every layer contributes to the whole, each according to its ability. Some users of plywood acknowledge this collaboration by

It was a cloudy, sultry afternoon. . . . Queequeg and I were mildly employed weaving what is called a sword-mat. . . . So strange a dreaminess did there then reign all over the ship and all over the sea . . . that it seemed as if this were the Loom of Time, and I myself were a shuttle mechanically weaving and weaving away at the Fates. There lay the fixed threads of the warp subject to but one single, ever returning, unchanging vibration. . . . This warp seemed necessity; and here, thought I, with my own hand I ply my own shuttle and weave my own destiny into these unalterable threads. Meantime, Queequeg’s impulsive, indifferent sword, sometimes hitting the woof slantingly, or crookedly, or strongly, or weakly, as the case might be; and by this difference in the concluding blow producing a corresponding contrast in the final aspect of the completed fabric; . . . this easy, indifferent sword must be chance—aye, chance, free will, and necessity—nowise incompatible—all interweavingly working together. The straight warp of necessity, not to be swerved from its ultimate course . . . ; free will still free to ply her shuttle between given threads; and chance, though restrained in its play within the right lines of necessity, and sideways in its motions directed by free will, though thus prescribed to by both, chance by turns rules either, and has the last featuring blow at events.

Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*, Chapter 47, “The Mat-Maker”

From his earliest student days, Degas used tracing paper to transfer an image from a printed source to his own notebooks. Later, in the 1890s, he began to use tracing paper extensively to draw and redraw his own images. “Make a drawing, begin it again, trace it; begin it again and trace it again,” he would say, as if by repeatedly drawing lines he could finally seize the very essence of a form.

Ann Dumas, “Degas and His Collection” in *The Private Collection of Edgar Degas*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997



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“Plywood in a Theater Lobby, November 19, 2016” (detail)

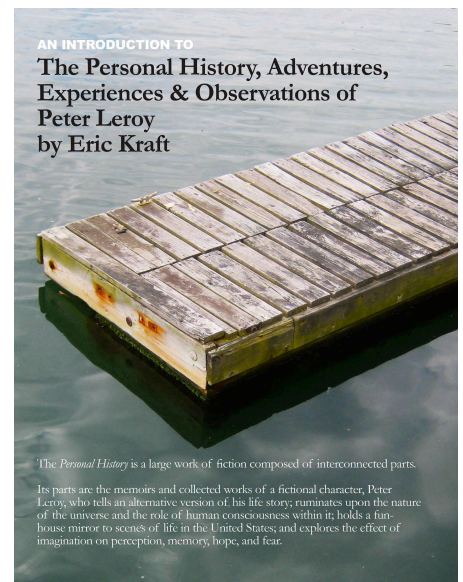
displaying the edges.

Viewed edge-on, plywood might be taken for a representation of the class stratification that obtains in the hives of *Bombus terricola*, or a representation of the layers in a life, the layers in the memory of a life, or the layers in the presentation of a life.

Years ago, I added an outer layer to my presentation of my life, a pseudonymous author, an alter ego, an outer ego. When I write my memoirs I sit on a chair with a seat and back made of plywood. I’ve been sitting on that chair for more than

thirty-nine years. My outer ego has one just like it. While I write my memoirs, he writes fiction, but he is not the type of arrogant solipsistic fictionist who believes that he alone is responsible for all the layers that lie beneath his. No. He welcomes collaboration, unlike my fifth-grade teacher, Miss Grackle, who, holding aloft the essays that my best friend Spike and I had written, said, “I find it hard to believe that two students would write on the topic of plywood unless they had *collaborated*,” by which she pretty clearly meant “cheated.”

Aux quelques rares jeunes peintres auxquels il voulait bien donner des avis, il répétait sans cesse: “Faites un dessin, recommencez-le, calquez-le; recommencez-le, et calquez-le encore.”  
Paul Lafond, *Degas*, 1918, Volume 1, page 20

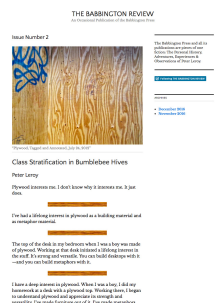


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[Paul] Lafond was a painter, printmaker, and writer who was later to become the curator of the museum in Pau (1900) and Degas’s biographer (1918–19). . . . a friend of [Henri] Rouart’s [“one of Degas’s best friends from school days”].

Marilyn R. Brown, *Degas and the Business of Art*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994, page 93

“Plywood Behind a Fence,” November 4, 2011 (detail)



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