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*New Year's Morning at the Flagstaff House (1/1/1980)*

Wittgenstein got acquainted with members of his class by having them individually to tea. I received such an invitation in 1939. There was no small talk. The conversation was serious and interspersed with long silences. The only topic that I recall had to do with my future. Wittgenstein wished to persuade me to give up my plan to become a teacher of philosophy. He wondered whether I could not do some manual job instead, such as working on a ranch or farm. He had an abhorrence of academic life in general and of the life of a professional philosopher in particular. He believed that a normal human being could not be a university teacher and also an honest and serious person.

— Norman Malcolm: *Ludwig Wittgenstein. A Memoir.*<sup>1</sup>

Note on the topography of the economic Chain of Being:

The western edge of Boulder runs up against the mountains, and is there bounded by statute by parks and open space. This defines a natural geographical ordering of the desirability of real estate as ineluctable as that defined by the ocean in California. From north to south the city extends no more than six or seven miles, and every street running east to west ends going up a hill to a house with a really impressive view, above which no one can ever build. It follows accordingly that there are a couple of hundred assholes who can look down on all their neighbors and regard them as the Little People; and thus wake up every morning,

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<sup>1</sup>Second edition, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001; p. 28.

gaze out their bay windows in unobstructed contentment at the sun rising over the eastern plains, and say to themselves, with infinite self-satisfaction, "I am the emperor of Boulder County."

To the north there are roads leading into developments in the foothills, among which are hidden mansions built by rock stars and Rockefellers.<sup>2</sup> I have seen a few, they're palatial, and many have impressive exposure to the east; though none, ironically, so impressive as the view from the cabin I lived in atop Golden Age Hill above Jamestown, ten or fifteen miles to the north and west at an altitude of 8500 feet; there though I had neither running water nor electricity the view from my outhouse went halfway to the Mississippi River.<sup>3</sup> One Fourth of July I watched simultaneously two dozen stadium fireworks shows, from Colorado Springs to Cheyenne. — A cat may look at a king; indeed look down upon a king from a considerable altitude, as it turns out. — But within the city proper the class hierarchy is strictly preserved by the mandated western border.

With two exceptions.

One is the National Center for Atmospheric Research on Table Mesa in South Boulder, which sits at about 5900 feet, a few hundred feet above the rest of the city; it wouldn't count, because it's on government property and isn't a residence, but I have always suspected they'll be forced to sell out eventually (it was one of

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<sup>2</sup> I mean this literally. I spent a few days in the late Naughties crashing at a mountain home owned by a scion of the family, an ill-tempered reformed drunk who in previous incarnations had been a source of delusional conspiracy theories, and had the Great Pyramid among senses of entitlement. The most significant impression I carried away, apart from the enthusiasm his gigantic Huskies showed for trying to hump my relatively tiny Australian shepherds, was the extent of his pantry: he really may have attained the survivalist ideal of having enough canned goods stocked to last the household for a year. For the ordinary citizen who generally found it difficult to buy food for the week forthcoming, this was indeed a revelation.

<sup>3</sup> All right, a slight exaggeration. 65 or 70 miles anyway.

those hidden subplots of the Bush administration, one that paralleled the scheme to transfer management of Los Alamos from the University of California to the University of Texas,<sup>4</sup> to fire all the climatologists and move the thoroughly bitchslapped remainder to Oklahoma, where the oil industry could keep them safely under its thumb)(and the one thing I have learned about postmodern American politics is that these dickheads never, ever give up)<sup>5</sup> and some well-connected developer, grown fat on crony capitalism, will take the place condo. — The building was designed by I.M. Pei and was featured in Woody Allen’s *Sleeper* — a futuristic fairy castle, we used to call it “Elsinore” — comprised of faux-Anasazi-sandstone towers housing numerous offices with dazzling views; the central plaza is laid out in such a way as to frame Pikes Peak to the south, though now of course it is rare that pollution permits such an unobstructed view. — I’m guessing several million a unit, once the gold-plated bathroom fixtures have been installed.

The other is a few hundred feet above the west end of University Hill, on Flagstaff Mountain, a mere bump of 6800 feet up which a road winds where, in later years after I quit smoking, I used to ride my bicycle. A schoolteacher built a cabin there a century ago, the property was somehow grandfathered, and a house and a restaurant were eventually attached. This is now a jealously guarded family heirloom, and it is hard to judge what it might be worth on the open market; many tens of millions, at my best guess. But, for the reasons I have explained, it is absolutely unique.

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<sup>4</sup> This was thwarted, but left the laboratory under corporate management which has been steadily running it into the ground ever since.

<sup>5</sup> I must now, alas, confirm my credentials as a Nostradamus by noting the Trump administration’s gutting the USDA by moving it to Kansas City. Same shit, different decade.

The restaurant consists of a kitchen and a dining room of a few dozen tables, surrounded by floor-to-ceiling windows with a view of the city below. I think there must have been fifty of them, since I remember computing that to squeegee them clean on either side, given the relative inefficiency of my technique, meant doing one hundred fifty deep knee bends. — The view in any case was spectacular. I always took ironic comfort in the reflection that, once I'd become the janitor there, even if I wasn't moving up in the world I was at least gaining altitude.

The owner, like all successful restaurant managers, was a paranoid control freak, and hated me on sight. Gradually he mellowed, but the first morning I came out the back door after finishing the job I found the kitchen manager, who had made a production of leaving half an hour earlier, lurking in the parking lot with an embarrassed expression on his face; obviously he had been instructed to hang around and make sure I wasn't stealing anything. — This pissed me off so much I went through the place the next day looking for something I might actually want to take, and found, believe it or not, in an otherwise decorative bookshelf near the entrance, a slender volume of translations from the Greek, which I promptly purloined. — And thus, no shit, I first read Heraclitus.

I learned other valuable lessons from this job, for instance that people who flaunt their wealth by buying expensive meals composed of exotic cuisine in picturesque settings are generally punished for their hubris with spectacular cases of the roaring shits.<sup>6</sup> I considered this poetic justice, and thought it was funny even though I was the one who had to scrape the dried splatters of fecal matter from the toilet seats.

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<sup>6</sup> At this point in my career I had already cleaned something like ten thousand toilets. But these were easily the worst.

One New Year's evening I got Mark Lankton drunk enough to promise he would go to work with me the following morning and take photographs. For some reason sleeping on this resolution didn't sober him up, and so he went through with it —















