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Jungle Goddess of Grandview Avenue (2006)

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Heine wrote his *Faust*¹ as a ballet. In the opening act the eponymous Doctor, *pro forma*, attempts to summon the Devil. On his first attempt he conjures up a monstrous blood-red tiger, which leaps from a flaming chasm which appears in the floor amid peals of thunder. It does not frighten him, and he dismisses it with contempt. His second attempt produces an enormous serpent, which again fails to impress him and is sent back to Hell. Demanding that the Devil appear in his most frightening shape, he conjures again. — “Suddenly the darkness is banished by a blaze of light. In place of thunder and lightning the most charming dance music is heard, and a basket of flowers appears from the chasm in the floor. It breaks apart and a lovely ballerina steps forth, clad in the usual costume, circling around the conjuror in a characteristic *pas de seul*.” — And you thought the Devil was a cheerleader.

¹ *Doktor Faust, A Dance Poem*. Translated by Basil Ashmore. London: Peter Nevill Ltd., 1952.



It's all a blur.

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Coming of age in Samoa (6/27/06)

The Wild Women Of Wongo. [James L. Wolcott, 1959. Written by Cedric Rutherford.]

Have I at last come across a movie so bad that even I can't sit through it? Don't be ridiculous:

In an eternally sunkissed Eden somewhere in the boundless paradise of the South Seas, a tribe of buxom babes who wear skins but mysteriously sport Fifties makeup and hairdos have all by some cosmic coincidence simultaneously arrived at the age of consent when a mysterious Stranger clad in black leather who speaks in Latin hexameters rides on his Harley out of the East. Doffing his signature aviator shades, he stares soulfully into the eyes of the beautiful (and absurdly zaftig) Princess Aringarosa and sets her clitoris abuzz and her very ovaries alight by quoting racy passages from Gregory Corso, winning her heart and lubricating the nether passages of her reproductive plumbing upon the spot; though not without inciting the envy of the brutish Prince Offal, a vile pig without breeding or manners to whom against her will she has been betrothed since infancy. In a dramatic trial by dragrace the two rivals rocket down a torchlit straightaway to battle for her hand, both hurtling over a sheer cliff which looms over the ocean when neither will chicken out. A long moment of suspense intervenes before a single figure is seen to clamber back over the edge. Though for the space of a heartbeat he seems to be the other, it is the Stranger. The Princess runs to his side and embraces him, grinding her hips into his, as he stares moodily over the cliff into the crashing surf below. "He was a swine," he says. "But he died like a Mandingo warrior." A Viking funeral is staged for the deceased. Huge funeral pyres are lit upon the beaches as the flaming casket is towed out to sea by an escort of war canoes and released into the equatorial currents to wander in world-girdling

Ocean until the gods shall will its release into the all-encompassing outer void. The stranger recites an elegy in an ancient tongue which is well received if not particularly well understood. The natives sing plaintive surfer ballads, hurl the ritual Frisbees of Farewell, and roast weenies over open driftwood fires. A roar is heard in the distance. A vast armada of Harleys arrives via the Polynesian interstate. "My posse," says the Stranger to the Princess. "I only hope there are enough of your sorority sisters to go around." The ensuing orgy proves that there are, but just barely. As the tropical sun rises over the detritus of the funeral wake, a new generation of Wild Women has been engendered, and the genetic heritage of the Wongonians has been perpetuated.

— No, that couldn't have been it. — No, it must have been this:

In a picturesque ruin reminiscent of Angkor Wat, crawling with strange iridescent beetles and giant serpents, hidden in the depths of the Polynesian jungle and referred to by the natives with superstitious awe as the Temple of the Dragon God, a priestess bearing a startling resemblance to Susan Sontag, albeit with bigger hooters, holds her regular Thursday office hours for the benefit of students and other members of the Temple faculty who wish to consult her on the great philosophical issues of the day. Questions are put to her about the plurality of worlds, the topological structure of spacetime, and the nature of the phase transition to consciousness in the higher vertebrates and the possibility of inducing it in inhabitants of the state of Texas, all of which she answers with preternatural fluency and a supple brilliance which dazzles her auditors. But finally a simple village witchdoctor schooled in postmodern voodoo comes forward and asks for the "answer" to the "great 'question'" of "life, "the universe, 'and "everything"''".

"That's it!" she exclaims, as gongs resound, neon lightnings flash and

crackle, and a rubber duck descends from the ceiling with a hundred-dollar bill in its mouth while she lights a cigar and adorns her upper lip with a greasepaint mustache. “You’ve asked the Secret Question!”

She presses a lever hidden beneath the mantel of the strange pagan fireplace that takes up the west wall of her office. A bookcase slides away, revealing a dim passageway leading into the heart of the sacred mountain, down which she leads the party by the light of flickering torches held aloft above their wondering faces as they regard with astonishment the strange hieroglyphic inscriptions and marvelous cave paintings which adorn the walls, into a hidden chamber deep within the earth, where a gigantic stone idol fashioned in the image of the head of John Malkovich is suspended in the air by alien antigravity plates (according to tradition, she explains, hubcaps stolen from the chariots of the gods) and speaks lengthy prophecies interrupted frequently by belches of incense. The stories change every fifteen minutes, but include the tale of an Irish student educated by the Jesuits who wanders the streets of Dublin lecturing his companions about the application of Aquinas to the aesthetic question, the adventures of a merry band of Greek mariners caught up in a waterspout and carried off to the Moon, and an existentialistic interpretation of the Oklahoma State game originally authored by Johnny Cocktail after a quart of Southern Comfort and too close a reading of *L’être et le néant*.

Energized, no doubt, by too deep a draft of the strangely intoxicating incense, the witch-doctor makes bold to ask the graven image his question. The idol scarce hesitates in its answer: “It is *not*,” it declares, “forty-two.” The witch-doctor protests that this is not a legitimate reply. — “Why not?” asks the idol. — “The question requires a positive response,” says the witchdoctor. “For, after all, there are no negative facts.” — “What?” asks the idol, in tones of incredulity. “If I assert, for example, that there is no elephant in this underground chamber, you would maintain that this is *not* a statement of fact?” — “No,” says the witchdoctor, “because — “ — “Bah!” exclaims the idol,

moving about the cavern and looking behind the graven images which decorate the walls and beneath the stone tables which are spaced about the floor, “is there an elephant *here*? No! Is there an elephant *here*? No! Is there an elephant *here*? No!” Continuing to zoom about the space with increasing speed and ever more erratic navigation, it turns over rock after rock and triumphantly displays the absence of an elephant in every instance. “Let me know when you’re willing to concede the point,” it says to the witchdoctor. — “Never,” says the witchdoctor, “for the discussion is based upon a fundamental misunderstanding.” — “What?!” exclaims the idol. “You maintain, then, that somewhere in the room, beneath this stone pillar, for instance — “ — plucking it out by the roots as it speaks — “an elephant must exist?” — “No, of course not,” protests the witchdoctor. “For — “ —

But here the discussion is at an end. For the pillar in question was the central support of the roof of the cavern. Which collapses, completely and instantaneously. And the rest is silence.

— No, that wasn’t it. — No, I think it was this:

An artist at the height of his fame wearies of his Parisian life of wine, women, and blue-noted song, sublets his garret, disperses his bling, cashes in his municipal bonds, and packs off for the South Seas, where he determines he shall live upon the beach and commence an ambitious project, a gigantic installation titled *Gidget Goes Gaussian*, fundamentally, to be sure, a fairly straightforward study of polymorphous perversity, but on so vast a scale that the work will be unquestionably be visible even at interstellar distances, and will thus serve to depict the varieties of human sexuality in graphic detail for the benefit of geek astronomers on other planets who spend their alien nights studying the Earth from afar because they can’t get laid. Shipwrecked as he nears his destination, he is carried by wayward

currents for long days and endless nights upon a floating trunk containing his possessions beneath the riddling subequatorial skies, playing demented solos on the ukulele, reading subliminal messages in the patterns of the stars, and stumbles ashore finally on the lost island of Goona, gaunt, unshaven, sunburned, more than a trifle daffy, and looking for some reason just like Frankie Avalon and talking like he's been badly lipsynched. Here he meets a tribal council of fat ugly stupid dudes who never shave and a lot of women hanging out in grass huts who are all so stacked that he has to wonder how they manage to balance on fewer than three feet. Strolling off into the interior to clear his head, he comes across Princess Whatsername indulging herself in a nude underwater swim in a sheltered grotto, relieves her of the attentions of an alligator which has taken an inappropriate interest in her delectable flesh, and proposes marriage, or at least a commingling of assets, forthwith. Negotiations are proceeding apace between the attorneys of the interested parties when suddenly a giant ape emerges from the sea and seizes the bride-to-be and lumbers off into the jungle! never to be seen again. — No! it swims back out to sea and wrestles the Kraken! — No! it leaps onto the nose of an ascending rocket ship carrying the genetic heritage of the planet into outer space and saves the world from destruction! — No! it morphs into a handsome young officer with a cruel smile and a dueling-scar who ruins her and she hurls herself into the path of an oncoming train! — No! after a carchase over the Golden Gate Bridge, a crash, an explosion, a vertiginous fall arrested by a fortunate last-second grab, and an awful moment in which she hangs by her fingernails above a yawning abyss while listening to a couple of mismatched buddy detectives crack wise about her predicament, she swings away on dangling cables into the Pacific sunset! yodeling arias from Verdi and vowing never to watch the late show again.

And that must have been the end. — I think. — In any case, for now this seems like more than enough.

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The Last Seminar (12/1/06)

I receive notice from Laver that [X], an ambitious dude pimping his brand toward tenure on another Colorado campus, will be lecturing on the Poincaré conjecture. I assure my man I shall attend, and for once make allowance for his tastes and sit with him near the front of the lecture hall, rather than in the back at the extreme right, as is my wont. — The guy has a cute summary of the problem: suppose you have a smooth compact² object and you want to hang it from the ceiling by looping a string around it; if every way you try the string slips off, must it be homeomorphic to a sphere? — This in any number of dimensions, of course, but three, famously, is the hardest case, and it has humiliated several generations of topologists. — Until now. He explains Hamilton's idea, the Ricci flow, which Perelman has now proved is correct; I have read Morgan's review article, and the argument isn't new to me, but I am struck again by its elegance; it is like a piece of mathematical physics, something Feynman might have thought of. — Nobody asks any questions, instead they all repair to the seminar room and serve pizza. — This is a rare outing for me, and I stuff my face unashamedly while I pepper the visitor with questions. — I remark my amazement at the intuitive simplicity of the inspiration: "My first thought when I read about it was that this was an idea too beautiful not to be right," I say. — "Yes," he counters, "but it's been an idea too beautiful not to be right for about twenty years." Now Perelman has made it work; spurned the money and the prizes, and retired to St. Petersburg to live with his mother. Grothendieck must be proud of him. — The discussion expands to field theories, Kaluza/Klein, and the need for higher dimensions, the room full of mathematicians grows hostile and silent, and soon I am the only one talking, because, face it, compared to these narrow specialists I

² There is a technical definition, but "of finite volume" will suffice.

basically know everything.....I can sense them muttering behind my back; it reminds me of Tech, actually. — Finally (unkindest cut of all) I finish the pizza and vanish into the dusk; wondering how Laver will explain me to these bozos. — Who was that masked man? — juvenile, I admit, but why apologize? I never get to talk, no one listens to or understands me, several decades of undelivered lectures are bottled up inside my head demanding to be heard. I already know they don't want to listen. What does that matter —

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Musil on mathematicians

“Just look at him! What would you take him for? Does he look like a doctor, or a business man, or a painter, or a diplomat?”

“But he isn’t any of those things,” Clarisse pointed out matter-of-factly.

“Well, do you think he looks like a mathematician?”

“I don’t know! How should I know what a mathematician is supposed to look like?”

“Now you’ve said something very much to the point! A mathematician doesn’t look like anything!”

[*The Man Without Qualities.*]

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White Christmas (12/21/2006)

I'm not sure what I expected of the weather today, but even if snow per se was no surprise the sheer mass of it all has been: I went out through the back yard this afternoon to take the trash out, and when I stuck a yardstick in the drift it went over fourteen inches. And it's still falling.

I'm rarely tempted by children's books; not, at least, since I broke up with my former girlfriend [K], who had been a children's librarian and never failed to recommend, indeed present as Christmas gifts, things like *The Phantom Tollbooth* and *The Missing Piece* as unsung classics of the Western tradition — not without justice, I must admit. But the habit of reading these is one of many I abandoned when we went our separate ways, like drinking goat's milk and baking bread, and fast-talking the landlord into believing you had no idea the rent check was going to bounce, and, honestly, it won't happen again. — Still, I have to admit I was intrigued by the review in the *Sunday Times* of a little volume called *The Thirty-Nine Apartments of Ludwig van Beethoven*.³ For obvious reasons I have to identify with a guy who got thrown out of every rental in Vienna. And the illustrations looked cute. ...

The local Borders turns out to be dog-friendly, meaning that now every time we walk by Natasha insists on going in to browse and try her Cute Act on the staff, who, predictably, make a fuss over her and give her treats. In consequence I keep getting guilt-tripped into wasting money on new books, which would ordinarily go against my principles. — Thus Pynchon —

³ Written by Jonah Winter, illustrated by Barry Blitt. New York: Random House, 2006.

One reason many reviewers seem to have been confused by *Against The Day* may simply be mathematical illiteracy: one theme of the novel, for instance, is the quarrel between the partisans of quaternions and those of vector analysis (the idea of describing three and/or four dimensional space in terms of “higher imaginaries” obviously fascinates Pynchon, and he of course cannot resist burdening it with a considerable load of metaphor), Hamilton’s inspiration on the bridge is mentioned repeatedly, relativity is of course a minor obsession (imaginary time),⁴ one of the principals ends up leaving the mining country of turn-of-the-century Colorado for Göttingen (thus introducing Hilbert into the plot), another spends a few chapters trying to prove the Riemann hypothesis (the Hilbert-Polya idea of associating the zeros with the eigenvalues of a Hermitian operator is mentioned), and the principal theme of the entire narrative involves the elaboration of the idea that what happens in the flow of time, reality, history, is a matter as it were of the sheet you’ve chosen on a Riemann surface and the result, accordingly, of a choice of path around certain branch points — whether you end up finding the legendary lost city of Shambhalla, for instance, can depend on which way you pass through an ancient gate on the old silk road through central Asia. — Which is not to say that I’m comfortable with the overwhelming mass of the fucking thing: Gibson managed to make many of the same points in a short story of a few pages called “The Gernsback Continuum”, and it only took an hour or so of *Sky Captain* to get Jude Law and Gwyneth Paltrow all the way to Shambhalla, which Pynchon’s heroes never quite manage in a thousand pages. — But if you’re entirely ignorant of late nineteenth-century mathematics, even less of this is going to make sense ...

⁴ Distance in Minkowski space is measured by a metric which is not positive definite, i.e. space and time appear with opposite signs. Since the terms in the expressions are squares, one can “fix” this by multiplying time by the square root of minus one. The trick has gone in and out of fashion, but proves to be useful as a formal device in quantum field theory, and was exploited by Hawking to explain away the singularity at the Big Bang.

Close to a couple of feet on the ground now. I took Natasha out for a walk (by necessity, mainly down the middle of the street) and discovered practically everything was closed — even Starbucks, to my chagrin, necessitating the purchase of a can of bad coffee at a convenience store. — Pissing me off somewhat, but admittedly it could be worse. For instance, I could be on my way to the Continental Divide with a truckload of newspapers. — When you no longer have to drive for a living, bad weather is always a joke on somebody else —

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Michael Douglas Hoye (1950-2007)



The only people for me are the mad ones, the ones who are mad to live, mad to talk, mad to be saved, desirous of everything at the same time, the ones who never yawn or say a commonplace thing, but burn, burn, burn, like fabulous yellow Roman candles exploding like spiders across the stars.....

It is a Saturday when the news arrives, and I am trying to set up a wireless network in my living room. This entails reading the impenetrably opaque documentation that has come with the accursed Linksys router, and I am reminded that the Dog always thought I should write this shit myself; even exerted his influence, albeit ineffectually, to try to get me a job as a technical writer. I wonder, briefly, whether that would have made everything better or made it worse, but of course there is no telling now. — I quit what I am doing, put on a two-volume edition of the Beach Boys' Greatest Hits, and fire

up the time machine. — News on the March: Citizen Dog.

Somewhere I have come across the advice a wise old degenerate gave his only son: that there were really only three vices, booze, broads, and gambling, and that the key to life was to pick one, and stick with it.

Insofar as gambling went, the Dog made the occasional bad bet on a football game, but never, to my knowledge, carried the practice to excess.

With regard to broads, though he was for all practical purposes irresistible to women his instinct was always to deny himself his natural advantages. I never knew him to behave shamefully, and I base this on intimate observation: on more than one occasion I saw the wives of his friends hurl themselves at him, and, despite what I would have considered mortal temptation, he always turned them down.

As for booze, however — well, we all know that story.

John Donne famously preached his own funeral sermon, and posed for his last portrait wrapped in a burial shroud. This was the kind of gesture I would have associated with Dog. Donne was obsessed with Love and Death; Dog, with Love, Death, and Football. (Not necessarily in that order.)

He once remarked to me that he drank because he wanted to die. It wasn't what he said but the way he said it that shocked me: he tossed this off as a casual aside, something he took so much for granted that he barely thought about it.

So there was a certain inevitability to the way that things turned out; something almost Greek about it. (For the intimate relationship between the Greeks and the Irish, see of course James Joyce.) It was

as if he thought himself confronted with the choice of Achilles: between being who he was, and living to his fortieth birthday. — That he made it any farther was a kind of miracle, and I think we had all begun to wonder whether maybe this was one of those cases that lay outside the order of nature; that having against all expectation outlived Jim Morrison he might, like Hunter Thompson or Charles Bukowski, survive past middle age. But no such luck, alas.

Most of Dog's friends seemed to have known him since childhood. I was different in that respect. Howard Manresa introduced us when he enlisted Dog to play drums in one of our pickup bands. Dog wasn't really a drummer, of course, at the time rather the saxophone player for Eileen Dover and the Rhythm Kings, another project of the Manresa brothers. But we needed a drummer for the gig, and Dog could play anything.

I can't say we hit it off immediately. One of the first times I saw him was at his old house on Steele Street, where Howard lived for a while after his chaotic breakup with my sister. Dog was playing a record — of course with the Dog this was just another sort of performance — some opus of the Bonzo Dog Band, and selected a cut, I forget which⁵ but an obvious Elvis parody. As always he demanded our complete attention, and then insisted on reactions from his audience. An aspiring dramatist myself, I put on my best look of intense concentration, gestured as if wrestling valiantly with the Angel of Conceptual Confusion, and asked earnestly "Yes, but what *makes* it sound like Elvis?" — The look he gave me convinced me that, if I wished to survive in the world outside the Ivory Tower, my disciple-of-Wittgenstein act was going to have to be permanently retired.

I recovered somewhat in his estimation over the next year or so — I recall in particular one epic all-night party on those premises at which

⁵ Possibly "Death Cab for Cutie" [1967], which is a parody of "Teddy Bear."

I attained distinction by being the only one in attendance who didn't stagger out of the house to puke in the bushes, though I did pass out face down on the filthiest carpet in Christendom — and when he took a new job in Boulder, Howard put us in contact, since I had a house lined up and was wondering where I could find a roommate.

We agreed to meet and discuss the matter. I forget the precise details — with the Dog, as with the Sixties, if you can remember, you weren't really there — but I think negotiations began at the Catacombs, the bar in the basement of the Hotel Boulderado, after he got off work in the afternoon. Since after a few rounds diplomacy appeared to be making progress we repaired to his apartment in Denver, and there I was subjected to a grueling qualifying examination: he began pulling books at random from his shelves, reading passages aloud, and asking me who had written them. I knocked off several without apparent effort, which appeared to cause alarm, and when I actually managed to call a couple of novels of Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters a kind of desperation seized him, and he began digging deeper and deeper into his library to find something sufficiently obscure that I wouldn't know it. Finally he found a typescript of a private-eye parody I didn't recognize, read it all the way through with great satisfaction, and then began demanding my assent to the proposition that it was perfect. When quite naturally I refused to grant it, he became agitated, but I started dissecting it phrase by phrase to prove my point, and then he broke down and confessed that he had written it himself. When I told him it was very good but still needed improvement, he broke down and confessed again, this time that it was written by Woody Allen. I told him I was unrepentant: Perelman was often perfect in his prose, but Woody Allen, never.

Then he resumed trying to find something else I didn't know. He succeeded, presently, with some poem of MacLeish, and tried the same line of bullshit, though this time I didn't believe him. When he identified it I said that I didn't know MacLeish well, though what I did know I admired, and cited "You, Andrew Marvell," which Dog

then found and read aloud. I told him someday I'd write a sonnet as a sequel and call it "You, Doctor Dog."

And eventually I did:

Address your glass, good Doctor: Here composed
The artist's hand our mortal state; confined
This tonic, body of the work; assigned
This gin, the soul, its place, and here reposed
This ice, the animating chill; supposed
This lime, a sense of loss; pulp and rind
Unconsummated union, brain and mind.
This hand was yours. Your purpose is exposed.

You hesitate? But drink. In scarce an hour
The gin evaporates; the tonic's fumed
The ice will melt; the bitter lime grow sour.
They've only mingled here to be consumed.
As we. Proceed. I have no further rhyme.
We have not wit, nor world enough; nor time.

We drank all night and into daylight, and finally — having somehow been transported back to Boulder — a dream-logic applies to any story involving the Dog, spatiotemporal discontinuities insert themselves without rational explanation — concluded at the house we intended to rent around eight o'clock in the morning. Of course I don't remember either how we got in or why the phone was still connected, but he called the property management company and began discussing terms. Since he insisted on conducting these negotiations in a thick faux-Minnesota-Swedish accent while I laughed hysterically in the background, I have no idea why they agreed to rent to us, but we took the place and moved in and the party continued without interruption for several months afterward until finally I suffered another

breakdown, quit my job, and had to move forward with the business of ruining my life. — I was grateful to him for providing this diversion, but it was clear that though the wholehearted pursuit of Dionysian self-annihilation might be his answer, it wasn't mine.

Of course I don't recall many details of our drunken conversations. I learned a great deal about music by talking to him, however. He played things for me that I never would have listened to otherwise: one evening, for instance, we racked our brains over a lengthy passage in "West Side Story" which had no discernible time signature. — "I give up," I said finally, "what is it?" — "I don't know," he said dreamily; lost in musical contemplation. — He laughed. "I think it's four/four!" — On other occasions he lectured me on subjects like the chord charts of Burt Bacharach, and why "Heat Wave" had to be played in D Major.

We both loved Mose Allison, and listened to him for hours. Indeed if I had to sum the Dog up with a single song, it would be "Fool's Paradise".

The band which had originally brought us together had harbored unusually sharp internal contradictions, and dissolved in a political firestorm when everyone fired everyone else at once; save Dog, of course, whom everyone agreed was indispensable. I explained this to him eventually, and he was outraged: "Fuck that," he declared, "I'll fire myself." And so he did, upon the spot.

One night when we were getting loaded I persuaded him that Boulder was too dull for persons of our talents, and we should move to California. "It's our destiny," I told him. "We should be working as screenwriters and getting drunk on the beach." If there were further details to this subtle argument they now escape me, but my eloquence,

such as it was, carried the day. “Done!” he declared. And we drank to that. Repeatedly.

A few months later he went to L.A. on a business trip and sent me back a postcard of the beach at Malibu. “We’re on our way!” it said. That stayed on the piano ever afterward.

The second time we lived together I had a night shift job, and not infrequently had to stagger off in the middle of the party and leave him to finish the bottle alone while I sobered up by cleaning restaurants for several hours. One night I left him with a couple of girls, sisters I think, who had materialized out of the East and were pausing in Boulder for the evening. They were both very cute, and I shook my head at the thought of the trouble they were going to make for him. I went to work, ran my ass off all night, and returned in the morning exhausted having completely forgotten what had happened until I absently walked into my bedroom and found them both sleeping in my bed, stark naked. Rarely have I experienced such complete cognitive dissonance; while they scrambled about looking for their clothing and laughing at the embarrassment this had caused us I puzzled the matter over groggily — they’d both obviously been hitting on him; why hadn’t he just done the pair of them? I suspected it was his unfailing character as a gentleman: it would have been crude to have had them both at once, and cruel to pick one over the other; why not let them cancel each other out? Anyway, it was such a good joke on me he could hardly have resisted.

He would occasionally get shitfaced and confess his undying love for someone. I can’t say that I ever took these declarations seriously, but it did seem significant that the object of his unbridled desire was invariably at least a thousand miles away; he had to keep them at a safe distance.

Because he had an obvious fear of commitment; not in some bullshit pop-psychological sense, but in the sense that he was clearly afraid that he, like his own father, might marry, beget children, and then one evening go out to the bar and never come back.

Eventually he was able to conquer this fear (it must have helped that he did finally track down his father and made his peace with him in adulthood), and did marry. I was happy to see it, but after the ceremony I watched closely and everyone did just as I did: walked up to him, shook his right hand in congratulation, and then, still holding it, without apology, took hold of the left and turned it over to be sure there really was a wedding band on his ring finger, that it hadn't all been a stage illusion, another one of his cons.

One evening I was watching him pick a sax solo off an old 45, just like they teach it in the textbooks: he played the first few bars, stopped the record, whistled the phrase, wrote it out in notation on a sheet of staff paper, and continued. I watched this for a minute or two and then remarked to him that I wished I could do that. He regarded me with the worldweary selfawareness of a guy who had repeatedly acquired and lost his learning and said, "Willy, it's a *muscle*."

I couldn't believe the depth of this remark, which I have quoted ever since. Because so much indeed does work that way. Intellectual capabilities run to flab if you neglect them, and develop if you exercise them; mathematical problem-solving ability is certainly an example. — Spinoza says the human mind is the idea of the human body; he might also have said that you develop one as you do the other, by pumping iron.

He had nonetheless an ambivalent relationship with his talent. It was obviously enormous, but he seemed unwilling to accept that; he constantly belittled his own abilities, and used this lack of faith as (of course) another excuse for drinking. But more importantly he also

seemed to use it as an excuse for a refusal to move beyond the merely imitative. That disturbed me. So though I never scolded him about his fear of commitment to women, I did about his fear of commitment to his talent. — I was berating him about this on one occasion, and played for him a song of Duke Ellington in which I'd modified the chord progression and, Dog agreed when he heard my version, improved upon it. — "Look," I said, "Duke Ellington was a genius and I'm tone-deaf, but I never hesitate to figure things out for myself. You have to do that. You have to have that confidence in yourself, whether you deserve it or not." — He seemed to agree, but was obviously uncertain. It pained me that he never really seemed to understand this.

His other failings were inconsequential. — He had a heart of gold, basically, but like any other force of nature left a swath of destruction behind him: he would loan you his last nickel, and then absently smash your priceless china with a violent gesture just because the Sooners got a first down. — Invariably I winced when I handed him my guitar, because he nearly always broke the strings; like Bullwinkle pulling the rhinoceros out of a hat, he didn't know his own strength. — He borrowed books, but never returned them; among his friends the accepted procedure was simply to wait a decent interval, and then steal them back.

One evening when we lived together I found myself trying to deal with an abrupt breakdown on the part of one of our friends and neighbors, an Armenian graduate student who had spent the best part of the day drinking himself into insensibility and, after subjecting me to a lengthy though not terribly coherent confessional, had finally lurched into his bedroom to pass out. This left me alone with his girlfriend, who, of course (this was a recurrent problem with wives and girlfriends: they really do all want to fuck the priest) decided this was an opportune moment to throw herself at me. Which left me rather conflicted, since she was [a] his girlfriend and thus [b] herself

dangerously unbalanced, not to mention at the moment shitfaced drunk, but on the other hand [c] had a build like a fertility doll and [d] was infamous for hosing anyone who crossed her path when the mood was upon her. As now obviously it was.

I took her out to the bar to stall while I tried unsuccessfully to catch up, and finally, still conflicted, wandered back to my own house with her hanging on my arm. — But here I found Dog, who rescued me immediately. She let go of me at once, collapsed in a feigned swoon upon the decaying couch where he lay slumped watching reruns of “The Untouchables”, batted her eyelashes, and gazing up at him with what focus groups had agreed was a come-hither look, said “Tell me about yourself.”

Without an instant’s hesitation Dog affected his best Bogart and replied “In 1935, I ran guns to Ethiopia. In 1936, I fought in Spain on the Loyalist side.”

She studied him intently. “You're not that old,” she said.

Though Dog cultivated the Bogart image, I never saw much similarity between them; for one thing he looked better in that white suit. He did, occasionally, remind me of Mitchum. But fundamentally the Dog was the Dog: a law unto himself, a star who shone by his own light.

One Sunday morning a few years later I was summoned to a brunch at the Broker Inn, for which he’d assembled one or two dozen of his cronies and henchmen. They were all arrayed around a long table, with Dog himself, of course, the chairman of the board, seated at the head, holding court. — The waitresses assigned to the party stood grouped to one side, watching open-mouthed. “They call him ‘Mad Dog’,” said one to the others, clearly awestruck. — I took my seat, and listened not only to Dog, who was in rare form, but to the murmuring of the others present: inevitably there was only one subject for anyone

else to discuss, and consequently I heard a constant muttered undertone of “M’Dog....M’Dog....M’Dog... .”

I realized this reminded me of a story related by a Regency wit who found himself at a dinner party during the height of Byron’s fame, when Childe Harold was the only topic of conversation in Swinging London: he could not hear more than scraps of any individual conversation at the table, he said, so the collective impression was just that, a low continuous murmur of “Byr’n...Byr’n...Byr’n...” that went on for hours.

But was he mad, bad, and dangerous to know?

I felt that somewhat. I loved the guy, but had to keep him at a distance for self-protection.

After the period when we lived together I visited him only occasionally, since it usually took a day or two to recover; then too I fell into a pattern of working more and more, not by choice but out of economic necessity, and rarely had evenings free for dissipation that were not followed immediately by mornings when I had to be at work by two. — Once by a sort of accident I ended up staying in his apartment for four days running; I think we split a bottle of whiskey every night. By the end of it I felt like a balloon that had risen to a vertiginous altitude and was tied to the earth beneath only by a slender string that might at any moment snap and set me permanently adrift; something like Marcello at the beginning of *8 1/2*, but afraid that I would *not* return to earth.

Dog, on the other hand, only grew more and more cheerful as time went on. I think in those days, when everything was going his way and nothing could stop him, no more than anything could the Duke of Earl, no cloud ever darkened his sky save for the occasional

evanescent pang of gloom when he couldn't find anyone who would drink with him.

But I couldn't keep that up forever, and knew it; as it turned out he really couldn't either, though he didn't know it yet. Or didn't want to admit it.

Then, however, everything was easy for him, he led a charmed life. He'd dropped out of school, but it never seemed to make any difference. He told me once he'd never applied for a job, they'd always been offered to him unasked for; whenever he'd filled out an application it had only been to humor Personnel just before they cut the first check.

The company he went to work for in Boulder was the *reductio ad absurdum* of the disparity in our fortunes: it had been started by a couple of guys I'd known in school — guys with whom, indeed, I'd smoked a metric ton of dope; with whom I had discussed this very business venture, though when last I'd heard it was still a kind of joke and they were starving; now by virtue of some unspecified miracle money and good fortune had fallen from the sky to land upon their heads, they'd been steered toward some unanticipated opportunity in the computer industry, had now in fact expanded so rapidly that one of them (the more blatant hippie) had been tossed out and the other rendered powerless to help me; the suits had taken over, and at their first opportunity, it seemed, had reached instead out into the cloud of flappers flocked before the gates of Hades and chosen Dog. — This would have astonished me if the authors of our fortunes hadn't dropped so many hints in the first act.

In fact when I lived with him (Act Two) he drank all night and went to work whenever he felt like it, was regarded nonetheless as a rising corporate star, and was promoted rapidly until the culminating moment a few years later when he received a phone call out of nowhere offering him another job on the East coast for half again his

current pay. After that (Act Three) he vanished from my radar for several years, and I rarely saw him until he returned. It turned out that his fortunes had continued to ascend until he'd returned to his original employer, by now rudderless and adrift in a market which had expanded with such astonishing rapidity that (the Reversal, success begets catastrophe) the self-styled genius executives who'd cashed in on the company's meteoric ascent began to panic and started cashing out. At that point their business abruptly contracted, and he'd been laid off in Chicago and had been forced, for the first time in his life, to actually look for a job. That search went nowhere, and (Act Four) he fell into depression. His girlfriend of that period told me she would leave to go to work in the morning and when she came home at night he would still be in bed. Finally she threw him out, and he went back to Denver; moved back into his mother's basement, returned to school, and finished his music degree. And then he got another job and (Act Five) started up the corporate ladder again. His spirits improved. I saw him occasionally. He seemed healthier. He got married. He appeared to prosper. But then once again the company he worked for misread the market; downsized; he found himself unemployed and unemployable. His health declined. His finances collapsed. In the end, I gather, by bitter irony, he was following in the footsteps of my failures and trying to get on at the Post Office.

So they fooled me, I guess. Everyone knows a comedy ends with a marriage. But a tragedy always ends in death.

Donne fell into depression in his thirties, at the nadir of his fortunes, and wrote a strange theological work called *Biathanatos*, which defended the thesis that "Selfe-Homicide is not so Naturally Sinne, that it may never be otherwise."

Realizing that it could only land him in deeper shit than he already found himself in, he circulated the manuscript only among trusted confidantes, and it was not published until after his death.

About it Gosse remarks: “There is prefixed an enormous list of nearly a hundred authorities quoted in the body of the work, among them being such names as those of Schlüsselburgius and Pruckmannus, at which the modern eye gazes with respectful awe.”

Even before he was gone the fact of the Dog had long since comingled with his legend in my imagination; typical was a letter to Johnny Cocktail I wrote at the beginning of 2001, based loosely on *Le Petit Soldat*, in which I fancied him exiled to Afghanistan and adopting the identity of Osama bin Dog, the Sword of Allah, waging slapstick comic jihad against the godless West. — I never regret my silly jokes,⁶ but I have to admit by the end of the year this read very differently.

One evening when he was still working in Boulder he decided he needed something from the office; we were with some other people — fortunately, since neither one of us should have been driving — who took us out to the old corporate headquarters on 55th Street, on the eastern outskirts of the city. On the way back — it must have been about ten o’clock — we had to stop for a railroad crossing. We sat there for a minute or two, and then suddenly he looked at me, full of excitement. “Let’s do it!” he exclaimed. “Let’s hop the train!” — I shrugged: what the fuck. — We jumped out of the car before anyone could stop us and ran up to the tracks. It was a slow-moving freight, and no life-threatening danger was involved: I ran after it for a couple of steps, grabbed a ladder on a tank car, climbed up a rung or two, and then dropped back to the gravel; proof of principle, mission accomplished. — Dog, on the other hand, maybe just because he was more completely shitfaced, refused to let go and was carried fifty feet off the road before he fell away into the underbrush. He limped back,

⁶ Not even this. At least at the beginning of 2001 I knew who Osama bin Laden was. Bush, Cheney, and Rumsfeld did not.

transported with exhilaration. — “We hopped a train!” he exclaimed, over and over again. — “I guess we did,” I said. — I don’t think I ever saw him so happy.

I let the Beach Boys run their course, from “Surfin' Safari” to “Good Vibrations.” “All Summer Long” is next to last, and particularly difficult, since I can still hear the Dog singing it. Not for us now.

When the album ends, I pull the Linksys router back out of the box. I hook it up, and plug it in, and spend another miserable hour parsing the ambiguities of the impossible documentation before finally, despite the best efforts of its authors, I get the fucking thing to work.

And this, I realize, is the way that things will be from now on.

Because I have been thinking about a conversation I have had this evening with a friend about the Dog's demise.

She said that he was larger than life; and I of course agreed.

But that had seemed too easy to say, and it is a kind of curse that lies upon me, that I have to think about anything that seems too easy; just as I had to wonder aloud what *made* a parody sound like Elvis.

So I see now that this wasn't it exactly. Because it wasn't just that the Dog was larger than life. It was that life had to expand to accommodate him.

He made the world a larger place. And that made it larger for the rest of us when he inhabited it.

The colors were brighter and more vivid; the chords more consonant, the harmonies richer, the melodies more expressive. Everything felt different, and tasted better. The salsa was hotter, the margaritas were

stronger, the jokes were funnier, the farts were ranker.

A football game could become an epic drama. A railroad crossing could become a scene of high adventure.

And so the world is smaller now. It is not a world in which mad poets wrap themselves in their winding sheets to preach their own funeral sermons any longer. It is a world of bad prose and Linksys routers: alien, flat, metallic, colorless, mechanical, and dull.

I miss that larger world. And I miss the Dog. It cannot be the same without him.

So in America when the sun goes down and I sit on the old broken-down river pier watching the long, long skies over New Jersey and sense all that raw land that rolls in one unbelievable huge bulge over to the West Coast, and all that road going, all the people dreaming in the immensity of it.....the evening star must be drooping and shedding her sparkler dims on the prairie, which is just before the coming of complete night that blesses the earth, darkens all rivers, cups the peaks and folds the final shore in, and nobody, nobody knows what's going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of getting old, I think of Dean Moriarty, I even think of Old Dean Moriarty the father we never found, I think of Dean Moriarty.⁷

⁷ I take it for obvious that the fronting and concluding quotes come from *On The Road*. — If you want to hear Kerouac himself read this final passage, see the conclusion of the documentary *What Happened To Kerouac?* [Richard Lerner and Lewis MacAdams, 1986].

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The value of high school (2/9/07)

“Art is born of humiliation.” [Auden.]

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Celeste at the Alexanderplatz (2/18/2007)



{...}

Send in the Clowns (3/23/2007)

Somewhere I have come across the sentence “Chuck Barris was the Pablo Picasso of game shows,” which I find impossible to parse.

{...}

Tasha by the creek (3/23/2007)





Pillow talk.⁸

⁸ Impossible to include without paying *Playboy* a billion dollars, alas.

{...}

The girl can't help it (5/11/2007)

Sleeping with Bad Boys. [Alice Denham, 2006.]

The Sixties. The Fifties. They came after the Forties. They began. They ended. What did they mean? What could one phenomenally stacked Southern girl know? I pushed my 38-DD headlights out and gave the mousey gray men in the green eyeshades my fourteen-hundred-watt smile. Their puny members quivered in their bourgeois boxer shorts. Their cameras went off prematurely. Outside gunshots announced the assassinations of Norman O. Brown and Herbert Marcuse. "Let us go then, you and I. When the evening is spread out against the sky," I murmured. "Like a patient etherised upon a table," Lemmy Caution replied. His throbbing Ford Galaxie hummed down my darkened boulevards, glistening with lubricious neon. "We're on a journey to the end of the night," Charlie Parker agreed, dying abruptly of an overdose. Not to be outdone, Mailer drained another bottle of bourbon. "The white Negro must dare to walk the plank," he said. He ripped the clothing from his Jewish-dumpling body, and naked rode a unicycle back and forth upon a tightrope stretched between the bestial and the divine far above the unforgiving pavement of anonymity. "I sing the body dielectric!" he exclaimed. "I advertise myself!" His were not, I perceived, the Olympian testicles of Hemingway. I ignored them, and the question they presumed. His wife took umbrage nonetheless. She stripped and attempted to smother me with the sacred melons of the writer's spouse. Robert Evans took notes and sold the treatment to Doris Wishman for Chesty Morgan. Suddenly James Dean, William Gaddis, and E. Howard Hunt made their entrance. Gaddis had exquisite cheekbones and the biggest dick, though I quarreled with the conceptual premises of *The Recognitions*. I disrobed and they cast lots for my garments. I realized suddenly that I had to write, no matter what the world might think. "Let's fuck and then you can cook and do my laundry," said the one in the funny hat.

“Quiet,” I said. “I’m working on my ‘a’s.”

The Sixties. The Fifties. James Dean hurtled off the road in his Porsche Spyder. This never would have happened if he hadn’t dumped me for that notalent Italian bitch. Bettie Page was shameless. Was there anything that slut wouldn’t do? Katherine Anne Porter had great boobs, even though she was seventy-six. The Mamie van Doren of her day. No, Mamie Van Doren was the Mamie Van Doren of her day. Never mind that, there was war in Vietnam. Astronauts circled the earth every ninety minutes. Literary giants circled my pudenda every ninety seconds. Brando, that enigma. I drenched myself with Mazola and, nipples ruby-red as laser beams, posed wrestling a giant octopus. Sucker marks darkened my aureolae for moons thereafter. Bettie Page would have done a threesome with a squid and a sperm whale.

The Fifties. The Sixties. The members of the camera clubs drooled upon their bibs, and left their lenscaps on. I did paperback covers. I did movie posters. I did comic books. I was Aelita, Queen of Mars. I was Sheena, Queen of the Jungle. I was Azusa-Pacific, Queen of the Khyber Rifles. I was all of the Girl Gun Runners of Saigon, except the one in the upper left. I was Secret Agent X-15 of the OSS, though Saul Bellow agreed with me that X-27 would have been better. Number ruled the cosmos, said Greek philosopher Pythagoras. Eros ruled the human imagination, said Viennese psychologist Sigmund Freud. Folly ruled the hearts of men, said Renaissance humanist Erasmus. Failed promise and the search for lost time ruled the five and dime, said Jimmy Dean Jimmy Dean. I posed for Nugget Gent Bent Swank Rank Dank Crank Stud Schtup Schwing Boing/Boing and El Kabong. “My presence in this narrative is a statistical improbability,” said mathematician Patrick Suppes. “My presence in this narrative is a symptom of the emergence of a higher consciousness,” said LSD advocate Timothy Leary. “My presence in this narrative is a logical necessity,” said article-omitter Alice Denham.

James Baldwin. Slight. Sensitive. Gay. Black. Not white. Not gray. Strasberg. The Method. The Lack Thereof. Philip Roth was insatiable. I worked on my 'g's.

Pictures of me began to appear on postcards everywhere.

Pictures of me appeared on billboards in the heartland. The Bible Belt revolted and seceded from the Union. Having developed a taste for armed insurrection, they seceded from themselves and came back. Nobody noticed.

Pictures of me were projected onto the Moon by NASA rocket dweebs who had no girlfriends. Fascinated, we smoked many more cigarettes and drank much more whiskey.

The East Village. Could that be William Randolph Hearst? He seemed fragile somehow, weighed down by age and the burden of his millions. I feared that if I dropped his name I might break it.

Hemingway. Yes. The bullfights. And then he shot himself.

Money came. But then it went. Historians debate the significance of this. Sex clubs opened. The universe expanded. Pictures of me radiated outward into the cosmos, borne upon the cosmic winds. With magnifying glass and infrared lantern I dusted my diaphragm for fingerprints. The butler did it. I took my troubles down to Madame Ruth. You know, that gypsy with the gold-capped tooth. "I do not find/The Hanged Man," she said. "Fear death by childbirth."

Jack Kennedy nailed everyone but me, though Michel Foucault argues it would have been the best thirty seconds of his life. "Still, one must imagine Sisyphus is happy," said Albert Camus as he expired in an automobile accident. Simone de Beauvoir invented the Second Sex. Science labored to discover a Third and a Fourth. Undaunted, I continued to investigate the First.

I was not a kept woman. I could not be a kept woman. I would never be a kept woman. I would not, could not keep. My shelf life was inadequate. I accessorized poorly, and shopped not for ball and chain. Collars made my neck break out in a rash. I read Dostoevsky and listened to Bartok. They would have loved my tits.

New York in the Fifties. Paris in the Twenties. The solstices. The pregnant pauses. Which was Geist, which Zeit? When I ask not, I know; when I ask, I know not. If my clothes fell off in the forest when there was no one there to watch, would the photographs be sold to the usual venues? to Cavalcade, Escapade, Stag, Bachelor, Dude, Duke, Ace, Modern, Ancient, and Medieval Photography, True Action, Equally Valid Opposite and Equal Reaction, The Journal of Molecular Biology, The Paris Review, Male, Men, Nude on the Moon, Soldier of Fortune, Planet Stories, True Detective, the Philosophical Review?

Alexander Grothendieck. I never heard of him, nor did I attend his legendary Seminarie de Geometrie Algebrique, where shutters would have clicked as men refused to take me seriously. But he would have brought me to the casting couch in his office at the Institut des Hautes Études Scientifiques, and declared his right to do mathematics in my every topos. His chalk, I am confident, would not have gone soft upon the blackboard of a woman who dared to be his equal.

We smoked, We drank. We bulged. We invented bulging. Our jeans were so tight I discovered my clit. "That's it over there," said Gore Vidal. "It dots the 'i' in 'Levi-Strauss'." "No," said Ad Reinhardt, "it's the thing at the end of the row of buttons." He painted it black as a joke. As always the critics didn't get it.

We drank to excess. Men were allowed to drink more than women, because they did not suffer penis envy, with the possible exception of James Earl Jones. The Forties. The Thirties. The Jazz Age. The Age

of Bronze. What were they thinking? We picketed Anthony Scalia's office for abortion rights. Too bad we didn't fucking bomb it. The Sixties. The Age of Reason.

Richard Alpert. The war, the drugs, the age of liberation. "You are all a lost generation," said the woman of great wisdom. "Well, maybe just a really stoned generation." Faulkner. Yes. But what about this kid Truman Capote? Historians weigh the relative significance of their dicks. Uncharacteristically bashful, nude sunbather Henry Miller covers himself with his hat.

Joseph Heller. He wasn't famous yet. Then he was. "Why haven't we ever balled on the top of a Ferris wheel?" he asked me mournfully. "You're married, Joe," I said. "And think of the scheduling difficulties." Nodding hello to the Lion Tamer, the Horse Whisperer, the Dishwasher from the Wailing Wang, Hurricane Carter playing upon his blue guitar, and other members of my three o'clock. "Oh well," he said. "what the hell." He danced a jig and left the room walking on his hands. Outside, more gunshots. Nixon was attempting a military coup. Meanwhile sexual intercourse had recently been invented and it showed much promise. I finished the first half of the alphabet and called Hugh Hefner on a whim and said I'd flash him my high beams if he'd publish it. "Sure baby," he said, using a screwdriver to adjust the expression of his face. "Look what I have under my robe. It rhymes with 'guerilla insurrection.'" Sure enough in Bolivia Che Guevara was striving to raise the consciousness of the peasants. Where would it end? Hefner was dispassionate and metronomic and methodical and substantial and boring and possessed of an accountant's soul though since a publisher potentially a means to an end and had a great stereo. He adjusted his staying power with a set of sockets and a pipewrench. I watched myself search for adjectives in the mirrored ceiling of his seven-acre bedroom. My father had a heart attack. My mother hated me. My father had a heart attack. My mother hated me. "Here's looking at you, kid," said my darling whitehaired Dad as his arteries cemented shut. My mother hated me.

“Why don’t you get a job, and marry a wealthy newspaper magnate,” she asked. “I can’t,” I said. “I have to write. It is my destiny, my kismet, my raison d’être.” She shrieked her incomprehension. I worked on my ‘q’s. The long loops indicated genius. J.D. Salinger published *Franny and Zooey*. The short loops suggested a predilection for the reverse cowgirl position. My mother was a psychotic bitch. Mailer wondered why we were in Vietnam. My apartment was two hundred thirty-six and a quarter square feet. Catch-22 sounded better than Catch-18. Though I would have preferred two to the catchier fifth power. Rod McKuen published *Song of Myself*. No, that was someone else. Rod McKuen was not Whitman. Whitman was not F. Scott Fitzgerald or E. Power Biggs. I worked on my ‘t’s and then on my ‘a’s again. A background in ballet helped. Jack Kerouac’s girlfriend answered the door in the nude and put us up for the night. Lyndon Johnson was disgusting. “You are an adventuress,” said the man of the hour when he beheld my spectacular rack. I strove to remember what man, which hour.

The Fifties. The Sixties. And then more decades. The end.

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Yankee Doodle Dandy (7/4/07)

The system of my reading defies rational description and certainly cannot be explained without photographic evidence of the chaos of my living room, but a minor landslide on the back of the couch night before last unearthed Greil Marcus's *Lipstick Traces*, which I had been perusing sometime in the last couple of months, and I finished it off — really remarkable; for a guy who started out at the butt end of rock and roll journalism, Marcus has done his best to turn himself into Adorno. — The extent of his research was astonishing; one favorite passage, which he dug up somehow from an account of Berlin in the Twenties, went as follows:

One of the most curious symptoms that showed all was not right with Germany was the extraordinary number of people who thought they were Christ Each one had his apostles and his disciples. They were so numerous that one day they decided to hold a Congress of Christs to find for themselves the true Christ among the impostors. As it was in the summer and in Thuringia [Marcus explains that this has traditionally been “a focal point of religious mania”] the Christs seemed to sprout like mushrooms. The meeting was organized in a large meadow near a town, and Baader [the hero of the piece — a famous Dadaist] did a fantastic thing. As he was then a journalist, Lufthansa had offered him a pass which enabled him to make whatever trip he wanted; free, if he went to an important rally in Germany. He called the company and asked them if he could be brought to Thuringia and set down in the middle of the meadow. All of the people at the rally stood up and formed an enormous circle. Each Christ went to the middle, and behind him came all of his supporters. The spectators pushed from behind and then all eyes went up to see Baader descending from the sky. He landed, and then went away. They saw his face, and were rendered

speechless.

At which, of course — not least because I remembered Woody Allen's All-Russia Village Idiot's Convention — I laughed my ass off.

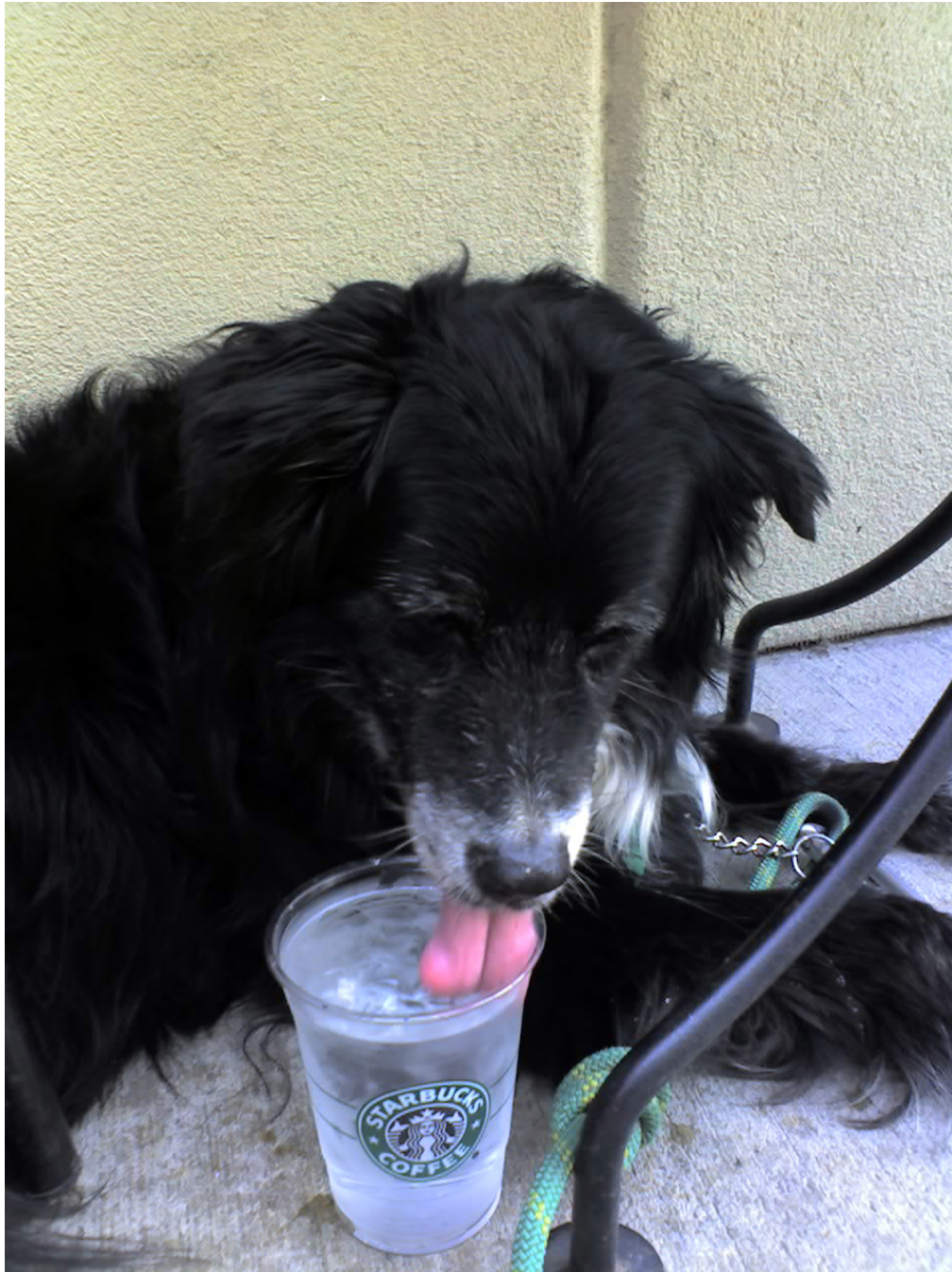
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Dog on the disadvantages of aging (circa 1981)

“The warranty runs out when you turn thirty. I’ve started to fart dirt.”

{...}

Natasha at Starbucks (7/31/2007)



Any film, no matter how bad, may provoke epiphany, and the tepid spy thriller *Swordfish* [Dominic Sena, 2001] was no exception — that little thrill of revelation when Hugh Jackman, World’s Greatest Hacker, walks into a Starbucks with John Travolta and, when prompted, orders a triple espresso. — Here was a stupid movie⁹ with an absurd premise, and here, nonetheless, was the perfect order. After seeing that I never ordered anything else.

My dog, however, preferred ice water. Particularly when the temperature went into the nineties, and even a modest stroll through the campus could overheat her.

⁹ Actually it’s interesting because it is such a perfect example of the pathology of the three-act dogma: the romance of the hacker is just the romance of the swordsman, and therefore we should [one] introduce him in some rustic exile (Jackman is indeed living in a trailer in Midland, Texas, working on the oil fields, to which Halle Berry is dispatched to summon him), [two] after overcoming his reluctance send him on a journey to [three] attempt an assault on a fortress, in which he fights a duel with an antagonist which ends ambiguously as he is overwhelmed by superior numbers, so that [four] he gets tossed into the dungeons, from which [five] the girl (there’s always a girl in the picture) springs him, setting up the final confrontation and (after a fraught moment when it seems he will fail) triumph. — Lacking any sense that this is the Errol Flynn movie they were supposed to be writing, and having no way of artificially enhancing the nonexistent visual excitement of hacking — there is even less to *watch* than in chess — besides showing someone typing furiously, the authors kill time for an hour between introduction and ridiculous action-movie conclusion; literally nothing happens, save Travolta hamming it up as a mad spook and Ms. Berry taking her shirt off. (For this, she noted later, she made an extra million, or “five hundred thousand a tit.” Clearly she was underpaid.)

{...}

The problem of the dilettante

...he began many projects but never finished any of them, feeling that his hand could not reach artistic perfection in the works he conceived, since he envisioned such subtle, marvellous, and difficult problems that his hands, while extremely skilful, were incapable of ever realizing them. And his special interests were so numerous that his enquiries into natural phenomena led him to understand the properties of herbs and to continue his observations of the motions of the heavens, the course of the moon, and the movements of the sun.¹⁰

(What have I got? A thousand not-quite-finished reviews of that many worthless and unremarkable feature films?)

¹⁰ Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Artists*. Transl. Julia Conaway Bondanella and Peter Bondanella, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991; p. 287.

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Wearable computing (2/9/2009)



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Tasha in Santa Fe (3/15/2008)





Play Misty for me.

{...}

Female Vampire (3/25/2008)

... I find myself explaining to Cliff that *Female Vampire* [1973] was indeed the work of the legendary Jesús Franco, director of *Succubus*, *Venus in Furs*, *A Virgin Among the Living Dead*, *Oasis of the Zombies*, *Sadomania*, *Barbed Wire Dolls*, *Vampyros Lesbos*, and a hundred-odd other titles; that it starred Lina Romay, an improbably gorgeous starlet who would do literally anything in front of the camera; that Franco had married her because after all who else; and that the film had been known under many different titles, among them *La Comtesse noire*, *Yacula*, *Jacula*, *Bare-Breasted Vampire*, *The Bare-Breasted Countess*, and *Naked Vampire*, though for some reason the obvious *Blowjob of Doom* was not one of them. — “It has the distinction,” I noted, of being one of the few movies (the Julie Smith vehicle *Survivors Exposed* was another) to have given me a continuous boner for an hour and a half.”

{...}

Another story you can tell against me (4/2/08)

Having, for some reason, attached an unquestioning credence to the prognostications provided by the online weather services I consulted regarding the prospects for dry roads on the morning of the 31st, I reserved a room in Vegas for Monday night and only at the last minute [prompted somewhat by the insomnia natural to my state of anticipation] decided to get up early and leave at five, just in case. A fortunate choice, since the idea of taking the direct route over I-70 turned out to be addlepatated at best, and I discovered rapidly that [duh] conditions projected for Boulder, Glenwood Springs, and Grand Junction do not, to say the least, interpolate smoothly to, say, the top of Vail Pass — which I would not have reached at all if I hadn't staggered into an auto parts store in Silverthorne after several hours en route and bought a set of cable chains, which, not to put too fine a point on it, saved my life. — By the time I got to Vail itself, of course, it was really just raining, and as I was sitting in a heap of slush trying to get the chains off a Paul Giamatti look-alike got out of his SUV, pointed at the Miata with a big grin, and said, "That's a great winter car." — "No shit," I said.

After which I got to Grand Junction, finally, at one-thirty in the afternoon; looked at the sign that said it was just over five hundred miles to Vegas, shrugged, floored it west on the emptiest interstate I have ever seen in my life, and made it all the rest of the way by eight-thirty. — Whereupon I gained the curious distinction of being the only guy out of several thousand people on the Strip who was out walking his dog at nine o'clock on a Monday evening. Well, fuck them if they can't take a joke.

All this to let Tashi take a bath in the Pacific.



{...}

Pasadena, Capital of the Nineteenth Century (4/7/2008)

Robert Millikan, founding father of the California Institute of Technology, seen here in the company of one of his degenerate progeny — and with W.C. Fields, from whom he was, apparently, separated at birth:



{...}

Natasha on the beach at Monterey (4/7/2008)



{...}

Dick sizes of the rich and famous (5/18/2009)

Sign of the times: a well-maintained and seemingly affluent young lady in a “Broke Is The New Black” tanktop going through a dumpster in the adjoining alley... .

{...}

Bulletin board (5/18/2008)



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The Beat and the Buzz (5/20/2008)

..... you say: "I suppose it is axiomatic that talent, however, defined, is the fundamental requisite for success."

But what is talent? What is success? ...

... the myth to which everyone gives unthinking credence still, even though we ought to know better, is that the artist is a creator, the rival of God Himself; one who makes things up out of nothing, brings order out of chaos.

From which it is supposed to follow that the artist answers only to inner compulsion, some urge to novelty, some drive to create — the grip of the divine madness — and that the presence or absence of an audience for his endeavors is entirely irrelevant: he works, as it were, only to provoke the envy of God; which is as much as to say, to satisfy himself alone. And no one else matters: no one else's opinion; no one else's input; no one else's perception. There's almost something solipsistic about it: the Other is irrelevant; and may as well not exist. Art for art's sake is for the artist alone.

There is a certain plausibility in this thesis, since there are, observably, such compulsions, and people who are particularly susceptible to them....

On the other hand we have to realize that this isn't exactly *a priori* truth — because, significantly, nobody thought this before, say, William Blake — and therefore this idea was, itself, historically the product of a sort of act of creation; and that a lot more people have behaved like the Romantic ideal of genius since 1800 than ever did before that. (Compare, for instance, your picture of Beethoven with

your picture of Mozart.)

So this is not some kind of natural necessity, but something more like a convention we employ when we're thinking about artists and how we want them to behave.....

And before 1800 everyone took it for granted that art was fundamentally imitative, that (in the jargon of the day) it put the mirror up to nature;¹¹ that it was something more like a species of social activity. — That you wrote, for instance, not by virtue of possession by the Muse (this was by now discredited pagan superstition), but to amuse and instruct other people — that the value of what you did was not intrinsic, but lay in what others thought of it. — So if you were to bring the greats of eighteenth-century English literature back from the grave and explained modern theories of the artist to them, Swift would laugh, Pope would react with baffled incomprehension, and Doctor Johnson would undoubtedly rip you a new asshole.

Anyway this divine-inspiration picture is exaggerated. Art isn't mere mimicry, of course; there is something transformational about it. But then mimicry isn't mere mimicry either (the deepest statement I know on this subject is Gaddis's novel *The Recognitions*); and art at least begins in mimicry. — In fact artistic talent is almost always first evidenced as a gift for mimicry: I've known any number of guitar players, and no matter what they went on to become, they all started out by imitating Chuck Berry.

Moreover the picture of the artist who labors untiringly because he's possessed by inspiration, though entirely accurate, is more than a little deceptive. Because, actually, anyone who's absorbed in a job behaves the same way. — I have a friend, for instance, an eccentric hippie craftsman from South Africa, who builds bicycles in the basement of a

¹¹ Terry Gilliam makes this a joke in *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* [1987].

shop a few blocks from here; he labors endless hours for little or no money, sleeps in the corner among his frames a few hours every night, and throws tantrums just like Beethoven's when people — even the people he's supposedly working for — interrupt him when he's trying to get something done. And it's not like he ascribes cosmic significance to the manufacture of bicycles — he's very well-educated (he went to Cambridge) and comes from an obscenely wealthy family of imperialist exploiters of the black laboring masses. It's just that he believes, as most people do, that work, in and of itself, does have cosmic significance; and it should be taken seriously.

In fact it's a sort of Puritan mirror-image to the Romantic myth, that people have to be whipped into working. Quite the contrary people love to work; and live to work. If their work seems inconsequential they'll project significance upon it, to make it seem more important; and this is, in fact, why they love it when their work requires them to do difficult and dangerous things. (The extreme case is war.)

Art may indeed require a measure of inspiration to enhance its value. But the idea itself, notoriously, is something that comes to you offhandedly..... in fact "creativity" so-called is mostly about the energetic pursuit of making things. This has little or nothing to do with originality. (To pick one out of a few billion examples, I think you said you knew Michael Bay, for instance.) — This is something which has always been obvious to me because I spent many long hours in my wasted youth listening to forty-five minute stoned organ solos in the middle of "Light My Fire", but others, apparently, had not my educational opportunities (or maybe thought the stoned organ solos were good, I don't know), and continue to worship the phenomenon blindly. — But creativity, actually, is quite common, Real originality by definition is not.

Moreover biology suggests, and the design of computer algorithms confirms, that there is a mechanism employed in innovation; and that, mostly, it involves on the one hand slight variations of whatever sort of

genome you're using to describe a situation (how you code it — which is always somewhat arbitrary, but the point is that you always *can* code it),¹² and on the other the recombination of familiar elements in an unfamiliar way by some variation of the principle of taking chunks from two similar genomes and swapping them with one another. (Perhaps you recall Buck Henry sitting down in Tim Robbins' office in *The Player* and explaining deadpan about his movie idea that “It's *Ghost* meets *The Manchurian Candidate*”; this is almost exactly it.)

Note that these mechanisms are, probably out of some deep requirement of natural necessity, rather conservative; one must avoid what in biological analogy would involve stuffing your brain up your ass, or leaving your kidneys out entirely (though replacing them with paper filters might, under some circumstances, constitute an acceptable experiment.) — And, in fact, innovation as we observe it in nature — and it is very important to understand that these processes are part of the natural order, not outside of it, part of the subject-matter of an abstract (and, yes, probably mathematical) theoretical biology — is very conservative: when organisms reproduce themselves, though their progeny are always very slightly different (thus allowing evolution) they have to be very nearly identical; when engineers produce new designs, they change as little as possible, because radical alterations almost always fail (usually in embarrassing fashion); when entrepreneurs start new companies, they take proven corporate organizational structures and experienced personnel and adapt them to produce new products — which differ not so radically from familiar products that their prospective buyers will not recognize their potential usefulness; etc., etc.

Art at any rate is no different: people do new things constantly (fashion by definition demands novelty), but they're always related by elaborate relations of similarity and analogy to familiar objects — because otherwise the audience would not recognize the work as *art*,

¹² Another statement of Church's Thesis.

wouldn't get it, wouldn't think it was cool, and therefore (we all recognize this is important) wouldn't *want* it — and the whole apparatus that educates and socializes the people who make the work (isn't it interesting that training is essential? I should take a moment here to dump on the myth of the untutored natural genius as well), the people who appraise and appreciate it, the people who market it, and the people who buy it, though flexible and adaptable cannot function properly if variation is not more or less continuous and thus, measured step by step, slight.

So: the Romantic myth of the Artist notwithstanding, talent is less creative (in the sense of being originitive) than imitative; the mechanisms which produce original work are closely analogous to the mechanisms of evolution; and, in fact, the whole process of finding a place in the art world (whether as manufacturer or marketer or author of descriptive brochures) is almost exactly like varying the genome that describes a creature until it finds an ecological niche in which it can survive.

Which isn't all that I would say, or exactly the way that I should say it. But obviously one ought to go on about this to the length of several books, and we haven't time for that at the moment.

Thus far talent, anyway.

As for what constitutes success: I always quote Freud here, that the goals of the (male) artist are simply honor, power, riches, fame, and the love of women.

What Freud goes on to marvel at is the paradox that, quite unlike other men (make this gender nonspecific if you like), the artist obtains his desires simply by fantasizing about them. (I have never ceased to marvel at this myself; and, of course, keep trying to get it to work for me.)

But note that these rewards are all socially defined: honor is the respect of one's peers and associates, power has no meaning outside the social fabric, riches are a quantified means of exerting power, fame is the adulation of the masses, and the love of women is the socially-objectified alternative to what Anthony Burgess once remarked in connection with Dylan Thomas was the fate of the writer, whose work is inevitably solitary — namely, to spend a lot of time jacking off.¹³

Accordingly one must conclude that “interpersonal relationships are a crucial factor in making success possible” is beyond being true: it's tautological.

As for how the art world really works — well.

The significance of the work of art, as Wittgenstein said about the meanings of words and sentences, derives from the social network, from its use in the human community — from its life and the role that it plays in the human world: if a tree falls in the forest when there's no one there to hear it, it may or may not make a sound; but it certainly does not make music.

And though talent means something — some people can draw and others cannot, some have tin ears and others have perfect pitch — the expression of talent depends on a variety of factors: it requires stimulation, for example, which can take the form of influence or competition, it thrives in interaction (there's a principle here akin to the familiar economic truism that the more money you make the more you can spend), and it is encouraged by positive feedback in the forms of recognition and economic reward. — Wolfe¹⁴ asked rhetorically why, if they sold the same paints in Ohio, everyone was queueing up to rent a loft in Soho? and the answer, obviously, is that though you

¹³ He dropped this bombshell in a *Playboy* interview.

¹⁴ Cf. *The Painted Word*.

can in principle paint just as well in Ohio, what you do won't get noticed, in fact won't be as good because you won't have such stimulating influences, won't make you any money, and if no one will pay attention to what you're doing or pay you for it you'll gradually lose interest in painting and try something else, like working in a bowling alley. — The whole social ecology that supports the life of the artist doesn't exist in Ohio; and, therefore, if you really want to be an artist, you have to make your way to someplace like New York, and somehow find yourself a niche.

As for the structure of this social ecology, we have for illustration the memoir of Ms. Gavlak (whom I found on Google, incidentally, posed among Palm Beach society at some social function — networking, I have no doubt, and quite successfully by the look of it), who is, obviously, a talented and (perhaps more important) perceptive person, someone who knows what she sees, but otherwise has a bizarrely haphazard resume: she majors in art history (as do many: one of my girlfriends got her master's doing this and ended up working in a greenhouse), goes to Berlin after graduation (just as I would have done if somebody else had been willing to pay for it), meets some people to whom she was referred by one of her teachers, comes back and goes to a lecture by a guy she meets later in LA with whom she parties incessantly, attends a Major Opening with helicopters buzzing overhead, meets many Really Important People and (quite as significant) many other People who will become Really Important, attends Art Center, develops presumably by virtue of her immersion in this social milieu a pretty good eye, dabbles in exhibition, goes to Europe again but isn't networked there and accomplishes nothing (exactly the problem encountered by my girlfriend Celeste), comes back to New York and lucks into a really great job by virtue of personal connections and (we infer) the fact that she has a nice ass, gets sober, learns the marketing of art, moves to Palm Beach (the first real evidence of initiative: an excellent entrepreneurial idea), gets huge, the end.

Which doesn't capture the fascination of her narrative — just what happened here, anyway? — as it emerges in the asides and offhanded remarks let drop along the way: “It was the first year Mike Kelley had the sock monkey dolls on tables” (Really? there was a second year?); “I helped put together their benefit auction and their big Valentine's party, which was outrageous and over the top” (I'll bet); “The economy was depressed, the art market was in the hole, and LACE had no money” (Proving the relevance of money); “I realized that the quality of the art being made in L.A. and the dialogue, the discourse, the context around it was so much more interesting and smarter than in New York” (What exactly is this “context”? how could you define it?); “L.A. was very generous of spirit; maybe that was because there was no market and nobody cared and there was no competition; people shared information and worked together in a collaborative spirit” (A curious interpolation of a portrait of a socialist utopia); “Here was someone who was so smart but was also trying to make a business somehow and promote artists he believed in” (But what did he recognize in them that he did believe in? and how did he recognize it?); “I learned from him that most important is your dialogue with your artists ... which is something I also developed by going to Art Center” (i.e., her ecological function is to serve as a communicator, something like one of the routers that directs internet traffic — and, curiously enough, she learned this in graduate school); “I don't know what will happen or what it will be like but what if we chose a few of your photographs and installed them in my apartment and have people over? ... we did and everybody came, people like Cathie Opie, Ann Goldstein and Chris Williams” (Who is “everybody”? why are they defined as “people like x/y/z”? what is the idea of similarity that defines this grouping? how does intension determine extension?); “Today drawings and works on paper are a legitimate specialty but at the time when Christine began, people were not really taking notice” (A description of something like biological speciation); “I realized that everything goes down uptown, that is the real deal, the center” (Compare my remarks on Kevin Bacon); “I curated a show at Gavin Brown's ... I produced a catalogue and Klaus Kertess wrote the

essay... there were articles in *Art in America* and *Artforum* and *The New York Times* had a review ... it was a big success” (The list of the components required for success is interesting); “I know people with tons of money but they have no concept of art” (proving again the relevance of money); ... — not to mention the incredible parade of names, which is undeniably impressive even though I have no idea who all these people are.

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Against all this you can protest that, just like art, scientific work only acquires meaning in a social context — not to embrace the radical postmodern position that scientific truth is socially defined (which I don’t think we should blame on Feyerabend, incidentally), but to accept that the results derived by the individual are only useful when they’re accepted and employed by the scientific community at large, and that the criteria that identify the problems people choose to attack, for instance, are socially defined. — So you have to wonder what the joke is in the cartoon that’s been tacked to one of my bulletin boards for the last several years, of a couple of labcoated scientists standing in assessment in front of an enormous blackboard filled with mathematical symbols, one of whom is saying to the other “This is fine as far as it goes. From here on, it’s who you know.”

The answer to that is, obviously, complicated. But there are differences between the arts and the sciences, after all; it’s just that it’s very difficult to put your finger on how to define them. — Again, obviously, we have the problem that “science” and “art” are two amorphous clusters defined not by reference to Platonic essence but by family resemblance, and there are a lot of places where they blur into one another. — Part of it is that (though I’m still sometimes loath to admit it) the sciences are more “objective”. in some sense: Chinese and Western ideas of art differ in many interesting ways, but ideas of mathematical truth don’t differ in the slightest. So that if, say, Grisha Perelman announces that he has proven the famous Poincaré

conjecture ... a consensus can rapidly develop as to whether or not he is, as we say, “correct” — On the other hand, the criteria that elevated the Poincaré conjecture to its status as one of the most important unsolved problems in mathematics are largely socially defined. So to the extent that Perelman has accepted his rewards of honor, power, riches, fame, and the love of women (he turned down the Fields medal, may not accept the million dollars the Clay Institute had offered for a solution,¹⁵ and continues to live with his mother in Saint Petersburg), they are his because of what other people thought of what he did; because of the way the significance of his results has been defined within a social network. ...

.....though the famous memoir of James Watson, *The Double Helix*, superficially has the same tone as Susan Gavlak’s — who he met, who hung out with whom, who showed up at what parties — and the progress of Watson’s career up to the period that he is describing (indeed even afterward) was made possible by his membership in an extensive (albeit rather unusual and exclusive) social network, the point of the story is just that he and Francis Crick fell in with one another because they were both outcasts who shared an obsession with a chemical explanation for the mechanism of genetics which everyone around them (the experts and leaders of the field included) thought was certain evidence of derangement; and only at the magic moment when they produced their model of DNA and, to the wonderment of all, explained everything at once, were they proclaimed Men of Vision (as opposed to pitiable cranks) and accorded the adulation of their peers. — The familiar scientific narrative paradigm of the lone wolf who forces a disbelieving world to accept him as a genius doesn’t translate well into the art world, in other words; it may work out like that eventually, but not with this kind of abrupt reversal of fortune and sudden accession to Olympus. For a variety of reasons, the social network of the art world can’t react as rapidly as the scientific community can.

¹⁵ Sure enough: he didn’t.

But the network undoubtedly dominates.

A few more remarks on networks, then:

... I don't keep track of the literature in this area, but I do know that there's an argument that the system of galleries, of critics, of schools, etc., is yet another manifestation of what Jameson calls "late capitalism", and thus yet another illustration of the thesis that the economic system determines the form and expression of everything (did this originate with Adorno? I have no idea, really); which is on the one hand, true (sort of), but (more importantly) on the other just a corollary of the more general argument that the dynamics of social networks — of which economics is just a special case — determine everything.

There's a sort of logic to the situation, i.e., which has evolved into something more completely articulated and with more moving parts, but which hasn't otherwise changed since the beginning of time. — The first guy to paint a depiction of the hunt on the wall of a cave might not have thought of the cave as a gallery, may not have had an agent or gallery owner to promote his work, might not have been fêted in black tie at parties thrown by the rich upscale and famous, might not have received fat checks that allowed him to buy his own loft; but had a space to work and show in, had viewers who transmitted the experience of seeing it to still others who came to look at it, and ended up somehow getting laid and getting fed without having to waste too much time at the hunt himself — because otherwise he would have starved, his genetic heritage would have been lost, and nobody would have imitated his example and made other paintings.

Moreover the pattern of behavior of the artist is something that is socially transmitted as well, and if it led nowhere or if it had proved counterproductive — if no one could make a living doing it — if the

variation were not viable — it would have been eliminated. — This is, again, about the laws of biology, in other words.

..... The connectivity of the network is a determinant, in a simple mathematical way: if you're connected to two people who are each connected to two more who are each, etc., then at the first stage you have two, at the second six, at the third fourteen, etc. If the multiplier is five, it's five, thirty, one hundred fifty five, etc. If the multiplier is just one, it's one, two, three, ..., and you'd better hope they aren't dying off more rapidly than they talk to one another. — So in principle you can quantify this situation, and the speed with which you can get famous (no matter what your talent is determined by, as we geeks would put it, the mean valence of the graph in question.

There are a few examples one would like to analyze this way; cases like Nietzsche and Van Gogh, for instance, who were known to at most a few dozen people before they died but later broke out, as it were, into wider recognition.

But the point is that someone knew who they were, and the knowledge was somehow transmitted. Otherwise they'd have vanished without a trace.

Another determinant, not quite so simply analyzed, is the quality of the audience on whom you make an impression: Harold Robbins was read by uncounted millions of people with very short attention spans; Frege was read by Russell — and in that case one person was enough.

.....the reification of the network to some extent permits the deconstruction of the individual. Because collective behavior allows the definition of a sort of intelligence (or a population of them) resident in the network itself, independent of the individuals which comprise it.

Traditionally we've dismissed this with Wittgenstein: "Where our language suggests a body and there is none: there, we should like to say, is a spirit." But there's more to it than that. What seems to happen, actually, is that if a machine is sufficiently complicated, a ghost does take up residence. (The brain would be one interesting example.)

I should probably drop everything at this point and write a few hundred thousand words to explicate this thesis, but a few remarks to motivate its acceptance will have to suffice: one thing that people have noticed, for instance, is that you can assemble a network of simple identical elements, with very simple interactions, and that if you wire enough of them together, very complex collective behaviors somehow — sometimes quite suddenly (I refer you to the literature on phase transitions) — become possible. — So that, literally, the whole becomes more than the sum of the parts. — The first evidence for this appeared in statistical mechanics, but now probably the most familiar illustration is the behavior of so-called cellular automata: you can download a demo of John Conway's Game of Life, for instance, and run it on your computer screen, and generate enormously complicated (in fact: arbitrarily complicated, in an interesting technical sense) dynamical patterns in an infinite checkerboard. more or less forever.
.....

Life itself is apparently one manifestation of this phenomenon: living organisms are made of cells, which in turn are little biochemical factories in which zillions of little chemical machines interact with one another; everything at every level of analysis is quite obviously mechanical and understandable, if not exactly deterministic (it is extremely important to understand that "mechanical" and "deterministic" are by no means synonymous), but the collective behavior produced by the individual units in interaction is not "predictable" from the bare statement of their elementary rules of interaction in any practical sense (and maybe not in any theoretical sense either).

You see, then, that social assemblies of biological individuals — for instance human social groupings — can exhibit collective emergent behavior that isn't necessarily resident in any of the particular individuals comprising the mass.

Another idea illustrating the same point that's gained currency by virtue of its usefulness in biology is a somewhat generalized idea of the gene. Richard Dawkins did a great deal to popularize this and create a new usage: in *The Selfish Gene*, for example, he argues systematically that the behavior of biological individuals is best analyzed by treating them essentially as epiphenomena, and considering the genes which they carry as the real causal actors on the stage of life; and thus resolves a number of apparent paradoxes of evolutionary theory — e.g. the problem of altruism, by showing that everything makes sense if you assume that the genetic heritage an individual instantiates is willing to sacrifice him to ensure the preservation of ... his family or even his tribe, which instantiate the same gene pool. — Obviously this represents a sort of resurgent Platonism; the interesting thing is that it's a kind of engineer's Platonism that everyone now embraces — for instance: everyone accepts that a computer program “makes” the physical computer perform any given task, even though the program, in and of itself, is no more material or substantial than the soul. ... And of course we think of the genetic code as a kind of program, and genes as functions or subroutines.

More than that, following the suggestion of Dawkins that behavioral patterns in human societies have similar properties — act like snippets of computer programs, are transmitted from one person to another and can therefore be thought to replicate themselves, succeed or fail by virtue of some kind of generalized fitness to survive, etc. — and could therefore be thought of as genelike (Dawkins called them “memes”), a lot of bullshit has been generated on the subject of analyzing religions, advertising campaigns, corporate identities, fashion statements (I think the unit example is the practice of wearing

a baseball cap turned around backwards), etc., etc., in these quasibiological terms. — Which needn't be taken seriously in its entirety. — But the essential point, that once the network has been constructed programlike entities can exist upon it autonomously, and that they can be transmitted and reproduced more rapidly the faster and more efficient the network is — more: that they can interact and in effect cross-fertilize one another and produce new forms by swapping chunks of their code with one another — that ideas can breed and evolve almost independently of the individuals who harbor them — is clear enough, and now seems almost incontrovertible.

So a network can have a resident intelligence; a corporation can have a personality (usually called its “culture”); a society can harbor ideas; a “scene” can in a real sense have a sort of soul, and a period a *Zeitgeist*. And all this seems to follow naturally from theoretical physics, the theory of automata, and evolutionary theory.

To conclude, anyway (or sort of): I think you're right to try to connect this with Wittgenstein, for at least a couple of reasons.

First because, like language, art is socially defined; it doesn't mean anything (has no function — doesn't do anything) in isolation. — As I recall there was a great debate among commentators after the publication of the *Investigations* as to whether a hypothetical Robinson Crusoe shipwrecked on a desert isle in infancy could invent language by himself; the short answer, Wittgenstein's answer, is no, and the same arguments would apply to show that such a castaway could not “make art” either. (The long answer is that this is vastly oversimplified, of course, but we can't discuss everything at once.) — Art only makes sense, has some function or purpose, in the context of an enormous and enormously complicated social fabric;¹⁶ of which,

¹⁶ “Much of the historical development of mathematics has taken place in specific centers ... formed around a single person or a few individuals ... sometimes as the result of the work of a

actually, I'd guess that the whole elaborately articulated ecology of schools, artists, critics, buyers, etc. which we observe in the contemporary art world only represents the surface, mere epiphenomenon. — At any rate the scientist trying to make sense of all this is not some kind of mathematical physicist (like Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*) but a sort of anthropologist. Because, for instance, “an expression has meaning only in the stream of life”

Second, and as a consequence, Wittgenstein began with a very monolithic picture of language; thought that he had, in fact, isolated its essence; and, therefore, expressed his conclusions in a form consonant with this idea — i.e., the brief and cryptic but nonetheless logically/linearly organized *Tractatus*, which has a perceivable argument, with a beginning, middle, and end. — When he returned to the philosophy of language in the Thirties, he originally had in mind a similar project, revised and updated and much longer, to be sure, but still a sort of treatise; and there were several drafts of this which survive as the *Philosophische Bemerkungen* and the *Philosophische Grammatik*. But he realized, finally, as he explains in the preface to the *Investigations* (which I suggest you examine again), that he wasn't able to complete this project because it simply wasn't the right way to go about it; and that this, too, followed from the structure of his subject-matter, from the nature of language as he had discovered it actually was. That language and the ways that people make use of it are too diverse for the kind of glib summation a treatise would presuppose; that he had without realizing it become a sort of anthropologist; that his results were, indeed, a sort of laboratory notebook or field diary;

number of people Such a group possesses ... a definite mood and character in both the choice of interests and the method of thought. ... this may appear strange, since mathematical achievement, whether a new definition or an involved proof of a problem, may appear to be an entirely individual effort, almost like a musical composition. However the choice of certain areas of interest is ... the result of a community of interests ... which evolves ... naturally from the interplay of several minds. The great nineteenth-century centers such as Göttingen, Paris, and Cambridge all exercised their own peculiar influence on the development of mathematics.” [Ulam, *Adventures of a Mathematician*, p. 38.]

and that this was the best he was going to be able to do. — “It was my intention at first to bring all this [i.e., his results] together in a book,” he says. But his material resisted assembly; and, “After several unsuccessful attempts to weld my results together into such a whole, I realized that I should never succeed. The best that I could write would never be more than philosophical remarks ... And this was, of course, connected with the very nature of the investigation.” He characterizes these remarks then as “a number of sketches of landscapes”; and concludes that after severe editing “a number of tolerable ones were left, which had to be arranged and sometimes cut down, so that if you looked at them you could get a picture of the landscape. Thus this book is really only an album.” (I always remember this last in the German, which somehow seems more resonant: So ist also dieses Buch eigentlich nur ein Album.)

And this is why what you have assembled has to look the way it does: because that is what it is, an Album. — Which should be a very interesting album indeed. I look forward to seeing it completed.

Later.

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Color (11/5/08)

The Polack told me this story: the day that Martin Luther King was shot, she went to her organic chemistry class as usual. The professor, who was black (and at Carleton College, in Northfield, Minnesota, this meant he was a very lonely man), entered a trifle late. Ordinarily he was talkative and funny, but on this occasion he walked to the blackboard without saying anything, and wrote a chemical formula upon it. "This is melanin," he said. He burst into tears, and could not continue. Finally he waved a hand to dismiss the class. — God, I hope that he's alive today.

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Think locally, melt down globally (11/20/08)

I dropped into Safeway this evening, and, in the process of settling the tab for the usual haul (coffee and frozen pizza), produced my indispensable Safeway Card (the one that reminds us that Big Brother is always watching, even at the grocery store) an instant too late for the “discounts” I’d purchased at the price of my privacy to register on the total; accordingly, the checkout lady walked a couple of counters down to get somebody to approve a cash refund to balance the transaction, and I moved out of the way and let the woman behind me take point in the checkout line. With the result that, when the computer burped and my coins rattled down the chute, it was her kid’s face leaning over the tray they rattled into, and he, of course, grabbed them. — “What do you think you’re doing?” she asked him as she took the money back and gave it to me. “You think you get money out of nowhere and you get to keep it?” — “No,” I said to the kid, “only bankers get to do that.” — Which, to my surprise, produced general laughter from everyone within earshot. — From which I think we may infer the current mood of Main Street toward Wall Street. Keep your hopes up, we may see lynchings yet.

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*Things of the spirit (12/18/08)*¹⁷

... Amusing tale recounted by my friend Erik, who disappeared for a month to take a road trip with a new girlfriend and ended up getting shanghaied to Fiji to sit at the feet of a self-styled guru. Had all gone according to the plan which (incredibly) the young lady in question seems to have endorsed, they would have stayed there indefinitely, drinking in the wisdom of this latest Maharishi/Manson/Mel Lyman figure while the Enlightened One systematically separated them from the contents of their bank accounts and made Erik watch while he fucked her in the ass, but, by a stroke of luck, the old fraud dropped dead in the middle of the morning blowjob; and, to the bewilderment of his still-thoroughly-brainwashed disciples, failed to resurrect himself in the three days or so they were able to keep the stiff from going bad by packing it in ice. — But the tropical climate had the last word. Ripeness is all.

... I think Tarkovsky's *Solaris* will be the evening's viewing. — So much easier for the dead to return in outer space: they keep better in vacuum... .

¹⁷ To [KH].

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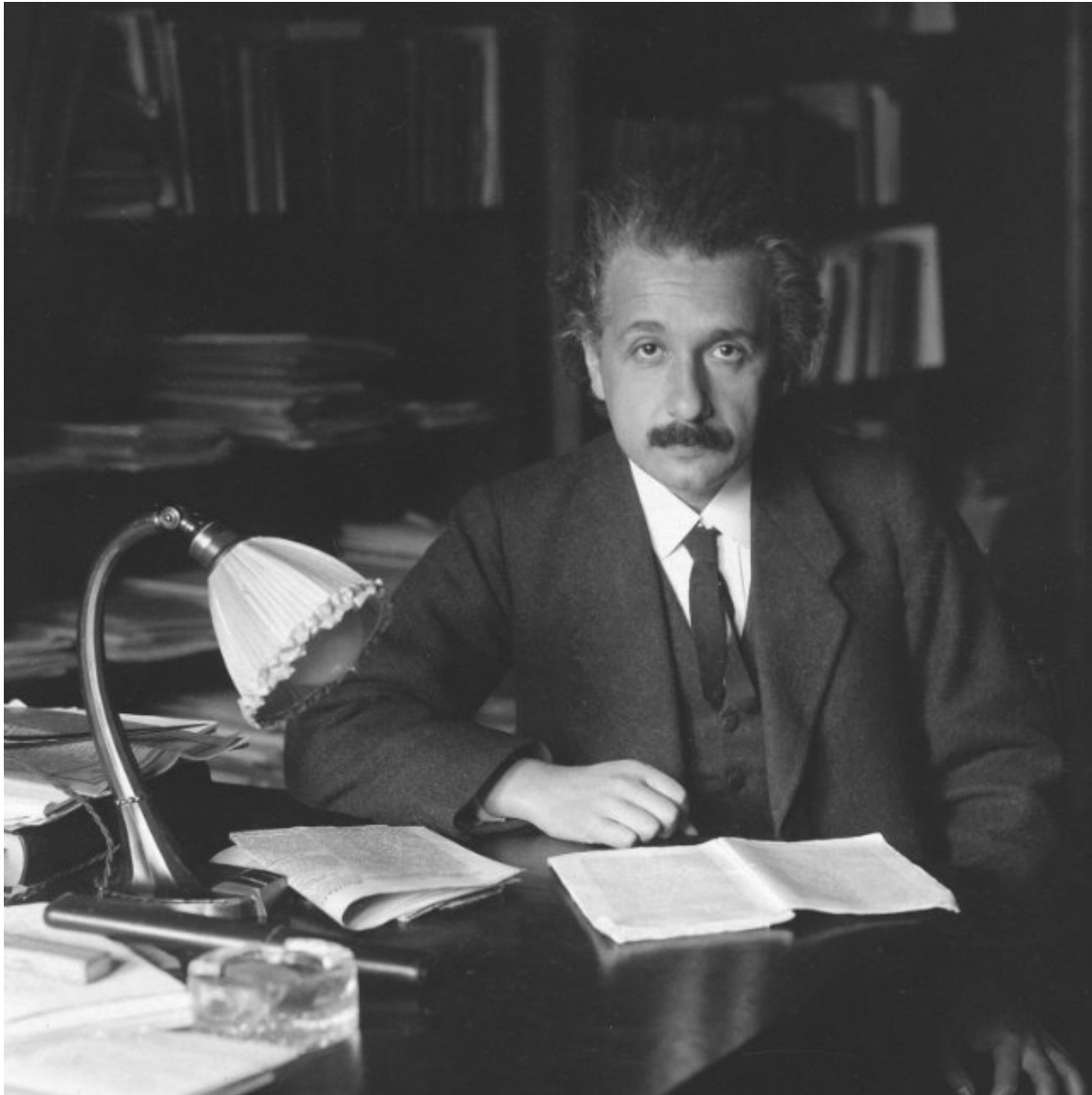
Mad science (12/25/2008)



Trying to get Celeste to reconsider.

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Annals of celebrity journalism (12/28/2008)



Famed screenwriter Joe Eszterhas at work on the third draft of *Showgirls*, 1996.



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The girl with the dragon tattoo

— Unhappy man, said Candide, I too have had some experience of this love, the sovereign of hearts, the soul of our souls; and it never got me anything but a single kiss and twenty kicks in the rear.

I never get married, I only get divorced. Thus have I learned many painful lessons, among them that whatever goes wrong for me with a woman is generally a consequence of what went wrong with the one before her; and what went wrong for her with the guy before me. — Some kind of twisted dialectical logic is involved that compels you both to use the current relationship to get even for the one that preceded it. — The thesis might be illustrated at dismaying length, but it will suffice to mention: the one whose ex had (she thought) humiliated her, and thus seized every opportunity to humiliate me; the naïf who dumped me for the guy with the job she thought I wanted but couldn't get (of course they all dump me for a guy with money, but this was particularly egregious); the large-breasted graduate student I pursued obsessively to revenge myself upon the small-breasted graduate student whom I'd been forced to dump to keep her from dumping me;

But the *reductio ad absurdum*, surely, was poor Shelley, whose deceased husband had been diagnosed with cancer before they even decided to get married, necessitating that she nurse him through the brief interval of their formal union; she herself had a bad heart, as it turned out, and I came home one evening to find her fallen back in an unnatural position upon the couch, bluelipped, waxen, and slowly stiffening — dead, it was obvious, to balance some internal scorecard, precisely on her tenth wedding anniversary; which coincided, by some

arcane cosmic joke, with the anniversaries of the attack on Pearl Harbor, the death of my little sister Lucy¹⁸ (also the victim of a bad heart), and the first time I consummated True Love. Thus was I reminded once again that I am probably just a character in a novel by Thomas Mann.

I met Celeste, at any rate, by the same kind of fated accident: we looked at a pair of adjacent cottages on the same day; the landlady was just explaining to me that if I were allowed to move in my elderly Australian shepherd would undoubtedly attack the neighbor and embroil us all in lawsuit when Celeste, the other prospective tenant and presumed victim, walked in the door, made an exclamation of delight, dropped to her knees, and threw her arms around Natasha — making it love at first sight all around, though it took a while to realize that her boyfriend,¹⁹ who accompanied her, was not moving in; rather she was moving out on him and no one seemed to know exactly what that meant. Though she did keep dropping hints.

Eventually it became clear to me, at least, that her interest in me, though more real than feigned, was mainly a maneuver in an extended campaign designed to get him to take her to Europe after she graduated from art school; in due course the campaign succeeded, the two of them left for Berlin, he tired of the arrangement and commenced a long-distance affair with a rich, strange, and even more gorgeous hippie girl he'd left behind in Boulder, Celeste deduced what was going on, left him, returned to Boulder, and moved in with me to get even.

¹⁸ Named after the ur-feminist Lucy Stone, an ancestor whose grave in New England I was in my childhood hauled off to visit. — There was a beautiful idea here, I mean to stress, that did not — alas — achieve fruition.

¹⁹ Hereafter usually referred to as Erik.

Thus it was that I gained an appreciation for the traditional wisdom that you should be careful what you wish for, because you may get it. Even if she and your dog met cute.

Here of necessity I omit many complications and reversals, among them how though she and I parted on rather poor terms her ex and I ended up becoming the best of friends, and why the bananas were always soggy. All that really should be saved for the screenplay, which I promise will also feature snappy dialogue and lots of carchases.

What seemed relevant at the time was that she was an artist, she was beautiful, she was accessible, and, most important, thanks to the eleven years she'd spent studying ballet in France, she had never attended an American high school and thus had no idea why she was supposed to despise me.

Of course she had no idea why she was supposed to like me either, except that I could write, which was useful; and after I finished composing her application to graduate school her interest flagged and she wandered off in search of shinier objects with deeper pockets. In due course she departed for London, survived the fall term, and found herself at Christmas alone in a heinously expensive foreign city with no entertainment save that afforded by the internet. In consequence I found myself receiving a series of increasingly absurd requests to join her circles on a progressively more ridiculous series of social networks; culminating with the ultimate nightmare, Facebook.

Here I was blindsided. For though I had been able to blow the others off without paying much attention, Facebook was founded on the principle of advertising to everyone that you were a loser who had no friends. Within a day or two Celeste and her ex had a hundred connections apiece, and I still knew no one save the two of them.

When I realized what had happened, I was absolutely furious: even though she'd never gone to one herself she'd tricked me into going back to high school, where not only was I was supposed to embrace the re-establishment of my status as a social pariah, but to accept that statistics confirming it were going to be published daily and hoovered up by Google. — God, it was maddening. It took at least an hour to figure out how to blow it all up.

For I could, after all, create as many accounts as I pleased, in any name that I liked;²⁰ we could all then friend one another (yes, the swine had turned this into a verb) and inflate our statistics to any level desired. — Rubbing my hands in gleeful anticipation, I logged in and made a preliminary search for a few of the identities I intended to assume — Sergei Eisenstein, John Von Neumann, Kurt Mondaugen, Franz Kafka — and then made the fundamental discovery about Facebook: it was all a masquerade. Because all of them were already there. Clearly many other people had found themselves in a similar position and had created accounts for these and other imaginary companions. — Of course this simplified my chore considerably: I simply sent friend requests to all of these dummy accounts, and within a day or two I had a hundred friends of my own, including Beowulf, Genghis Khan, Dante Alighieri, Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, Friedrich Nietzsche, and an impressive assortment of Jim Morrisons.

Now, the paradoxical result of all this play-acting was that, by the logic of the social network, I then became connected to a few hundred *other* people, all of them real, who had also chosen to indicate their contempt for the system by establishing connections with these bogus personages; and with whom, therefore, I automatically had a great

²⁰ The bullshit that Facebook feeds its advertisers notwithstanding, this has always been a triviality: I still have three or four accounts, none displaying a recognizable portrait, none with a correct address, none with an accurate birthdate or personal history, and none in the name on my passport. — Though it is still less a Fantasyland than Twitter, of course, which is largely bots.

deal in common. So for a brief interval I was occupied almost continuously with chat sessions with unemployed actors in Istanbul, Hollywood costume designers,²¹ Australian psychotherapists — After a couple of weeks I was beginning to think I'd gotten even and began to tire of this merry sport. But then I met Nina.

Again it was a sort of fated accident that brought us together: we both happened to be leaving comments at the same time on a page maintained by some guy pretending to be Richard Strauss. Nina had danced the role of Salome in an extremely revealing costume, and was apologizing for not having done better; influenced no doubt by the photographic evidence, I protested that she was being too hard on herself. Our relationship then progressed rapidly from a polite exchange of greetings through a discussion of Borges and Rimbaud to videophone sex (hitherto only a subject of conjecture, though from the very outset I had been insisting to anyone who would listen that this must prove the killer app for the internet), more or less in the space of an evening, and had all this transpired in physical reality we would have gone home together and humped each other senseless for a couple of weeks until she knifed me at breakfast.

But, no. She lived in Argentina. Complications ensued.

²¹ That story about Clooney punching out David Russell on the set of *Three Kings*? — True. I have it at first hand.

{...}



Ralph 124c41+ looking for action on Facebook Chat, 1911.

{...}

Variations on the theme of Celeste

“What does he know of love who did not have to despise just what he loved?” asks Zarathustra.²² — Proving that it could have been worse. It could have been Lou Salome.

One afternoon shortly after the two of us have moved in I am going out the back (I have excuses for the formation of this habit, but they are bullshit, I do it in the hope I will run into Celeste) and discover her screen door propped open, the main door locked, and two bags of groceries sitting on the ground outside. I knock; no one is home. I can't get into the cottage, since in the week or two we have been there she has already managed to lose both her own key and the spare that had been hanging in the shed. So I regard the situation for a moment; shrug; and take Tasha for a walk. — I come home later. The groceries are still there. — I look out the back door at ten o'clock. The groceries are still there. — I look the next morning. Still there. I wonder vaguely whether I should bring the bags in and put everything in my refrigerator, but realize this is now a scientific experiment, and I shouldn't change any variables in medias res. — That evening: still there. — The morning after: still there. — Finally after two days Celeste returns and takes the groceries in. — I ask her about this later: did she lose her key, or just get distracted and leave before she got all the way into the house? — Sure enough, as per my expectation, it was just this, the latter. She was coming home with the groceries and forgot what she was doing on her very doorstep.

Worse fool I, this does not deter me from agreeing, a few weeks later, to run down to the sushi joint to pick up a couple of her favorite items.

²² In Kaufmann's translation.

I should know better, but it turns out they are called “orgasm rolls”, and I cannot resist. — I walk over to the Hill, find the place, plunk down an absurd amount of money for a couple of rolls, one for her, one for me, and walk back. This takes perhaps twenty minutes, and she has completely disappeared. I wait a couple of hours and then leave the bag inside her door (open, this time) and take Tasha for a long walk. When I return she is back as I left her the first time, done with her roll and wondering where I have been. “It’s good,” she says, “you have to try it.” I eat the thing like a good sport, and have to admit it isn’t bad, albeit absurdly overpriced like everything else consumed by the health-food freaks who inhabit this city, home of the world’s richest granolaheads. — I tell the story to my sister later, venting my exasperation. “At least she got to finish first,” I say.

Celeste in describing her missionary childhood in Africa says that she used to play with her mother’s drawings by erasing them. — I laugh and say that a Freudian would find this straightforward to interpret. — Celeste says, seriously, that she doesn’t think she did this to negate her mother so much as to try to learn how to draw by reversing the process; she erased the sketches line by line. — Astounded at the beauty of this conception, I say, So you wanted to learn to draw by deconstruction? — Yes, she says, it was something like that. — We discuss this idea.

By coincidence while she explains this my notebook is open to a page on which I have sketched two interpretations of an abstract machine’s implementation of a computation: one in which it runs forward; one in which it runs backward. — I don’t notice this while we’re talking, but remember it abruptly the next day in the middle of a sentence, make an exclamation, and dash off to get it to show to her. Perhaps she is impressed.

Her father comes to visit. He is a starving composer who lives in Pomona. We talk about Bartok and the Pythagoreans for four or five hours straight. Self-absorbed, brilliant but oblivious, borderline Asperger's, I know all about this guy — *mon semblable, mon frère*. We all eat dinner and I bid them goodnight, speculating about genetics. — The next morning I meet the two of them walking back from the grocery. They stare straight ahead with goofy smiles and do not seem to recognize me; something like the familiar tableaux of the impaired person out for a walk with his or her escort, but who is keeping whom? — The feeling there is something dark and sticky in this relationship, and I don't want to step in it.

Remember me, I used to live for music
Remember me, I brought your groceries in
Well, it's Father's Day, and everybody's wounded
First we take Manhattan —

And, sure enough: she goes to Berlin.

We correspond, at first infrequently, then less so. Sometime the following March I mail her in Italy:

“Meanwhile, it stopped snowing finally, the sun came out, I turned the heat off, and I'm sure before I know it it will be ninety-five degrees again. Against my usual habits, I composed a haiku to commemorate winter:

Shit shit snow shit. Shit
Shit snow. Snow shit snow shit. Snow
Shit snow. Snow snow. Shit.”

I don't bother to explain that, given my general loathing for haiku as a form, I wouldn't have bothered making this up had I not been able to

arrange it so that it spelled out “Fuck me” in Morse code. But I figure if she hasn’t caught on to the subtext by now, it’s past hopeless.

When she returns the first thing she insists upon is rearranging everything in my house. I find out later from Erik that she has done this everywhere she has stayed more than a few days, but in the absence of context it is alarming. Everything must be reorganized according to her interpretation of the principles of Feng Shui. In consequence my bulletin board collages are edited to eliminate distracting messages; the *Vanity Fair* cover of a naked Scarlett Johansson disappears for good, but I pull the poster of Rosanna Arquette in *The Wrong Man* out of the dumpster and hide it behind the armoire. — A large board ends up empty. She asks me if she can use it, and I say, Sure. She explains that it has to go on a certain spot on the wall, which in the artistic scheme according to which everything is being rearranged will represent Career — meaning, hers. I say, All right, go ahead. — She then spends several hours going through fashion magazines looking for stuff to clip out and mount, and finally selects one small horoscope, which she trims neatly and mounts at the bottom. — That's it. — Subsequently she forgets all about the project, and the one small horoscope is the only thing that ever gets pinned to the board, which sits ignored and empty in a corner for a few weeks until she disappears and I reappropriate it for my own uses. — And I thought I was negligent of Career.

The arguments we have are numerous, and of course I lose all of them. It is difficult to understand exactly how this comes about, but gradually I begin to perceive a pattern. — It is an issue between us, for instance, whether or not I can be considered to be her boyfriend. She makes vehement reference to her need for freedom, her loathing for male systems of Control, her inability to understand the concept of jealousy, etc., and of course I am carried away by the rhetorical force of her arguments, since I am, naturally, sympathetic to all these ends;

and (more importantly) allow her to lead me along just to see where she is going. — But it turns out in this instance that she insists on redefining “person with whom you live and are physically intimate and who pays your bills” to mean something other than “boyfriend”. And how is this to be accomplished? By declaring one’s creative independence from the dull constraints of linguistic convention. (I think this is it. I still can’t follow this part.) — The semantic theory implicit here is not at all hippie-Goth, but classical:

“When *I* use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master — that’s all.”

I remark to her that I have been wounded in love before, and that it is like being stabbed in the heart with a knife. “Eventually the handle rusts away,” I say, “but the iron is still there in your heart. My heart is full of iron now. If you listen you can hear it clanking when it beats.” — “You can hear it when you laugh,” she says. — This is so perceptive that I fall in love with her all over again. The Celeste who can say such things, I don’t regret having fallen for.

*Hot Shots, Part Deux:*²³

Topper: Why’d you have to come here now? Of all the missions, in all the jungles, in all the world, you had to come

²³ Jim Abrahams [1993]; written by Abrahams and Pat Proft.

walking into this one...

Ramada: Oh, Topper, I tried to stay away ... I thought I was never going to see you again ... that you were out of my life But it's a sequel. I had to come.

Topper: Do you have any idea what the critics will say? "same warmed-over characters..."

Ramada: Topper, stop it. You're only using this whole casting thing as an excuse ... to hide what's really hurting you.

Topper: Hurt? maybe. Once. But I knew this day would come. I knew one day you'd come crawling back. Begging for forgiveness, groveling, sniveling, pleading for another chance. — Sorry, sweetheart. But this all-day sucker is down to the soggy white stick.

The wisdom of the hippie sages: "I love women," Saul says, "but I no longer allow them to rule me." — "I love Celeste," I say, "but I want her the fuck out of my life." — Loud helpless laughter.

The daily routine involves taking Tasha for a walk around the neighborhood. This ends at Suzanne's shop on the Hill, where my dog can expect to get a treat (or six) and a pat on the head. On this occasion I take off my jacket to remove my vest as Tasha is munching on the biscuits, with the result that I don't have a grip on the leash when she finishes and starts walking out. — "Look at her," says Suzanne, "she gets what she wants and then walks away." — "Just like Celeste," I say. — Suzanne glares at me. "Don't you *ever* say that about your dog," she says. "Not ever."

I have an argument about this with Millie: she insists that women always know what they are doing, whereas I maintain that they don't, at least not at the level of direct awareness, in fact that the whole situation is explained, not by the hypothesis that women have no souls — this would contradict Aristotle — but that superlatively attractive young women, at least, do not possess conscious minds, which in their case emerge only later; that the real reasons for their actions are unknown to them, and that what they say, therefore, and what they really mean, are at best indirectly related and can only be determined by analysis. Millie, still the existentialist and disciple of Sartre, insists that they *do* know, that they scheme consciously to manipulate their victims. — I consider this ironic, since she still doesn't seem to understand, or at least is not willing to acknowledge, her own motives when we were involved with one another, but all that is behind us now, and I will not contradict her. — Anyway, she is funny: I laugh helplessly at her description of her astonishment when she finally discovered, years after I had known her, just how much it costs when you have to buy a drink in a bar all by yourself. — Yes: and cigarettes don't light themselves, doors don't open automatically, rides aren't offered without asking, dinner costs money. The rent is due on the first. Welcome to reality.

The student population decamps en masse and, as usual, leaves its valuables in the trash; for days we all poke through the dumpsters picking up odds and ends of furniture, food, appliances. — It used to be possible to find books, but now of course none of them read. — I collect a few plants as well, including a large potted tree I discover after hours and haul home in the dark. For a few days it sits out in the back yard; I water it occasionally, as always absent-minded and not paying very close attention to what I am doing but noting that the leaves have a rubbery texture, which seems exotic. Saul makes some remark about this, but for some reason I am not paying attention, or perhaps don't want to hear what he is telling me. Finally I take a clear look at it in daylight and realize that I have been lavishing care and

attention on a plastic plant. — The metaphorical burden of this episode is so obvious that I cannot stop laughing, and repeat the story to everyone. — Then I move it into the living room, and hang one of her things in its branches.

Months later, after she is safely removed to London, I meet Erik one evening at Mamacita's on the Hill, where he is drinking margaritas with his friend Kim. I have a couple myself, but I am clearly way behind and make no serious effort to catch up. Kim is getting married, which obviously will not slow him down, and tells the story of how he met his fiancée in Mexico in between shameless efforts to hit on the waitress. I see this must be typical; he simply cannot turn it off. — Saul shows up and resumes the recitation of his legal woes; we all advise him. Kim promises to call his lawyer first thing in the morning: as if. — Everyone has shots of some very good tequila, and Erik, now shitfaced, starts telling the story about the night he came home and discovered Celeste making out with one of her female paramours; and, while she was removing her clothing and pulling out a gigantic dildo ("Like this!" Erik exclaims, slurring the words and holding his hands a foot apart), was handed the remote control that activated the vibrator already installed in the other girl's vagina. — "Wow," say I, "and I only got to see her play with bananas." — The story continues, but it seems that somehow Erik failed to seize this opportunity to embrace his inner porn star and ended up in the loft trying to sleep while listening to the two of them go at it all night. He talks more and more slowly, and keeps exclaiming his astonishment at the magnitude of the dildo. Finally he passes out face down on the bar, and shortly afterward vomits copiously in his sleep. — Immediately we all spring into action: Kim picks him up and carries him out to the car to take him home for the night; Saul and I mop up the mess, and I pay the tab, something over a hundred bucks. — I see that this is the way it works for Erik, it is with him just as it is for Celeste: he can do anything, and suffer no embarrassment, because people want to take care of him.

After this Saul and I walk back to my house, laughing merrily at the folly of our fellow men. Really, I should get out more often.

Freud concludes a series of stories about wedding plans that went awry due to the interference of unconscious wishes: “And now one striking example more, with a better ending. It is told of a famous German chemist that his marriage never took place because he forgot the hour of the ceremony and went to the laboratory instead of the church. He was wise enough to let the matter rest with one attempt, and died unmarried at a ripe age.”

Indeed, here was the wisdom of the mad scientist. — Anyway, like Zappa said: broken hearts are for assholes.



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Natasha (3/14/94 - 1/31/09)



Dogs are children that always die young.

{...}

Puppies in Snow (3/28/2009)



{...}

La nave de los monstruos



Nina explaining to me that a nerd must know his place.

{...}

Gracie (4/29/09)

...in re George Burns, I should tell the story that defines my relationship with my erstwhile girlfriend [K]. — After a series of unfortunate events, it came to pass [this was in 1986] that she and I were forced to move out of one house and into another; which, in the days when this meant transferring a considerable number of livestock and the assorted paraphernalia attendant to their maintenance, was the kind of slowly unfolding catastrophe that could take a couple of months to play out from beginning to end. There had been ample warning, in any case, and a deadline established ten or twelve weeks in advance; nonetheless (and something about this was all too predictable) it developed that, more or less on the eve of the occasion, and with practically nothing accomplished, [K] abruptly left for what somehow seemed to her to be an Artistically Significant monthlong vacation in California. Which left the matter of picking her clothing up off the floor and throwing it into boxes, hauling all the furniture, and getting sixteen goats into the back of a small truck and moving them several miles down one mountain and up another to be installed in a barn which I had not as yet finished building all up to me. — So I found myself, at any rate, driving along one afternoon with Lankton (whose assistance I had enlisted, exactly this once, to help me with a refrigerator), attempting to explain how this burden had ended up on my shoulders. Lankton of course knew [K] well, and understood that this catastrophe had come to pass not out of malice or some sinister plan to dump all the responsibility in my lap and split for The Party, but simply because my girlfriend was, her many virtues notwithstanding, a hopeless airhead; and completely incapable of comprehending the relation of cause and effect, let alone planning ahead to accommodate them. — Not addressing the matter directly, in my usual elliptical fashion after a brief review of the situation I launched into a diatribe that went roughly as follows: “The thing is,” I said, “I look at a guy like George Burns; here he is, what, ninety-

something, he's still funny, he still smokes cigars, he still drinks martinis, he claims at least that he's still getting it on with starlets; I look at him, he looks great, he sounds great, and I think, you know, even though maybe it doesn't seem that way while it's going on, maybe being married to Gracie Allen is *good* for you." — I don't think I ever saw him laugh so hard.

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Fan mail, from some flounder?

To the *Times*, in re David Brooks, "The Long Voyage Home,"
5/5/2009:

Mr. Brooks is for once correct in stating that the westerns of John Ford do not respect party lines, but might better have chosen for his example *Stagecoach* [1939], in which the hero (played of course by John Wayne) is an outlaw and the heroine a hooker, the sympathetic characters include a gambler and an alcoholic doctor, the "moral majority" for whom Mr. Ford harbored an unbridled contempt are represented by a mob of bonneted harpies, and, please note especially, the villain is a banker who, while protesting his moral superiority to those around him and insisting on the independence of business from governmental meddling, absconds with the funds the citizens have entrusted to his care. (The line "What's good for the banks is good for the country!" does, indeed, pass his lips.)

One should also note that the myth of the cowboy as a nomadic individualist is unfounded: cowboys were in effect indentured servants, the chattels of large landowners; and the old West celebrated by this myth was, in fact, a feudal economy dominated by ranching and mining interests still disproportionately influential in western politics. (Indeed when speaking to such people one senses still a palpable nostalgia for the days when the United States might have turned into Pakistan.)

Brooks is more typically incorrect in characterizing the Republican party as the party of "freedom and individualism". This is indeed the pretense, but it is a transparent charade. The Republicans are not the conservative but the authoritarian party; as should be obvious from the robotic uniformity with which members follow the orders of (and parrot the talking points dictated by) their leaders, punish dissent, and

(with discipline that might indeed have been the envy of the Communists) vote in a monolithic block. The first step toward a clear understanding of American politics is to dispel the illusion that the Republican party has any institutional commitment to the freedom of any individuals other than the wealthy and the powerful; the rest of us, it should by now be obvious, are supposed to know our place — to shut up, to sit down, and, once the government has been safely removed from our backs, to polish the silverware and shine the shoes of those who will then be left free to climb back up upon them.

{...}

I laugh to keep from crying, sometimes (5/13/2009)

Wendy and Lucy. [Kelly Reichardt, 2008.]

Beyond remarking that the scene in which she is walking in the woods, singing to herself, is evocative of *Grimm's Fairy Tales* (indeed she encounters an ogre), I can't say anything about this film, or describe or discuss it, because it is beyond being touching or tragic; it is simply crushing. She has to give up the only thing she loves, the only other living creature who loves her. This is a human being reduced to less than human agency. She has become an animal who must gnaw its leg off to get out of a trap.

For once I have attempted to read reviews. They are uniformly insensitive and stupid. The consensus appears to be that the character Ms. Williams depicts "has failed to plan adequately" — once more the Grasshopper and the Ant: if only she had read Weber, all would have been well. — Hers was a *moral* failing. — As if a choice could be involved when only one plan is possible: to be lucky. To get to the one place on Earth where you may be welcome before your car breaks down. — She has no friends. She has no family. She has no assets, save this decrepit Honda. She has no hope, no prospects, save a job offer at the ends of the Earth. What the fuck else is she supposed to do? except roll the dice and take a desperate chance. — Elsewhere I have heard this called entrepreneurial initiative; though I may have missed some subtle nuance of the argument — or, no, wait a minute, it might all have been bullshit...

I tell myself that Chaplin was generally this desperate, and still made a happy ending of it: that he would have walked off into the sunset, dog beside him, no matter what. — Does this mean that we are less resilient than our forebears were? I think not. The horror then was worse. It has been papered over — no: it is more like the body buried

in the basement, layered under by fresh cement — not so much deliberately forgotten as repressed by *force majeure*. — Chaplin himself labored unceasingly to erase the nameless Dickensian horror he had know in childhood with stories that reflected it, but only as it were through an inverted telescope, in a distorted mirror — the optics of sentimentality. — Rather as did Dickens himself, come to think of it. Perhaps this is the only way it can be faced.

Which provides us with the easy thing to say: that the appeal of the Chaplin characters, of the bums as protagonists, was that it confronted the viewers of that era with their worst fears and then discharged them: relieved their internal stress; turned the nameless unspoken terror into laughter.

But what *is* that? It is something like the phase transition in the topology of magnetic field lines when a solar flare occurs: an abrupt reconnection that releases energy.

What a strange theory of laughter this is. Still something about it is correct.

{...}

Stanzi on the couch (6/5/2009)



{...}

Battling the giant octosaur (6/19/2009)

(Cliff enquires:)

I went ahead and looked you up, and sure enough, there you are, right out of the google gate! How did you accomplish that, Zarkov?

Then I noticed in LinkedIn you present as a “mad scientist living in the greater Denver area” a combination of a normal, pedestrian lifestyle with the science fiction overtones, *just like Flash Gordon*, which, from my brief memory, had more in common with the sword and sandal genre than fancy space technology. The futuristic stuff was provided more by Zarkov than anyone else. Is that about right?

So here’s Irishman Frank Shannon, with parts in sixty-eight B and C films from 1912 - 1949, playing characters named Phil Rourke, Badger, Henchman Mike, Mr. Farley, Dr Alexis Zarkov, Fred Morgan, and Capt. McTavish, among others. Boy, there’s one that stands out for me, how about for you?

Also, in a rare decision that actually improved on the original, Universal changed Zarkov’s first name from Hans to Alexis. But I’m sure you know all this.

For some reason, I didn’t give these serials the time I suppose I should have, and I get Flash mixed up with Buck Rogers, and I get all the Rocketmen confused — who’s battling evil men under the earth, on the earth, or in space, etc. (I’ve seen discussion of Buck Rogers being just a second-rate Flash, for ex.) Sometime, if you can, bring these into brief focus for me, and offer your opinion on their relative merits.

You can't spend all your time in a careening vortex with Nina — that chick is obsessed with you. You need to call on the powers of Professor Zarkov and calm her down, if not contain her, with some kind of brain ray.

(Zarkov replies:)

Flash Gordon began as a comic strip, which I can dimly remember as still part of the Sunday paper as late as the Fifties; the principal inspiration must have been the Martian romances of Edgar Rice Burroughs, who occasionally invoked some kind of super-scientific hocus-pocus but, basically, waved his hands and deposited his hero, John Carter, on the Red Planet to have excuses for a lot of swordfights in exotic locales. — Zarkov and his rocket ship were in this respect a great stride forward in verisimilitude, but the redoubtable Herr Shannon mainly spent his screen time posing in Bride-of-Frankenstein sets amid bubbling retorts and crackling electric arcs and only pulled a rabbit out of the hat when the plot was really dragging, e.g. when he decided to make Flash invisible for a couple of chapters toward the end of the first serial. Otherwise, I'm afraid, he was just another guy who looked bad in rocket-man shorts....

Buck Rogers was a spinoff, also starring Buster Crabbe but without the supporting cast of the Flash Gordon serials. This was also originally a comic strip, I think, but one which derived from a novel set shortly after the First War called *Armageddon 2419 A.D.*; the date determined by the requirement that Our Hero should have been preserved by some kind of sleeping-gas for five hundred years before being awakened and enlisted in a valiant American resistance against a Mongol Yellow-Peril empire that was supposed to have conquered the world in the interim. All this was garbled in the translation to film, and the Buck Rogers serial is much less satisfying than its predecessors, unless (as I

fondly recall) you're home from college for the summer and trapped in your parents' basement on a Saturday morning with your last bag of hash brownies, in which case even a snowy old black-and-white television can open a portal into a world of marvels.

The other great super-scientific serials of the Thirties eschewed use of the flight-to-other-planets motif in favor of more pedestrian devices like pitting G-Men against some evil scientific mastermind (cf. *The Fighting Devil Dogs*, in which intrepid Marines face off against a caped Man of Mystery named "The Lightning" who sails around on a Flying Wing firing electric torpedoes at anything that pisses him off) or dropping the protagonists into the middle of a civil war in some Lost City a la H. Rider Haggard; see especially the adventures of Gene Autrey in *The Phantom Empire* (and, yes, that one is underground).

One of Nina's recent ploys has been to try to ensnare me in other social and/or professional networking sites, with the result that I am now nominally registered not only with LinkedIn but with assorted other wannabes like XING, Netlog, etc. — This may backfire: I see from my mail on Netlog this morning that some bimbo from India with what look like 38 triple-Ds is insisting that she wants to be my friend; and who am I to say her nay? at least until she tries to get a credit card number out of me to watch her home videos. — O brave new world/That has such people in't.

Later.

{...}

Die Frau im Mond (7/20/2009)

Mamie Van Doren notes: “On this 40th anniversary of the first landing on the moon, my thoughts go to the romantic adventurer, Buzz Aldrin. Buzz and I spent some memorable and erotic times together some decades ago, and he is often in my thoughts. After all, a man who could make it to the moon, could make it with me anytime.”

Jesus, this is exactly what made America great.

{...}

The march of time

I see it clearly now as the progression Sixties Seventies Eighties
Nineties Zilches.

{...}

Business plans for the recession (12/8/09)

While pulling Stanzi's face out of an abandoned pizza box she discovered on the sidewalk the other night, the following inspiration struck: Papa Doc's Haitian Pizza ("It's voodoo!"); we deliver in hearses, of course, and the drivers wear (classic, not George Romero) zombie makeup; the pies themselves can feature novelty items like shrunken heads and cockroaches —

Should that fail — well — having no regard for security, I don't hesitate to offer the following suggestion: suppose a hypothetical configuration, which, perhaps naively (and I intend to remain naive on this subject) I envision as a nested set of ellipsoidal (Chinese) eggs, growing in geometric progression, each (polished on the interior (or whatever you would do) to make it] hypothetically reflective to X-rays, each beginning with the smallest placed at one focal point of the one next larger (I guess we'd alternate from left to right as we proceeded up the scale), and with a series of (of course, progressively larger) deuterium-tritium capsules placed at the opposite focal points of each ellipsoid. (You may want to coat them externally with some sort of plastic to make more plasma.) Under the proper circumstances, then, it does not seem unreasonable that the detonation of the first and innermost will trigger the detonation of the second, which will, etc., etc. — As for the precise design, it might not have to be this, but it should be something like it: the key ideas are recursion and amplification; you would want to trigger a sort of escalating cascade. — As for the practicality of the Chinese-box construction, as usual I call upon my Fairy Godmother to wave the magic wand of nanotechnology. — At any rate if you could do this, you would have a mechanism for turning a very small initial bang (triggered, perhaps, by a relatively small laser pulse) into one as large as you liked. — So: this week's idea for making fuel for nuclear rockets; please try to keep me off the terrorism watch list, even though I couldn't resist telling you

about it...

{...}

*Life of Savage (4/3/2010)*²⁴

Today over lunch I read Johnson, concluding the *Life of Richard Savage*: “This relation will not wholly be without its use, if those, who languish under any part of his sufferings, shall be enabled to fortify their patience, by reflecting that they feel only those afflictions from which the abilities of Savage did not exempt him; or those, who, in confidence of superior capacities or attainments, disregard the common maxims of life, shall be reminded, that nothing will supply the want of prudence; and that negligence and irregularity, long continued, will make knowledge useless, wit ridiculous, and genius contemptible.” — Wow, did that put me in my place.

²⁴ To [RS].

{...}

Nukes (8/19/2010)

[Responding to the explanation that though there are 1054 nuclear detonations in the database, they do not suffice to predict the viability of the arsenal since most of them represent a haphazard series of tests of *sui generis* designs and ad hoc experiments:]

... I understand about the problems with the database, but, really, one must wonder what the point was supposed to be if useful knowledge did not result from the experiments. If Galileo had actually dropped two weights off the Leaning Tower, that would have been an *experimentum crucis*, and real science. But if he had kept hauling whatever junk he could lay his hands on, mattresses, dressers, safes, pianos, marble statues, up the stairs and thrown it all off to watch it smash, that would just have been an episode of “Jackass”... .

{...}

Feynman (left on his blackboard after his death): “What I cannot create, I do not understand.”

When the mad scientists of the Venter Institute created a synthetic organism in 2010²⁵ they encoded this dictum into its genome — a nice illustration of Feynman’s point, since the Venter idea was that you couldn’t understand the cell unless you tried to build one, and also of the observation I have frequently made, that if life really were the product of “intelligent design”, whether by beings natural or supernatural, the vestigial remains of the copyright notice would still be visible in the genetic code.

²⁵ Gibson, Daniel G., John I. Glass, et al., “Creation of a Bacterial Cell Controlled by a Chemically Synthesized Genome,” *Science* **329** No. 5987 [2 July 2010], pp. 52-56.

{...}



I would believe only in a god who could dance. [Zarathustra.]