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Gypsies

Matthew Arnold introduces “The Scholar-Gypsy” with the following excerpt from Joseph Glanvill’s *The Vanity of Dogmatizing*:

There was very lately a lad in the University of Oxford, who was by his poverty forced to leave his studies there; and at last to join himself to a company of vagabond gypsies. Among these extravagant people, by the insinuating subtlety of his carriage, he quickly got so much of their love and esteem as that they discovered to him their mystery. After he had been a pretty while exercised in the trade, there happened to ride by a couple of scholars, who had formerly been of his acquaintance. They quickly spied out their old friend among the gypsies; and he gave them an account of the necessity which drove him to that kind of life, and told them that the people he went with were not such impostors as they were taken for, but that they had a traditional kind of learning among them, and could do wonders by the power of imagination, their fancy binding that of others: that himself had learned much of their art, and when he had compassed the whole secret, he intended, he said, to leave their company, and give the world an account of what he had learned.

I can’t say that I have ever really been “bewitched by language” per se, but I have certainly been bewitched by poetic expression, and this passage cast a spell over me. In my imagination I fancied myself the wandering scholar, the itinerant theoretician, with the Bateman

manuscripts¹ in my rucksack, pausing by a mountain stream to resume his calculation.

Marked thine outlandish garb, thy figure spare
Thy dark vague eyes, and soft abstracted air.

says Arnold — no doubt remarking the jeans with the Rarita-Schwinger equation tattooed across the ass — that was me, all right, rendered as a figure of romance.

Of course it had become something else, something less obvious, once I was really out of doors, but — well — that is what we are discussing here — at any rate Glanvill so fascinated me that I finally found a copy of *The Vanity of Dogmatizing*, which for some reason wasn't locked up in the Rare Books Room and remained in circulation, even though it was a valuable antique, printed in 1661; not something to be trusted to the grimy paws of a bum who would read it sitting on the lawn, with his dogs about him. — And no one had ever read it all the way through! I had to cut many of the pages! — carefully, I assure you — one of the few things the Boy Scouts got right was the advice to carry a Swiss Army knife....

As it turned out, Arnold had condensed Glanvill rather drastically; the actual point of the story, which carries on for several pages, is to expound the myth, then current, that gypsies possessed psychic powers; the errant scholar performs a demonstration of his ability to exert mesmeric influence for his friends, and Glanvill speculates about possible mechanisms that might explain telepathy.

¹ Harry Bateman was a brilliant albeit eccentric professor of mathematics at the Institute in the period between the wars, renowned for his mastery of the classical techniques summarized in Whittaker and Watson's *Modern Analysis* [1902]; dying prematurely, he left a massive *Anschluss* behind him which was published posthumously, in several volumes, and which later during the ascendancy of S-Matrix theory had a vogue among theoreticians of Regge poles, who thought the complexities of the strong interactions could be conquered by sheer analytical virtuosity with explicit formulae. I had only dipped into them occasionally, but thought they sounded like cool things to be lugging around.

Glanvill also makes interesting remarks about the relation of mind to body,² and may have been the first to present the famous argument of the Blind Watchmaker:

That our *Bodies* are made according to the most curious *Artifice*, and orderly contrivance, cannot be denied even by them, who are least beholden to *Nature*. ... And I cannot think that the branded *Epicurus*, *Lucretius*, and their fellows were in earnest, when they resolv'd this composition into a *fortuitous range of Atoms*. To suppose a *Watch*, or any other the most curious *Automaton* by the blind hits of *Chance*, to perform diversity of orderly *motions*, to show the *hour*, *day* of the *Month*, *age* of the *Moon*, and the like, with an unparallel'd exactness, and all without the regulation of Art; this were the more pardonable absurdity... .³

He was also an early member of the Royal Society, argued the reality of witchcraft, and was the first English translator [1686] of Fontenelle's *Discourses on the Plurality of Worlds*. A dude's dude, to be sure.

² "But how the purer spirit is united to this clod, is a knot too hard for fallen Humanity to unty. What cement should unite heaven and earth, light and darkness, natures of so divers a make, of such disagreeing attributes, which have almost nothing, but *Being*, in common; ... How should a thought be united to a marble-statue, or a sun-beam to a lump of clay! The freezing of the words in the air in the northern climes, is as conceivable, as this strange union."

³ Ch. VII of the edition also titled *Scep sis Scientifica*; edited by John Owen. London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1885. (This one can be found on the Internet Archive.)

be reckon'd in the first rank of *Impossible*: Yet by the power of advanc'd *Imagination* it may very probably be effected; and *Story* abounds with Instances. I'll trouble the Reader but with one; and the hands from which I had it, make me secure of the truth on't. There was very lately a Lad in the *University* of *Oxford*, who being of very pregnant and ready parts, and yet wanting the encouragement of preferment; was by his poverty forc'd to leave his studies there, and to cast himself upon the wide world for a livelyhood. Now, his necessities growing dayly on him, and wanting the help of friends to relieve him; he was at last forced to joyn himself to a company of *Vagabond Gypsies*, whom occasionally he met with, and to follow their Trade for a maintenance. Among these extravagant people, by the insinuating subtilty of his carriage, he quickly got so much of their love, and esteem; as that they discover'd to him their *Mystery*: in the practice of which, by the pregnancy of his wit and parts he soon grew so good a proficient, as to be able to out-do his

his Instructors. After he had been a pretty while well exercis'd in the Trade; there chanc'd to ride by a couple of *Scholars*, who had formerly bin of his acquaintance. The *Scholars* had quickly spyed out their old friend, among the *Gypsies*; and their amazement to see him among such society, had well-nigh discover'd him: but by a sign he prevented their owning him before that Crew: and taking one of them aside privately, desired him with his friend to go to an *Inn*, not far distant thence, promising there to come to them. They accordingly went thither, and he follows: after their first salutations, his friends enquire how he came to lead so odd a life as that was, and to joyn himself with such a *cheating beggerly* company. The *Scholar-Gypsy* having given them an account of the necessity, which drove him to that kind of life; told them, that the people he went with were not such *Impostours* as they were taken for, but that they had a *traditional* kind of *learning* among them, and could do wonders by the power of *Imagination*, and that himself had learnt much of their Art, and

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How did Villon live, when he was out on the road, after he'd been thrown out of Paris?

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Here is a typical problem. — I am reading a paper,⁴ not a bad one, really, which discusses (among other things) what Nietzsche said about homelessness, and what Heidegger said about what Nietzsche said. The useful part of what it says is the obvious, that this is about alienation, that (insofar as we can draw political morals from Nietzsche and Heidegger — who are, really, the last two people⁵ to whom I would look for guidance in this arena)⁶ there is much to be said for the ecological perspective, in which we attempt to embrace the Earth as our home once again, rather than (say) entertain fantasies about abandoning it for other planets as yet not terraformed, that ... — Well. — This doesn't really suck.

The bulk of it, however, the part that is necessary to make this read like “a paper” and not like a few insightful remarks, is an attempt to summarize Heidegger, who of course is impossible to summarize because he makes no fucking sense, and then to interpret Nietzsche as Heidegger claimed to, as the culmination of Western metaphysics, the point at which the nihilism that lay concealed within the project of plumbing the ultimate nature of things was finally exposed.

Now: was Nietzsche doing metaphysics? Certainly he didn't think so, but let's pretend: did he have what we would call a Theory of Everything? — Well, yes, but only if we adopt Nietzsche's definition of “Everything”, which was rather carefully restricted. Nietzsche is only interested in the *human* world (the fact that Heidegger insists that this is “metaphysics” tells you a great deal about what he actually

⁴ Leslie Paul Thiele, “Twilight of Modernity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Politics”; *Political Theory*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (August 1994), pp. 468-490.

⁵ The first two would be Thucydides and Rufus T. Firefly. (Not necessarily in that order.)

⁶ Rüdiger Safranski in his excellent and generally sympathetic biography [*Martin Heidegger: Between Good and Evil* — Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998] concludes, finally, that the pupil surpassed the master in significant respects, and I would, certainly, rank Hannah Arendt far above Heidegger — or Nietzsche — as a political philosopher.

meant by “Being”), not in, say, the physical world that surrounds it. — The Great Nebula in Andromeda is a galaxy about two million light years away, and its distance was only determined correctly when Walter Baade figured out that it harbored two distinct stellar populations, in which the periods of Cepheid variables⁷ differ; this discovery would have fascinated Kant, who was among the first to guess that it was a separate stellar system, but would have meant absolutely nothing to Nietzsche (and absolutely Nothing to Heidegger), for whom the night sky might as well have been a painted backdrop. — Nietzsche is concerned with Man, and — the occasional joke about Woman aside — Man alone, and wishes to understand him in purely biological terms. So although he does provide an abstract principle to explain the phenomenon of life in general, the will to power, what he is talking about is a generalized life force, *élan vital*, the force that through the green fuse drives the flower; and even though he occasionally pretends that he can derive, say, the laws of mechanics from it, he never makes a serious attempt to do so. — Though he did admire Spinoza, obviously he cannot be compared to Descartes or Leibniz.

Nietzsche doesn't give a flying fuck about the system of the world; about cosmology, or the foundations of geometry, or the nature of space and time. He does propound a pragmatic theory of logic, but half in jest. — And of course Heidegger doesn't care about any of that either.

So pretending that what Nietzsche did, or what Heidegger said that he did, or what Heidegger was babbling about while he was making his few useful remarks, had anything to do with metaphysics in the traditional sense, is ridiculous. Nonetheless academic convention demands that one pretend it does. — Perhaps only an outsider can see the intellectual dishonesty this demands.

⁷ These are variable stars whose (metronomically regular) periods are strictly related to their *absolute* brightness, which allows them to be used as standard candles to determine distances.

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Vogelfrei

“Having become God-less and world-less,” says Heidegger, “the modern human is home-less. Indeed in the absence of the God and the ruin of the world, *homelessness* is especially expected of the modern historical human.”⁸

— Which is only typically apocalyptic. — Looking for someone who would have anticipated this crisis, of course he immediately seizes upon Nietzsche; and (passing over *Gay Science* #377, “*We who are homeless*” — that would be too obvious), quotes at length from a poetic fragment somewhere in the *Nachlass* which depicts a barren landscape, leafless trees, screeching crows, and berates the poor homeless dolt who has not fled:

Now you stand numb
you look backward, oh no!
How long already!
What have you, fool
escaped before winter
into the world?

Einsleitung in die Philosophie — Denken und Dichten (in *Band 50* of the *Gesamtausgabe*); translated by Philip Jacques Braunstein as *Introduction to Philosophy — Thinking and Poetizing*. [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011.] — Herein Heidegger, still thinking in 1944 he could find the taproot of the world-historical situation in a study of Nietzsche and Hölderlin, explains that the Germans are “the people of poets and thinkers” — this by way of preface to a lecture course cut short, alas, when he was dragooned into the *Volksturm*; we can only guess to what stratospheric heights of cluelessness he might have ascended. — In any case this is where these remarks on Nietzsche are located.

— etc., etc. (“Soon it will snow,” he keeps repeating.)⁹

Heidegger points out, however, that this fragment appears in Nietzsche’s notebooks under several titles, among them — aha — “The Free Spirit” — suggesting that our hero is here less lamenting the fate that has put him out of doors than celebrating the opportunity it presents: the homeless one is he who has embarked upon the quest for novelty and adventure; the antithesis of the all-too-rooted bourgeois, the mediocrity, the materialist, the “English”, the country-club-Republican (I don’t know the German for that, but it must be good) — everything he despises, in short.

Thus in the later notebooks we find

We homeless ones — yes! We want to make the most of the advantages of our condition, never mind perishing from it, and to let the open air and the powerful overflow of light prove advantageous for us.

In re which Heidegger says helpfully

The homeless ones that Nietzsche means are the willing ones, willing in the sense of the will to power, to whom the essence of their willing — wherein they will and through which they have come to be at home — appears in the brightest light of the brightest midday, and all homesickness and longing die away.

with the usual lack of evidence of a verbal rudder.

⁹ Julian Young (*Friedrich Nietzsche: A Philosophical Biography* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010], p. 357) places this in the context of a bad winter in Italy: “Local conditions did not help. Food in the *albergo* was bad, and, for the normally mild Gulf of Genoa, it was extremely cold Nietzsche blamed not only Germany but also his unaccustomed return to sociability for the Salomé affair. For the sake of his mental and physical health, he decided, he had to return to his ‘hermit’s regimen’ of strict isolation. But the cold turned isolation into alienation. ‘A cold room affects the mood’, he observed, producing a feeling of ‘world-alienation’, of being an exile and ‘wanderer’. This is the *Winterreise* mood captured in the following year by his memorable poem, ‘Farewell’”

Nietzsche himself is much clearer:

We homeless ones from the beginning — we have no choice, we have to be conquerors and discoverers: so that we may perhaps bequeath to our descendants what we ourselves lack — that we bequeath a *home* to them.

Which makes this a story, one with a happy ending. But like the man said, it all depends on where you stop telling it.

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Nietzsche says the prisoners of the European culture he despises — “their fate is hard, their hopes are uncertain” — are like the men living in Plato’s cave; their home is a trap, a prison; to be homeless, then, is simply to have busted out of jail.

For him homelessness is a metaphor for the alienation of the philosopher who must, therefore, be a spiritual nomad — “We children of the future, how could we be at home in this today?”¹⁰

But what does that remind me of? the old Steve Miller album, with its eponymous title track. — What happened to that? Are we now children of a future that has passed?

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Indeed, what changed? because in the Sixties¹¹ homelessness was an expression of freedom — a refusal to take one’s slot in the social matrix, to sit down and shut up — *Tout le monde*, so it seemed, was On

¹⁰ *Gay Science* #377.

¹¹ Meaning, in accordance with convention, the late Sixties and early Seventies. — After the Beatles; before Disco.

the Road in a Microbus; all gone to look for America, as that noted Heideggerian Paul Simon had put it. — In a mobile society built around the automobile, this was only natural.

One obvious answer is that the difference between the Sixties and the Teens is just the difference between your teens and your sixties: what was exciting and filled with romantic possibility in adolescence looks very different when you teeter on the brink of senescence. The stories in *Nomadland* would sound just like Kerouac's and Snyder's, were these young Bohemians seeking adventure to escape the constraints of bourgeois life; instead they are people past retirement age, living in their vans out of economic desperation, reduced to rootless serfdom by the crushing weight of Late Capitalism. — It is one thing to spurn social constraint out of youthful exuberance, quite another to be cast out of society — clubbed into senselessness and tossed outside the city walls — because the socioeconomic order deems you old, broken, and worthless.

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And what do you do, when it comes to this? only what you must: you march out into the wilderness, to die with your boots on.

And those who dwell within the city walls ain't immortal either. We'll see who gets the last laugh.

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Heidegger: “Pre-eminent in the historical place, they become at the same time *apolis*, without city and place, lonely, strange, and alien, without issue amid the essent as a whole, at the same time without statute and limit, without structure and order, because they themselves *as* creators must first create all this.”¹²

(With apologies to Brian Wilson:)

Town town blow this town
I'm blowing town
Yeah, blow this town town town
I'm blowing town
I'm blowing town
I won't be found
I'm a real strange dude
I'm coming real unglued

I'm getting bugged treading all about this same auld sod
I've got to find a new place, where the kids are odd
Yeah, my puppies and me are feeling lower caste
The rich brats see us and they stare all aghast

I'm blowing town
I won't be found
I'm a real strange dude
I'm coming real unglued

Well I read Dostoevsky but it still seems bizarre
To pull your clothes from a dumpster and to sleep in your car —

¹² *Introduction to Metaphysics*, transl. 152-3.

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“We children of the future” — or of the distant past. — Well: there is the eternal recurrence again.

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There is a theory that homelessness represents the pathology of subjectivism; that once the independence of the moral judgment of the individual from social custom has been established, subjectivity alienates the individual from community, its natural home. Heidegger buys into this,¹³ but it originates with Hegel.¹⁴

Hegel finds the invention of the subjective in the figure of Socrates — in fact he seems to be saying that Socrates was the first Protestant, that before him no one ever put the individual conscience above authority; and argues that the Athenians were justified in putting Socrates to death, since the appeal to individual conscience as superior to the laws of the state was treasonous.

Unsurprisingly, this is completely backwards. It took millennia of brainwashing to *uninvent* subjectivity. The free individual, the nomad, is the natural man. It is the social matrix that is unnatural.

Moreover the “state” so-called in this particular case was not some objective arbiter of right and wrong, but (see Thucydides) a democracy steered by demagogues into catastrophe, subsequently hijacked by a party of oligarchs, in which practically anyone could fall from favor and be condemned by a pack of his enemies; and from which nearly every prominent figure, before and afterward, had been

¹³ Cf. Cecil L. Eubanks and David J. Gauthier, “The politics of the homeless spirit: Heidegger and Levinas on dwelling and hospitality”. *History of Political Thought* **32** (1), 125-146, 2011.

¹⁴ *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, Volume 1, pp.415-420; edited and translated by Robert F. Brown and Peter C. Hodgson. [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2011.]

forced at one time or another to flee — Alcibiades, Xenophon, Thucydides himself — Aristotle later, “so that the Athenians would not sin twice against philosophy” — and that Socrates’ friends were appalled they couldn’t talk him into skipping out, as his accusers had doubtless expected anyway — that the whole dramatic gesture was aimed at justifying himself *within* the framework of the *polis*. That what we’re really talking about here is Socrates’ peculiar indifference to his own fate, his conviction that he heard messages from the gods — compare the trial of Joan of Arc — the very opposite of subjective awareness. That he seemed to have been brainwashed by respect for the State. That he did *not* behave like a rational individual who formed his judgments without reference to the judgments of others, but submitted to the verdict of a kangaroo court summoned for the purpose of giving him a fair trial before they hanged him.