

XXV.

Napoleon in Rags (or, Ecce Hobo) (2011)



As for me, by the blessing of indifference, I have simplified my politics into an utter detestation of all existing governments; and, as it is the shortest and most agreeable and summary feeling imaginable, the first moment of a universal republic would convert me into an advocate for single and uncontradicted despotism. The fact is, riches are power, and poverty is slavery all over the earth, and one sort of establishment is no better nor worse for a *people* than another.

— Byron in his *Journal*, Jan. 16, 1814.

Note en passant on the Arab Spring (2/25/11)

I had the feeling, even as it was going on, that I understood the collapse of the Communist empire: it seemed to me that this was the natural conclusion of an age of revolution neatly bracketed by the years 1789/1989, and that the whole thing was explained, as well as could be, by the second song on the first side of *John Wesley Harding*, the haunting ballad in which Dylan imagines himself “Out one morning/To breathe the air around Tom Paine” (What is that air? the Spirit of the Age), and is accosted by a fair damsel who walks the grounds in chains — *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, of course, but more than that: she takes his arm, he feels a thrill of commingled fear and desire, and cannot help but listen despite his horror to her plea to take her away. “I will secretly accept you/And together we’ll fly south,” she suggests. — There is a temptation here, in short, which Dylan (master of negative capability) does not explain; rather he concludes the song with the timely appearance of “Tom Paine himself”, who comes running to the rescue — “shouting at this lovely girl/And commanding her to yield” — and apologizing profusely: “I’m sorry, sir, he said to me/I’m sorry for what she’s done.” — Who is she? and what is the temptation? Paine obviously is the spirit of Revolution, but Revolution in the sense of the Age of Reason; the magnetism of the damsel, I think, is the temptation of power, and the terror lies in the apprehension that this power will corrupt. — Robespierre and Lenin succumbed to this temptation; Washington, by the grace of the God who used to watch over our destiny, did not. — So that was the history of this era, a long series of revolutions which (as Hegel would have said) derived their own contradictions. Finally, two centuries later than one might have hoped, the values of the Enlightenment did indeed run to the rescue. And Tom Paine finally won.

There’s another, shorter periodicity however, which we see in the way the phony revolution of 1968 begat the real revolution of 1989. And

this seems to be a second echo of that. — It is somewhat reminiscent of the doubling of the rainbow, which is just (as it turns out) the second term of an infinite recursion, analogous to the Regge poles of S-matrix theory.

Maybe a joke of Mahler's explains it, then: he had a love/hate relationship with Vienna, and he used to say that when the end of the world came, he would be sure to go there "because everything gets to Vienna twenty years after it gets everywhere else."

And, I guess, to Cairo a couple of years after that.

Heraclitus at the laundromat (12/24/2011)

It also tells me, this voice I am only just beginning to know, that the memory of this work brought scrupulously to a close will help me to endure the long anguish of vagrancy and freedom. Does this mean I shall one day be banished from my house, from my garden, lose my trees, my lawns, my birds of which the least is known to me and the way all its own it has of singing, of flying, of coming up to me or fleeing at my coming, lose and be banished from the absurd comforts of my home where all is snug and neat and all those things at hand without which I could not bear being a man, where my enemies cannot reach me, where it was my life's work to build, to adorn, to perfect, to keep? I am too old to lose all this, and begin again, am too old! Quiet Moran, quiet. No emotion, please.

Samuel Beckett: *Molloy*.

On the kind of men who matter to me I wish suffering, isolation, sickness, ill-treatment, degradation — I wish they may become acquainted with deep self-contempt, the torment of self-mistrust, the misery of the overcome: I have no compassion for them, because I wish them the only thing that today can prove whether a man has any value or not — his ability to stand his ground . . .

Nietzsche: *Late notebooks* 10[103] Autumn 1887.

Before I was homeless and destitute I was, variously, a mathematician, a theoretical physicist, a programmer and designer of computer languages, a composer of advertising copy, an occasional poet, songwriter, novelist, film critic, philosopher; even the author, once, of the libretto of an opera.

But now on Christmas Eve as I sit here in the Doozy Duds, the laundromat across from the campus at the intersection of Broadway and University Avenue in Boulder, Colorado, in the company of my Australian shepherds, Wolfgang and Constanze, who are playing with my fellow bums as they roll on the floor in toothless drunken laughter, I am not thinking about Einstein, or Eisenstein, or Wittgenstein, or even Heraclitus, whom I am reading, in desultory fashion, in the copy of Burnet's classic edition of the pre-Socratics I came across in the university library. (How it is I have staff privileges at the library is another entertaining tale, but let that pass for the moment.) Instead I am recalling my years as an amateur farmer.

My then-girlfriend and I had the annual ritual of sending off for day-old chicks, shipped live through the mails. They would generally arrive late in the evening, and we would get a call and go down to the mail-handling facility to pick them up; bring them home, and construct a pen from cardboard boxes in which the little birds, balls of fluff no larger than pingpong balls with little toothpick legs, would mill around in a mass pecking at anything that might be edible under the light and heat of a couple of reading lamps. After we fixed this up we'd sit and watch them for hours. It beat the shit out of television.

One year, however, the ritual was varied, because when we pulled our twenty-five chicks out of the shipping container we discovered one, the victim of some random mutation, whose wings were attached upside-down. It seemed as healthy as the rest, but the others kept pecking at it, so we separated the population into the mass and the outcast, put a partition between them, and left a small hole in the divider through which the odd hen out could look at her fellows and be reassured by their company.

Then we sat down to watch, as usual, and what happened was appalling. The little bird with the funny wings didn't keep to its own side of the cage, but kept going over to the hole in the partition to look at the others and try to join them, and they all responded by pecking

at it through the hole. I grabbed it and pulled it away and it kept going back. I shoed the mob away from the partition and they kept lining up to take turns pecking at the cull. I blocked the window and they all pecked through it. It became obvious that no matter what I did the mass and the outcast could sense each other's presence and would do whatever it took to be united, so that the mob could peck the little oddball to death.

Which they succeeded in doing, within twenty-four hours. End of experiment.

All things come into being and pass away through strife, says Heraclitus.

—ii—

Most people react to this story as a sad one, but the inherent pathos of the situation was not what fixed my attention. I was instead puzzled and annoyed, because the behavior of the chicks was irrational. — Chickens are essentially flightless birds, who can at best occasionally get over a fence just ahead of absolutely flightless dogs; their wings are largely cosmetic, a kind of fashion statement. So the protest of the mob against the deviant wasn't really that she couldn't fly, since they couldn't either, but rather that she wasn't maintaining appearances; doing her part to uphold the illusion that the others could.

Moreover our neighbors had a breeding pair of geese, who really can fly, indeed span continents; and who had, by some similar accident, hatched a little sport with exactly this condition. He'd grown to adolescence and now walked squawking around the yard with his parents, flightless and admittedly funny-looking but otherwise healthy and certainly not an outcast and pariah.

So the mystery I labored to resolve was why chickens, specifically, were programmed from birth to recognize and exclude other birds

who deviated, even in inconsequential ways, from the norm. And then kill them.

I decided, finally, that it had to be a simple heuristic, designed to eliminate mistakes and preserve the genetic purity of the tribal unit, the flock. It looked stupid to me because I understood it was pointless, but the birds, of course — less rational, less self-conscious, less self-modifying in their behavior — did not. — God the Grand Designer might have a purpose in His every line of code, but Nature the Impatient Bitch is always in a hurry to get to Her next idea, and resorts to hacks and kludges.

Time is a child playing draughts; the kingly power is a child's, says Heraclitus.

— iii —

My laptop sits open on the table in front of me. They have wifi here, which allows me to verify that I have 13 cents in my bank account and have received no mail from my Fairy Godmother.

Then I put a movie on, an old Flash Gordon serial, *Purple Death From Outer Space*.¹

I find it comforting to have a computer with me, so I have to use it for something. It is a sort of security blanket.

Still, I'm rather furtive about it. — It is best to hide folly, says Heraclitus.

— iv —

I loved my life as an amateur farmer. For years after I had to quit it I continued to lug around the old milking stand on which we restrained

¹ AKA *Flash Gordon Conquers the Universe* [1940].

the goats while we performed our morning and evening obligations, with the rubber mat that kept their feet from slipping — old goat turds still caught within the webbing, turning into coprolites. — It worked on the same principle as the stocks, trapping the head of the goat between a couple of hinged two-by-fours, with the difference that her face was planted in a tray filled with grain — restraining and distracting her while you violated her personal space at the udder end. — You would sit sideways on the bench, position the milking pail, lean into her hip with your shoulder to discourage any unauthorized movement that might knock the pail over, give the udder a quick massage, grasp the teats (only two on a goat), and squeeze rhythmically.

I lost the stand finally in the last desperation move, when I only had time for one trip with the rental truck and had to leave behind everything that wouldn't fit. It seemed a shame, after I'd managed to preserve it through all the previous desperation moves. But this was the last and most desperate, and there had been a finality about it.

I still have the milking pails, though. I'll hang them over the kitchen sink, when I have one again. — The things that can be seen, heard, and learned are what I prize the most, says Heraclitus.

—v—

So I understand what has happened to me. I have been cast out. I have been culled from the herd. The tribe has voted me off the island. — The exclusion of the deviant, the expulsion of the Other, follows a universal logic. It is the work of the same force that expels the thorn from the flesh of your hand.

Which isn't a force, exactly, though it behaves like one. — What it reminds me of is the hydrophobic force that contributes to the folding of proteins. That isn't really a force either, but it acts like one; you see it at work in the way that oils introduced into liquid water tend to minimize their surface area by forming balls. — Water is an unusual

substance with properties that are in some respects unique: water molecules attach themselves to one another, even in the liquid state, by forming hydrogen bonds, partly ionic and partly covalent; these are directional, attach the hydrogens, which stick out like prongs, with the oxygens on other molecules, and have the effect, when water molecules are drifting around in the liquid state, not simply of tugging them toward one another but aligning them in a particular configuration. Substances introduced into water which do not form such bonds disturb this matrix of interactions. You can picture the situation as something like a square dance, in which people are moving around the floor joining hands and swinging around one another in an organized fashion; if you introduce people in straitjackets into this situation, they will get in the way and be jostled about unpredictably by dancers trying to join hands. You realize that the people in straitjackets will be pushed around randomly until they find their way to the wall of the ballroom. Or, if there isn't a wall to push them to (or they can't be persuaded to fall off the edge of the Earth), they'll clump up in groups around which the dancers can move unobstructed. (When these form in water they are called clathrates.) — You get pushed off the dance floor because you get in the way. — You're an obstruction, spoiling the fun. — That is the mechanism of exclusion.

The tribe has spoken, says Heraclitus.

— vi —

Everybody stinks. I usually don't notice it, of course, though the guy who wets himself is an exception; him I've discussed with the management at Starbucks. We shake our heads, but really who am I to talk. — Souls smell in Hades, says Heraclitus.

— vii —

Also, everyone but me is drunk. — It is a pleasure for souls to become moist, says Heraclitus.

Regarding the abuse of alcohol, though my observations are not scientific, what I see suggests that the usual commonplaces about alcoholism among the homeless invert cause and effect. It doesn't seem that people are homeless because they drink, rather that they drink because they're homeless.

This point was made long ago by Samuel Johnson, who often slept in the streets himself when he first came to London in the 1730s; Boswell relates his annoyance when one of his well-off female friends sniffed she could not understand "what pleasure men can take in making beasts of themselves." — "I wonder, Madam," replied Johnson, "that you have not penetration enough to see the strong inducement to this excess; for he who makes a beast of himself gets rid of the pain of being a man."

Many homeless people drink, at any rate, but not that much, because they can't afford to; I would often see two guys share a quart bottle of beer in a bag for the better part of an afternoon. Really impressive excess is only possible for the affluent.

One would think this should be obvious in a university town which is home to one of the most famous party schools in the country, but of course self-awareness and the sense of entitlement are mutually exclusive. — I find it amusing nonetheless to perform the thought-experiment of proposing to the City Council the eviction of the inhabitants of the fraternities of University Hill and their replacement with the homeless: the citizens of Boulder would doubtless storm the meeting to register their outrage at such a proposal, though under cross-examination every one would have to admit that alcohol consumption in those residences would instantly drop by ninety percent, and associated vandalism and property damage (very considerable, for anyone living within lurching distance of the party

nexus)² would decrease dramatically. — The homeless, in other words, drink much less than the students do, and are infinitely less destructive. Best of all, they are far less numerous.

So why pretend they are a problem? Of course this is really a question of money and class.

The way of man has no wisdom, says Heraclitus.

—ix—

I have no taste for maudlin fables, but here pro forma I suppose I might insert a little fantasy about visitations from the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Yet To Come — portrayed no doubt by women with grim but strangely familiar visages — though really, why bother.

Christmas Present is — well, what we see before us. Wolfie and Stanzi are enjoying themselves. That doesn't suck.

Christmas Past has never been a big fucking deal, to tell the truth, possibly because I added it up once and figured I had to work some demeaning job or other on the holiday on at least fifteen occasions, possibly because I have generally lived by myself and the celebration has consisted of splitting a pizza with my dogs. — I recall one Christmas morning, the first one after I started delivering newspapers for a living, when I was on my way out of an apartment building around 6 a.m. and found a bum sleeping in the entryway. I woke him up, warned him the managers would bust him if he stayed there, took him to Seven-Eleven, bought him coffee, and gave him five bucks. — Well, we can see now how much good karma that earned for me. — Last year I was newly out of doors, and was sleeping in a dead van parked in the back yard of the mother of a soon-to-be-ex-friend. She

² I was forced to park on the street, and so my car suffered about three thousand dollars in body damage over the course of the last year I lived in the neighborhood.

allowed this because she was in the hospital for a month, but left strict instructions that I was not to be permitted to enter the house to use the bathroom, presumably to prevent contamination by Loser Cooties. In consequence I found myself washing my hair outdoors in December under a nearly-frozen garden hose, and walking two miles down the highway to the nearest Starbucks to take a dump. — There was no sidewalk, only a ditch, and I had to do this at least once in a whiteout blizzard with cars sliding out of control a few feet away from me.

Rest assured I remember the names and faces of my generous benefactors. — You're a funny guy, Sully (says Heraclitus in *Commando*), I like you. That's why I'll kill you last.

(Spoiler alert: he lied.)

— x —

And the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come?

In Argentina they shoot off fireworks at Christmas and New Year's. Nothing about the display is organized, it is folk tradition, *la gente* buy *fuegos artificiales* and set them off at midnight. The sky lights up over Mendoza. I watch it all from a hill overlooking the city, among a crowd of my neighbors. The kids shriek in appreciation and clap their hands.

God bless us every one, says Heraclitus.

— xi —

Someone comes by to lock the laundromat up at eleven, so we must take our leave by then. When the hour seems sufficiently advanced, we pack up our things, slip out the door, and commence a devious and deliberately obfuscatory roundabout perambulation that takes us up

and down several side streets — watching, always, to make sure we are not observed, and if we are that our destination cannot be inferred, the whole process is something like ditching a tail — until we finally re-emerge on Broadway a couple of blocks down the hill, and cross the street to a small park. — We've tried sleeping here once or twice, wrapped up in an overcoat lying on the ground under a tree, but it isn't an optimal location, to say the least, so we pass through it, follow a trail through the woods to a spot overlooking the creek and the back side of the high school, and unwrap our sleeping bags (they're light, it's best to double-bag); I don't bother to remove my boots. — If it's really cold the dogs will sleep on top of me, but otherwise Wolfie and Stanzi are part Bernese and sleep in the snow without discomfort, indeed enjoy it.

The laptop battery isn't good for much. I watch a few more of Flash Gordon's adventures on the planet Mongo and then close the clamshell, wishing briefly that the grounds were not so brightly lit.

The waking have one common world, but the sleeping turn aside each into a world of his own, says Heraclitus.





“Liberal” and “conservative” are poorly chosen labels which have largely lost whatever meaning they originally possessed, but — adopting them with bad conscience for the moment — then the traditional liberal condescension is that the poor are poor because they are ignorant (don’t know how to do useful things), thus education is panacea and everything reduces to the “acquisition” (whatever that is) of “skills” (whatever those are); the traditional conservative condescension is that their “values” are deficient, and since unfortunately it is no longer possible to punish them with debtor’s prison, they should at least be herded into churches, where they can be reprogrammed for productive serfdom.

A better theory is that the poor are poor because they lack social connectivity; because no one knows or cares about them, and in turn they don’t know anyone important enough to be of help. Because they have not succeeded in drawing attention to themselves. Because they are unattractive and unpopular.³

Or one might simply say the poor are poor because they’re poor. That poverty simply is what it is. — A is A, says Heraclitus. Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.

Not to know the right people — this wasn’t it, exactly. I might have known them. They certainly didn’t know me.

They are estranged from that with which they have most common intercourse, says Heraclitus.

³ It may be it is so easy to be appalled by social media simply because they lay bare the underlying logic of the human universe: to an alarming extent, your place in the world can be read directly from the number of followers you command on Instagram.

Of course the moral reading of poverty is that it is a punishment for the failure to grasp the necessity of delayed gratification; the Grasshopper's punishment for failing to be the Ant.

Here the Grasshopper may reply that all pleasure is ephemeral, and to eschew it on those grounds alone is to render life painful and meaningless. But this would still accept the terms of the fable — which is propaganda, really, so much gaslighting.

Because it should be obvious that the exact opposite is the case: poverty by definition is a state in which gratification is delayed. Often in perpetuity.

One gratification that is delayed, for instance, is that of going to the dentist. Thus teeth are an infallible class indicator. My mood is surprisingly light, but I cover my mouth when I laugh, and only guardedly smile.

Another gratification which in my current circumstances I find I must delay is taking a bath. There is a bad stretch in the spring when the opportunity for total immersion does not present itself and (since it is cold) I go a month without removing my boots. In consequence my toenails turn black and fall off. — I don't worry about this, assuming they will grow back later; and they do eventually, albeit thick and gnarly. — It rests by changing, says Heraclitus.

Others have attempted to explain my situation to me, of course, presuming that my condition proves my own judgment to be defective. But only the poor understand poverty.

First, it is expensive. — Consider my telephone, for instance, nearly useless anyway since I have had to block two hundred numbers for collection agencies (they have developed some method for spoofing Caller ID that changes them automatically), but now in addition shut off half the month because they started adding fifty percent to the bill on the theory that I should be fined for being unable to pay on time. — Clearly this can't go on much longer. (Indeed it does not.)

Second, it is illegal. This follows from the moral interpretation of being unable to pay your bills. In practice it means, for instance, that if you didn't have the money to renew your car registration, you can be ticketed and fined an even larger amount. When you can't afford that either, additional fines and penalties will be assessed until the next time your luck runs out, at which point you will be incarcerated. — Really insurance is a worse problem, but a still better illustration is this: for a long while I fell behind on my utility bills, and struggled to pay them before the shutoff deadline, at which point service would have been terminated until I could pay an impossibly enormous deposit to reinstate it. One year on three separate occasions I managed to forestall this disaster by first mailing a check written on an account which had been closed (guess why), and then going into the office before the check could bounce with another copy of the bill (they always helpfully sent several death threats) and paying the delinquent amount in cash. — Really I don't even know: was this felony fraud? no matter, in this rare instance my luck held.

But third, and by far the most important, money is power, the poor are powerless, and the powerful *prey* upon the powerless — instinctively, without thought, not even noticing that they are doing it; this is inexorable biological law. So in reality poverty has nothing to do with tightening your belt, or temporarily doing without,⁴ or making sacrifices to begin clawing your way back up the economic ladder.

⁴ The old New England proverb was Use it up/Wear it out/Make it do/Or do without. But a glance at my shredded jeans should have confirmed that I absorbed this moral with my mother's milk.

Poverty is about other people taking everything away from you and your being powerless to stop them: your free time and disposable income first, of course, and your love life with them; then your job, your house, your car, your possessions, your friends, your self-esteem, your time, more and more of it — your life, if they can get it — because as you eventually figure out, they really *are* trying to kill you, and by the time you are homeless they have very nearly succeeded.

If you want a picture of poverty, says Heraclitus, imagine a boot stamping on a human face, forever.

— xvi —

Thus it is that despite insistent suggestions by assholes who think they mean well, I never consider giving up my dogs for adoption. They are my best friends and the only family that counts, my companions when everyone else has given up on me. And I have a responsibility to them which I simply cannot abandon, since that would deprive me of my last excuse for simply giving up and offing myself. — Which is what the world desires, of course, the logical conclusion of everything that has transpired; this is the corral into which they are trying to herd me.

But I'm too fucking obstinate. I refuse to die and give the bastards the satisfaction. — Character is destiny, says Heraclitus.

— xvii —

Really, the phone was a particularly elegant example. I never used it, save to call time and temperature periodically to verify its continuing functionality — who wanted to hear from me, after all — but I held onto it as long as I could, on the theory that it might still come in handy. But there was a slight phase misalignment between the billing date and the date I received funds, resulting in a steadily escalating self-amplified cascade of late fees and penalties. This resulted finally in termination and yet another unpaid debt added to the mountain.

I imagine the bill has been passed from one collection agency to another in the intervening years, old debt never dies, rather it is sold and repurchased on the theory that it can be turned into a producing asset for the rentier class, and somebody, somewhere, is absolutely convinced that if they try hard enough they'll be able to get me to pay ten thousand dollars for the half-dozen phone calls I made in the fall of 2011. — The most esteemed of them knows but fancies, says Heraclitus.

— xviii —

Mike Tyson's post-mortem on his career: "I'm a peasant. At one point, I thought life was about acquiring things. Life is totally about losing everything." — It is not good for men to get all they wish to get, says Heraclitus.

True, but it is worse for men to lose everything they have.

— xix —

So I can't throw anything out either. Everything is in my storage locker.

It is, of course, a large one, since it must contain an entire houseful of shit. I like to go there and commune with my junk; looking for a book is always a good excuse. I gaze fondly at my mothballed computers and disk drives, with my music and film libraries on them. — Pick up my guitar. — Work out a bit with my weights. — Ordinarily I lack any semblance of discipline, but when the alternative is the complete disintegration of the personality I hear the voices of my German ancestors. — The dogs eat bowls of the exotic designer chows we scavenge from the Petco dumpster, I grab the sleeping bags, we wander off into the woods.

I have tried sleeping in the storage locker once or twice, in principle a great idea because there is no shortage of pillows, blankets, bedding, flashlights, pens, notebooks, but this is more trouble than it is worth. The lot is patrolled, albeit sporadically, and though there are several other people who appear to be sleeping in their units they don't have a great many possessions at risk. I have had a few encounters with the management, they are obnoxious assholes, and if they throw me out I'll have to find another place to put everything and move it all again. They might even lock the container from the outside while I'm still in it and force me as it were at gunpoint to accede to some draconian conditions. As always, it comes down to a balance of power, which is never in my favor.

No question of contract law or moral principle enters into these calculations, of course. It is a simple matter of assessing probabilities and performing a risk-benefit analysis. I can't afford to get caught, that's all.

You're a stray dog, trying not to get hit by a car. But sooner or later you'll make a mistake.

The House always wins, says Heraclitus. Or maybe that was Darwin.



— xx —

Occasionally somebody walks up and offers me money. I always thank them and take it, without guilt or false pride. When I had money, I gave it to bums. When I have it again, I'll resume the practice. I have a generous nature, and in this regard I behave toward others as I would have them behave toward me. There is no problem here. And every little bit helps.

Handouts are as nothing, however, compared to the cash drunken students let drop in the street. — If only their parents knew; if only their parents wanted to know. — I have seen altogether too much of the undergraduate population in the decades since Reagan, and (foreign students excepted) despise them uniformly: the steady decline in their literacy has been matched by a steady increase in their sense of

entitlement; they know nothing, they learn nothing, and they think they need never learn anything more — though eventually, I expect, they'll have to pick up enough Chinese to take orders.

I dress in what I discover in the dumpsters. Shoes in particular are remarkably easy to find, indeed they seem to materialize, precisely in my size, just when I need them. This reinforces the delusion that there is some twisted Providence watching over me after all. — “All right, we’ve fucked with him enough. Give him a pair of hiking boots.” — I have the feeling it is waiting to see whether I have learned some lesson. — Something about endurance, presumably. All this is just my punishment for always having been such a quick study.

I also find packs frequently. Even suitcases; I stash a couple of them against my eventual escape.⁵ — One pack I discover while taking a shortcut across the railroad tracks east of town; somebody vomited into it profusely and dropped it on the spot. I run it through the washer and it’s good as new. It becomes a favorite.

The lord who is the oracle at Delphi neither utters nor hides his meaning, but shows it by a sign, says Heraclitus.

— xxi —

The dogs and I do walk everywhere, often eight or ten miles a day. We enjoy this, actually.

I have observed that the homeless trudge. They have nowhere to go, they seem burdened by cares, aimless and unmotivated; they have become fatalistic about loss and suffering, and have that vacant dispirited/defeated look in the eyes, the one you associate with Third World peasants beset by natural disaster and pictures of Okies from the Depression. The psychologists call this condition “learned

⁵ And sure enough, I used them.

helplessness”⁶ — it is as if gravity has increased, everything is heavier, it is harder to move; because what is the point?

I react against this from the outset. I walk rapidly and with purpose, bounce off the balls of my feet even though I’m usually lugging a heavy pack around, and regard my surroundings with animation and interest. — I know I am supposed to crawl off and die. But I never do what I am supposed to.

Of course we walk without ever really getting anywhere, but it doesn’t matter, the journey is its own destination. — You will not find the boundaries of soul by travelling in any direction, says Heraclitus.

— xxii —

One awkward problem is the problem of too many packs. — To the extent that it is possible, you must avoid making yourself conspicuous: that makes you a target, someone upon whom their natural instincts will lead them to prey. And therefore it’s a mistake to haul a giant pack around, as many do. But the functional necessity is there nonetheless, and so I have a tendency to multiply smaller ones. At one point I find myself carrying five (including one dedicated to my own coffee pot, which I plug in when I can find a convenient outdoor outlet), plus sleeping bags. This isn’t terribly heavy or difficult to manage, but leaves me walking around with a small mountain of stuff heaped up on my shoulders, destroying the illusion I am trying to maintain. Thus I develop a system for stashing the packs in secure spots and grabbing them only when I need them. This tends to complicate our itinerary, but we spend most of the day walking around anyway.

⁶ Discovered by Martin Seligman during his doctoral research in 1967, for which he performed experiments in which he administered electric shocks to dogs under restraint, trying to condition them into accepting pain as their fate. His methods were later adopted by the CIA for the (“enhanced”) interrogation of suspected terrorists.

Sleeping bags in particular are easy to hide, and also easy to replace if lost, since the homeless have a tendency to abruptly disappear and leave their camping gear behind them: my favorite spot on the hillside above the creek is many layers deep, like Schliemann's Troy, and contains canned food, clothing, several blankets still in good repair, and at least three abandoned tents.

At a minimum I carry a laptop (not the older and more fragile Powerbook, but the relatively robust though alas heavier Sony Vaio),⁷ some books and notebooks, my shaving kit, some shampoo and a large plastic glass I can use to rinse my head rapidly when I duck into one of the public restrooms in which it is possible to wash my hair, and my food supply. Unfortunately I have to eat a lot, since I eschew the sensible diet of the bum, which would be something like peanut butter and Fritos, in favor of yogurt and fruit, which may be healthier but takes up a lot more space. It's frequently necessary to hit the grocery twice a day.

I also have an electric toothbrush. Plugging in the laptop at Starbucks is normal, of course, but recharging the batteries of the toothbrush without making myself a public spectacle is tricky. Still I love the silly thing, and I enjoy the reaction of the morning joggers when they find me using it at a public fountain at 6 a.m. on the bicycle path along the creek. I probably should be mugging the assholes for their phones and credit cards, but failing that at least I can fuck with their heads.

Men do not know how what is at variance agrees with itself, says Heraclitus.

⁷ Purchased originally for its bluray drive. It died young, alas, no doubt a victim of this constant abuse.

Periodically something snaps and I have to check into a motel. This is expensive, and I can't afford to do it more than two or three days a month, but it turns out to be essential for preserving my sanity. I take many showers, read in the bathtub, watch Turner and ESPN.

The dogs sleep on the bed. They love it too.

It is like a pressure building up which finally leads to an explosion.

It doesn't necessarily make me feel human again, but at least I feel like an animal whose cage is occasionally cleaned.

Thus I attain a perfect understanding of how it was that when the miners came down out of the mountains they blew all their money on liquor and whores. — And of course that is how this town came to be here in the first place. — It is hard to fight with one's heart's desire, says Heraclitus.

Why are cheap motels so expensive? as usual a close examination of the question illustrates broader principles. These same run-down old dumps have been sitting on the main drag ever since I can remember. I've stayed in many of them in earlier periods of transition. Nothing about the motels changes, or ever will (except that eventually they'll all be torn down to make way for upscale condos to rent to rich students) but the cost of a room continues to rise, not continuously, but in abrupt quantum jumps when their ownership changes hands. — This is a law of rentier capitalism: the only reason to own such a property is to flip it at a profit; whoever buys it goes into debt to the bank and must immediately raise rents to make the loan payments. — The banks collect their piece of the action; the buyer and seller turn profits; capital amasses more capital. Those who have money get more

of it, those who spend money spend more of it. This is the way of the world.

Recalling one vermin-infested apartment house I'd inhabited in the slums of University Hill, where mud backed up into my kitchen sink for five years while the rent doubled: one year the roof leaked more than usual, the walls of the girl upstairs rotted out, and we'd looked into the space between them to discover with amazement the insulation favored by Primitive Man: newspapers from the Nineteen-Forties. — Nature loves to hide, says Heraclitus.

— xxv —

I still read the *New York Times*, though I no longer have my own subscription. Instead I get a copy from one of the other bums when he's done with it. — It might seem strange to hear a guy who has slept in his clothing for a month explaining why the Obama stimulus fell short of the Keynesian ideal, but everyone reads Krugman now, I guess. — A different class of people are starting to show up in the streets. I feel that once again I have anticipated a trend.

The *Times*, however, long since ceased to be the newspaper of record; the baton was passed at the moment when the *Onion* greeted Bush's election with the announcement that "Our long national nightmare of peace and prosperity is over." — This simultaneously [a] exposed the implicit moral-restoration premise of the Bush campaign⁸ [b] stated succinctly, as no major media outlet ever did, the real motivation for the manufacture of the Lewinsky scandal, i.e. to get even for Watergate, and [c] was prophetic in its prediction that the Bushies would seize upon the first excuse to go to war.

⁸ It should be noted that Bush circa 1998 was expressing alarm at the new level of personal attack that had been employed to pursue Clinton and, obviously worried that his own personal history would render him an even more attractive target, expressed his reluctance to run for higher office in such a poisonous environment. Presumably someone took him aside and explained he would not be subjected to the same kind of scrutiny.

The *Onion*, at any rate, wonders whether the cost of living has begun to outweigh its benefits. I have to admit I too am no longer sure.

When the going gets weird, the weird turn pro, says Heraclitus.

—xxvi—

Sometime earlier in the year I made my last visit to the Video Station, the best — now really the only — video store in the city, which I had visited two or three times a week continuously over a period of twenty years. On this occasion, however, I hadn't shown up in several months, and speculation had circulated about what had happened to me. — I was candid; I told the owner that my finances had suffered shipwreck, and I had gone down with all hands. — “Picture me,” I told him with a smile, “like Leo at the end of *Titanic*, frozen in a posture of farewell as he sinks into the abyss.” — He laughed, but seemed concerned. — Well. At least someone was.

And how did I go bankrupt? Sure enough, it happened as Mike Campbell said, in two ways: gradually and then suddenly. — It is the thunderbolt that steers the course of all things, says Heraclitus.⁹

— xxvii —

Starbucks to its lasting credit does not ask many questions of its customers. For a while when I was sleeping in the garage I got up at four in the morning to avoid observation by the neighbors, walked the streets for an hour or so, and then went in when they opened at five after tying the dogs up on the patio. Since I pulled out a laptop and immediately began working, like any other guy who used the place for an office (of course there were many such), I could pretend to be an eccentric professional, and the staff treated me as if I really were one. I became a valued customer, in fact, the frequent recipient of favors and discounts, and they had my signature triple espresso waiting before I

⁹ Heidegger and Fink [Martin Heidegger and Eugen Fink, *Heraclitus Seminar 1966/67*, transl. Charles H. Seibert; University of Alabama Press, 1979] translate this as something closer to “Lightning steers the universe,” and then proceed to debate what “lightning” is, what “the universe” is, if it is “all things” then what “things” are, what “steering” is and whether it presupposes the direction or control of a helmsman, what power the lightning-flash possesses to illuminate, the nature of the conflagration which will mean the end of the world, etc., etc. — in short to parse every extant syllable in an attempt to reconstruct a hypothesized Heraclitean masterwork, lost for millennia, from its fragmentary remains — philosophical paleontology — but it is perfectly obvious what Heraclitus was talking about: of all the guys who ever lived here is the one who would have been least surprised by the revelation that the dinosaurs were wiped out by the impact of an asteroid (he would indeed have laughed and said “How else?”), and that the Earth spawned the Moon when it collided with another planet — the prophet of catastrophe, the philosopher of the quasi-stellar object and the gamma ray burst, the photographer, in imagination, of the black hole that powers the jet that emerges from M-87 — the author, in spirit, of the idea that the chemical constituents of the world began as dust scattered by exploding stars — indeed the spiritual father of the Big Bang itself, the notion that the universe began with an explosion (Einstein’s original static cosmological model, long since discarded, was explicitly Parmenidean) — the guy whose intuition of chaos at the dawn of Western philosophy showed him that creation is catastrophe, that the essence of the world is fire, that everything begins in strife. — No, we know all about this guy, the one guy who at the beginning of philosophical history already understood everything, who saw it all in advance. No seminar required.

even got to the counter. This cost a few bucks a day, but I could usually afford it; in fact I would probably have hung out there all the time, particularly in bad weather, but as always the puppies were a complication. I tried leaving them in the car, when I still had one, but people kept calling the cops; eventually some anonymous defender of the civic order claimed I'd left them there overnight in subzero weather, I was issued a ticket based upon this fiction, and in due course since I couldn't afford to contest the charge I was apprehended and incarcerated, the vehicle was impounded, and I lost my last capital asset.

All things are an exchange for fire, says Heraclitus.



Stanzi and Wolfie waiting by the back door at Starbucks.

In jail I had no appetite. I gave all my meals to a densely-tattooed Mexican biker who was in on some kind of bullshit meth bust, figuring he looked like somebody I should cultivate. He was a great dude, as it turned out, and we talked at length while he ate. — In general the population consisted in roughly equal parts of homeless people recursively busted for their n th camping tickets because they'd been unable to pay the fines the first $(n - 1)$ times and thus had that many outstanding warrants, and those who were theoretically hardened criminals; maybe just because no one knew who might really be dangerous we were all extremely polite with one another, and got along very well. — Indeed predictably the only assholes were the cops. I wondered briefly about the perennial question of whether this was nature or nurture, but of course that had long since ceased to be interesting and I rapidly stopped worrying about it. — Water is wet. The sky is blue. Cops are dicks. This is not the banality of evil but the evil of banality. Better to think about something else.

I kept trying to use the phones to call out and find somebody to make bail for me, or at least check on my dogs, confined to the companion slammer at the Humane Society, but of course they didn't work and no one cared that they didn't. — They did give us little Walkman radios on which I discovered an oldies station which still employed the same disk jockey who had ruled the airwaves when I was in high school. — He was still playing the same tunes. That wore out rapidly. — I got a few sheets of paper and a stub of a pencil and tried resuming a calculation I'd been working on, but couldn't read what I was writing and made indifferent progress. — Then I discovered the library, and began to read continuously, far into the night, even after lights out, sitting next to the door holding the book up to the window. It took a day or two to get up to speed, but then I read four books a day, and of course was just getting back into shape: another day or two after that and I would have been doing six or seven, but they finally gave me a hearing, I got to talk to a public defender who had no

difficulty making me sound good to the judge, and I was sentenced to time served on the condition I agreed to be guilty of something I hadn't done; the only alternative being to wait another month or two and stand a real trial to be exonerated. — Thus was I released once again into the wild; but only after I had permitted the machinery of justice to redefine me as a criminal who had paid his debt to society.

It was a three mile hike back into town. I hadn't had any caffeine for a week, the longest stretch cold turkey since I first sat up all night writing a term paper in the eleventh grade. I got a four-pack of canned Starbucks espresso-and-cream at the grocery along the way and drank two as I walked. These were easily the best coffees I'd ever had.

It is sickness that makes health pleasant, says Heraclitus. — evil, good; hunger, plenty; weariness, rest.

— xxix —

I walked all the way back the next morning to bail the dogs out of the Humane Society. We went straight to the motel, and spent a couple of nights watching television and taking long hot baths before our money ran out and we resumed camping out along the creek.

And so I spent a week in the Boulder County Jail for doing nothing — a week more than John Ramsey ever did — and it taught this poor white boy a valuable lesson about American justice: that I should be happy. Because if I'd been black, obviously I'd still be there.

Men would not have known the name of justice if these things [i.e. injustices] were not, says Heraclitus.

— xxx —

Andre Weil did his best work, on the Riemann hypothesis for curves over finite fields, when he was imprisoned at Rouen in 1940 awaiting trial for the comedy of errors that commenced when he chose to leave

the country rather than serve in the army. About this he wrote in a letter to his wife “My work is proceeding beyond my wildest hopes, and I am even a bit worried — if it is only in prison that I work so well, will I have to arrange to spend two or three months locked up every year?”¹⁰

He notes that when he later arrived in Princeton and began writing up his results, Hermann Weyl made the kind offer to use his influence to have him put in prison again, since his previous stay had proved to have such a positive influence on his productivity.

It is the opposite which is good for us, says Heraclitus.

— xxxi —

At best the police are bureaucrats with guns, and I have to wonder who came up with this idea, not one of the great inspirations of the Dead White Males. At worst they are a reminder of why “police states” are so called. It is instinctive to avoid the cops, since they too prey upon the powerless, and no interaction can work to your benefit. — This has absolutely nothing to do with right and wrong — the idea that my dogs and I represent some kind of menace to society is *prima facie* absurd — it is just recognition of the fact that the law is a machine which will crush you if you get caught in it and you can’t afford a lawyer. You avoid them for the same reason you try to keep your hands away from a drill press.

Fuck the police, says Heraclitus.

— xxxii —

Cold per se is not a problem, nor snow, if it is dry. The combination of wet and cold, however, is not simply uncomfortable but potentially

¹⁰ *The Apprenticeship of a Mathematician*, p. 146.

life-threatening. There are evenings in the laundromat when I waste many quarters trying to dry my boots. When such conditions prevail it is necessary to find real shelter.

Moreover after the City Council meets and passes a new-and-improved anti-camping ordinance,¹¹ the Occupy protesters are run off the courthouse lawn and forced to seek temporary quarters elsewhere. Meaning that I am displaced from my fairly sheltered favorite spot for a couple of months in the middle of the winter. — Thus it is that I decide, reluctantly, to investigate the campus more thoroughly.

Without the dogs, there is no question but that I could elude the university cops and find a warm place to sleep; even inside one of the buildings. I took classes here in high school, I've worked here in many capacities — all of course menial, but so much the better for learning the lay of the land — I've hung around here for decades, and know the campus better than any cop or any of the few security guards left on patrol; I know which doors are unlocked, which roofs are accessible, which buildings don't have a night crew. — Not to give very much away, I could simply tell the police I was sleeping in the University Theater, and it would take them a week to find me in that labyrinth. — Outdoors the grounds are densely overgrown, and there are patches of forest which in summer are impenetrable; even in winter I could hide there easily enough. — If I were alone, at least.

With the dogs, it's trickier. I am already under suspicion for reading in the outdoor theater every afternoon: it's quiet, sheltered, has easy access to bathrooms, there are exterior outlets which allow me to recharge the battery of my laptop or even plug in my coffee pot; but thanks to the tireless efforts of the numerous spies who apparently

¹¹ A study for the Homeless Advocacy Policy Project of the Sturm College of Law at the University of Denver found that 1767 camping ban citations were issued in Boulder from 2010 to 2014 (two of those were me, both thrown out of court); in the same period, 15 were issued in Denver. (See www.law.du.edu/documents/homeless-advocacy-policy-project/2-16-16-Final-Report.pdf.)

have no better occupation than to peer through their office windows at unwanted interlopers, I have been denounced to the police and interrogated a couple of times. If I were to actually sleep here, as some are already claiming I do, the dogs will bark at skunks and foxes all night and give us away. So I have to avoid getting caught at all costs, or I'll be dealing with a serious trespassing beef and a ban from the campus which may or may not really be legal, but which will certainly be enforced.

So this is a delicate calculation.

I decide, after further investigation, that the stadium is most promising. A gigantic addition has gone up on the east side to accommodate sky boxes for the high rollers — of course — and despite the obscene expenditure involved, the facility is not really intended to be used more than half a dozen times a year; for the rest it is occasionally rented out for parties and receptions. So — passing over camping out in the bathrooms themselves, which are warm and left open 24/7, but may for just this reason be inspected by the guards (I have bad memories still of an earlier attempt to sleep in the bathrooms in one of the public parks, an experiment which lasted only a few days before someone ratted me out to the park rangers and the doors were all locked) — I discover nonetheless three ten-story stairwells leading up to the rooftop edifice; all warm, dry, their doors always unlocked, and of course completely unused — indeed there is still trash lying on the floor from the last home game, months earlier.

And here we stay for a couple of months. There is some minor discomfort in sleeping on bare concrete every night, and there are occasional close calls when unexpected traffic comes through and we have to bolt on a minute's notice, but basically it's cool: no one patrols the site after ten o'clock, and no one seems to notice us when we leave in the morning — indeed it is an added bonus that it is safer sleeping late and insinuating ourselves into the dense pedestrian traffic that appears around nine. — There's even good reception for the university wifi network. — So, save for one or two panic attacks that send us to

the motel, this arrangement lasts until the weather improves and we can go back to camping out on Boulder Creek. — Where, presently, harried by newly-empowered cops dispensing camping tickets, we migrate eastward out of town to a really pleasant spot (convenient to our storage locker, which is a plus) where we hang on for months, reading Gibbon by flashlight in the sleeping bag at night, harassed only by coyotes and the occasional psychopath wannabe. — Every beast is driven to pasture with blows, says Heraclitus.

— xxxiii —

Nor iron bars a cage





Making the stadium the ultimate destination complicates the lengthy perambulation following our evenings in the laundromat enormously, entailing as it does a lengthy circuitous walk through the campus, avoiding cops, scanning for security guards, killing a few minutes with a stop at the Engineering Library because why the fuck not, examining the upper stories of the annex with paranoiac focus, trying to decide whether the local jet set are staging some kind of reception in the lounge, what do those lighted windows mean — finally strolling casually through the edifice (sometimes even nodding to the security guy on his final patrol) — hitting the bathroom — slipping through the unlocked door into the stairwell, up a couple of flights to a landing — checking the telltales I have left, like Bond, whether anyone has picked up the big baggy sweater I found here earlier and dropped casually on an upper landing — since not, grabbing it for additional padding —

Occasionally I climb the remaining stairs to the top floor and the entrance to the lounge and the skyboxes of the high rollers to examine the locks, but it is no use: these are the hardest kind to pick, and anyway even could we gain entry we would probably trigger alarms and be captured on surveillance video. — Too bad, it would be the most elegant hack of the system of control to crash in the private sanctum of some wealthy asshole and leave dog hair and empty yogurt containers for him to discover next September when he returns to lord it over the little people. — Or perhaps even better yet to take the elevator to the penthouse during a party, and to emerge with my dogs, like Maria with her children in *Metropolis*, confronting the Sons of the Oligarchs. — It is fascinating how completely the logic of these sky boxes has recapitulated Lang's symbology, the architectonic of late capitalism.

The way up is the way down, says Heraclitus.

In January snow falls upon the keyboard of the laptop as I type outdoors in the courtyard theater where in more affluent seasons I have attended the summer Shakespeare Festival. Everything is familiar here. I sit crosslegged with my back against the exterior wall of the building where I took classes in my days of whiz kid innocence; Elvis and mathematics have long since left the premises, but they still, ironically, house the philosophy department.

Here I text long-distance conversations with my Argentine muse, who is trying, unsuccessfully, to figure out why her uncle has disinherited her. She tells me tales of excess, horror, evil, and ruin, and I take it all in stride, because what else can be expected of a borderline hysteric who dresses like Morticia Addams.

The weather gradually improves. One afternoon I am sitting outdoors at work when a seminar relocates to the open air and a posse of posers and wannabes install themselves on the seats about thirty feet away — paying no attention to me, of course, manifest incarnation that I am of the Platonic Idea of the Loser. — I am trying to ignore them, but somehow the discussion gets hung up on the question of the existence of negative facts. Here I cannot help but raise my voice and interject that this is the subject of a famous story Russell told about Wittgenstein: that Wittgenstein insisted there were not, that Russell had proposed as an example “There is not an elephant in this room,” and looked under all the desks in the classroom for errant pachyderms; that Wittgenstein had still insisted, No. — I added that this incident had been depicted in Derek Jarman’s (rather inferior) biopic¹² — that the problem actually was relevant to logic programming languages like Prolog, where one assembled a database

¹² *Wittgenstein* [1993]. — He tried to make Wittgenstein over as a gay icon, without much success. Turing is a better choice, as proven by *The Imitation Game*.

of positive statements of fact and had to look through all of them to verify a negative — that ...

... no little consternation.

Some curiosity is evidenced as to how I might have acquired this knowledge, dread and wonder at my diminished circumstances unspoken but obvious. — I laugh, and tell them a familiarity with the philosophy of logic is no guarantee of economic viability.

The learning of many things teacheth not understanding, says Heraclitus.

—xxxvi—

Out of reflex reading the rentals on Craigslist. Seeing a listing for the carriage house on the property of the art collector on 4th Street whose house I walk by all the time — I've spoken to him, his dogs and mine are friends, they sniff at one another through the fences when we pass, border collies and Aussies, practically relatives. It would be a done deal as soon as I called. — Except — of course — it's two thousand a month. I waste a fair amount of time fantasizing about how I might miraculously acquire an income of this magnitude. — If only I possessed the serene gall of a Michel Simon....no, impossible.

Since I am often out walking the whole fucking day, of course I explore every corner of the city like this. I am particularly fond of the affluent neighborhoods on the west end. After all, I used to live there.

In the circumference of a circle the beginning and end are common, says Heraclitus. Though this is more like a downward spiral.

The legend of Merlin, as it first appears in Geoffrey of Monmouth, is the story of a Welsh king driven mad by the horrors of war who flees civilization and becomes a wild man who lives in the woods.

I envy him this freedom. Now, of course, within a day or two he would be ratted out to the forest rangers, ticketed for illegal camping, and (his indigence once established) summarily incarcerated.

The logic here is something like the one Foucault was trying to identify in his history of madness: the growth of a certain industrial organization that demarcates the boundary between civilized order and what it chooses to define as the outer chaos. And then represses that, with bureaucratic efficiency.

The wise man is not known because of men's want of belief
says Heraclitus.

Superficially this is a practical question, however: why not just live in the woods? Particularly since — fuck the campus, forget the woods along the creek — I also know the mountains west of Boulder like the back of my hand.

But I run through it in my mind, over and over again, and it simply won't work. — First, without a car I need to stay within walking distance of a grocery; it might be possible to bicycle up and down the canyons a few miles, but that would leave the dogs at risk, tied to a tree or hidden in a cave somewhere, so really that is out. Near the city though there are hundreds of sheltered spots where one might pitch a tent, the trails are so heavily trafficked and patrolled that it would be impossible to escape detection for long. And food caches attract bears.

With the appropriate vehicle, it would certainly be possible, at least if we kept moving around. I know many places where we could camp out temporarily, though any attempt to take up semipermanent residence would be sure to bring down the heat. It would not be possible to light a fire, since that would attract attention even at a distance, but one might make do with a Coleman stove and a portable heater. — For that matter there are still many abandoned shacks, old miner's cabins, streams with fresh water in which (in better times and warmer weather) I was once wont to bathe, old unused mining roads to provide access, at least if one had four wheel drive. (And in winter, chains.) — My old Jeep would have done, had it not died long since, victim as were so many cars of the paper routes, which (a heavy sigh of reminiscence) devoured vehicles like Goya's Cronos.

But it *sounds* possible. At least if I were willing to renounce the use of computers and the internet and go back to writing longhand. — Though why not; it worked for Villon, after all, and what better model for the gypsy scholar.

There would be other possibilities: I could drive out into the desert and simply squat, for instance, for as long as I could stand it. Or find an abandoned town in Nevada somewhere, and wait there to be abducted by aliens.

For that matter I might go back to Detroit, move into an empty house, and shoot rats for food. Though in Detroit the rats probably shoot back.

But can I escape civilization completely? — No. — How can one hide from that which never sets? asks Heraclitus.

— xxxix —

Walking through the retail district of University Hill early one morning after a heavy winter storm, I discover a guy sleeping in the

doorway of a shop. He is covered with snow, but ingeniously has contrived to wrap his sleeping bag in a plastic Hefty bag. This keeps moisture out, and adds a layer of insulation.

The dry soul is the wisest and best, says Heraclitus.

— xl —

Sometimes when the weather is bad my colleagues and I hang out in the laundromat during the day. This might be awkward if anyone were actually using the machines, but it is Christmas vacation, the place is deserted, and even though the bathroom has been locked to discourage deadbeats like ourselves from loitering one can, with the exercise of caution, get away with pissing in one of the laundry sinks.

One afternoon a few of us are sitting around (like characters in Gorky's *The Lower Depths*, I am thinking, and wondering whether this is more like the Renoir version or the Kurosawa version) when a stranger who is obviously not a local enters with some laundry, loads a few machines, looks around at us, and leaves. Shortly he returns with takeout from one of the adjacent restaurants, and hands the containers out silently. The other bums all eat quickly and leave without so much as looking at him; contrarian as always, I linger, thank him sincerely, and engage him in conversation. — It develops that he drives the tour bus for a band that has just pulled into town for a gig at one of the clubs on the Hill; he explains in a pleasant Tennessee accent that he'd been down and out himself in Nashville before he happened on his current gig; conscious always of his good fortune, he takes pains to assist those in trouble when he can. — I tell him when I was better off I did as much myself, and will resume the practice when my circumstances improve. — We talk for a bit about the musician's life upon the road, and how it steers him into odd adventures such as this. — He remarks that I seem very calm and confident, different from the other guys, and I laugh and tell him not to worry, all will be well with

me, this too shall pass. — He says that he believes this too. — Pulls his clothing out of the dryer, shakes hands, and takes his leave.

I am different from the others, he's right about that. But it isn't that I'm better than they are, superior in some way that would satisfy a Puritan moralist. I'm luckier, that's all: stronger, smarter, healthier.

And what brought me here, the fact that I don't fit in anywhere, means that I don't fit in here either. I am an outcast among outcasts. Wherever I am, I refuse to belong.

I make no statement without metalinguistic re-examination. Even the collapse of my fortunes is an ironic gesture.

And so I'm still an anthropologist, and this is just another field expedition — an experiment I am performing upon myself.

Men that love wisdom must be acquainted with very many things indeed, says Heraclitus.

— xli —

Eventually I did escape. — They voted me off the island. Fuck you, said I, and left the continent.

But if this was an experiment, it remains to explain the results. How did this happen? What is my feeling about all this?

— First, of course, that it was always inevitable. I had come close so many times, after all — the grim week after I'd been evicted in the spring of 1995, for instance, when I lived with three dogs and two cats in a van without valid license plates or registration that had run just as far as the cemetery before it too dropped dead — it was obvious that I was being steered toward this catastrophe, that it represented the attractor of some kind of dynamical evolution, that some dire teleology had been invoked. — This despite the fact that my whole reaction was

one of disbelief, of unreality, an inability to accept that this was really happening to me — even though it was simultaneously the most crushing and omnipresent reality. How can something be both inevitable and unbelievable?¹³

— Again, that nonetheless it was desirable, in that only by being cast completely out of society can it be possible to gain an exterior perspective, and see it as a whole. That this was the only way to understand it.

— And yet again I also had the feeling that — this is complex and difficult to express — if some are cast out and must experience this, then I had no right not to — something like, if it were a case of “There but for the grace of God go I,” then God by denying His grace to some and not to others has proven Himself a malevolent despot, and the — Satanic? in the sense of Milton — posture is to express solidarity with the oppressed by sharing their experience. — Though here we are, sure enough, finding bad reasons for what is known by instinct. — And also there is a fascination with the nadir of misery, with debasement, something like the the disturbing urge I had felt standing on the ledge of the Millikan library as Higgins and I hurled water balloons at the pavement ten stories below, the lure of the abyss. Heidegger had wondered why anything should exist, and not rather nothing; of course you could not understand that any way but dialectically, by passing from being to not being and then embracing the impossible synthesis — somehow attaining the wisdom Nietzsche ascribed to Silenus.

— Or it might be interpreted as a sense of duty, the same instinct that led the saints to share the misery of the unfortunate and oppressed — to debase themselves, to embrace suffering, that Christian self-effacement, the mortification of the flesh, the renunciation of earthly desire.

¹³ Clearly this was an interior monologue that could only have taken place before 2016.

So I am not sure whether this is the Faustian seduction, the need to court damnation, the thing that made Rimbaud think he had to fuck himself up to become a seer; or whether it is the moral imperative Father Damien obeyed when he chose to share the misery of the lepers. Or whether these are somehow the same.

— But then again I am also angry that I have been reduced to these circumstances — very, very angry — at being preyed upon, victimized — *pecked at* — I am certain now that they really are trying to kill me, and that this justifies anything — and I find myself remembering that Che too went into the jungle to work with lepers, and emerged the scourge of imperialism. — That he wound up at the head of a peasant army that overthrew a corrupt government, and spread the fear of the guillotine throughout the hemisphere. — That he died a martyr, and became the patron saint of Revolution.

Fire in its advance will judge and convict all things, says Heraclitus.

— xlii —

Diogenes Laertius says of Heraclitus that in the end he became a complete misanthrope, and wandered about the mountains feeding on grasses and plants.

One story has it that he expired finally of a dropsy, which he attempted to treat by covering himself with cow dung; in this unrecognizable state he was devoured by dogs.

I have sought for myself, he said.¹⁴

That was Nietzsche's favorite text. No fucking wonder.

¹⁴ Lennon/McCartney render this "Nothing you can do but you can learn how to be you in time."

The Antichrist (2011)

Nietzsche considers the Christian the type that has been bred for domestication. — But is it specifically Christianity that is at fault? I think not. It is more like this is the general purpose of religion, to program the individual for submission, for subordination. — So even though he is correct in considering the priestly class the enemy, I don't buy the rest of it — the condemnation of otherworldliness, for instance. No one had his head in the clouds any more than Isaac Newton; and yet no one had a greater love of working with his hands. One can be both involved in the world, and still removed from it.

That the Roman empire may have been corrupted by Christianity is another matter. This was Gibbon's scarce-disguised theory as well, and though it doesn't seem as though that was the worst of its problems, it certainly didn't help. — But it was all a function of the historical context. Nietzsche prefers Islam, more obviously a religion of the sword, but in the course of time surely more people have been slaughtered in the name of Christ.

*Down goes Frazier (2011)*¹⁵

“Frazier is dazed, he is getting hit again and again.....Frazier is dazed, he doesn’t know *where he is...*”

What is the sick fascination in this? — Frazier gets knocked down, again and again, he is out on his feet, stumbling around blindly, nonetheless trying to put his hands up and continue to fight — he can’t quit — you have no doubt that if the referee hadn’t stopped it he would have kept getting up over and over, back to his feet and down again until he was dead in the ring....

— And there’s your metaphor. — It fascinates you because this is precisely your own situation: *You are Frazier.*

¹⁵ This is as close as we will get to a meditation on the phenomenon of YouTube addiction: *what* exactly is it that attracts us in our meanderings? And why?

Independence (2011)

“What I must do is all that concerns me,” says Emerson, “not what the people think. ... the great man is he who, in the midst of the crowd, keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude.”¹⁶

But independence is — problematic: a burden, almost a curse. — In terms of its effects — viewed extensionally, as it were as a behavioral phenomenon — it is hard to distinguish it from ostracism. You might as well have the mark of Cain upon your brow.

Because society, in general, is not an object with which the independent soul can have some mutually beneficial interaction, any more than a comet can with Jupiter. It is a gigantic gravitational vortex that either sucks you in, to the destruction of your individuality, or flings you away into interstellar space. — The House always wins, says Heraclitus.

¹⁶ “Self-reliance”.

The scapegoat (2011)

A curious imperative: the social order must not only exclude, but punish. It is not enough that the geek should be cast out for his deviance, he should also get his ass kicked by the football team; and witches must be hunted down to be burnt. — The public spectacle associated with the institution of the stocks; carried to its logical conclusion, we cannot picture the guillotine without the crowd gathered to watch the aristos lose their heads.¹⁷ — The chick must be pecked to death. — Everyone must cast a stone. — There is some low-level mechanism, some piece of machine code, that demands that you single some poor asshole out to make an example of him.

The phenomenon may be general among the social structures of the animal kingdom; I have observed something like it, e.g., in dog packs. Smaller groups are usually stable, but aggregates of more than half a dozen or so display a pronounced instability: suddenly, for no apparent reason, random barking will enter upon a runaway feedback loop, all will become excited, one among them will be designated the runt, and all the rest will turn on it.

In early cities, banishment. Tossing one outside the walls and forbidding him to return. We do not want this one among us. We make him a symbol of — what? the will to violate the rules? perhaps the mere possibility of transgression? — and cast him out.

Perhaps simply the principle of exclusion. Inclusion demands its complement: no one can belong to a community, if no one can be kept out of it. — This is natural: in a way the principle of the gated community is just the principle of the cell wall; the division between order and chaos.

¹⁷ Admittedly my mental picture derives from Baroness Orczy, but —

But how is the scapegoat selected? — I take a personal interest in the question.....

—ii—

We find the idea in the Bible (cf. *Leviticus*), of an animal which, in time of plague or famine, could be ritually burdened with the sins of the people and then cast out into the desert. — The Greeks also followed the practice, but with humans: in theory some person of importance was to be cast out (in some cultures even sacrificed, see any volume of *The Golden Bough*);¹⁸ in practice, naturally, some poor schlemiel would be substituted to take the fall instead, and it is in this form that the practice survives into the present day.

The odd thing is that the Hebrew name¹⁹ associated with the scapegoat is (suitably Latinized) *Azazel*, which in an Apocryphal text — the *Book of Enoch*, claimed by tradition to be of antediluvian provenance, but more likely composed two or three centuries B.C., and subsequently elided from canonical scripture²⁰ — is the name of one of the fallen angels cast out of heaven who taught mankind the arts and the sciences; specifically, he who taught the fabrication of swords and daggers and breastplates, and the working of metals. — Which sounds suspiciously Promethean, and confirms us in our guess that the unlucky stiff selected for ostracism and exile would probably be a geek who had authored some dangerous innovation. Why not kill two birds with one stone, after all.

¹⁸ In the cinema my favorite illustration of this theme is *Eye of the Devil* [J. Lee Thompson, 1967], in which modern-day feudal lord David Niven ends up the victim of a ritual stag hunt (led by David Hemmings and Sharon Tate, clad head to toe in ninja black) after the crops fail on his French estate.

¹⁹ In the Bible not so much the name of a person as the name of the place to which the sacrifice is sent, but, whatever.

²⁰ Save among Ethiopian Jews, who have preserved the most complete manuscript. See Michael A. Knibb (with Edward Ullendorff), *The Ethiopic Book of Enoch* (2 vols.); Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978.

About this work Sir Walter Raleigh, in a *History of the World*²¹ written while he was imprisoned in the Tower of London, after noting that Enoch is supposed to have engraved various prophecies “on pillars of stone and Bricke” which since have disappeared, says

“But of these prophecies of *Enoch* Saint *Jude* testifieth; and some part of his Bookes (which contained the course of the Starres, their names and motions) were afterward found in *Arabia fælix*,²² in the Dominion of the Queene of *Saba*²³: (saith Origen) of which Tertullian affirmeth that hee had seene and read some whole pages.”²⁴

though he bases these assertions on evidence no one else has been able to discover. — Speaking from the perspective of one who has labored in similar circumstances, I don’t find this surprising. Sometimes you just make shit up. — Enoch, at any rate, was supposed to have recorded certain secret mysteries later communicated by God to Moses but not transmitted to the vulgar masses (here insert the Rosicrucian mantra), related to the Kabbalah. Unsurprisingly these are lost. What remains for our inspection is less cosmic in significance but admittedly entertaining, painting as it does a picture not of revolt in heaven but of a renegade band of angelic voyeurs (“the Watchers”) who decide after beholding “the beautiful daughters of men” to take off for an extended weekend in Vegas, with predictable consequences:

²¹ “At London Printed for Walter Burre”, 1614. Cf. “The first Booke of the first part”, Chapter 5, Section 6: “Of the Patriarchs delivering their knowledge by Tradition; and that ENOCH writ before the floud.”

²² I.e., Southern Arabia.

²³ I.e., Sheba.

²⁴ P. 79 of the edition preserved on the Internet Archive; the spellings are Raleigh’s. — He also claims that Augustine made mention of Enoch, though this isn’t exactly footnoted either.

And they took wives for themselves, and everyone chose for himself one each. And they began to go in to them and were promiscuous with them. And they taught them charms and spells, and showed to them the cutting of roots and trees. And they became pregnant and bore large giants, and their height was three thousand cubits. These devoured all the toil of men, until men were unable to sustain them. And the giants [i.e., the *Nephilim*] turned against them to devour men. And they began to sin against birds, and against animals, and against reptiles and against fish, and they devoured one another's flesh and drank the blood from it. Then the earth complained about the lawless ones.²⁵

— clearly a prophecy of the role of billionaire oligarchs in global capitalism, and one which promises us a Flood is forthcoming that will cleanse the planet.

The fate of *Azazel* in this account is particularly instructive: he is singled out to be bound and buried under stones and cast into a darkness which sounds suspiciously like the Caucasus:

(8. 1) And Azazel taught men to make swords, and daggers, and shields and breastplates. And he showed them the things after these, and the art of making them: bracelets, and ornaments, and the art of making up the eyes and of beautifying the eyelids, and the most precious and choice stones, and all (kinds of) coloured dyes. *And the world was changed.* (8.2) And there was great impiety and much fornication, and they went astray, and all their ways became corrupt.

Thus predictably:

(10.4) And further the Lord said to Raphael: “Bind Azazel by his hands and his feet, and throw him into the darkness. And split

²⁵ Knibb and Ullendorff, op cit.,

open the desert which is in Dudael, and throw him there. (10.5)
And throw on him jagged and sharp stones, and cover him with
darkness; and let him stay there for ever, and cover his face, that
he may not see light, and that on the great day of judgment he
may be hurled into the fire.”

Which doesn't sound promising. Even Shelley might have had a hard
time writing him out of this one.

— iii —

In more modern and presumably more reliable literature, Jan
Bremmer²⁶ after citing *Leviticus* notes the existence of similar rituals in
Greece, Rome, among the Hittites, in India, “and even in mountainous
Tibet”, and analyzes at some length the practice of driving the
designate from the city with rods of the *agnus castus* aka *lygos*, a
relative of the willow;²⁷ and, remarking that it was the marginal
members of society who were selected for scapegoating, notes also that
these were sometimes singled out to wear the *lygos* wreath, which —
aha! — was associated with Prometheus, that notoriously marginal
Titan. — Scapegoats were escorted from the city through a designated
gate, led around the walls in a procession (I would bet not clockwise
but widdershins),²⁸ and then, in the best traditions of reality television,
driven off by stoning.

²⁶ “Scapegoat rituals in ancient Greece”, *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, **87** (1983),
299-320.

²⁷ Frazer says the *agnus castus* was “a tree to which magical properties were ascribed” but is
no more specific.

²⁸ Though it is one of the little-noted ironies of theoretical physics that the sense of a rotation
is assigned according to the right-hand rule, and thus the (left-handed) clockwise direction is
negative, while the counterclockwise direction is positive. — I leave reinterpretation of the
rituals of witchcraft that also take into account charge conjugation and time reversal to some
other scholar.

It is in this spirit that the hapless boob who becomes a ritual sacrifice in *The Wicker Man* [1973]²⁹ is burnt in a manshaped cage made of willow branches. — And here was the original Burning Man, worshipped by California hipsters to the present day. — The developmental arc of human society is once again revealed to be either a vicious circle, a Slinky [a/de]scending an Escher staircase, or a vain attempt to find the inside of a Klein bottle.

—iv—

Which is all clever in its own way, but explains nothing.

Frazer devotes Part VI of *The Golden Bough* to the scapegoat, and as usual refers everything to magical reasoning: it is an instance of transference; the sins of the people are responsible for their suffering, and must be passed on to an object, an animal, or a person, which then is cast out.

He offers countless illustrations in the ritual practices of a variety of primitives,³⁰ all of which are clearly designed to bestow Cootie Protector upon their practitioners — writ large, the crucifixion of Christ to remove the stain of original sin from mankind; on a less cosmic scale, variations on the theme of Huck Finn lecturing Tom Sawyer about remedies for warts. — “A German cure for toothache,” says Frazer, “is to bore a hole in a tree and cram some of the sufferer’s hair into it. In those cases, though no doubt the tree suffers the pains of gout [similar recipe] or toothache respectively, it does so with a sort of stoical equanimity, giving no outward and visible sign of the pains that rack it inwardly.” — Plagues similarly are caused by demonic possession, and —

²⁹ Described elsewhere (letter to Cocktail 2/6/01, “Frazer in the Hebrides”) as “the first, last, and only Druid nudie musical”. — Directed by Robin Hardy but, more significantly, written by Anthony Shaffer.

³⁰ I think we must agree the word is here used ironically.

All this seems to presuppose a capacity for symbolic representation and a lamentable tendency to confuse names with things, which — rather as lactose intolerance is gradually being eliminated from the gene pool — one may presume will slowly disappear as cultural evolution continues to debug the existential software of *Homo sapiens*.

—v—

Of course that is bullshit. It is the instinct to expel the Other that is fundamental; the rest, the elaborate justifications for the expulsion of the deviant, is mere epiphenomenon, rationalization after the fact. No kind of sympathetic magic is involved when the thorn is expelled from your flesh; the social order is simply finding excuses for what it would have insisted on anyway. Frazer is doing metaphysics in the style of Bradley, finding bad reasons for what is believed upon instinct. — The real question is, who will be singled out? who is the undesirable?

And I know the answer to that one too. — Look out, kid. It's something you did. — It scatters and it gathers; it advances and retires, says Heraclitus.

Nietzsche [*Twilight of the Idols*]: “The free man is a *warrior*.”

Admittedly it seems to solve the problem of subjugation if you take charge of it. But where does it end? — Nietzsche the reclusive scholar has no idea how *boring* endless fighting is. How boring warriors are, how limiting it is to make that the sole purpose of life. — How counterproductive: Poncelet was an officer in the French army; he invented projective geometry only after he'd been taken prisoner during the retreat from Moscow and tossed into a cell.

Le Carré asks “What is the difference, in morality, between the totally anarchic criminality of the artist, which is endemic in all fine creative minds, and the artistry of the criminal?” — Though this sounds more like Austin Grossmann, in his portrait of the Mad Scientist.³¹ — Again, compare Nietzsche: the purpose of art is to destroy the State; of science, to destroy the world.

³¹ *Soon I Will Be Invincible*. [New York: Pantheon, 2007.]



Nun stehst du starr,
Schaust rückwärts ach! wie lange schon!
Was bist du Narr
Vor Winters in die Welt entflohn?

However even though we find things like

The crawling glaciers pierce me with the spears
Of their moon-freezing crystals, the bright chains
Eat with their burning cold into my bones

I doubt Nietzsche ever had to sleep outdoors in the winter.

—798—

Snow



In practice it isn't a problem finding a place to sleep. The real problem is finding a place to sit down...

Heidegger on the lawn (6/1/2012)

Whatever his limitations, Heidegger makes great reading for a homeless guy. I time myself: it takes exactly seven minutes to dash into the University library, run up four flights of stairs, sprint into the stacks, grab another volume (it is fortunate that 'B' in the Library of Congress classification lies close to the entrance), dash back to the front desk to check it out, and get back to the hiding-place where I have tied the dogs up in the bushes before the campus cops arrive to write us a ticket. — If I am late inevitably there ensues a long and profoundly boring argument about whether leashed and extremely friendly Australian shepherds represent a menace to academic society which I must always pretend to lose if I wish to avoid incarceration. — Then I can sit out on the lawn all afternoon, drinking canned Starbucks espresso-and-cream and indulging the nihilistic Schadenfreude of the gypsy anarchist yucking it up over the darkening of the world, the flight of the gods, the destruction of the earth, the transformation of men into a mass, and the hatred and suspicion of everything free and creative. — No man is poor who can do what he likes to once in a while, says Heraclitus.





— 800 —

Stardust (6/26/12)

A meditation on this theme, prompted somehow by Robert Musil: if everything I see on this spring morning around Varsity Pond was cooked in a supernova and blasted away and ended up here in time to form this world that I see, then the dispersion time is small, relative to the age of the universe; this means that spores could have arrived here

as easily — and (recalling the pingpong balls and the hydrogen bomb)³² might have been blown away by the shock wave without being vaporized; one would have to verify this with an explicit calculation (does radiation pressure dominate? I really don't know), but it seems plausible. — Then to model the rate of diffusion. But surely in a billion years or two they could be all over the galaxy. Certainly dust clouds are everywhere.

So you would wonder then whether there is some RNA signature that could be detected by spectroscopic means — beyond, say, nucleic acid fragments. — Or proteins, perhaps, but it is still easiest to imagine panspermia as the spreading of the *idea* of self-reproduction; of the Von Neumann replicator, of the genetic code. — Or perhaps one could not identify the most complex molecules, but rather the set of products characteristic of their breakdown. Really I think most of these have been seen.

It would be natural to look for the residue of the primordial goop on comets. Conversely, if life originated independently here, would it have spread to comets? a few bacteria here and there, perhaps more, meteoric fragments get knocked all around the solar system. So that if the sun went boom, the spores would be scattered. (The cosmic puffball hypothesis.)³³

³² Cf. Chapter 8 of George Dyson, *Project Orion: The Atomic Spaceship 1957-1965*; Penguin, 2002. — During a series of nuclear tests in the mid-Fifties, the Air Force physicist Lew Allen experimented with hanging steel spheres covered with layers of graphite or plastics from the towers on which the bombs were detonated. Remarkably, even though they were literally 20 feet from the center of the fireball and exposed to temperatures of as much as 150,000 degrees Kelvin, many of these specimens were propelled to considerable distances and recovered intact. These surprising results convinced skeptics, among them Ted Taylor himself, that the idea of a nuclear rocket propelled by bombs wasn't completely crazy. — The key, it developed, was to coat the object in question with a layer of something that would ablate to dissipate the heat efficiently; plastics turned out to be a particularly good choice. — Anaerobic bacteria buried within the fragments of the body of a planet, or a comet, of course, could be similarly shielded.

³³ An alternative explanation suggested by the subsequent discovery of interlopers like 2I/Borisov is that spores might be dispersed by interstellar comets.

Difficulty: how long they could remain dormant? Even on the Earth the sell-by date is fairly short;³⁴ the cosmic radiation field can't make things easier. — On the other hand, would they really need to be alive or even intact? Seeding might be accomplished simply by providing the local chemistry with the appropriate hints.

—ii—

Consistency check: obviously we would expect to discover life on other planets in the solar system, also (perhaps even more likely) on comets. Presumably we wouldn't even know what we were looking at if it were not carbon-based and very similar to our own, so grant that. The test would be the genetic code. — If the same, we expect that the Earth has contaminated the solar system, and analyze the samples for divergence from a common ancestor, by looking at the sequences that code for specific proteins, e.g.; the same analysis can be applied to life on Earth, of course, and we can use this clock to figure out when the branch occurred. If billions of years, we suspect a common origin; otherwise we can date the meteoric event that knocked the seed loose, and even guess whether this occurred more than once. — If not the same but close, creative confusion: after Crick we suspect some bottleneck, look for more samples on other worlds, and begin to entertain Hoyle-like hypotheses: could even mitochondria be evidence of multiple seeding events? — If not the same at all, we start to get paranoid. (Dead giveaway would be different handedness for amino acids.)

³⁴ The question of the sell-by date is a matter of controversy. Various authors have claimed to have recovered and revived bacteria preserved in amber (shades of Crichton/Spielberg) as much as 120 million years old; see for instance C.L. Greenblatt et al., "Micrococcus luteus — Survival in Amber", *Microbial Ecology*, **48** (2004), 120-127. Others express extreme skepticism about these results and argue for a maximum DNA preservation time of less than a million years; see Eske Willerslev et al., "Long-term persistence of bacterial DNA", *Current Biology* **14** (2004), No. 1.

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

manuscripts³⁵ 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.

³⁵ 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. Since my tastes ran more to the abstract 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,³⁶ 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... .³⁷

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.

³⁶ "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." [*Batrachomyomachia*.] — The idea that a sort of Higher Epoxy is required to explain the union of mind and body seemed familiar, and I recalled finally young Eldridge Cleaver's failed attempt to resolve the mystery of the Trinity by analogy with Three-in-One Oil. Though this met with censure and ridicule from the nuns who were his teachers, really, did Augustine do any better?

³⁷ Ch. VII of the edition also titled *Scepisis 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

I find myself wondering how Villon lived, when he was out on the road, after he'd been thrown out of Paris —

Here is a typical problem. — I am reading a paper,³⁸ 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 people³⁹ to whom I would look for guidance in this arena)⁴⁰ 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

³⁸ Leslie Paul Thiele, “Twilight of Modernity: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Politics”; *Political Theory*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (August 1994), pp. 468-490.

³⁹ The first two would be Thucydides and Rufus T. Firefly. (Not necessarily in that order.)

⁴⁰ 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 variables⁴¹ 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.

⁴¹ 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.

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.”⁴²

— 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.)⁴³

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.

⁴³ 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.

— ii —

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?”⁴⁴

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?

— iii —

Indeed, what changed? because in the Sixties⁴⁵ 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

⁴⁴ *Gay Science* #377.

⁴⁵ 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.

—iv—

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.

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

— ii —

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,⁴⁶ but it originates with Hegel.⁴⁷

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.

— iii —

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

⁴⁶ 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.

⁴⁷ *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.]

which nearly every prominent figure, before and afterward, had been 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.

Annals of natural history (2012)

One annual visitor, whom I see over a period of several years alternately in the creek east of the city, or in the marshes south of it, is a solitary blue heron. It is extraordinarily beautiful, and I can never help but stop and stare at it when I see it on my daily walks, though it is extremely shy, and does not appreciate my attention. (The dogs don't help.) I have no idea, of course, whether it is male or female, though my instinctive guess is that it is a guy lost in the mating season, come to Boulder to hang out in a mountain stream in the hope that some girl heron will come along and they will Meet Cute.

Just another poor geek trying to find the party. I know the feeling.

I used to say that the only real sciences were physics and anthropology; that everything arranged itself on the globe defined by these two poles. — Obviously this derived from Wittgenstein and Quine, but still, there is something to it.

Maddin's Dracula (8/1/2012)

I have to admit, the city has its moments. — One afternoon I am out walking Wolfie and Stanzi and let them loose on the high school grounds to play with another Aussie belonging to someone I peg as a random techie, with whom I strike up a conversation. — He is a recent arrival from Canada, and hails from Winnipeg. “You probably don’t even know where that is,” he says. — I tell him that, 6th grade geography aside, I am a film geek, and therefore know that it figures in a famous question put to Mister Memory in Hitchcock’s *The 39 Steps*, and that it is at present the home of Guy Maddin, one of my favorite film artists. — He tells me that his girlfriend there was a dancer, and appeared in Maddin’s film of a ballet based on *Dracula*. — I have seen it, of course. “Dude,” I tell him, “I am uncharacteristically impressed.”

*Variations on a theme of Strelitz (10/4/2012)*⁴⁸

An earnest social worker contrives an increase in my food stamp allowance; I thank her for her stipendous achievement. — Daydreaming about the California coast, I imagine a sitcom about a circle of aging Pynchonesque stoners, prone because of the accelerated senility induced by prodigious weed consumption to frequent and hilarious memory lapses; this could be called Lacuna Beach. — Passing through the mall on the morning walk, I come across an outpost of Victoria's Secret, where I see a large display labeled "What We're Wearing Now" featuring the loathsome pink hoodies bearing the slogan "Love Pink" all the sorority bimbos seem to be wearing; reflecting on the role that fashion plays in stimulating economic activity, I think to myself: the Schlock of the New. (Surely this can't be original.) — Encountering a young Bohemian with whom I frequently conversed when he worked at Starbucks this last year, I ask him whether he has retired from the coffeemaker's trade; he tells me that he has, and plans to attend law school in the fall. "Ah," I say, "from barista to barrister."

⁴⁸ To Richard Strelitz. [An inveterate punster.]

*The Dogshit Blues Band (October 1969)*⁴⁹



... Yes, the sweater vests throw me into a time warp. “What sort of man reads *Playboy*? A cool collegiate man on the go, he arrests attention with his confident smile and sure sense of sartorial elegance” (Shot of an admiring coed staring at Young George Bush as he instructs a couple of his minions where to buy beer for the evening kegger.)

⁴⁹ To Richard Gillmann.

Thanksgiving (11/22/2012)

In the evening I walk back to sleep in the office, and realize belatedly that everything has closed and I have nothing to eat. Finally I pass the gas station just below the building, and find that they are open and have a convenience store. I tie the dogs up outside and inspect the shelves; select a large bag of (Chili Cheese) Fritos, and buy them from the girl behind the glass barrier. She seems to like me, or maybe it's just Wolfie and Stanzi. I smile and bid her a happy holiday; sneak into the building, eat my dinner, which actually isn't bad, and pass out watching space operas on the big Mac. — Trying to compare this feast with Thanksgivings past, which have featured generous repasts like dinner at Denny's, frozen pizza, peanut butter sandwiches, and (the previous year) a cold can of chili before reading myself to sleep in my storage locker.⁵⁰ — On balance, not so bad.

⁵⁰ Actually I recall this episode fondly, since what I read was Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, whose principal ("Hiro Protagonist") despite being a legendary hacker and (as his business card declares) the world's greatest swordsman, lives in a storage locker and makes his living delivering pizza. — Irony may not be an armor impervious to circumstance, but if it is not, that statement is my Gödel sentence.

The Arab Spring (again) (2/1/2013)

The outcomes of revolutions tend to resemble Faraday's demonstration of the reality of the magnetic field: you scatter iron filings on the surface of a piece of paper, and it somehow comes as a surprise that they arrange themselves in alignment with the lines of force emanating from the bar magnet hidden beneath it.

*In the matter of Ms. Bigelow (2/2/2013)*⁵¹

I am trying to clarify my thoughts on the matter, and as yet have no coherent opinion. *The Battle of Algiers*⁵² was if anything worse, but that doesn't excuse it. What is clear from a study of the screenplay is that the position of the CIA guys, which is reflected in the standpoint of the filmmakers, is that this was a necessary tool for obtaining information. It is also clear that this took a toll on the people who employed these methods, that there was considerable emotional cost. Whether any of this really had to happen, whether other methods might have obtained better results, etc., as a technical question isn't obvious. What is obvious is that it was morally wrong; but in war you kill people, which is also wrong, and it is justified on the ground that it is the least of the evils that confront you. And of course the other guys are shooting back. What they attempt to insinuate here (and again I think Boal/Bigelow are just presenting the point of view of their sources) is that Al Qaeda was, indeed, shooting back, thus the repeated terrorist attacks, the Pakistani guys trying to hit Jessica Chastain, the suicide bomber that kills her colleagues in Afghanistan, etc. I'm not sure the "war" on balance is that symmetric, particularly when you start adding up the collateral damage from all those Predator strikes. — The one thing that I'm sure pisses me off is something I missed when I was watching the movie, and only caught in the screenplay, namely, that when the dude who did the interrogations goes in to ask his superior for a few hundred K to buy his Kuwaiti source a Lamborghini, he agrees in return (*quid pro quo*) to take the fall for the program. This kind of systematic bureaucratic avoidance of responsibility infuriates me. Whatever the final verdict may be on the morality of the current program of targeted assassination by Predator drone, we do know, at least, that Obama is

⁵¹ To Johnny C.

⁵² Dir. Gillo Pontecorve, 1966. It is worth noting that both this and Godard's *Le Petit Soldat* [1960] were banned in France on first release.

taking direct responsibility in that he insists on final approval of every hit. So he's not trying to weasel out of it the way that Cheney and Rumsfeld did with Abu Ghraib. I take some small comfort in that.

I also think it is wrong to try to weasel out of the admission that the CIA did these things, and that the public was to some extent complicit in that, e.g., most people supported Bush, at least at first. On 9/12/2001 everyone was gung ho for the war on terror. What nobody wanted to admit at the time — though I've methodically gone through my correspondence and I at least tried — was that this was going to entail the usual response of an imperial power to violent attempts at subversion, i.e. empowering a secret police. The fact that we also got some cool ninja warriors in the bargain doesn't obscure the facts of the matter: some people, somewhere, are getting the knock on the door in the middle of the night, and find themselves in short order getting the shit kicked out of them in a prison cell somewhere very far from home. Some of them probably deserve it, but most of them, I fear, do not.

So. All this bothers me, and I don't have any easy answers. Still thinking. I'll keep you posted.

Later.

*Status report (3/26/13)*⁵³

... after a couple of years of being buried under a mountain of shit, I have burrowed far enough back toward the surface that I can breathe through a straw. More anon

⁵³ To Cliff.

Putative Classics (2013)

The End Of The World. [John Hayes, 1977. Written by Frank Ray Perilli.]

Earnest young NASA scientist Kirk Scott — a man with a Seventies job, sporting Seventies hair, pensively smoking a Seventies on-the-job cigarette as he stares at a Seventies terminal in the Seventies computer center that gives him access to a Seventies mainframe running execrable Seventies software — discovers while poring over his computer logs that someone in the vicinity is sending and receiving radio messages from beyond the earth.

Returning home to brood over this revelation and smoke more cigarettes, he pauses momentarily to have unscheduled Seventies sex on the living room rug with his gorgeous California blonde Seventies wife (Sue Lyon, and no wonder) before stepping out to address his colleagues at a dinner engagement; after which his harried boss Dean Jagger takes him aside and insists over protest that he is being transferred to public relations, and must for a season wander the countryside from school to school giving pep talks to the eager youth who need to be recruited to the cause of space exploration, whether they want it or not.

Meanwhile strange earthquakes are being felt about the globe.

As the young scientific couple cruise down the blue highways of lost California, pausing here and there to rip their clothes off, wrestle, and then smoke more cigarettes, they stumble across a mysterious convent presided over by Father Christopher Lee, where a basement full of glowing electronic gear indicates that all is not as it seems to be — and, sure enough, in a trice our hero and his little blonde cupcake have fallen into the hands of — yes! — Evil Nuns From Outer Space.

Cross-examining his captives, the sinister priest, now revealed to be a shipwrecked mariner from another world, exerts his mesmeric influence to discover that NASA is experimenting with the manufacture of an essential part needed to restore his interstellar conveyance to full functionality; holding the girl hostage but promising to release her and go quietly as soon as his engines turn over, he dispatches the distraught husband back to his erstwhile workplace to score some dilithium crystals, or a carburetor, or whatever it is that seems to be missing.

More earthquakes.

The professor does his best ninja imitation, and meets with success, notwithstanding the inept efforts of a few overweight guards to deter him. Nonetheless Lee reneges on the deal; explaining, as he and his posse disappear through a teleportation portal into dimensions unknown, that he must follow the orders of the alien masters of the cosmos, who have decreed that the Earth is a menace to the galactic gene pool, and the human race must forthwith be culled.

Dumbstruck with this abrupt denial of genre convention, the couple look at one another aghast; look at the television monitors around the room showing recycled *Our Man Flint* footage of a world in peril from tornadoes, avalanches, floods, earthquakes, and volcanoes; look at one another again; shrug; and follow the departed religious order through the gateway to the unknown.

And sure enough: the world explodes.

The Wizard Of Mars. [David L. Hewitt, 1965. (Technical advisor Forrest J. Ackerman!)]

Four hapless bozos, three male, one female, are circling the Red Planet in a dimestore spaceship on the usual illfated exploratory mission

when — on cue — a cosmic storm strikes, their orbit falters, and, smoke pouring from their control panels, they plummet from the sky to the polar ice. Out of desperation they decide to journey to the south to look for a missing module which may have a working radio and fresh supplies, and, after rafting down the canals, fighting off carnivorous plants, wandering through rainbow-colored underground caverns lit by eerie phosphorescence, skirting a volcanic inferno, and trekking through inhospitable desert, arrive at their goal; only to be disappointed in their quest. All is not lost however: they stumble across an ancient abandoned roadway of (a cough behind the hand) golden brick, which leads them to a lost city haunted by the shades of an ancient race which mastered the secrets of space and time long before apemen learned the use of fire. Here they are lectured on their intellectual shortcomings by that consummate specimen of disembodied intellect John Carradine, and then assist the supermen in unsticking the clockwork that has frozen the Martians in some kind of (dare I say it?) chrono-synclastic infundibulum, returning themselves to their ship before the crash in the process: the time was out of joint.

The actors suck, the effects are pathetic, the sets are cheesy, and the reliance on the classical model a trifle too obvious. But the movie is strangely entertaining nonetheless: the structure is sound, and with better execution it might have become a classic; as can be inferred from the obvious borrowings made by the later and technically much more sophisticated *Mission to Mars* and *Red Planet*.

The Cape Canaveral Monsters. [Phil Tucker, 1960.]

Bodysnatching aliens are blowing up experimental rockets. Scientists with German accents are baffled. Once again teenagers making out in convertibles defeat the menace.

Creation Of The Humanoids. [Wesley E. Barry, 1962. Written by Jay Simms.]

Dick Lite: in a postapocalyptic future (cue stock footage of mushroom clouds) in which a depopulated earth has been largely reinhabited by a servant class of humanoid robots and no one seems to have much to do except stand around and talk a lot, scientists of the Clicker android underground plot perfect simulation of the human condition while the vigilantes of the Order of Flesh and Blood try to crush them beneath their bootheels. Here robophobic boy meets anthropilic girl; only to discover, to their mutual chagrin, that they have both been replaced by simulacra unawares and are actually machines — a conclusion at which the viewer might already have arrived given their rather inanimate delivery of the dialogue. Having thus made the disconcerting discovery that one can pass the Turing test with respect to oneself, they are overwhelmed by philosophical perplexity; the curtain closes on a lengthy dialogue on the nature of the soul.

Woman Eater. [Charles Saunders, 1957. Written by Brandon Fleming.]

Transfixed by the tale told by a dying explorer, of a lost tribe in the Amazon whose juju can revive the dead, mad doctor George Coulouris swiftly snatches the treasure map falling from the cold dead fingers of the luckless wight, dons his pith helmet, and sets out forthwith on one of those expeditions in which sweaty white men with eyes wild from jungle fever are drawn by the beat of savage tomtoms through the very heart of darkness and stagger at last upon an overgrown temple where they witness a secret native ritual which concludes after a

remarkably explicit snake dance with a human sacrifice. By complete nonsequitur, we find him then after a title card announcing a five year hiatus returned to England and ensconced in a country mansion whose ample catacombs, apparently, are adequate to house not only the industry-standard secret laboratory and adjoining dungeons but also an Amazonian theme park in which a grinning native maniac beats upon his jungle drums as Coulouris feeds buxom blondes to a giant carnivorous plant; from whose sap, we infer, the magic elixir must eventually be derived. — Alas, Vera Day stumbles into the intake bin, her boyfriend is compelled to come and rescue her, and the dreams of Mad Science once again are crushed. There is no justice.

Battle Beyond The Sun. [*Nebo zovyat.* Mikhail Karzhukov and Aleksandr Kozyr, 1960. American re-edit by Thomas Colchart aka Francis Ford Coppola, 1962. Bearing some distant resemblance to a story of Stanislaw Lem.]

In a postwar world dominated by North/South conflict and Russian special effects, the South (the good Russians) prepares an expedition to Mars; the jealous spacemen of the North (the weasel Russians) jump the gun to try to get their own expedition there first, get shipwrecked, must be rescued by their rivals, and both parties are left stranded on an asteroid crawling with rock monsters while they wait for a relief ship to arrive with enough fuel to get them back. Very cool for its day, great rockets, space station, and not without influence on the Lucas franchise — indeed, I would guess that the giant snake-creature that springs out of a crater like a jack-in-the-box trying to swallow the Millennium Falcon in *The Empire Strikes Back* is a sort of phallic response to the famous fight scene here between the headless-fondue-pot creature and the vagina-dentata creature; one would otherwise have been forced to conclude that spaceflight may be hazardous to your dick.

Music by Carmine Coppola, who much later — truth again proves stranger than fiction — had the opportunity to score the restoration of Abel Gance's *Napoleon*.

The Colossus Of New York. [Eugene Lourie, 1958. Written by Thelma Schnee. Produced by William Alland.]

Scientific wizard and benefactor of humanity Ross Martin steps off the plane returning from the award ceremony in Stockholm and into the path of an oncoming truck — bad luck enough, but his father Otto Kruger is a somewhat unbalanced brain surgeon who does not believe in the soul! He performs the obvious Forbidden Operation, and before you can cross yourself superstitiously and mutter “but there are some Secrets Man Was Not Meant To Know” a strange android giant with a big metal head and radioactively glowing eyes has escaped from the laboratory and is stumbling around the city wreaking havoc as an expression of his existential anguish. — Photographed very capably by John Warren; striking score by Van Cleave.

The Brainiac. [*El Barón del Terror*. Chano Urueta, 1962. Written by Adolpho Lopez Portillo and Frederick Curiel.]

Condemned for sorcery in 1661 by a Mexican subsidiary of the Spanish Inquisition, evil Baron Vitelius d'Esteria calmly names the men beneath the executioners' hoods as he is burning at the stake and vows to return in 300 years (this has some unspecified relationship to the period of a comet) to exterminate their progeny. True to his word, he falls from the sky in a meteor in 1961 a giant beast with claws and fangs, morphs into faux nobility in evening clothes, occupies a convenient castle, and proceeds to suavely swap spit with the upper classes, the better to single out his victims, denounce them for the crimes of their ancestors, and suck their brains out with a soda straw; thus preparing them for careers in politics and screenwriting, I guess, but in any case attracting the attention of the police chief and his comedy sidekick, and rendering the fate of the attractive young

astronomical couple (she the descendent of his tormentors, he the descendent of his sole defender) dramatically uncertain. At least until it all goes up in flames again: look out, 2261.

Terror Is A Man. [Gerry De Leon, 1959. Written by Harry Paul Harber.]

Variations on a theme of Wells: shipwrecked mariner Richard Derr washes up on the shores of a tropical isle inhabited by mad doctor Francis Lederer, horny neglected wife Greta Thyssen, and a strange bandaged monster, halfmanhalfbeast, which keeps escaping from the dungeon laboratory to terrorize the few remaining natives who haven't poled off in their canoes to escape the inevitable wrath of the gods of evolution.



Ms. Thyssen assumes the position.

The Head. [Victor Trivas, 1959.]

Thanks to his invention of a mysterious Serum Z, Professor-Doktor Michel Simon has succeeded in forbidden experiments which reanimate the heads of animals severed from their bodies; alas, his own heart fails him at a critical juncture, allowing sinister assistant Horst Frank to perform the same favor for him, park his protesting cranium in a vat, and then commence the project of transplanting the brain of a hunchbacked nun into the body of a stripper. A lovestruck sculptor saves the day — or rather, the perpetually dark and stormy night. — Formulaic, but as with all things mechanical the Germans make them better.

Crack In The World. [Andrew Marton, 1965. Written by Jon Manchip White and Julian Halevy.]

Gray geophysical eminence Dana Andrews, obsessed with a Faustian quest for new sources of energy all-too-obviously motivated by an inability to service the needs of his young wife Janette Scott, decides to compensate for his phallic deficiencies by firing a nuclear missile into the Earth; striking magma and producing a convincing eruption, he is momentarily jubilant, but then discovers (oops) that his professional nemesis (and, of course, romantic rival) Kieron Moore is right after all, that this was not a healthy act of lust, but one of rape and twisted violence, and that he has cracked the crust of the planet (weakened, we have been warned, by repeated nuclear testing), with what promise to be universally fatal consequences. — Frenzied action and excruciating melodrama ensue (and the birth of a moon does finally result), but, really, nothing can top the opening shot of the wrong-way missile dangling impotently from a gantry and aimed into a hole in the ground: without question one of the most limp-dicked metaphors ever committed to film.



Soft and fuzzy.

The Space Children. [Jack Arnold, 1958. Written by Bernard Schoenfeld, after a story by Tom Filer. Produced by William Alland.]

After a terrifying opening sequence which shows Fifties parents conveying Fifties kids somewhere on a road trip in a station wagon — the searing acid flashback! the dorky glasses! the asshole crewcut! the dipshit shorts! the claustrophobic horror! the screaming of four little sisters! the ghastly lunch at Howard Johnson's! the carsickness! the vomit! the gruesome cleanup in a gas station restroom! the whining ... the whining — we arrive, finally, mercifully, among a colony of poor rocket scientists living in trailers on the beach where discontented suburbanhousewifewannabes sniff that sand gets into everything and aliens that look like giant omelettes have beamed themselves down out of the empyrean into a cave beneath the cliffs close by the water. Here these visitors from another world await the arrival of the eponymous Children, who in due course wander in out of the surf after an errant soccer ball and are converted by cosmic mesmerism into unstoppable secret agents (junior Jesuits) who sabotage the test launch of an ICBM in the name of a universal conspiracy for peace, harmony, and the end of the nuclear terror. If only Reagan had seen this one instead.

Stranger From Venus. [Burt Balaban, 1954. Written by Hans Jacoby, from a story by Desmond Leslie.]

Enigmatic interplanetary wanderer Helmut Dantine drops out of the heavens into the English countryside — running feckless heiress Patricia Neal off the road in the process, but thoughtfully taking time to revive her from the dead before walking to the nearest picturesque inn, where he performs assorted other prodigies mental and physical (not however including halting all terrestrial machinery or muttering anything memorable into the ear of a giant robot) and lectures everyone on the necessity of nuclear disarmament. All ears are deaf to his warnings save those of Ms. Neal, who can once again be counted on to fall for a visitor from another world like a ton of bricks; alas, the

son of the gods must sacrifice himself to avert universal cataclysm and save mankind. Anyway, he's an alien and she's from the Valley.

From Hell It Came. [Dan Milner, 1957. Written by Richard Bernstein.]

Dispatched to a remote Pacific island to monitor the results of nuclear testing, a party of American scientists inadvertently provokes a political upheaval among the native Polynesian tribe, setting traditionalists at odds with those newly corrupted by the spirit of rational enquiry; when the son of the chief is executed by the witch doctor's party for consorting with the outsiders, an evil tree grows out of his coffin and starts walking around seeking revenge upon his killers. — All this has something to do with native women bathing in secluded lagoons, but, please, don't quiz me.

The Day The Earth Caught Fire. [Val Guest, 1961. Written by Wolf Mankowitz and Val Guest.]

Nightmare on Fleet Street: after reckless nuclear testing knocks the axis of the world askew and sends it reeling toward the sun, a wisecracking London newspaperman trying to drink himself out of a job and a buxom babe from the office pool meet cute as earthquakes, floods, unscheduled eclipses, killer fogs, tornadoes, heat waves, fires, drought, riots, mass hysteria, famine, pestilence, martial law, and sweating female near-nudity portend the end of humanity. — All beautifully photographed in black and white by Harry Waxman (and smoothly matched with stock disaster footage.)

The Snow Creature. [W. Lee Wilder, 1954. Written by Myles Wilder.]

Dauntless Man of Science Paul Langton launches a voiceover expedition into Himalayan stock footage in search of new botanical species, accompanied only by his photographer, Man of Liquor and

the Lust for Money Leslie Denison, and a happy-go-lucky party of Sherpas whose focus falters midway through the expedition when their leader Teru Shimada discovers his wife has been kidnaped by a Yeti, prompting a mutiny and deviation from plan: the boojum is captured; deep philosophical argument ensues between the photographer, who wants to exploit the creature by exhibiting it to make money, and the pureminded scientist, who wants to exploit it by first shipping it to a museum in California, where it will be exhibited to make money; the scientist wins, but the creature is detained in customs on suspicion of being a terrorist, or something; and, while the humans are arguing over its immigration status, the Yeti escapes, going upon a suburban rampage which somehow does not remind us in the slightest of King Kong in New York. — Cops drink coffee and smoke cigarettes, anxious stock-footage citizens listen to period radios, the occasional molested woman screams in protest. — With the cunning of the cave dweller, the creature attempts to use the storm drains to escape pursuit; a chase through the sewers ensues. The creature, now unmasked as Harry Lime, is cornered and dies ignobly like a cornered rat after making a speech advising the citizens of Los Angeles to stop making cuckoo clocks and instead build their houses under Vesuvius; fade out on the long walk back from the cemetery.

Photographed by the great old pro Floyd Crosby, who surely saw better days but here renders some beautiful film noir LA nights.

Battle Beneath The Earth. [Montgomery Tully, 1967. Written by Charles F. Vetter.]

After an unbalanced veteran goes Wozzeck in Vegas and starts babbling about hearing voices in the earth, twofisted young military scientist Kerwin Mathews is summoned to the psychiatric hospital to hear a strange tale of an invading Oriental horde armed with nuclear weapons and heat rays which has invested Fortress America by tunneling under the Pacific and now poses a mortal threat to the soft underbelly of the continent; sure enough it is all true, and, aided by

improbably comely vulcanologist Vivienne Ventura and a pack of Army grunts who thought they were being clever ducking out of Vietnam, our hero must plumb the depths of a subterranean labyrinth gouged from bedrock by futuristic drilling machines to penetrate at last into the lair of the mastermind of the offensive, mad faux-Chinese warlord Martin Benson, who has surrounded himself with the lavish interior decoration appropriate to a Fritz Lang villain. — Announced by a gong, interrogated with a cigarette and a sneer, bombarded by the hypnotic radiations of a fiendish apparatus designed to turn captured American scientists into zombie fifth columnist Manchurian candidates, and tossed into a medieval dungeon to complete his reeducation, all seems lost — unless, of course, he can club the guard over the head and hot-wire a Chinese nuke to blow his captors into carbonaceous slime. — Be that as it may, we must count ourselves fortunate that Mao didn't watch the all-night movies on Sixties television; if the Great Helmsman had seen this, he surely would have tried to implement the scheme; and, as the impeccably scientific logic of this scenario demonstrates, undoubtedly would have succeeded.

Dimension 5. [Franklin Adreon, 1966. Written by Arthur C. Pierce.]

Jeffrey Hunter and France Nuyen engage in international intrigue involving chases in sports cars, beautiful women with guns in their purses, cameras in watches, deep cover agents masquerading as maîtres d' in Chinese restaurants, exploding statues, enhanced interrogations, and diminished scruples — with, however, the dimension added by some kind of magic spatiotemporal displacement device that allows our heroes to timewarp/teleport their way out of tight spots, jump onto waiting helicopters to make their escape, and get back to the office in time to banter with the secretaries. Alas, as an unforeseen side effect it fogs the intelligence of those who use it, so that they only remember once in a while that this magical gadget, which renders all enemy strategy useless and every other weapon irrelevant, is available for their use; and then employ it only for the narrowest applications — so that, for instance, they do not deal with

the formidable Dragon Tong which opposes them by travelling back to a time and place five minutes before its first organizational meeting and planting a bomb in the conference room; or, indeed, settle the ongoing Vietnam War by retroactively changing the outcome of the battle of Dien Bien Phu; or for that matter erase Communism from history by strangling Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, and Ho Chi Minh in their cradles. — Their mastery of Sixties spy movie paraphernalia is otherwise impressive, however, and I expect that mad-scientist character back at the laboratory to have the best of luck with his next invention, which will harness the elusive antigraviton: in any scenario such as this, weight is just an illusion.

The Gamma People. [John Gilling, 1956. Written by Gilling and John Gossage.]

The setup recalls *The Lady Vanishes*: a couple of journalists who look like Hitchcockean comic relief are taking the scenic route on their way to an assignment in Salzburg when at a fork in the railway line, by some whim of the gods, their train goes one way and their car goes another; leaving them stranded in an isolated principality where visitors are unknown, possibly because it isn't on any map drawn since the last remake of *The Prisoner of Zenda*. Apprehended and incarcerated by soldiers in operatic costume, though they are presently released it soon becomes apparent that there is no telephone, no telegraph, and no transport out; even stranger, no one will tell them why. Of course there can be only one explanation for this conspiracy of silence, namely, that the country has been enslaved by a mad scientist who is trying to create the Master Race by bombarding children with gamma rays; a procedure which also gives them all German accents and makes them arrogant and obnoxious and wear shorts while playing the piano. (Naturally they are whipped for their mistakes.) — Just a guess, but this dude may have an appointment with destiny in a burning castle.

Killers From Space. [W. Lee Wilder, 1954. Written by Bill Raynor, from a story by Myles Wilder.]

As feckless VIPs in sunglasses oblivious to the perils of blast and radiation queue up to watch an atomic bomb test from bleachers in the Nevada desert (cue the military stock footage), dauntless scientific observer Peter Graves circles in a jet overhead, taking readings; glimpsing a strange shining ball on the desert floor below, he approaches to investigate and seems to auger in, but later stumbles into the base unharmed save for a mysterious surgical scar, a hole in his memory, and an alarming tendency to rifle the safes of the nuclear establishment when he thinks he's unobserved. Apprehended by security bozos, he tells a bizarre tale of having been resurrected from the dead by alien invaders who wear black hoods like Death in *The Seventh Seal*, except that they are all popeyed like Marty Feldman; their world having entered terminal entropic decline (cue the stock footage of futuristic cities on other worlds)(no, really, this is kind of cool), they have hidden in caves beneath the testing range to steal the energy released by atomic explosions to create a new element which will somehow make inevitable the subjugation of mankind. — When this tale is received with the credence it so richly deserves, Graves escapes the atom shrinks and races off in his pajamas to the power plant, where he plans to unplug an extension cord the aliens use to power their nuclear capacitors; after a bizarre chase, he succeeds, and it turns out This Was All (Not) A Dream. But I still don't believe it.

The Atomic Man. [Ken Hughes, 1955. Written by Charles Eric Maine.]

A stiff pulled out of the river comes back to life on the operating table seven seconds out of synch with the rest of the universe and starts answering questions before they are asked; it must be the isotopes talking.

The Cyclops. [Burt I. Gordon, 1957.]

Searching for her missing fiancé in the lost world of the Mexican outback, Gloria Talbott and her aerial posse crash into a mountain of uranium crawling with mutant lizards and ruled by a one-eyed giant who looks strangely familiar and will probably kill Lon Chaney Jr. for his pocket flask.

The Day Mars Invaded Earth. [Maury Dexter, 1963. Written by Harry Spalding.]

The day after his probe lands on Mars and mysteriously stops transmitting, overworked scientist Kent Taylor takes a leave of absence from the Cape and goes home to Beverly Hills, little realizing that the disembodied intelligences that inhabit the Red Planet have returned the favor and landed a probe on him. Checking into the neglected gothic mansion neglected wife Marie Windsor and their two neglected children seem to have rented from Gloria Swanson, he is baffled and dismayed as the invisible aliens master the nuances of human emulation by cloning each of the family members in succession; but his reactions are rendered moot when the Martians deem their experiments successful, toast their practice dummies with a heat ray, and set off to conquer the world by replacing everyone in power with body-doubled Evil Twins. — Alas, this explains everything that has happened ever since.

The Flying Saucer. [Mikel Conrad, 1949.]

Sent upon a mission to save the Free World by solving the mystery of the eponymous flying disc, millionaire playboy and sometime spook Mikel Conrad returns to his native Alaska, where amid breathtaking scenery even a film this cheap can't spoil he brushes off the attentions of Russian spies on his way to a rendezvous with an eccentric inventor with a hanger full of surprises.

The Magnetic Monster. [Curt Siodmak, 1953. Written by Siodmak and Ivan Tors.]

When a new element goes rogue and starts sucking in energy in an exponential frenzy that threatens to devour the planet, the Office of Scientific Investigation and its staff of investigating A(tom)-Men are called in to crack the case; what ensues takes the form of a sort of police procedural in which the inimitable Richard Carlson delivers the Joe-Friday voiceover as the investigation proceeds from a hardware store in the Midwest through a variety of laboratories and picturesque ancient computer facilities to a giant particle accelerator beneath the sea, where in a grand Nikola-Tesla finale gigantic arcs of electricity cross the atom chamber as a billion volts get tossed into the ravenous maw of the deviant form of matter, and it chokes on its own gluttonous appetite. — No doubt elements embodying the other six deadly sins were to be disposed of in the sequels, but, alas, those didn't get made.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ I thought this was a joke, but apparently Ivan Tors and Richard Carlson had plans for a scifi franchise; which, however, advanced no farther than *Gog* (Herbert L. Strock, 1954) and *Riders to the Stars* (Richard Carlson, 1954; written by Siodmak and produced by Tors) — the former a personal favorite, prophetic in that it foresaw a secret laboratory that relied on a central computer to control everything would be vulnerable to hacking; the latter a rather uncanny anticipation of *The Right Stuff*, made before the astronaut corps even existed.

—816—

Dog park in light snow (3/11/2014)



–816.1–

On the bulletin board at the gym (3/28/2014)



I think what I was learning was that I suck.

*Yo (7/18/2014)*⁵⁵

Here is the reductio ad absurdum: the messaging app that transmits a single bit.

“Yo” is described as “a simple app that just sends a ‘yo’ to your friends.” After dropping the names of numerous Famous Investors which are doubtless supposed to impress us, Ms. Buhr asks the obvious question: why should this be worth any money at all? and answers by quoting co-founder John Borthwick, who says

We are fascinated by these uses of simple yes/no, on/off communications tools. As the notification layer becomes the primary interface of alert-based information on your phone — as the OS’s [sic] allow navigation and controls in those alerts — there will emerge a new class of applications that mediate this layer for web sites, other app’s [sic] and connected behaviors.

One wonders, naturally, whether this expert deployment of buzzwords in formation really means anything (hint: no); and also precisely how Borthwick would use his own app to convey a message of such apparent complexity. — Perhaps this is just the point: by saying nothing at such length, Borthwick means to demonstrate that communication is vacuous, since everything can be reduced to a single primitive message — indeed, to a single bit. — Ye gods, but postmodern capitalism is endlessly fascinating.

⁵⁵ Buhr, Sarah, “Yo Raises \$1.5 Million in Funding at a \$10M Valuation.” Techcrunch.com, July 18, 2014.

*The nature of money (3/15/13)*⁵⁶

... Spring arrived abruptly in the last couple of days, and a young man's thoughts turn to the mathematical theory of economics. I have never had the slightest interest in this, not even Nash equilibrium etc., but a stray remark by Krugman in his blog started me thinking about the exponent of the power law which income distribution obeys at the upper end: granting that all our liberal handwringing about income inequality doesn't actually prove anything (Krugman's point, which absolutely none of the several hundred comments seemed to grasp), can one show, perhaps, from first principles, that overall economic growth is maximized for a more uniform income distribution than we have at present? as intuition and historical evidence seem to suggest. — Of course I assumed at first that some handwaving about a graph-theoretical model would suffice (and indeed there are very simple models that produce Pareto behavior). — But, then, on reflection, it became obvious that the causes of growth lie outside economics, more or less in the territory for which the flow of money is only the map, and to model that is much more complicated: to a first approximation money is exchanged for free energy, for instance, i.e. a weighted sum of energy and information; but then on further consideration it seems that one should make allowance for the fact that the nodes in our hypothetical graph are not simply trying to optimize their consumption, but also have to have supplies of raw materials, moreover the flow of energy or material is quite a bit different from the flow of information (in the sense that the knowledge of how to make gunpowder, e.g., spreads like a virus, with very little effort). Which makes everything more complicated, and lessens the chances of coming up with anything simple and convincing. (I don't see how this can be very different from models of chemical evolution, for example.) — No wonder I don't understand money....

⁵⁶ To Richard Strelitz.

*Weird science, dismal pseudoscience (10/2/2014)*⁵⁷

... I finally obtained a copy of Piketty's celebrated essay on *Capital* ... the work is extremely impressive, and the breadth and depth of his research obviously exceeds that of his predecessors by orders of magnitude; a point for Big Data, I'll admit it. There is some rudimentary mathematics, a couple of Ohm's Law relations basically, but mainly it's a long love letter written by a guy who loves facts and has a boundless appetite for statistical analysis; the databases and analytical tools, one gathers, are available online, and I plan on taking a look at them, if only to see his version of the derivation of the Pareto law.

For the most part he doesn't address the questions that baffle me about economics, things like, e.g. What is money? or, in the case at hand, Why is the rate of return on capital so much higher than the rate of economic growth? since I thought that, basically, what justified the idea that money should make money all by itself, without your having to do anything to earn it, was the fact that productivity, and therefore the economy at large, grows; meaning there should be a close correlation between the two rates. I suppose this means that the premium is paid because of the scarcity of available capital, but then that is hard to understand when the mass of capital apparently outweighs GDP by a factor of at least five in the US, and more like six or seven in France and Britain. It seems there is some feeling that equilibrium must eventually be obtained (indeed, since we are talking about economics, a discipline corrupted by pseudoscience [and deliberately promulgated disinformation], it is apparently claimed by some that this equilibrium already exists, all evidence to the contrary), but God knows at what astronomical ratio it would occur. — What Piketty does establish is that the real rate of return on capital has historically been between 4 and 5 percent, from the 18th century

⁵⁷ To Richard Strelitz.

(when overall economic growth in the modern sense was nonexistent) to the present, thus surviving the Industrial Revolution and the transition from the world depicted by Balzac and Jane Austen (whom he quotes extensively) to the world depicted by Tarantino and *The Social Network*; and that the ratio of capital to GDP has been largely constant in all this time, excepting the shocks caused by the World Wars (big troughs in all the graphs demonstrate this). Moreover the fraction of total wealth held by the aristocracy (then as now the one percent plus the lesser landed gentry), which was wholly hereditary before the Napoleonic wars and is rapidly evolving toward that condition again, has generally been enormous, on the order of 90 percent in Europe before the First War. He argues that immigration and population growth (not to mention starting out with an empty continent and no rentiers) have largely disguised these verities in the United States (outside the plantation economy of the Old South), that the usual claim that this is a pure meritocracy is specious, and, after pointing out that income inequality in the US has now reached levels never previously attained in world history, dismisses the claim that this reflects inequality of talent with a snort of derision, and soundly refutes the claim that this has restored productivity in Britain and the US since the Thatcher-Reagan era by pointing out that there is NO statistically significant indication of an increase in the growth rate after 1980 — let alone a return to the Golden Age of 1950-1970 — and that the astronomical increases in executive salaries, for instance, almost certainly represent a realization by the guys in the corporate boardrooms that since income tax rates on the top brackets have been slashed to a fraction of previous levels, they can actually keep any salary increases they vote themselves. (Not that the superstar argument so beloved of morons like David Brooks should really fool anybody: one need but repeat the magic words “A-Rod”, and the illusion dissolves like mist in the morning sun.) — That this kind of thinking should have captured the American imagination is especially strange, given that devices like the progressive income tax were invented here, and exploited with universal approval to prevent the formation of obscenely large fortunes, which for most of the country’s

history have been regarded as undemocratic and therefore unAmerican.

He says real growth per capita has never exceeded two percent, except in emerging economies and periods of reconstruction like Europe after the war. He analyzes the value of slaves as capital assets before the Civil War. (I think he decided it was something like 80 percent of what you would have had to pay for the labor of a free man over his lifetime; the whole calculation reminded me of the model that estimates the value of a stock by the present value of future dividends⁵⁸ — anyway, this is why the South was bankrupted after the war, and never really recovered.) He remarks the meteoric growth of Bill Gates' fortune between 1990-2010, and points out that the richest woman in France, the L'Oreal heir, grew her fortune over the same period just as fast as Gates did, without lifting a fucking finger; so much for the idea of vast wealth as the reward of entrepreneurial zeal.

As an example of his ingenuity in finding ways to extract information from the data, there's a discussion toward the end of the book about the question of whether larger pools of capital earn returns at higher rates. I gather this is generally denied, and it is hard to get data about what returns billionaires make on their money, for instance, but he comes up with the idea of looking at university endowments in the US, which are matters of public record — and, sure enough, it turns out that though the average return on smaller endowments is lower, around 6 percent, Harvard, which has the largest, has averaged over 10 percent over the last thirty years! which, he theorizes, is the result of their being able to afford the services of the very best investment counselors. — Now, I would not necessarily have believed that anyone really knows anything about investing, no matter what they say on CNBC, but this argument looks convincing — and, incidentally, neatly refutes what they would also tell you on CNBC, and what is

⁵⁸ Of the several theories I found that purported to explain stock pricing while taking a course in finance for a well-heeled but lazy foreign student, this came the closest to a scientific explanation; ironic, since it is little better than science fiction.

Holy Writ in Chicago, namely, that the markets are by definition efficient, and that perfect information is equally available to everybody. Because, obviously, some people really do know more than others, and can make more money by acting upon it. (I.e. all trading is to some extent insider trading.) — The reason this is a particular matter of concern is that the ownership of capital is, actually, more widely diffused now than it ever has been before, but if larger fortunes grow faster than smaller ones obviously this won't remain the case. — In general the creation of a middle class with a large fraction of the national income and a corresponding fraction of the national wealth looks like a kind of historical aberration, possibly a corollary of the shocks attendant on the world wars, and what we could be seeing is the restoration of the natural economic order, in which the bottom 90 percent of the population own practically nothing.

He also goes over the evidence and decides (in part by adding up all the national books and showing that all countries are in the red, suggesting that, as he says, the Earth has a trade imbalance with Mars) the fraction of global capital now hidden in offshore accounts aka tax havens is something like ten percent,⁵⁹ and, therefore, most of the famous deficits everyone pretends to worry about are illusory. — Why the very people hiding their money are the ones screaming about these deficits is another question. Krugman keeps trying to analyze this, without coming up with anything convincing. I'm inclined to think this is just the largely instinctive attempt of the ruling class to consolidate its power. (Incidentally I don't think Krugman has yet recognized the fraction of global capital that is dark matter. The only way I fault the guy is that he isn't cynical enough.)

Well, too much to easily summarize, obviously, but a fascinating read, even for somebody who doesn't give a shit about money (and never gave a shit about Marx either). If you haven't seen this yet, check it out....

⁵⁹ This conclusion was widely denounced by Piketty's critics, but later confirmed by leaks beginning with the famous Panama Papers.

Other observations about money:

— Money is power.

At least that is most of it. Therefore:

— Money wants to be more money. This is the economic correlate of the Will to Power, and explains everything about capitalism *per se*.

— Money is not a substance but something more like an activity.

In fact it behaves a bit like relativistic mass in that the faster it moves around the more of it there is: suppose, e.g., that the economy consisted of a number of people arranged in a circle, who are passing a dollar bill around from one hand to the next; then the faster they can do this, the greater their gross domestic product. (The question here is less whether the argument is incorrect than why; it suggests that economics is less the dismal than the absurd science.)

— Why real wealth increases over time is rather mysterious, but must somehow follow from the fact that, over time, people learn how to do more things; that is, what used to be called know-how increases. — Economic growth is the growth of the body of expertise. — This has to be most of it; the increase in energy consumption by itself is significant but what drives that is information. Oil is dug out of the ground more rapidly and efficiently because more is learned about how to find it (geology), how to refine it (chemical engineering), how to make things that use petroleum products (automobiles, dynamos to generate electricity), etc.

— There is an inherently unpredictable aspect to economics, accordingly, because though at a first approximation you might

imagine a map consisting of nodes connected by edges which can carry money in either direction, and then correlate this with a territory with a variable energy density — something like life springing up around the suboceanic volcanic vents: here the soil is fertile, there a source of fresh water, over here a forest which can be harvested and exploited, etc., so that the corresponding nodes show surpluses which are then exchanged with one another (trade) — the actual landscape is as much abstract as physical: there is a body of knowledge waiting to be discovered which we call chemical engineering, there is a science of thermodynamics to be articulated in company with the design and construction of steam engines — later turbines and internal combustion engines — there are the laws and practical methods of electrical engineering, there are the methods of mining metallic ores and processing them, the techniques of manufacturing dynamos, wire, insulation, etc., etc. — and this landscape is not static, it is dynamic, and what valuable deposits there are and where they lie is entirely unpredictable because the evolution of science is unpredictable. — Who could have predicted the invention of the techniques that have made it possible to shrink electronic circuits to microscopic size? Who could have predicted Moore's Law? — Obviously no one. No one at all.

— Thus clearly the way to ensure more rapid growth is to endeavor to discover new things as fast as possible. — This is the contradiction at the bottom of technological capitalism: money doesn't *like* new ideas. An increase in the sources of power threatens those who hold power already. The increase occurs despite their best efforts to limit and control it. — *Because* it is unpredictable.

—iv—

— Ah, gentleman, your own girl, sir! The first handsel today, gentleman. Buy that lovely bunch. Will you, gentleman?

The blue flowers which she lifted toward him and her young blue

eyes seemed to him at that instant images of guilelessness; and he halted till the image had vanished and he saw only her ragged dress and damp coarse hair and hoydenish face.

— Do, gentleman! Don't forget your own girl, sir!

— I have no money, said Stephen.

— Buy them lovely ones, will you, sir? Only a penny.

— Did you hear what I said? asked Stephen, bending towards her. I told you I had no money. I tell you again now.

— Well, sure, you will some day, sir, please God, the girl answered after an instant.

— Possibly, said Stephen, but I don't think it likely.

*Re: Did you find a place? (5/30/2013)*⁶⁰

Haha, quite an adventure. It never ceases to amaze me how much stupid shit one can do when there is no alternative. I did, indeed [1] persuade Al to loan me the deposit [2] walk out North Broadway Monday afternoon and rent a truck (for which I had to wait an hour in the hot sun) [3] drive back and park it in back of the office [4] walk back over to Al's to pick up the puppies, getting back to the office already exhausted in time to eat a half-gallon of frozen yogurt and get five hours' sleep before [5] getting up at midnight and moving furniture all night, closing the door of the van at five and driving off but [6] stopping at the Married Student Housing dumpsters and finding a couch! an enormous couch! which I dragged over to the truck and had to lift over my head (literally) to get into the back before [7] going back to Al's and walking the puppies and then [8] calling the girl on North Broadway to make sure we still had a deal and then [9] running over to the bank to get a cashier's check but most importantly [10] getting the money out of my account before the storage lockers called in with my card number to collect the monthly rent, which I couldn't afford to pay if I was to pull the other deal off then [11] driving out to meet the manager at 10:30 to sign the lease which [12] had a no-pets clause! which I stared at stupidly for a minute (still rubbing the stomach of the Office Dog with my foot) before asking what it meant, which turned out to be [13] of course, just something they put in there in case your dog attacks somebody and they need to have an excuse to evict you then [14] hauling all the furniture I spent all night dragging downstairs back upstairs, all twenty-one of them on an exterior staircase to a door on the second story next to the door to my space, finishing however by 2 p.m. allowing me to [15] walk the puppies again before [16] getting the truck back to the U-Haul lot across the street by 3:15, which was the deadline. After this [17] the couch still remained at the bottom of the

⁶⁰ To Suzanne.

stairs, but I had to wait until dark to try to move it and finally passed out, waking up at 5 to have another shot at it, which involved [18] moving it over the top of a dead Volkswagen van that was blocking access to the bottom of the stairs! then [19] shoving it all the way up to the top by myself! balancing it on the fucking rail, I could not believe how hard this was but finally [20] getting it to the landing at the top! and then [21] discovering that it would not fit through the door. In the course of all this I ate absolutely nothing, but drank three quarts of grapefruit juice and two quarts of apple juice.

So the couch is still sitting at the top of the stairs. (At least I have the cushions to sleep on.) Also it turns out that though there is a grocery (Lucky's Market) within walking distance, it is somewhat expensive, I haven't got internet yet (at least not without negotiating the 36 blocks to Al's house), and the air conditioning remains hypothetical. (Also incidentally the latest Arab I wrote two papers for last week hasn't paid yet and is not responding to mail.) However there is much more space, easily enough for all the rest of the shit after I rent a truck again in three or four weeks, practically nobody is around, ever, except the tattoo parlor artists across the hall and the Volkswagen shop mechanics downstairs, so I can go in and out as I please, and the puppies seem to like the new neighborhood, which is half junkyard and half pristine new suburban neighborhoods with beautifully landscaped shrubbery to dump in. Thus on balance a qualified positive, and, relative to how completely fucked I was last week, a great improvement.

Anyway we still need [1] a medium-sized couch and [2] most definitely, a dormitory refrigerator. So keep your eyes peeled,⁶¹ and if you see anything promising, snag it for me and I'll try to persuade Buddy to help me move it.

⁶¹ It is presupposed that, since this was the season in which the students were moving out, vast quantities of valuable shit would be left on the curbs of the neighborhood for the taking. It was commonplace to see tenured faculty out dumpster-diving in this fruitful season, which we anticipated more than Christmas.

Later.

Huckleberry Finn (9/1/2014)

Here is another of those bogus ranking questions, derivative of a pseudoproblem that used to be commonplace — i.e., how to write the Great American Novel. Because the great American novels were written long ago, and they are two: *Moby Dick* and *Huckleberry Finn*. Of course neither can be compared to the other, and it is pointless to argue which is better.

But there was only one way to conclude *Moby Dick*, and there is no obvious way to conclude *Huckleberry Finn*. Thus the way Twain went about it is often felt to have been a mistake, some kind of failure. — Eliot argued the contrary,⁶² but unconvincingly; it reads as though his love for the story clouded his judgment.

And what is the problem? It is the problem of trying to turn a romance into a novel. *Huckleberry Finn* is a romance of the River, and the River, properly, should go on forever.⁶³ — Or if it ends, it must end in the Sea, which can only represent (Tennyson on Ulysses) a kind of ellipsis.

If (as MacLane would say)⁶⁴ you reverse all arrows, as in Conrad and thus in *Apocalypse Now*, you work backward to an origin, and can invent some conclusion out of Frazer to put a period to the quest; but taken in the other direction, the story has no end.

⁶² Cf. his essay in the Norton critical edition. Eliot was born in St. Louis and grew up beside the river; understandably he loved Twain and was willing to defend him to the death.

⁶³ By which I mean, how could there have been a final episode of *Route 66*? I assume there was one, but it had to have been a kind of contradiction in terms. Something like that by definition must end not with a bang, but a whimper — not because the theme is exhausted, but because the audience has lost interest; and that because the writers have grown too tired to continue.

⁶⁴ See his definition of categorical duality.

Accordingly the way Twain chose to wrap things up looks artificial; it is as if he took the whole of what preceded as a kind of first act, and conjured up a threshold guardian to prevent any further progress. — Though really the separation of Huck and Jim is typical of the fourth act of every Road Movie that followed it. — Still, what happens thereafter is supposed to tie it all up in a tidy package. So what can he do?

What inhibits the progress of the voyage of discovery — the endless progress down the River — the tale of nomadic escape — the escape from civilization, literally, an escape from slavery — are the limits of the imagination: here that of Tom Sawyer, but more generally of the Old South, of the civilization which Twain has been describing. The River ends in the Gulf, at the boundary of the continent; but this is also the boundary of the people and their form of life. Jim is imprisoned, according to the laws of this society; Tom is also imprisoned, by the constrained forms of his imagination, which is profligate, but programmed by the conventions of romance (Walter Scott) — a shout-out to *Quixote* here, for sure. So there is this weird cosplay taking place, Tom trying all manner of ridiculous schemes to free the captive; which all end abruptly, *Deus ex machina*, when it is revealed that Jim is a free man — crushing irony here, as if he hadn't really been all along — and there is an overriding sense — the truth of the satirist, the ironist — that the natural evolution of the story, to follow the River to the Gulf, and to the great Ocean of Truth that lies beyond it — has been confounded and cut off by the stupidity, the brutality, the boneheadedness of the culture through which they have been passing and in which they are now finally trapped and from which they cannot escape.

Perhaps this is realism: they reach the limits of their language, the limits of their world — the end of the Mississippi, the Gulf, the Sea, the period to the presuppositions of the Quest — and what can happen then? This is a question that has no answer. Twain understood that perfectly, and in a grand gesture of ironic detachment turned the

whole thing into a Road Runner cartoon.⁶⁵ — Because what lies at the end of the world? at least at the end of *this* world, the world of the antebellum South? — Well, why not farce. It deserves no better.

The perfection of the postscript is thus underscored: Huck *will* light out for the Territory, sooner or later; his adventures will continue. But that will be another story: in another time, another place; another world.

⁶⁵ There is, actually, a parallel with the conclusion Mel Brooks drew to *Blazing Saddles*: a complete lapse into slapstick surrealism. Because after all what else could have followed what came before it.

Honesty (2011?)

It would be an exaggeration to say that as a child I never lied. But I did so rarely, remembered every individual occasion (they could be numbered on the fingers of one hand), and reviewed each one, repeatedly, with regret and guilt.

Now, however, I seem to want to lie about everything to everyone. How did that come about?

— ii —

Aristotle considers the fundamental virtue to be magnanimity; which, in its original (literal) meaning, is greatness of soul.

His idea is that not some presumption of equality but the reality of just proportion should determine the relations among individuals. — Aristotle would have assumed these were free men, because just proportion determined who *was* a person; women and slaves were automatically excluded from consideration. — The magnanimous man “thinks himself worthy of what he is actually worth”; his judgment is consonant with his position.

Thus the magnanimous man will be justly proud, despise honors from his inferiors, exhibit courage because he is superior to fortune and more puissant than his enemies, lend money but not borrow, or if he does then repay more than he received to show he is truly the richer, behave with dignity before members of the upper classes but be unassuming with members of the middle and lower classes, not conceal his feelings (i.e. not care less for truth than for what people think) because to do otherwise is cowardice, show taste in his choice of possessions; and, naturally, speak the truth to show he has nothing to fear from it.

This is a character easy to recognize since it describes the instinctive behavior of a member of the upper classes — what we disparage when we refer to “entitlement” — and since (says Russell) Aristotle considers ethics a branch of politics, and aristocracy the natural political structure, what he is actually providing here is what Emily Post did later for New Money looking up to the Old in her manuals of etiquette:⁶⁶ instruction in how to behave like an aristocrat.

— iii —

How is the American attitude supposed to differ from that of the Greek?

The story that we tell ourselves is that we are democrats, that all in principle are equal. — In fact all are not, but attitude is based on aspiration, and equality defined upward: implicitly the argument is that you should behave like an aristocrat in order to prepare yourself to become one.⁶⁷

And what does that entail? That you are supposed to view yourself in a distorting mirror, one that unnaturally magnifies your stature and deceives you as to your importance.

— iv —

Honesty, or at least the appearance of honesty, is supposed to be important in business dealings; the argument being that, if you are known to cheat, no one will want to deal with you. — Naturally then people lie most vehemently when *accused* of cheating. — However the

⁶⁶ See Edmund Wilson, “Books of Etiquette and Emily Post”; in *Classics and Commercials, A Literary Chronicle of the Forties*; pp. 372-382. [New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1950.]

⁶⁷ Dumbed down to the level of Schools of Education, this is the obsession with the “development” of “self-esteem”.

powerful *can* cheat and get away with it; to cheat therefore is a display of power; the natural tendency of the wannabe must therefore be to imitate this behavior. — None of this appears in Emily Post, though it should.⁶⁸

—v—

In any case there is, paradoxically, an element of bullshit in honesty; in the whole idea of square dealing. Because you are honest with another out of the sense that — in fact to *project* the sense that — he cannot harm you.

Aristotle would make this a matter of calm self-assessment, but the modern is honest, or tells himself he must be honest, out of a desire to show the other he has no fear of him and that the other can do him no harm *even when the other can* — the point being that you are not only trying to bullshit the other into thinking he is dealing with an equal, but indeed (this is the aspirational part) trying to bullshit yourself.

(I.e. in performative honesty with others you are not being honest with yourself.)

⁶⁸ It does appear in Thorstein Veblen: “Under any known phase of culture, other or later than the presumptive initial phase here spoken of, the gifts of good-nature, equity, and indiscriminate sympathy do not appreciably further the life of the individual. Their possession may serve to protect the individual from hard usage at the hands of a majority that insists on a modicum of these ingredients in their ideal of a normal man; but apart from their indirect and negative effect in this way, the individual fares better under the régime of competition in proportion as he has less of these gifts. Freedom from scruple, from sympathy, honesty and regard for life, may, within fairly wide limits, he said to further the success of the individual in the pecuniary culture. The highly successful men of all times have commonly been of this type; except those whose success has not been scored in terms of either wealth or power. It is only within narrow limits, and then only in a Pickwickian sense, that honesty is the best policy.” (*The Theory of the Leisure Class*.)

Which perhaps is realistic. The aim is still magnanimity (which in the modern connotation of generosity toward the less fortunate is⁶⁹ the characteristic American virtue), but you recognize that you achieve and maintain that by a continuing act of will.

— vi —

(Revealing yourself — nakedness — the connotation of being defenseless — something in the attitude that you require no defense is like the Greek city that knocked down its walls to receive a champion, because with citizens like this we don't need them.)

— vii —

But obviously this is irrational.

A more natural inclination is to lie to protect yourself from those who are more powerful; to save face, for instance, which is not a matter of — foolish pride? (is there anything foolish about it?) — but the protection of social standing, which is also necessary for self-preservation — when you are perceived to be weak and incapable of defending yourself, depend upon it, Sir, you *will* be preyed upon. This is simple biological necessity, a banal corollary of the logic of power and aggression.

The point is less that you should lie any more than necessary, i.e. more than you do already, but that you shouldn't feel guilty about it afterward; that this guilt is another of the mechanisms devised by the powerful to keep their minions in subjugation — to maintain and indeed increase their power over you — to try to trick or intimidate you into being honest with them even though (experience teaches us, contra Aristotle) they generally have no intention of being honest with you.

⁶⁹ Or was, anyway. Admittedly many of us are, in our minds, still living in the Truman administration.

Thus the insistence on honesty is generally part of the system of control.

In fact this is one of those things that everyone understands but no one will admit — that, e.g., anyone who does not lie to an employer as a matter of course is just trying to get fired. (That the employer lies to the employee of course goes without saying.)

—viii—

The same applies to theft, actually. And in fact the instinctive assessment of its morality is equivalent: you won't steal from someone worse off than yourself, or from someone with whose situation you can identify or empathize — someone on your own level, a peer, an actual equal — but (if you can't get caught) you may well shamelessly steal from the wealthy and powerful, and from institutions of power — from a bank, for instance, or a large corporation — as in turn banks and corporations steal from the government without compunction — on the assumption, not frequently incorrect, that they have gained such great power by doing just that to others, and will not hesitate to do it to you.

Mosquitoes suck blood and get swatted for it. Still, you can't blame them for trying.

(Application: the issue of copyright.)

—ix—

Russell remarks that moral behavior consists in the choice among *possible* actions.

When possibility is radically constrained, behavior is distorted to fit. (One must remember, always, the image of dandelions growing through the cracks in the sidewalk.)

It is impossible to deal honestly with someone of whom you are afraid.

And in a world of great disparity of power, it is natural, rational, justifiable to be afraid. Always.

— x —

Feynman titled the second volume of his memoirs “What do you care what other people think?” This was a question his first wife had asked him on some occasion, I forget precisely which, but I always hear it now in the voice of Patricia Arquette.⁷⁰ In any case this is the way you talk when you wish for something without knowing what the fuck you are talking about.

I say this with absolute confidence because it has been my habitual misfortune not to care what other people think, and it has been the source of unending grief.

What other people think determines whether you can make enough money to live on and whether you’ll ever get laid — to name two considerations that have occasionally seemed important.

Worse, they *know* when you don’t care what they think, and they do not like it — not at all — and make you pay for it. — It is a distressing fact of (what one might call) social nature, that you are generally at the mercy of the opinions of persons whom you justifiably revile (and certainly cannot trust).

⁷⁰ Who played the role in the movie: *Infinity* [Matthew Broderick, 1996], based upon Feynman’s memoir. (I have no idea what possessed Broderick to take on this project, incidentally, but his Ferris Bueller interpretation of Feynman isn’t a bad one.)

— xi —

John Waters: “I look up to bad taste because it’s a freedom I don’t have, I do care what people think. I don’t sit on my front steps in my underpants and give people the finger when they go by. I’m jealous of people that do that, because they don’t care. Bad taste is a great freedom if you have it”

— xii —

Of course we are also expected to show courage, to defy those who would punish us, no matter that they are more powerful. Our heroism is then the more glorious, our example the more shining. — Though of course if we are political opponents of Vladimir Putin, we end up taking polonium in our tea, falling off balconies, or committing suicide by shooting ourselves several times in the back of the head, stuffing ourselves into Hefty bags, and locking ourselves into the trunks of our cars.

You have to wonder about that. Defiance in the face of overwhelming force seems admirable, Victor Laszlo standing up to the Nazis, but does it really make sense? What good does it do if no one ever hears of it? We interpret this as drama, but drama supposes an audience. If a man facing a firing squad refuses the blindfold when there is no one there to see it, does his courage set an example?

So far as I know the bravest man who ever lived was the Chinese dude who faced down a line of advancing tanks in Tiananmen Square in 1989. By the grace of God a photographer was there⁷¹ to immortalize

⁷¹ Jeff Widener got the best picture (Peter Beaumont, “Thirty years on, the Tiananmen Square image that shook the world”; *The Guardian*, 11 May 2019), but Charlie Cole was there as well (see his obituary notice by Rebecca Tan in *The Washington Post*, 13 September 2019); both had already been beaten up, Cole by the Chinese secret police, and were forced to employ elaborate stratagems to smuggle their photographs out of the country.

this grand existential gesture, and so I know of it, though I don't know his name or anything else about him save that he probably died a miserable death not long thereafter. He was trying to set an example for a billion-odd of his fellow Chinese, about whom we can guess — we can only guess — that most don't know he ever existed, and those who do dare not mention him. — By comparison Socrates was a showboating self-promoter, a veritable Mohammed Ali, who could grandstand for posterity confident that his pupil Plato would take notes and polish his performance for optimum advantage. — So, I mean, what good was it? What good was his gesture? He set a good example for Americans, who know what he did, but doesn't seem to have had much influence otherwise.

— xiii —

I say that, of course, without believing a word of it. The gesture was that much more grand because it all might have gone for nothing.

It is something like buried art. I used to call this existential countenance.

Nonetheless — planetary lithography is in its infancy, but when it is perfected that photograph should be etched on the face of the Moon, so that every time it hangs in the sky over Beijing, those motherfuckers have to look at it.

One is ten thousand to me, if he be the best, says Heraclitus.

Or a billion. Or more.

— xiv —

So I don't care what other people think, and it has condemned me to poverty and misery. Of course I don't care about that either, but I have to think I must be some kind of fucking idiot. — Why couldn't I disguise it better? Why did I have to be so honest?

– 821 –

Of Human Bondage (2019)

— 822 —

The Road



Tramps like us/Baby, we were born to run.