

XXVI.

*Over the rainbow (2014)*



Stanzi in Rosario.

In that part of the book of my memory before the which is little that can be read, there is a rubric, saying, *Incipit Vita Nuova*. Under such rubric I find written many things...

— Dante, *La Vita Nuova*<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Translation of Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

Thermodynamic equilibrium is not precisely static — see Brownian motion — but it is stable. Dynamic equilibria, on the other hand, tend to be metastable, and decay eventually; though of course the definition of “eventually” is rarely obvious —

*Only Angels Have Wings (7/28/13)*<sup>2</sup>

At first I couldn't believe that the guy could have jumped off the Eiffel Tower forty times and ended up like this, but then I remembered the moral of Tom Wolfe's book on the Mercury astronauts, which appears near the very end: he is talking about the later development of the astronaut corps, and mentions, more or less offhand, that out of this group of guys, the best test pilots in the world, the number who died in training flights was just about exactly the number you'd expect from statistics; another way of saying that, no matter how good you are, sooner or later your luck runs out. — Still, what a career. And, as they say in the westerns, he died with his boots on.

A goal toward which I aim myself, of course. — In brief: after a flurry of improvisation which left me sleeping in a garage on the Hill for most of a very cold winter (ironically, this was nonetheless warmer than many apartments I've had to live in), I settled into a daily routine which consisted, mainly, of trekking over to Starbucks every morning at five to scour the Internet for a job and/or venture capital. I deputized Nina to bombard prospective angel investors with *The Pitch*,<sup>3</sup> composed business plans, and, like a good Mad Scientist, plotted to take over the world. Our efforts met with success on all fronts, and, as of the first of June 2011, we had a couple of backers on the verge of writing checks, I had a job sweeping floors at the University

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<sup>2</sup> To Erik. — This referenced the death in a wingsuit accident of the famed base jumper Hervé le Gallou, in the French Alps in June, 2012; see Ed Caesar, "It's more like a suicide than a sport," *The New York Times*, July 26, 2013. — Among the numerous lunatic exploits which made him a legend, De Gallou and a friend were the first to parachute from the top of the Burj Khalifa skyscraper. — Erik is himself a base jumper of some renown, and has done some seriously crazy shit.

<sup>3</sup> "Right now it's only a notion, but I think I can get money to make it into a concept ... and later turn it into an idea."

lined up as backup, and, completely securing the situation, Nina's rich uncle succumbed to heart disease and left her his estate. So at that point everything was set, and I expected to be leaving for Argentina in a matter of days. — As if. — Instead the investors backed out at the last minute (as then did the next guys we lined up, and the guys after that, and the guys after that ...), the job lasted exactly a week and a half before I got busted (and thrown into jail) by the university cops for tying my dogs up outside the building while I was at work, Nina's evil sister executed some mysterious legal maneuver which disinherited Nina and left her even worse off than before — and, after spending the whole summer sleeping in the Miata with two large dogs (strange but true, not as uncomfortable as it sounds), I got busted for vagrancy, tossed into jail again, this time for a week, and by the time I got out and spent what money remained to me bailing the dogs out of the Humane Society, my lawyer, who had been holding the title to the car to protect me from the hypothetical threat of the IRS, suddenly went psycho, decided since I was going to die in the gutter anyway he might as well do what he could to expedite the process, sold the car for a few hundred dollars to cover what I owed him (to put the matter in perspective, he was at this point about a hundred grand in debt himself), and left me, finally, deprived of my last asset, sleeping on the creek under the stars. — Thus passed the subsequent winter: when it snowed I sneaked into the football stadium and slept in the stairwell; when it didn't I camped out in a variety of locations, dodged several camping tickets which could have sent me back to the slammer (the first thing you have to understand about poverty is that it is, basically, illegal), and, gradually, reinstated myself in the good graces of one or two friends who, if they couldn't actually adopt me, at least provided me with a place to bathe and the all-important Warm Place To Shit. — Eventually I negotiated a combination of small welfare checks and "tutoring" arrangements with Arab business students (read: I take their online courses for them and write their term papers) which add up to enough to eat and pay \$350 a month to rent

office space, and started sleeping indoors again. — At the moment we have an “art studio” in the cheap seats of the industrial district at the north end of town; into which, finally, I managed to haul all that remains after several hasty moves — most of the books and papers still, but a lot less furniture, and much of that thoroughly busted up by Saul’s assistance during the original eviction. — So much the better, I figure: that much less to haul along with me when I finally get out of town. — Which remains the goal, even though like the rainbow it seems to recede as I approach it....

[continues:]

... it was all pretty stressful, I must admit. One of the daily rituals, for a long time, was dropping by Suzanne's shop on the Hill to reassure her I wasn't dead of exposure or murdered by some psycho, and it always seemed to amaze her I could joke about my situation. But I figure that, appearances perhaps to the contrary, I am stronger than other people, and I can take more punishment. Which is still true, but to really enjoy living on the margins like that you have to be nuts, like Saul.

Whom I didn't trip over sleeping in the woods, since, not wanting to contend with bears and mountain lions, I generally went east, not west, along the creek every evening. (Where the coyotes are bad enough: Wolfie and Stanzi would frequently bark all night.) This was also convenient to my storage locker, which meant I didn't have to lug a pile of sleeping bags around with me all day, had a place to change clothes, etc. ...

... Aside from a few rather strange encounters with young females who seemed fascinated with the hippie philosopher reading Nietzsche on the university lawn with his cute dogs, I haven't been chased by any women, and of course I haven't had any energy to devote to chasing them, if indeed I wanted to....

(They all seemed to want to feed me: the artist who shared her seaweed treats, the Asian girl who kept giving me bananas, the neohippie poetess who favored protein shakes, thought my handwriting looked like Greek, and wondered what the equations meant ...)

In a notebook of the homeless period I find a lengthy discussion of Birkhoff/Von Neumann circuits, some speculations about making balloon animals from superconducting shells to confine magnetic fields and thus constructing machines that could pinch plasmas, and a fantasy about flying kites with carbon-fiber strings in the jet stream. — “Men that look upon my outside, perusing only my condition, and fortunes, do erre in my altitude. For I am above Atlas his shoulders.” (Sir Thomas Browne.)



The office.



The view to the west from the Boulder Creek Hotel.

Subject	7/1	7/2	7/3	7/4	7/5	7/6	7/7
Math							
Science							
History							
Literature							

The handwritten schedule shows a grid of dates from 7/1 to 7/7. The subjects listed are Math, Science, History, and Literature. The handwriting is in red ink. Some cells contain 'X' marks, indicating tests that have occurred or are scheduled. The subjects listed include 'Math', 'Science', 'History', and 'Literature'.

Test schedule, Summer 2014.

*Re: You made it, so what does this mean? (10/4/14)*<sup>4</sup>

Christ, another novel . . . . — Well, to make the matter at least slightly clearer: nothing happens when I punch the Send button unless I walk across the street to the gas station/diner and indicate with my fetching combination of sign language and pidgin Spanish that I want a coffee (“grande”); after which I can access their slightly more reliable wifi, and try to finish the day’s business. Until that happens I have — sometimes — internet access at slow dialup bandwidth, and something blocks any outgoing mail I try to send with my mail client rather than by logging into the server directly (which doesn’t really work either). — But the situation is otherwise so completely fascinating that I don’t give a shit. — Or wouldn’t if the 16.50 pesos this costs me (divide by 8-point-something-that-keeps-rising for dollars) were not, at the moment, hard to come by. — The latest paycheck from the Arabs should repair that problem. Or so I hope.

Well, obviously it’s all very complicated.

To review the chain of events that brought me here: after a series of random fluctuations in what I laughingly refer to as my income put my nostrils far enough above the waterline to rent cheap office space, I did at least manage to sleep indoors in Boulder for most of my last couple of years there, roughly Thanksgiving 2012 — Memorial Day 2014. Since the way I was doing this was technically illegal, like everything else the poor are compelled to do these days, I got evicted twice; the second occasion coincided not only with the advent of warm weather, which made the prospect of going back to the Boulder Creek Hotel a trifle more palatable, but with a veritable Perfect Storm

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<sup>4</sup> To Cliff Yablon.

of Arab clients who needed help getting through algebra, statistics, and (I know, I know, the irony was crushing) even finance (I aced the course, incidentally, it was kind of interesting), which presented the possibility of making enough of a killing over the summer that I might actually be able to fly my ass out of there, dogs, research materials, and all. So I took eleven online courses simultaneously, billed them all at five hundred dollars a pop, and then blew the entire wad on tickets to the Dark (well: dimly-lit) Continent.

I left September 8, which was a Monday; spent a day, a night, and another day in airports and in transit; and found myself around 5 p.m. local time on Tuesday standing out in front of the terminal in Buenos Aires with two dogs and a couple of enormous bags wondering just how it was that my genius girlfriend had not figured out from all the travel plans I'd sent her that I was actually going to arrive and might require a ride, or something, to get to Rosario. Apparently her son's car was in the shop, or missing some documentation, or both; I never got this part of the story straight, and probably never will. — At any rate she pulled some strings: a cabbie materialized; grabbed the bags; tucked us all into the back of his car; and drove us away to the north. — I had the vague impression all this was going to cost us something like 600 pesos, but soon learned the First Rule of Improvisational Travel: everything costs three times what they say it is going to. The final tab came to 2160, and I think the asshole is still trying to collect the last of it. (With so many others making demands on the Rich American Tourist — honestly, all Americans are rich, they saw that in a movie somewhere — it is hard to keep track.) — Interlude dozing off while the slums of Buenos Aires roll by and are replaced by a landscape that could be the Midwest, for all I can tell, it looks exactly like Nebraska. — Finally arriving in Rosario and driving through the streets to the entrance of a hotel, where I discover I am supposed to spend the night. The bill for this too has somehow mysteriously tripled en route, and there is no way I have enough money left to check

in; real Rich Americans, of course, reach for their credit cards at this juncture, but I need not explain to you, at least, why they practically threw me out of the country. — So, a problem. Finally we decide to pretend I am going to be back to check in after an hour or so and leave my bags in the keeping of the night clerk, and set off for a gas station/diner where we can sit down and impact our options.

For indeed, Nina was there awaiting my arrival: somewhat older than the girl in the photographs, and somewhat abused by the stresses of poverty and illness, but of course I have myself been clubbed over the head repeatedly for the last three years and don't give a shit, and neither, I guess, does she. — So: love at first sight, sure enough. Now for the footnotes and codicils.

First, there is some unspecified problem with my staying at her house. I had heard nothing about this before I set out, of course, but apparently after such a lengthy courtship no one believed I would ever actually get here, indeed (save for Nina herself) most of the people to whom she has described me thought she was making me up; her son, I guess, included, he being relevant in this connection since he is the other occupant. I guess I have to meet with his approval before anything else can happen. And, for some reason, he isn't home tonight. What this means I can't figure.

Second, I have budgeted this down to the last centime, and even after filling many pages of my notebooks with the calculations came up short at the last minute, meaning I had to negotiate an emergency loan literally while en route to be sure there would be enough to pay my entry fees in Buenos Aires. The plan, from the moment I conceived it, was that I was going to have just enough money to get me here; and after that, though my stable of clients was sure to be good for continued income and there was no problem making enough to eat and indeed to pay Nina's rent, if that should prove necessary or politically expedient, it was going

to take a couple of weeks, at least, for my exchequer to recover, during which time I needed a place to stay that wasn't going to cost me anything. I have explained this to Nina dozens of times, but apparently it all got filed under "When you wish upon a star", not with the grocery list. So now I am suddenly confronting the necessity of paying for lodgings, and I don't have any money. — At least, the ATM says I don't have any money. Since it is telling me in a foreign language and I am six thousand miles from my bank, I am not completely sure of this, but I'm inclined to believe it.

Third, Nina is acting weird. I have learned to read her pretty well at a distance, but everything looks different in closeup. Even though we are holding hands like schoolkids she is simultaneously playing some kind of tragic-renunciation scene that I am having difficulty interpreting. Is she ill again? Is she trying to pretend she's not good enough for me? if so, it's a little late to be explaining it.

So, at any rate, we're sitting in this all-night gas station/convenience store/diner with the dogs tied up outside, drinking espresso, and wondering where the fuck I am going to spend the night if not right there. She is getting more and more stressed by the moment, her hands are shaking, she's cold and trembling (incredibly thin, I really wonder whether she can afford to eat), and, lacking any happier inspiration, I pull my laptop out of my bag and put on Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. — Which does fascinate her, fortunately. She begins to revive. We talk about the art of the silent movies, how the acting was more like dance. We trade a few of our favorite jokes about postmodernism.

This goes on for hours. Finally, about four in the morning — bear in mind I have scarcely slept for three days, and have eaten practically nothing since I left Boulder — it occurs to me that the ambiguous result of my attempt to check the contents of my

bank accounts online could have the interpretation that the bastards at Wells Fargo without telling me beforehand have imposed a daily limit on withdrawals. And if I try the ATM again, since it's now past midnight, this time it might work.

And sure enough. I run around the corner, find an all-night bank machine in a lobby, ask the genie to dispense 1000 pesos. And it does. The whole trip is a miracle; why not one more.

So now I can afford lodgings, albeit at a hostel, not a hotel. We get a cab (taxis at least are cheap and plentiful, even at this hour one passes every couple of minutes), run a couple of blocks to a place we'd scoped out earlier, and I plunk down 400 and get a room up three flights of stairs at the top of the building — a real garret, inexpressibly charming, with a door onto the rooftop and a bathroom that looks like somebody's junior-high-school shop project. It is beautiful, like something out of *La Bohème*.

But does Nina stay the rest of the night? No, of course not. She hops into another taxi and returns home, promising to negotiate with her son and return on the morrow.

Which she does, eventually, though not until well past noon. We walk down to the river, though the city parks, and discuss the situation. It develops that her son is adamantly opposed to my taking up residence, at least not until they consult the landlord about the acceptability of the dogs. — Once this question has been raised, of course, I know its answer. — A vacuum opens beneath my feet, the interstellar void: I have risked everything to come to this foreign country, spent every cent I was able to make in the last four years, and now I am stranded, abandoned, doomed. I will die here in the gutter, and no one will understand my elegantly-phrased last words. Except my dogs, who are going to have to gnaw on my carcass to stay alive. In advance, I forgive them.

Nina disappears again and I return to the hostel. Fortunately, nobody asks for money. I spend another night, and go out the next morning by myself. I wander down to the river again, and look at the water for a while. My resolve stiffens. If nothing else, maybe I can sell the Macbook, get enough to buy a junkyard sailboat, repair it, and make my way down the river and up the coast and back to North America. It will be an epic journey, but fuck it, Shackleton got back from the Antarctic. And think of the screenplay.

On the way back to the hostel I stop at an electronics store and try to explain with sign language my need for some kind of converter to plug my computer into; the power supply will work on 220 (I anticipated this problem long since), but the plugs and sockets are different here, and I can't recharge any of my batteries. The kid understands, finally, what I'm talking about, but he hasn't got one. He suggests some other store, I think, but I can't understand his directions. Instead I stop at a little market and buy a small bag of dog chow. The puppies won't have to eat me just yet.

Nina reappears later, after a rough day arguing with the landlord, and confirms the foregone conclusion. — So: homeless again, six thousand miles from Boulder Creek; now what? — Fortunately, another scheme has occurred to me, and even more fortunately (we're still on the same wavelength) exactly the same scheme has occurred to her: we have had a longstanding offer from a guy who has a little resort motel in the wine country around Mendoza, in the west, to come out there (if ever I could get to Argentina) and stay in one of his cabins; he can't afford to invest in our business plan, but he can at least offer free lodging. The offer has been reiterated every few months for the last three years. All we need to do is come up with enough money to make the trip, and we can run away together and live far from the dogrejecting landlords of the cold cruel city. — Moreover, we

both know where the money's coming from. While the Arabs were warming me up in the bullpen during the spring semester, I bought not one but two iPhones (I didn't realize how difficult it would be to get the first one unlocked, and ended up using it only as a camera); these are rarities here, and should fetch a premium. We'll make the rounds of the electronic-toy stores, and whoever drools most uncontrollably will bankroll our pilgrimage west.

As it turns out her son (whom I still have not met) starts drooling as soon as he hears of this scheme, and buys the better of the phones immediately. So I am 3000 pesos to the good at once, and have enough to cover the bill at the hostel, which has been running while these efforts have proceeded. — Alas, I have to move, the room has been reserved for someone else. We bid a fond farewell to the Hostel Malvinas, and, after an ugly afternoon interlude during which we bounce from one place to another in search of an empty room in a place that will allow the puppies, alight finally at — I am not making this up — the famous Hostel Kalifornia.

No, you think I'm kidding:



Here, as it turns out, I spend about a week and a half, burning through the proceeds from the first iPhone, selling the second, and finally (doing homework furiously the while for another crew of Arabs, trying to make as much money as possible, checking the PayPal account every couple of hours to see if anything came in yet, firing off emails in mounting desperation), after more emergency loans secured by the food stamp account I left in the hands of one of my friends back home, get enough to pay for the ride to Mendoza. — Or almost. At the last second (why is this not a surprise?) the price goes up drastically, and the 4000 pesos I thought was going to cover it turns out to be a down payment on the 6000 the guy who replaces the guy who replaces the guy we thought would do it is going to charge. — Well, maybe Nina's son can pay the asshole when he gets back; that terminal paycheck from the employer who laid everybody off is due any minute now. (Any minute now for the last couple of months, in fact, and probably any minute now until Christmas.) — Tell him that; tell him anything. — Fuck it, we haven't any choice. We're going. I can't pay for the hostel any longer, it will devour my funds and leave me back by the riverside wondering whether I should build a raft. (And to think I used to be/So amused/At Napoleon in rags/And the language that he used.)

So: I pack everything up the night before. Nina says she'll be there with the taxi in the morning. The die is cast.

Well. Not quite, of course. Nothing is quite as we expect, here beneath the Southern Cross. Nina arrives, indeed, half an hour late, and announces tearfully (more drama, everything is grand opera) that she cannot go with me; that she is making this sacrifice to ensure my happiness; that the comfort and safety of myself and (of course) my darling puppies is her principal concern; that, therefore, I must climb into the taxi, and allow myself to be carried away — not simply into a foreign country, I am there already, but into a distant dusty rural province where I

am going to have to communicate with the natives like a cave man, in grunts and signs. (Really, the Spanish thing would have been doing better were it not for this ongoing dire necessity of putting all available energy into doing homework for the Arabs.) — She also says something about having to go to the doctor, though whether she is really any sicker than usual I can't figure out. But obviously she thinks she is, and that is all that counts.

My protests are futile, and of course there's nothing I can do about it. I have to leave. I pile my bags into the trunk and climb into the back seat with the dogs. — The driver's name is Angel. His wife's name is Mary. She smiles brightly, and consults a dictionary before offering a garbled greeting. — And off we go. — The trip is supposed to take about 9 hours.

The trip, of course, takes more like 12 or 14 hours, possibly because the interstate highway system has not been invented here and the roads keep petering out and turning into dirt tracks, possibly because even when you find the right road there are no highway signs to tell you that you're on it, possibly because Angel and Mary if they have maps don't seem to know how to read them and though they do have GPS don't pay any attention to what it is telling them, possibly because they stop every half hour out of apparent reflex and ask somebody, anybody, sleeping cabbies, children, domestic servants, animals, which way it is to Mendoza, no matter that it may yet be hundreds of kilometers distant. On two or three occasions even though I have no idea where we are it is clear to me that we have taken a wrong turn, and I attempt to communicate this intelligence without success. Finally, late at night, when we really have arrived, they drive past the place and I have to tug on their sleeves to get them to turn around and go back.

But here we are. Not in Mendoza after all, not even in the outlying San Martin, but eight kilometers out in the country, across from a gas station and in front of a vineyard. A couple of

cabins, each duplexed, divided in two. The proprietor, M. Ponce (for some reason Nina and I always refer to the guy as if he were French, another one of a thousand jokes I cannot adequately explain) greets me enthusiastically: his command of English, of course, has been vastly exaggerated, and it is clear that for the foreseeable future I am going to be talking to myself, or to no one at all.

Well, nothing new in that. I haul the bags into the cabin, take a bottle of the local vintage he offers as a housewarming present, and dine on my last chunk of bread and a glass of wine. I have about sixty pesos left to eat on for a week. But worry about that tomorrow.

Which arrives presently. M. Ponce appears again, and over my (very feeble) protests carries me back and forth along the road gathering assorted presents, among them oranges at a fruit stand and assorted odds and ends from his own kitchen, enough that I needn't worry about starving for a few days more. He introduces me to his wife, his daughters, his mother, his brother, his father, assorted neighbors, and the girl who makes coffee at the diner — with whom, I can tell, I am going to develop a lasting relationship, since it becomes apparent almost immediately that the wifi signal available in the cabin is entirely inadequate (see above), and any serious attempts at communication with the external world will have to take place over coffee (16 pesos 50) at a table with a view of the pumps.

Nina meanwhile calls, writes, accosts me constantly on Facebook chat, and assures me that she will be here in a couple of weeks. The bus is cheap, she says, she'll have the money for the ticket. But first the doctor, the lawyer, the landlord, etc., etc. — And Angel, I guess, who didn't get paid the rest of his fee at once, as we had led him to expect, and now stands out in front of the house all day screaming insults at her and threatening physical violence. (Not a Catholic, of course, but a fundamentalist

converted by one of the evangelicals that form one of our most obnoxious exports; really, I feel better about dumping our toxic wastes in the Third World than I do about this.)

So here I am in rural Argentina, this Land That Time Forgot, unable to talk to anyone, unable to raise anyone on the internet, unable, weird but true, to take my dogs out for a stroll on the dusty country roads that surround us because every household has half a dozen mutts in the front yard who dash out to accuse us of trespassing whenever we approach, really unable to do much of anything except read, write, and do homework for the Arabs. But what the fuck, it's free, isn't it?

Hahahahaha. Of course you knew this was coming. After a week or so, I began to notice a certain agitation in M. Ponce's attempts to communicate: something strangely familiar, something that unquestionably had to do with ..... money. The denial mechanism switched on, and protected me a day or two longer, but finally (the detailed accounting he wrote out and shoved under my nose was of course a great help) I had to face the fact that something had been omitted from all previous imaginings of the pastoral idyll we were sure awaited us here in the west. Something like this: the free rent offer was bullshit. What he was actually trying to accomplish, all this time, was to ensnare a Rich American Tourist (see above) into coming to stay for a protracted period at this wannabe-resort-motel he was having great difficulty renting out to much of anybody, and paying him large sums on a regular basis, in American dollars (illegal for Argentinian citizens to hold, and therefore, on the black market, worth more like ten or fifteen pesos apiece). So what he is now telling me is that he expects 300 dollars American a week. Payable immediately, por favor.

At this, I must admit, I momentarily went ballistic, but there really wasn't much I could convey in pidgin Spanish, ignorant as I am of verb tenses, the use of the subjunctive, and the methods

appropriate for the projection of sarcasm and irony; not that these aren't alien anyway in this part of the world. — What I did manage was to express incomprehension, convey by grunts and signs the necessity for him to talk to Nina, and transmit to her by back channel the urgent necessities of (a) stalling him with bullshit stories about checks coming in the mail and (b) getting her polyglot ass out here as soon as possible so that the two of us can make an escape to wherever the next stop is on this bizarre Odyssey.

Back to Rosario, maybe. I'm not sure. A charming city, really, in which Nina is very much at home and where it would probably be much easier, should the need arise, to find employment as an English instructor — that unfailing safety net for the American stranded abroad without visible means of support. — Though there are other possibilities. We'll have to discuss them.

For the fact remains, despite everything I've related, that I'm still committed to this insane endeavor. Once you jump out of the airplane without a parachute, all that preserves you is the faith that something good will happen before you hit the ground. That the providence that favors fools will protect you; that love will find a way.

And, you know, everything that's happened has only confirmed that. So maybe it's not as stupid as it seems.

Well, we'll see. — I'll keep you posted. My best, of course, to your somewhat stabler girlfriend; and to the city of Poe and John Waters. — Where, at this rate, I may end up yet. Keep watching the skies.

Later.



Espresso on the Avenida Pellegrini.



Unfortunately there was nothing interesting about the number of this cab in Rosario.

*Continuing the thread (10/21/14)*<sup>5</sup>

(Cliff adds [or “I, Zarkov, have gone South American”])

At any rate:

Maybe the situation was best summarized by a weird moment in Rosario, when Nina and I were walking around looking for a bank where she could open an account. We tried one or two places without success, and then came across an impressive gleaming new location with glass fronting the lobby along the sidewalk. So we decided this looked promising, and Nina started to go in. But paused, staring through the glass at the interior. And just stood there.

So I am watching this, and I really don't believe it, but it is pretty clear what has happened. Nina is looking through the glass at the bank lobby, and she is not moving forward because this big wall of glass is in the way, and somehow she is not noticing that, three feet to her right, the glass door is wide open and people are walking in and out of it. So she is stuck, and muttering to herself, “But they aren't open....?” — At which point, impressed, I'll admit it, I step over to her, grasp her lightly but firmly by the shoulders, and move her sideways just far enough that the open door is in front of her. — And she goes in. — Now, I have dwelt many years in Absentmindedprofessorland myself; a thinly-populated territory, somewhat to the north. But this is halfway to the Pole from there.

As it turned out she couldn't open an account in this bank either, lacking several critical forms of documentation relating to established income, but — should I say typically? — it didn't

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<sup>5</sup> To Cliff.

matter because she had an account already, in another bank. She'd just forgotten about it.

Let me continue for a moment on the theme of the bank. I wanted her to open an account so that she would have some kind of routing/account number or address to which I could direct funds transfers, since I was getting tired of being ripped off by the ATM fees that attach, like electronic leeches, to every transaction conducted with a bank card. As it turned out this was NOT going to work, because my bank for some reason doesn't allow transfers to Argentina; nor was my second idea going to work, i.e. attaching her account to my PayPal account (through which the Arabs generally pay me), for rules and reasons known only to PayPal. But if Nina could open a PayPal account, and attach it to her bank account, then I could send money from my PayPal account to hers, and she could transfer it to her bank, and maybe, just maybe, all this would be a cheaper way of getting money from the US to Argentina. — So I have explained this to her now probably fifteen or twenty times, and she still doesn't get it. She thinks the Arabs should pay her so that she can transfer the money to my bank account and then I can have it. Every attempt to explain why this is the exact opposite of what needs to be done has somehow sailed over her head. She thinks the important point here is that if money passes through her account on its way to mine, she won't touch it. That this is not a matter of playing a percentage, or optimizing the efficiency of a transaction, but of making a noble sacrifice.

Is this just Nina? I'm not entirely sure. I am beginning to form the theory that the reason that Americans take a fundamentally ironic attitude toward life — an attitude which I had already observed is very difficult for persons from other cultures to understand (even, take note, persons from disadvantaged subcultures in America itself, black people for instance) — is not so much the wiseass gene that seems to have spread so widely among Yankees, but something more basic. Roughly, irony is

what happens when you contrast fantasy with reality: you say, for instance, “Yeah that’s brilliant all right” about some incredibly stupid idea and you are commenting not only on the stupidity of the idea but also implicitly on the human folly of its author; who probably really DID think it was a brilliant idea, at least for a moment. But to be able to do this you have to have some dim apprehension of what the reality actually is, and more important you have to understand that what we fantasize, what we want to be the case, generally isn’t. I don’t think the ability to perceive this distinction is very common beyond our shores. Not that it is universal even among Americans, but it is one of those characteristics that has distinguished us at our best, and — not to put too fine a point on it — no wonder then we rule the world.

— I am thinking of the whole amazing cast of characters in *Casablanca*, and I am thinking of Rick telling Ilsa “The Germans wore gray, and you wore blue.” Isn’t that the whole point about Bogart? that he is the one who can see things in perspective, the one who can separate himself from his own romantic illusions. Everyone else is to a greater or lesser extent the prisoner of his own fantasies. He’s the realist. He embraces idealism at the end, but what makes this conversion so powerful is that he actually understands what the world is like, and everyone else doesn’t. The Germans are strutting around thinking they really are the master race. The French guys are like Claude Rains, what the fuck if Paris is in the hands of the Nazis so long as he can chase women and win by cheating at roulette. Victor Laszlo is a hero, but he’s crazy and he’s obviously only still alive by sheer dumb luck, he doesn’t have enough sense not to go up against the Germans when they’re all-powerful and can crush anyone who opposes them openly. The Arabs are like Sidney Greenstreet, all they know is cutting deals. Ingrid Bergman is in love with two guys at once, and keeps forgetting the one who isn’t standing in front of her. But Rick is like Odysseus, the man of many turns. He’s the wise guy, the guy with depth perception, the one who sees in three dimensions. He can see things as they are.

Well, I can see things as they are, too, and I know this is just philosophical bullshit, but I can't resist adding an anecdote or two. — My maternal grandfather was not a famous man, exactly, but among a certain class of people he was pretty well known, and after the war he was invited to Japan to lecture and consult in the automobile industry. He gave some talks at Nissan, which I guess is all they expected, I picture a room full of engineers busily taking notes and memorizing everything he said, but really this bored the shit out of him, and he kept pestering his audience to ask him something interesting. "Tell me what your problems are," he said. Finally they gave in and accepted the loss of face and admitted that they'd designed an engine according to the textbooks, but it didn't work, and they couldn't figure out why. This filled them with shame, I guess. But Grandpa, of course, was excited. "Let me think about it," he said, and took the problem home for the night. The next morning he explained to them that he thought they could fix it if they just changed the throw of the piston, and that they should try that. — Which they did. It worked. They mass produced the suckers, and called it "the Stone engine" in his honor.<sup>6</sup> — But what they learned from this, or should have, was more important than any mere technical tour de force: that nothing ever works the way you expect, certainly nothing ever works the first time, and you always have to expect mistakes; the trick is to be prepared to adapt and correct them. That in engineering particularly everything is a hack and a kludge. They simply didn't know that before he demonstrated it for them, because they weren't realists. They didn't have that ironic perspective on their own designs.

Grandpa lived to be 98, and he's buried in Flint. I haven't been back to check, but I picture a long line of General Motors executives out the entrance of the cemetery and around the

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<sup>6</sup> A slightly different version of this story can be found on pp. 268-270 of David Halberstam, *The Reckoning*. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1986.

block, waiting to piss on his grave.

“But that isn’t what I came to talk about,” says Arlo Guthrie. “I came to talk about the draft.” — The point, I guess, is just that if I told this story to Nina, and added the part about the line around the block, she’d think there really were people pissing on my grandfather’s grave. And then I would have to spend twenty minutes explaining that this wasn’t literally the case, that this was a joke, a metaphor, another symptom of my ironic detachment, an expression of my contempt for the bozos who ran the largest industrial enterprise in the world into the ground by forgetting the qualities that made them great in the first place, by losing the sense of perspective and the appreciation of cause and effect that would once have made it plain to them that doing something like shutting my grandfather up was not going to eliminate the possibility of competition; which is probably what they would think, if they knew the story, because they’re morons. The Japanese, or some of them, learned to think like Americans, and a lot of Americans started thinking like Japanese.

As for Argentinians, who knows what they think like. But they don’t think like us, that’s for sure.

So what happened after I got here? Did Nina ever actually show up? — To date: no. This was not completely unexpected, since the business she was supposed to be taking care of before she left included finding enough money to buy a ticket; that in turn depended on her son getting paid the money his previous employer owes him; and that, in turn, will obviously depend on legal action whose difficulty I can’t estimate here beneath the equator, but which when I attempted it myself, in a country where you never have to bribe a judge, took a year and a half. So I’m not holding my breath on this one, if you catch my drift. — What they will do in the meantime I don’t exactly know, but it will undoubtedly involve desperate improvisation and selling shit on short notice. (Which is how he bought the iPhone,

incidentally: he unloaded his Playstation and got a new toy with the proceeds from the old one.)

So where did that leave me? Completely at the mercy of a more than slightly daffy landlord with whom I am completely incapable of communicating. Every once in a while he and Nina have a telephone conversation which determines my fate for another week or two, but I'm never entirely sure what she is telling him. She called me last week and insisted I had to pay him something, and at that point I sent her an email so clear, concise, and logical that I think for the first time she understood (though of course I know not for how long) that the guy is nuts, that there is no way I can possibly pay him a tenth of what he thinks he is going to collect, that at any moment he can decide to toss me out into the street and then I will literally have to start walking back to North America, that in shoving me into the taxi and shipping me off to this dusty province she was throwing me under the bus, and that I didn't care what she thought, I would pay for the fucking ticket to bring her here myself, just as (predictably) I ended up paying the 2000 pesos outstanding for which our good friend Angel had been camped out on her doorstep threatening to kill her to collect. At which point I almost succeeded in getting her to come, but then there was another emergency phone call which I received five kilometers into the long trek into town to buy the ticket at the bus depot telling me to put it off for a few more days while she and her son negotiate a loan from somewhere else so that they can avoid getting evicted. Maybe she'll be here Wednesday, but I'm not making any bets.

I did succumb to exasperation and attempted to explain to her, loudly and slowly, that I have in the last month spent so much on hostels and wild goose chases to Mendoza that I could have covered their rent until the end of the year; that of course I would have been perfectly happy to do so, and since they were getting evicted anyway the acceptability of my dogs to the

landlord was essentially irrelevant. But this didn't register, of course. Nor did I really expect it to.

As for what else has happened since I was hustled out of town: I think, really, that so long as the status quo was re-established, i.e. Nina mailing me or chatting on Facebook to maintain contact, it was somehow not occurring to her that anything could be wrong. After all, it was just the same as always. The fact that after months of preparation I had spent what was to me a fortune on tickets and moved myself and my entire furry family six thousand miles and that now I had been abandoned in the fucking wilderness was weirdly irrelevant, not an element of the Nina universe; I'm not completely sure that, from one moment to the next, she realizes this has happened. — In fact (no, you believed the rest of it, this can't be any more absurd) the first couple of weeks I had to deal with a recurrence of her paranoia, and received a daily barrage of messages accusing me of chasing bimbos on Facebook, explaining to me that I wasn't really interested in her, that I was just using her and was preparing to dump her for younger and more attractive women, etc., etc. — And apparently her friends encouraged her to believe all this! thus my inclination to embrace universal theories explaining the mental dysfunction of nonAmericans generally, and Argentinians in particular. I really have begun to think they were all dropped on their heads in infancy.

Similarly I'm not completely sure that Nina really understands that I got thrown out of my house four years ago and I've been sleeping in the woods since then. — But you have to understand this, too. That determines my perspective. I'm stranded here, all right, but I'm six thousand miles not from home but from homeless, and in most respects despite the danger of the situation I'm still better off. For instance, I've slept in a bed every night since I left Boulder. That hasn't happened in years. — Again: it may seem like I made an insane gamble blowing my last five thousand dollars on a wild leap into the unknown. But it wasn't

really crazy. If I had stayed in Boulder, my best option would have been to sleep outdoors the rest of the winter in the hope that I could make enough more money that I'd be able to buy a car. Which could then carry me to Detroit, which is the only place left in America that a person like me can afford to live. Whereas, if things had worked out in the way I had every reason to expect they were going to, I would have succeeded in transporting myself, with a one-time payment, to a place where I would not have to pay rent and my meager income might actually be adequate for the other essentials of life. Not to mention the girlfriend. — So, even as a matter of cold-blooded rational calculation, this wasn't stupid. In fact, it was the best option open to me. (Trust me. I'm a mathematician.)

And it could still work out, I haven't given up completely. I still have the ironic perspective and can see this landscape in three dimensional relief: my naive faith in an unreliable female, the distortion of my judgment caused by economic desperation, the tendency to double down on a bad bet and then redouble when it goes bad again ... not to mention the all-encompassing irony that I probably ended up chasing after a woman who comes from a country full of self-deluding fantasists because that was the only kind of person who could ever fall for me. But it's still a question of numbering your options, assessing the probabilities, and estimating the payoffs. And on that basis, honestly, the situation doesn't look any worse than usual.

As for your very perceptive questions: does Nina have an income? can she support herself? has she ever, to my knowledge, been able to support herself? I'm really not sure, but I think no. Once upon a time, before the banking collapse of 2001-2002, she was wealthy, or says she was anyway, and this is consistent with everything I know about her: she behaves like a rich girl who never learned the value of money and then lost it all; in fact the way she lost it all is curiously shrouded in mystery, but it may have happened simply because she didn't have enough sense to

take it out of the bank before it folded. Before that in any case she took several degrees, learned many languages, and was a musician, dancer, and a travelling lecturer. Since then she has had various forms of erratic and occasional income, tutoring, working as a therapist, translations, etc., but nothing ever seems to last very long and there is a consistent pattern of her talking enthusiastically about some new opportunity for a few weeks and then seeming to forget it completely. She has frequently been ill, which never helps, but even when working she never seems to have enough to eat, and when I was better off I often sent her money to keep her from starving.

(Why, you might ask, didn't she just send out her resume and get a job? In the States, I'm sure, she would have ended up on a university faculty. But in Argentina there aren't as many opportunities, and women just aren't supposed to be smart.)

As for how she managed to survive without an income: for a long time she lived in a house that belonged to her uncle, with whom she had a curiously intimate relationship. Her parents died relatively young, and neither her real nor her nominal father was ever much of a presence. Her uncle was the guy who ran her life from a tender age: every prodigy has some puppetmaster who pulls his or her strings, and in Nina's case he was the one; he saw to it that she learned to read at the age of two, that she had piano and ballet lessons, that she had tutors and coaches who crammed her head full of Latin and Greek before the age of ten. She told me she used to lull herself to sleep as a child reciting the names of the Roman emperors in their order of succession. — It seems to have been typical of their relationship that at some point, perhaps as late as her early twenties (I have no consistent chronology for Nina's life and career), she went to Paris for a year to study, and her uncle went along to keep her company, I think literally as a chaperone. And, finally, when inevitably she rebelled against this strict Catholic upbringing and got knocked up by a musician she was playing in a trio with, it was her uncle

who tracked the guy down and arranged a shotgun wedding.

Which Nina still claims was not actually marriage, though they seem to have lived together for the best part of twenty years thereafter. Why exactly I'm not sure; the kid must have had something to do with it, but the guy seems to have been an abusive asshole who hung around, mainly, on the hope that her (of course very rich) uncle would drop dead and leave Nina all his money. — Which Nina's uncle had figured out long in advance of his eventual demise, of course. Thus (a) he never forgave her for sticking with this loser and (b) cut her out of his will.

At any rate you have to picture the two of them living in the same house, Nina upstairs, her uncle downstairs, for twenty years without speaking; a bit like the stories you hear of the Siamese twins who decide they hate each other. — At some point he tried to evict her from the premises, but they went to court over this and — weird but true, Argentine law I guess is very different from American on points like these — it was ruled that she couldn't be thrown out. More than that, squatter's rights being somehow enshrined in the legal code,<sup>7</sup> she was half owner, and if he sold the place, which he later threatened to do, it was ruled, I was told, that he was going to have to pay her half the proceeds.

So this was the situation around the time that I first made Nina's acquaintance. The husband was gone, or so she claimed at least. (At least once he came into the room while she and I were talking on Skype and started beating her up and tried to smash her computer; there were other such incidents, I think, but she was more successful in concealing them from me.) The uncle was

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<sup>7</sup> At least that was the impression I had gained from her rather garbled explanations of the matter. This can't really be the case, some issue of inheritance from her mother must have been involved.

estranged. The income was nonexistent. The son was old enough that he was starting to work, and she began depending on whatever scraps of his income he threw her. (As for what he depends on her for: so far as I can tell he like his father before him expects Nina the polymath musician dancer and linguist to cook, clean, and do the laundry by hand, such activities being beneath the dignity of Manly Men in the Catholic patriarchy.) The bills were never paid, they had no gas or heat, and their electricity came from an illegal extension cord. The roof leaked, and the uncle didn't fix it. Obviously he was hoping to starve her out.

But he died first, of course, about three years ago. Since this coincided with my first season of homelessness, I was extremely receptive to the idea that Nina was going to inherit his estate (as she assured me was certain to be the case), and save me from what was already a ghastly situation. Indeed I was so receptive that I actually sent her money again, 200 dollars that I didn't really have, to pay a lawyer to facilitate the settlement. This was sometime in July 2011, and in direct consequence I spent a couple of months unable to buy anything, and at one point went an entire week having nothing to eat but dog treats I pulled out of the dumpster behind Petco.

Hmmm, another telling anecdote. They got a new telephone about that time, a landline to replace the cell phones they never seemed to pay the bills for. So Nina called me three or four times a day; sometimes just to ask why her browser crashed when she was trying to talk to me on Facebook. I could find no way to explain to her that she could not possibly afford to do all this; and, sure enough, that particular phone only lasted until the first bill came in, and then was disconnected. — Since then, I notice, her son has usually not allowed her to have a phone of her own, but rather loans her a cellphone when she needs to transact business. (And, I think, watches her while she uses it.)

So is her son in loco parentis? well, not exactly. I am not clear on their precise relationship, but (a) he appears to be a major airhead himself and (b) though he does, e.g., buy food for her, it's only as an afterthought and he only seems to do it every two or three days. At least once she fainted in the street and was taken to a hospital where they fed her intravenously. She's about five feet four, and she now weighs less than 90 pounds.

(Other accidents which have befallen Nina in the last three years: hit by cars twice; third degree burns from an electrical fire which nearly destroyed the house, once; fallen down the stairs, possibly because of fainting, resulting in severe sprains and/or broken bones, two or three times.)

Ah, but I was explaining about her uncle's estate. — Well: there is an Evil Sister. I collected many tales of contested estates after my mother died and my oldest sister went bonkers, and there is always an Evil Sister; it is some kind of natural law. — This specimen is (hahaha, shades of Cinderella) an evil half sister, actually, has a small boy, and lived with the uncle in his half of the house for the last ten years of his life; during which time, evidently, she conducted a continuous campaign for Nina's disinheritance which on the surface appears to have been completely successful, since a will eventually materialized, after several months, which named her as the sole heir and left Nina penniless. — Or more or less penniless. In this as in many respects I have had conflicting reports as to what Nina did or did not receive, whether e.g. she inherited her uncle's (very valuable) library, for instance, whether she got her piano back, whether she retrieved her jewelry, etc. Since presently I discovered that when I made inquiries that were too persistent Nina had a tendency to fall down the stairs and go to the hospital again, I gave up trying to find out. But I think the sister dangled some stuff under her nose just to taunt her, and then took it all back. — As for the uncle's financial assets, which I presume must have been considerable, I have never received a coherent explanation.

I think Nina's sister told her "It all disappeared," and Nina actually believed this, but I'm not sure. When every question provokes an anxiety attack, it is very difficult to obtain information.

At any rate this dragged on for months, and at some point I had to give up and admit to myself that there was no point in counting on this ever being resolved, let alone solving my problems. I stopped thinking about escaping to Argentina and started thinking about just sleeping indoors. And eventually managed to accomplish that, at least.

So everything went along roughly the same for a couple of years, and then abruptly this spring Nina's sister announced that she had sold the house. — Now, it had been established (I guess) that when the house was sold, Nina had to get half the money. So this seemed like good news. However (hahahaha), Nina's sister said — at least I think she said, I am taking for granted that you understand that all this information comes from a neurotic, unreliable, and usually uncomprehending source — that all the money wasn't going to come in at once. Nonetheless a date was given as the date by which Nina and her son had to be off the premises, and Nina's sister gave Nina an advance on the proceeds of the sale, to use for moving expenses and to find a new house.

So they did, and that's why I didn't have a place to stay when I got here.

But of course this is not all of the story. — After a decent interval, Nina made inquiries about the REST of the money. And at this point but not before, so I am told, discovered that the sister had NOT sold the house after all (though perhaps she did move out.) Rather she'd just told Nina this story to trick her into leaving.

And, possibly, to maneuver Nina out of her share of the proceeds should the place really be sold, I'm not sure. Indeed I am sure of nothing about this. Nina is supposed to have a lawyer (though as always whether the guy has been paid I don't know, perhaps this explains why he can't seem to find his ass with both hands.) The lawyer is supposed to be investigating the status of the property, what Nina's rights are, etc., and presumably is going to ensure — someday — that Nina either receives her share of the house, or gets to move back in, or maybe even gets half of her uncle's estate after all, who knows. I don't know anything, of course, about Argentine law, but I know lawyers, and anyone I would have hired (a) would never have allowed this rather suspect will to be accepted in the first place and (b) would have put a hold on the sister's assets while these very dubious proceedings are under investigation or (c) I would have canned him and hired someone else. Moreover the idea that the rich uncle's money could all have mysteriously disappeared is patently risible, and in the States, obviously, all real estate transactions are matters of public record and it would take an instant on the county assessor's website to find out whose name was on the title of a property whose current status this bozo attorney claims is unknown.

So, great, obviously even working through a translator I could ask enough questions in a few minutes to light a fire under this guy's ass. Nor is it inconceivable that I could find a few bucks to pay him an advance, not that he shouldn't be working on contingency. Fortunately for all concerned (since I see no faction here interested in promoting the rational conduct of affairs) I am on the other side of the country. — But the real question, obviously, is why I am the one who has to be thinking of all this. Where is the son? He has an income, and a vested interest in the outcome of the lawsuit. More than that, he's supposed to be going back to finish law school himself, if he ever gets ahead on the bills, and ought to know who to talk to and what questions to ask to find out what the fuck is going on. So why hasn't he taken care of it?

The obvious answers are (a) because cultural programming has turned him into just another Argentine airhead who hasn't got sense enough to pour piss out of a wet boot and (b) maybe this whole story, which makes very little sense, makes so little sense because I'm hearing it all from Nina. Maybe there is some much simpler explanation, without characters that sound like they belong in a fairy tale.

Though I think, actually, that it's just the opposite, that the characters all sound like they came out of a fairy tale not because Nina is making up that kind of story, but because everyone in this benighted country uses fairy-tale logic, and they all really do behave like that. No wonder then I got stuck out here when the clock struck midnight and my carriage turned into a pumpkin.

One more illustrative anecdote: what happened to the iPhone I sold Nina's son? you might ask. — Well, I'll tell you: first he carried it around in his underwear for a couple of weeks because he was afraid someone would steal it. Nonetheless he managed to drop it at least once, denting and scratching it and thus lowering its resale value (he is already thinking he may have to sell it.) Then his girlfriend decided to investigate its contents, did not, I guess, approve of what she found, and tried to smash it with a hammer. — So was this the end of it? no, he took it to a repair guy (I can see, from this and all else I have heard, how the principles of natural selection would dictate the emergence of a large class of genius repair guys in Argentina), and got it fixed. And he and his girlfriend kissed and made up, and will doubtless live happily ever after.

So nobody, but nobody, is touching this Macbook.

The house she lived in with her uncle is real, in any case, though now it looks deserted. I came across it by accident while walking

around Rosario:



Doesn't it look gothic? you can just picture that troll living in the cellar.

So, anyway. Since we have to somehow bring this narrative to a close, at least until our next installment, it is time to draw some neat conclusions.

First, it would have been a good idea to have remembered a famous piece of advice I once gave myself, namely, "Never follow a woman across a state line." Since in this case I crossed about a dozen national boundaries, obviously I lost sight of this principle somehow. No fucking wonder nature is out of balance.

Second, though obviously if I had known a couple of months ago what I know now I would have made very different plans, thermodynamics does not allow us to run time backwards and reassemble Humpty-Dumpty, at least not without performing heinously difficult computations anyway, so the hand I'm going to have to play is pretty much the one I have inadvertently dealt myself. Since I'm in Argentina, I'm going to have to try to make this work somehow. Since I came here to be with Nina, and since the already daunting degree of difficulty of what I have to manage will be amplified by many orders of magnitude if I do not have her close at hand to translate and negotiate with the universe of Spanish-speaking airheads with whom I am surrounded, I will have to patiently exert what influence I may have over her until she suffers the kind of momentary lapse that could cause her to get on the bus despite her best excuses, and join me here in this rustic exile. — After that the odds improve considerably; at least we'll be able to call a taxi to get us out of here if we get evicted. And there are the ongoing negotiations with the Argentine government for support of research; it almost worked three years ago, and it may yet, we'll see. Should all else fail, maybe I can finally get the straight story about the estate fiasco; maybe that is a solvable problem. But I have to be

reconnected to some kind of social network to accomplish anything, and at this time, in this place, Nina is the only link that leads me to it. So even should love prove to be an illusion (and about even that I am still sanguine), I'm bound to her as a business partner, and I have to see how far that will carry me.

Thus, finally, even though there is a sort of nuclear option which would carry me back to the United States, it would leave me there in an even worse position than I was in before I left, far worse than the one I find myself in now. And this really isn't that bad by my standards; nothing like the winter I had to sleep in the stadium stairwell at Folsom Field, for instance. So why should I complain?

Anyway this is where Butch Cassidy ended his days, and who am I not to honor such a distinguished precedent. Particularly when I got vision and the rest of the world wears bifocals. (You must have been waiting for that.)

Which pretty well sums it up at the moment. Is this weird enough for Baltimore? Keep me posted.

Later.

*Re: Continuing the thread (10/22/14)*<sup>8</sup>

I haven't seen Claire Danes do autistic, but there was a biography of the famous physicist Paul Dirac that came out a few years ago, titled "The Strangest Man," that presented the thesis that he was so weird because he was autistic. One thing that cracked me up (since at that point I already knew Nina) was the offhand remark of the author that Dirac married a foreign-born woman, which was common for autistic guys because it was harder for such women to notice their peculiarities. Of course it works both ways, and in this case probably both ways at once.

Basically at the moment I'm out on an ice floe among the penguins. There isn't a lot I can do to make contact with other people, and even if I did stumble across other Americans they would almost certainly be the rich tourists I am assumed to be; the days of the hippie diaspora are long past. Moreover it cost me a fucking fortune, by my standards, to get here, redoubling the original error, since now I have paid out all the money I could make to get to Argentina on the assumption that once I'd managed to do so I could live on nothing, and then borrowed more money on top of that to move out here in the wilderness where, no, really, this time for sure it was going to cost nothing to live. So I am assuming that, though there must be some cheaper form of transport than the taxi to get me, my stuff, and my dogs back to civilization, I'm not going to be able to find it without the assistance of Nina. Therefore I have to get her out here before I can do anything else. — Meanwhile, obviously, I have to try to make some money, though whether this gig as tutor to the Arabs is ever really going to amount to more than three or four hundred bucks a month on a regular basis I don't know, and it is usually an incredible pain in the ass: I can learn

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<sup>8</sup> To Cliff.

practically anything on very short notice, but it takes an effort, particularly when what I have to do is something like somebody's business law exam. For which if I'm lucky I make forty bucks. So this is not what you would call a thriving enterprise at the moment. But beggars, as they say, can't be choosers.

If I had an income adequate to cover the expenses, it would probably be best just to live in Buenos Aires. That is most likely the cosmopolitan environment for which I am feebly grasping. Obviously it is also the most expensive place to live in this country, though by American standards it's cheap; if I had six hundred a month to pay out for rent, I think I could manage. And really that should not be impossible.

After another month or so I have to start worrying about extending my visa. This was, like everything else, supposed to be simple, but now I'm not sure. Negotiating the extension would also be much, much simpler with the assistance of Nina (I was, naively, figuring we could simply get married). However if at that point she still hasn't shown up, I'm going to have to try to figure out how to get out of here, since I have a ticket back the first week in December, and I would be backed into a position in which it would appear I would have to use it. — I don't think I would; I think what I may end up having to do is figure out how to escape this charming rustication all by myself, go back to Rosario, present myself on their doorstep (incidentally I never saw her house or met her son), and tell the two of them that I'm going to be living with them whether they like it or not, "fuck you" understood.

After which I'll solve the rest of this conundrum. But first, the hell with it, let's eat some ice cream and watch a couple of movies.

Later.

*Another chapter, somewhat shorter (10/29/2014)<sup>9</sup>*

This is turning into one of those old movie serials in which the hero falls off a cliff at the end of every episode and then is miraculously seen to have escaped destruction at the beginning of the next, is it not? — “What Has Gone Before: Zarkov, ne’er-do-well scion of an infamous line of Mad Scientists, fleeing his creditors and a lifetime of spectacular underachievement escapes to South America, where a mysterious woman of Italian antecedents has promised him a life of luxury and ease. Instead she betrays him and disappears, turning into a voice on the telephone, another of those Sinister Masterminds who serve as the puppet masters in the classics of paranoid fiction.... .”

Indeed, where did we leave our protagonist? trapped in a cabin eight kilometers east of San Martin, at the mercy of a deranged landlord who was threatening to evict him. As we resume the narrative, our hero is desperately barraging his invisible girlfriend with a series of missives reiterating these dismal facts in the hope that she will, finally, acknowledge her responsibility in inserting him into this impossible situation, and assist him in getting out of it. And, finally — this time for sure? — she announces her intention to hop the next bus for Mendoza, bringing with her the latest load of medicines prescribed by her inventive doctors (this time, I guess, it’s supposed to be diabetes) and sending before her a taxi with instructions to pick him up and carry him and his much-travelled perritos into the city, to another, cheaper hostel at which all concerned can reboot this halfassed attempt at Romantic Exile, resume the pursuit of Mad Science, and celebrate the Final Triumph of Love over Neurosis.

Hahaha, as if. — Well, holding up his end of the bargain, Zarkov

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<sup>9</sup> To Cliff.

does indeed pack his things and wash the dishes, and rises at 6 on Monday morning to await the arrival of the cabbie who is going to get his ass out of there. He paces. He waits. He paces. He waits. He paces. He waits. — Finally, around 11 a.m., there is a peremptory knock on the door. The dogs bark. This doesn't sound like the cab. — No, in fact it is M. Ponce, yet again. This time with the police.

So we find ourselves again facing an impossibly difficult problem of communication, with the added frisson that if we fuck up, we could be going to a South American jail. Somehow, aided somewhat by the fact that the cops have brought along a smartphone with a translation app (very bad, but better than nothing), I manage to convey the intelligence that I am trying to remove myself even as we speak, give them Nina's number in Rosario on the offchance that someone will be able to reach her and she will be able if not to rectify the situation at least muddy the waters sufficiently that I can make my escape, and satisfy the cops — mainly the woman, who seems to be taking point on the matter — that I am not the most irrational person present. — As for Ponce, who knows what he thinks, but he leaves, at least for the moment. Time to dash across the street and fire off fifteen or twenty more emails, in the hope that I can arouse some response.....

.... it is usually, of course, only after the fact, and always like this in the middle of a long and complex series of moves in an extremely complicated game, when you realize that, despite your best efforts, you have slipped up, slightly, Max von Sydow playing chess with Death, and made the critical error that will bring everything down in ruins in the end. — Up until this point Ponce did not have much more than my name and my thoroughly fictitious Facebook profile to identify me. But now the cops have taken my passport number. And I realize, suddenly, that this is the misstep that will make it impossible to renew my visa: I have been denounced to the police as a

deadbeat, and I'm probably guilty until proven innocent. Meaning that, in all likelihood, I will have to be out of the country in a month.

And, of course, that I may never see Nina again. — Since, it develops, there is no response to my emails, my phone only receives but will not send (I followed the directions on their website but it didn't work), the telephone in the booth at the gas station doesn't work either, time is marching inexorably toward sunset, and I have to figure out where I am going to go. Since probably this will (a) require a taxi for which (b) I may have to front money (c) I'm out of funds and (d) I will go mad if I don't do something, anything, I start walking into San Martin to go to the bank; figuring I'll check out the campground I have remarked along the way to see what they charge.

The campground, of course, isn't open (the two descriptions I apply most frequently to all aspects of life in Argentina: "it doesn't work"; "it isn't open"), but as I press forward the phone in my pocket rings, and it is Nina. Apparently she finally got all the emails, and has conducted another whirlwind campaign to relocate me; this time, she says, by taxi to another campground, where I can wait for her arrival, which will be....soon. Maybe not tomorrow after all, but....soon. — Okay, I say, but I can't be back there for the taxi in less than three hours, because I have to walk to the bank and back, which is 15 kilometers. I explain this three or four, perhaps five or six times. Finally it registers. She says the cab will be waiting at 6 p.m. She adds that dealing with all this is extremely stressful for her. — I continue into the city, muttering unpleasant things to myself; extract a thousand pesos from the ATM, muttering unpleasant things to myself; and stop briefly at the local equivalent of Walmart to price tents on the way back: over a thousand pesos, i.e. more than I have on me, and nowhere near as good as the tent I left in storage when I departed Boulder, which cost about 30 bucks on Amazon. Nor do I have my several sleeping bags; naively, I had thought I

wouldn't need them. I begin to mutter extremely unpleasant things to myself. Finally, there is the overriding consideration that I am, apparently, going to be dumped in the middle of some kind of park, wherein, perhaps, there may indeed somewhere be bathrooms, wifi, cooking facilities, etc., but in which I am going to be, basically, sitting in a heap of my own most valuable possessions, laptop, hard drives, books, manuscripts, along with a few items of clothing and for that matter a couple of suitcases which cost me nothing but which I have just priced at the local pseudoWalmart at around 1600 pesos apiece, all exposed and undefended unless I am sitting right there with them, every minute, and way the hell too much for me to be lugging around on mandatory expeditions like trips to the grocery, which by the sound of it could be several miles away. So I am back to sleeping at the Boulder Creek Hotel, far, far, from Boulder Creek, without any of my camping equipment, without any place to store my valuables, probably without any way of making coffee or recharging the batteries on my laptop, and I am going to be sitting there, just sitting there, waiting, just waiting, until Nina shows up, if she ever shows up. And I am to remember this is really stressful for her. — At this point I start muttering to myself very loudly indeed, and making violent gestures that alarm the passersby. Or would alarm them, if there were any. Not that I give a shit.

Thus passes the trek back to the cabin. Where, when I arrive, I find M. Ponce, whom Nina for some reason has deputized to call the cab, and a couple of guys in a nondescript sedan who have apparently come instead. Saying as little as possible to my dipshit landlord, I haul everything out and put it in the car, wave goodbye and good riddance, and we are whisked away.

So where do we go? Straight back into town and past the bank, of course, meaning that the four hour walk was unnecessary. But then onward to the west, after a couple of detours which look as though they have been added onto the itinerary to run up the

tab. Finally we pull into something that looks, sort of, like a park entrance, or maybe doesn't. One of the guys in front hands me back his own translating smartphone with the English phrase displayed: Are you going to the gendarmerie? And sure enough there is a very sour-looking dude in the usual scary military garb coming out of a door in front of us. It is at this point that I realize that Ponce has handed me to a couple of his stooges, with instructions to give me over to the cops. If not to dump my body in the landfill.

But is it that exactly? of course I am not sure, and the exchange with the cop doesn't improve my understanding of the situation. Whatever they are asking him, perhaps it is indeed something about a campground, he doesn't know and doesn't care, and instead of tossing me out in the parking lot the guys confer, turn around, and head back up the road. I try to ask questions but of course get no response. After a few more turns and a couple more miles, they arrive at another cop shop, this one, I perceive, belonging to the tourist police. The stooges indicate I should get out but in truth they look as confused as I am, so I am not particularly apprehensive. And sure enough out of the door comes the female cop with whom I had conversed earlier. Who now produces a somewhat larger pad computer, and we commence a lengthy conversation mediated by something that works just as badly as Google Translate, but much more slowly.

After a while it becomes apparent that the chick and I are bonding in some bizarre fashion, so the stooges haul my shit out of the car and put it in the office, I give them a couple hundred in hush money (whatever Ponce thought they were going to do, they did drive around for an hour and someone ought to pay them for their time), and the cop and I continue our dialogue.

She indicates, first, that the idea of camping in the park, if that was the plan, is a very bad one, for the reasons I had already enumerated to myself on my afternoon walk. I explain that this was not my idea, and that I would much prefer to stay in a

hostel, if the presence of the perritos can be negotiated. She expresses some skepticism about my ability to pay. I produce a wad of cash. She asks why then had I not paid M. Ponce. I explain, or attempt to, that Ponce lured me into this situation by offering free rent, that I had become trapped, that what he wanted was more than I could afford or could pay in good conscience even if I could afford it, that a hostel was a different proposition, by comparison much less expensive, etc., etc. She protests at the length of my explanations, laughing, but I shrug, laughing, and made the obvious gestures indicating that it is a long story and there are two sides to it. In any case I'll front the money if she can find me a place to crash.

Which indeed she does, almost immediately. I am not entirely clear on the details, and there does appear to have been another one of those it's-going-to-cost-this-no-sorry-I-meant-that bait-and-switches interpolated, but the price does not go up as much as usual and will go down quite a bit if I pay for a week, in dollars. Midway through the protracted negotiations we move into her office, she gives me some coffee, and I pull out my laptop to access my bank accounts; she catches a glimpse of the desktop background painting (at the moment Raphael's School of Athens) and exclaims at how beautiful the display is.

Then Nina calls, finally, to find out whether I am still alive, and I hand the phone over and the two females in charge of my destiny exchange the Spanish-language equivalent of machinegun fire for about fifteen minutes, during which, I am sure, more information than any mortal really needs to absorb about the perfidy of M. Ponce and the prospects for Argentine scientific and cultural advancement if I retain my freedom, illustrated doubtless by illuminating quotations from Dante and Borges, comes over the line from Rosario. After which Nina and I converse again, briefly. She assures me that I was not being arrested, which I already know, but does not absorb the intelligence I attempt to convey in return, that this is not at all

M. Ponce's fault, since that had obviously been his intention; I leave out the parts about asking her what the fuck she thought she had been doing putting the handling of my escape in his hands and what a clusterfuck camping out in the park would have been. We say good-night, and a couple of guys from the hostel arrive and start loading me up to leave again.

I bid the lady cop farewell. "Thank you!" I exclaim, several times in succession. "I am very glad to have met you!"

After which I get a ride in the dark that leaves me completely at a loss as to the location of my destination, but it seems pleasant enough: a couple of bedrooms, only mine to be occupied; a bathroom, a kitchen, working television, albeit getting only one or two channels. They even point out a stack of DVDs in the closet, exclaim "Porno!", and mime jacking off, which cracks me up. I walk around the yard in the dark, but can't even figure out which way is south or west: too cloudy for stars, no sign of the Andes.

When I get up in the morning, however, it all becomes obvious. After all that driving back and forth, I have moved exactly one kilometer down the road from Ponce's cabin. I am now right behind the Supermercado on Ruta 50, maybe 7 kilometers out of San Martin. No internet here, but it is just a short walk back up the road to the diner, where the girls will doubtless welcome me back with open arms. Otherwise, I need hardly point out, there is no entertainment whatsoever. There are some gorgeous mountains out the window, but without money and transportation I'll never get any closer to them. What an idiot I was to leave Rosario.

So, great, I know how to forage in these environs. The problem, obviously, is M. Ponce. Far from having left him in the taillights, I am still in his neighborhood, maybe renting a room from one of his buddies, this neighborhood could just as well be a small town,

everyone probably knows everyone else, and given the unbalanced nature of the guy and perhaps also the fact that I left a dogstain or two on his covers, he may show up at any moment and start demanding money again and calling the cops. Which won't get him paid, but which can sour my relations with my new host rather more rapidly than I might want. Not to mention adding to my rap sheet, which is probably already long enough to get me expelled from the country.

So after frantic efforts I am still trapped in rural exile with no obvious way to extract myself unless Nina finally does show up, which at this juncture of course is slightly less likely than the second coming of Elvis. And with a bit more than a month to figure out how to resolve my several dilemmas.

I knew it was a mistake to come down here without a Zeppelin. Or at least a fucking Jeep, for Christ's sake.

Will Zarkov escape this predicament? Or have his fortunes truly hurtled off the road into a bottomless chasm filled with elephant dung? Stay tuned.

Ah, and what was the lady cop's name, you might ask? — Ha! I reply, sometimes the Great Novelist reveals His hand. — It was Sonya.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> By cosmic coincidence, also the name of Cliff's girlfriend.

*“A bottomless chasm filled with elephant dung,” or, I left out the cliffhanger (10/29/2014)<sup>11</sup>*

(1) They do have Walmart here. I saw one on the road up out of Mendoza.

(2) I ended up in Mendoza because, true to prediction, when I got back from the diner after sending my mail I found the cops waiting for me again. This time I was evicted for no reason at all, but that’s the way things work in Mister Ponce’s Neighborhood. So they called me a cab, and off I went. Farewell, Sonya.

(3) Joke’s on them, I think. Mendoza is beautiful, right next to the mountains, which are fucking spectacular. I don’t miss Boulder, but the landscape does get wired in after a few decades. Only problem is.....

(4) Expense. Well, we’re working on that. And., of course....

(5) Nina will be here in a couple of days. No, really, This time for sure.

More anon.

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<sup>11</sup> To Cliff.

*Re: A haze of whiskey and pills (11/2/2014)*<sup>12</sup>

The Arabs having been dealt with for the evening, after a couple of hours watching television (apparently *Argentine Idol*, with singers, wannabe comedians, and belly dancers, for Christ's sake), drinking wine, and eating dinner with my hosts concluded, a few further notes continuing the thread:

Yes, I did have more than a flicker of paranoia when I flashed the wad in front of Sonya. But it wasn't that much of a wad, in truth, a thousand pesos is barely more than a hundred bucks in real money, and Argentina isn't Mexico, the cops aren't going to roll you and leave your body in a drainage ditch. Besides, by that time I trusted her, and you're right, I was starting to think the two of us could get pretty friendly if the opportunity arose.

As for how I could get evicted from a different place where I was paying the rent like a law-abiding cash-cow-gringo: more or less as I expected, it was all in effect a small town, M. Ponce knew everybody from when they all played soccer together in high school, or whatever, and it didn't take 24 hours for word to get back to him that I hadn't gone more than a few hundred meters from his tick-infested cabañas; at which point, naturally, he and his old buddy my new temporary landlord compared notes at the local feed store and decided to toss my ass further on down the road. Which no one pretended was fair, but that matters even less here than in North America, where, you may recall, justice has been taking it up the ass fairly often of late.

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As for how exactly I keep staying where I am right now, I'm not

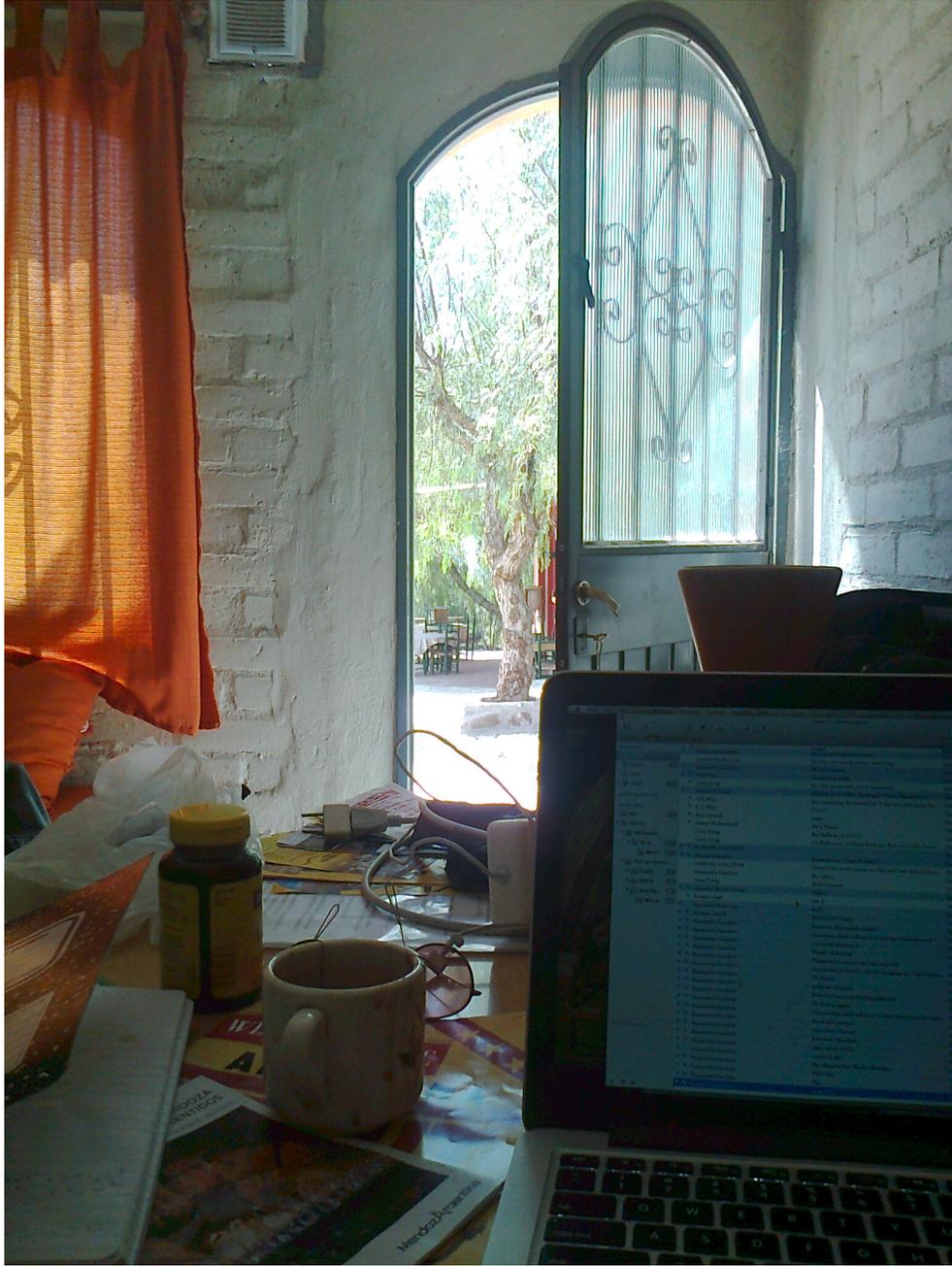
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<sup>12</sup> To Cliff.

sure, but it works at the moment and hopefully it can be made to work for a few more days or even weeks. Hopefully Nina shows up almost immediately, All Is Forgiven, we resume the romance where we left off a month ago, and discover some devious new form of economic stability, though this sounds like one of those exotic varieties of matter that decays before it ever really takes form, like the Higgs Boson. Hopefully my paranoid fears of being thrown out of the country as a bad credit risk will prove unfounded, though what the fuck, I guess there's always Bolivia. Hopefully I keep escaping when someone ties me to the railroad tracks, and the serial continues for a few more chapters, though, who knows, even if I don't maybe some South American member of the Mad Scientist's Guild will preserve my severed remains and I'll reappear on the Late Show in *They Saved Zarkov's Brain*.

Fingers crossed. Let's see what the morrow brings.

Later.





Villa Diodati, 1816.

*Frankenstein Unbound* (2014)

If our eyes could penetrate the Earth and see its interior from pole to pole, from where we stand to the antipodes, we would glimpse with horror a mass terribly riddled with fissures and caverns.

Thomas Burnet: *Telluris Theoria Sacra* [1699].

One element of the original *Frankenstein* I always found aesthetically satisfying was the conclusion, in which the mad scientist pursues his creation into the Arctic, the Absolute North, to confront and destroy it. — Though in the end, of course, it is he who dies instead, leaving the Monster to pronounce his elegy.

There is an echo of this denouement — presumably deliberate — in Poe’s enigmatic *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, which comes to an abrupt conclusion<sup>13</sup> in similar fashion, albeit at the antipodes, with the protagonist delivered unto the threshold of a lost world at the South Pole:

But there arose in our pathway a shrouded human figure, very far larger in its proportions than any dweller among men. And the hue of the skin of the figure was of the perfect whiteness of the snow.

— full stop, and try to figure what he meant by *that*.

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<sup>13</sup> Jules Verne, who lacked negative capability, wrote a sequel (*An Antarctic Mystery*), apparently to relieve his frustration with Poe for seeming to leave the story unfinished. Alas, this worked no better than one of those theories of gravity that “explain” it by invoking an ether wind.

None of this appeared in the first cycle of cinematic adaptations — as indeed did not much else: the Miltonic subtext,<sup>14</sup> for example, or the remarkable passage in which the Monster, the noblest of Rousseauian savages, teaches himself the use of language, in a manner imitated later by Burroughs' Tarzan, and still later vehemently proscribed by Wittgenstein — but it has crept back into subsequent treatments: the theme of the final pursuit, for instance, was integral to one of my favorite scifi novels, *Frankenstein Unbound* [1974], a rather original treatment of time travel by Brian Aldiss; later given the usual brilliant B-movie adaptation by Roger Corman [1990].

Aldiss casts his protagonist adrift in a temporal landscape fractured by superscientific world war and now composed in equal parts of history and myth; it is not simply the distinction between past and future that has been erased, but also the distinction between the real and the imagined, between authors and their creations. His hero thus finds himself transported to the Switzerland of 1816, where he encounters not only Byron and the Shelleys, but also Mary's Frankenstein, and Frankenstein's own creation, the Monster. — The implication is that the internal contradiction which has shattered the world in

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<sup>14</sup> Explicit in *Blade Runner*: the sublime exultation on Batty's face as he descends in the elevator from the summit of the (pyramidal!) arcology where he has slain his God marks the pinnacle of cinematic Satanism, something Blake himself might have written — or painted — (born out of time; what a filmmaker *he* would have made.) — Villeneuve's sequel (*Blade Runner 2049* [2017]) also underscores this theme, portraying Niander Wallace, Tyrell's successor as the Maker of Replicants, as an evil Deity, and suggesting that the uprising we sense to be imminent will be less a political revolution than a revolt of the angels against the order of Heaven. — "This breaks the world!" Robin Wright/Lieutenant Joshi declares, appalled, when she discovers that replicants can breed — for what can be born, within the logic of the film, possesses a soul; implying that the distinction between natural and artificial beings is illusory ("The world is built in a wall that separates kind," she says) — that they too are not dependent on a Maker, but can *create themselves*. (Another definition of consciousness, and related, again, to the question of memory: to be born is to have real memories and not implants.)

which the protagonist originated was born in this primal scene, of the creation of the Monster, and that his task is to correct it: in the end it is he, not the deranged moral cripple Frankenstein, who pursues the Monster and its mate into the far North, through further temporal discontinuities, to a place which seems to lie in the distant future of a thoroughly fractured cosmos, where the stars have changed and the earth is covered with ice. There though he appears to succeed in destroying the Monster, his triumph is ambiguous — it expires exulting that its creation cannot be undone, that it is truly Unbound — and in the end he approaches a mysterious city — the City at the End of the World, perhaps at the End of Time<sup>15</sup> — where, we can guess, the enigmatic gods who have orchestrated these metaphysical adventures — Poe’s shrouded giants, or Stapledon’s Last Men,<sup>16</sup> or pandimensional beings who look like white mice — will reveal themselves at last and explain What It All Meant.

{...}

Why does it seem natural that time travel should dissolve the distinction between history and fiction? — Because it seems to draw the obvious conclusion: the object of any hypothetical journey into the past is generally to “change” it, and alter (or repair) the present/future; some kind of landscape of possibility, a manifold of possible worlds is thus always implicitly presupposed, and the difficulty, in this universe of discourse, of drawing a distinction between what is real and what can be imagined has already been admitted when you speak, as is usually done, of “rewriting” history; as if it had never been more than a kind of literary production in the first place. Aldiss pushes

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<sup>15</sup> Not to be confused with *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*. — Though in truth who knows.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Olaf Stapledon, *Last and First Men*, a future history which traces the evolution of the species through eighteen variants and two billion years until the death of the Sun. — Apparently Aldiss read this in 1943, while serving with the British army in Burma.

this only a trifle further by suggesting that the time warp might deposit you neatly in the primal scene of your defining myth.

You can compare the old scifi idea of taking a shortcut to Alpha Centauri (or wherever) by stepping outside the fabric of space and then re-entering it on another fold: this might actually be possible, but it's absurd to suppose you would automatically jump "through hyperspace" to some distant location "right now" — that still means nothing, "now" has been as thoroughly deconstructed as Humpty Dumpty — rather than jumping into the past or future or into some other spatiotemporal (dis)continuum altogether.<sup>17</sup> — Similarly, to travel in time would be to navigate the manifold of possibility, and aren't novels simply the histories of alternative realities? — Perhaps not, but it takes a suspicious amount of effort to argue the negative.<sup>18</sup>

{...}

Fred Hoyle in *October the First Is Too Late* imagines such a fragmentation, with different historical eras juxtaposed on contiguous areas of the surface of the Earth; the protagonist, a musician and composer, begins in the present but crosses domain boundaries and passes back and forth between modern and early America, ancient Greece, and the distant future. The cause of the fracture is not identified, but hinted to be the work of alien beings — gods at play — who have done something akin to pasting together a set of holographic representations of the distinct eras in an unorthodox fashion — like an editor stitching volumes together in Borges' library, or — better — splicing film

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<sup>17</sup> Some string theorists have already drawn the obvious conclusion, that a possible answer to the Fermi question is that all the really advanced races — the gods, if you will — have left for more attractive Lebensraum in other continua. — A more daring conjecture would be that they have departed for realms of myth and legend. If indeed they ever left them.

<sup>18</sup> Aldiss — who must have read Borges, if not Kripke — does explicitly take the affirmative..

strips together, as an exercise in cosmological montage — and the spatiotemporal fragmentation is prefigured by an unusual pattern of solar activity.<sup>19</sup> — Hoyle had recently attended a conference organized by Thomas Gold to address the problem of time in theoretical physics,<sup>20</sup> and the influence of Gold's ideas is evident.

{...}

As for whether all this can actually be translated into plausible physical theory: the short answer is yes. — A slightly longer answer would be that the apparent resemblance of the narrative strategy of Pynchon to more explicitly postmodern metafictional experiments like those of John Barth (who in his later work nearly reduced the idea of the author writing a novel about the author writing a novel to cliché)<sup>21</sup> is only superficial: postmodernism is nihilistic, completely divorced from reality, and is only concerned with a universe of text, the forms of words; Pynchon (like Hoyle and Aldiss) invokes mathematical ideas and hints that these are not simply logical/linguistic but geometrical possibilities, which is infinitely more provocative. — This is still mythologizing, but it is mythologizing in the spirit of the *Timaeus*.

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<sup>19</sup> Curiously enough the rupture described in Murray Leinster's famous story "Sideways in Time" [*Astounding Science Fiction*, June, 1934] begins with a sudden increase in solar radiation; exactly like Hoyle's hypothetical device, though I doubt Hoyle ever heard of "Leinster" (aka Will Jenkins) — who also describes the formation of a black hole, long after Schwarzschild but well in advance of Oppenheimer/Snyder [1939].

<sup>20</sup> At Cornell in 1963. Among those attending were Penrose, Wheeler, and Feynman. The proceedings were published as *The Nature of Time* {Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967}.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. *The Last Voyage of Somebody the Sailor* [1991], *Once Upon a Time: A Floating Opera* [1994], etc. — Perhaps I should note that Heinlein did something similar in *The Number of the Beast*, but I only know the work at second hand; unfortunately Late Heinlein, defined as the period after he became so successful that he could indulge all his own worst tendencies, is essentially unreadable.

(Borges, *sui generis*, lies somewhere in between.)

{...}

As for what spoke to me in this novel of Aldiss, that should be obvious: when I first read it I was myself falling apart, fragmented; the idea of a fractured time mirrored the fractured state of my psyche. — At any moment traversing my mental landscape I could cross the wrong boundary<sup>22</sup> and find myself lost and disoriented in some region of the past or epoch of fantasy.

Though on the other hand — why not admit it — it was liberating to be unhinged. I too was unbounded and unbound.

{...}

Poe's conclusion suggests the existence of a lost world in the Antarctic — perhaps an entrance to the hollow earth, a world within the world accessible only at the poles.<sup>23</sup> — The most notorious 19th-century proponent of this theory was the American eccentric John Cleves Symmes, Jr., with whose works [1818 et seq.] Poe was probably familiar. — He seems also have been inspired by the *Mundus Subterraneus* of Athanasius Kircher,

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<sup>22</sup> Literally. I could be listening to the radio, hear the wrong chord change, and be seized by existential vertigo. As if some inner argument had derived a forbidden conclusion.

<sup>23</sup> Here the carping physicist must interject that the gravitational potential inside a spherical shell is constant — see Volume I, Chapter 13 of the *Feynman Lectures on Physics* — and if there really were a world like Burroughs' Pellucidar within a hollow earth, everything there would be weightless.

an astonishing exercise of the imagination<sup>24</sup> which had painted a fantastic picture of the interior of the planet:<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Athanasius Kircher, *Mundus Subterraneus*. Amsterdam: “Apud Joannem Janssonium à Waesberge & Filios”, 1678. — The proximate cause of Kircher’s fascination with the subject appears to have been a descent into the crater of Vesuvius, and his hypotheses regarding the origins of vulcanism, at least, turned out to be more or less correct.

<sup>25</sup> P. 186.



Systema ideale  
 QVO EXPRIMITUR AQUARUM  
 per Canales hydraulicos subterraneos  
 ex mare et in montium hydrophylacia  
 per totius mundi circuitum  
 per totius mundi circuitum

Aquis centrali A. undiq; et undiq; per peragoge canali ex latitudine spiritus ignis fundit: ha hydrophylaciae impacta, partim in thermas disponit partim in vapores attenuat qui concavorum antrocorum spiraculis effluunt, frigore loci condensati in aquas demum, vestigia vitae rursus generant: partim in aëre divergorum mineralium evocati sicut mater, et demum in metallicis corpori coalescunt, aut in poram combustibilem materiam, quae spiritus nutritivum desinitur. Videt hic quod quicquid, illis vapore et terra, vel aëre motum, aquae per subterraneos canales in aëre montium hydrophylaciae peritur. Sed Figurae hae hinc docent, quod quicquid, aquae per subterraneos canales, in aëre montium hydrophylaciae peritur, et hinc aerem in Systema docet. Reliqui autem ex ipsa opere desinitur.

In particular “A Descent into the Maelström” appears to refer to the hypothetical northern sinkhole that drained water into the interior of the Earth, and the complementary source that was supposed to lie in the Antarctic is apparently alluded to in “MS. Found In A Bottle”; in which the narrator ends up on a Flying Dutchman heading into a whirlpool at the South Pole.

(As for *why* Kircher may have wanted to ensure an interior passage between the poles: he probably was disturbed by the topological intuition that a smooth flow on the surface of a sphere is impossible without singularities; on a torus, however, there is no such problem, water could enter at one pole and exit at the other, moreover this idea seemed to provide a theory of the tides and a mechanism to explain the Biblical Flood. — At any rate Fauno Lancaster Cordes conjectures in her comprehensive bibliography of Antarctic fiction<sup>26</sup> that Kircher was the first to hypothesize a world within the Earth.)

{...}

The image of the labyrinthine interior of the earth is an image of the labyrinthine interior of consciousness: another doubling, of the surface, a sort of internal mirror in which the world, or the Ego, can regard itself; of course properly there should be an infinite series of interiors,<sup>27</sup> like Kane’s reflections as he walks through the mirrored halls of Xanadu.

So the appropriate conclusion to the tale of Frankenstein, as to that of Arthur Gordon Pym, would be the pursuit of the Monster

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<sup>26</sup> “*Tekeli-li*” or *Hollow Earth Lives*, [<http://www.antarctic-circle.org/fauno.htm>].

<sup>27</sup> Symmes drew maps of the interior with four or five concentric spheres, but really, why stop there. — In a similar vein one might wonder why Dante stopped at nine circles in Hell; human depravity is clearly limitless.

— whom we already begin to see is a kind of phantom Double — into a labyrinth of mirrors. (And a myriad of duplicates.)

But of course that is just Welles again, the conclusion to *Lady From Shanghai*.<sup>28</sup>

{...}

Borges on Poe and mirrors:

It is truly awful that there are mirrors; I have always been terrified by mirrors. I think that Poe felt it too. There is an essay of his, one of the least known, on the decoration of rooms. One of the conditions he insists on is that the mirrors be placed in such a way that a seated person is not reflected. This tells us his fear of seeing himself in the mirror. We see it in his story “William Wilson” about the double, and also in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, where there is an Antarctic tribe, and a man from that tribe sees a mirror for the first time and collapses, horrified. We are accustomed to mirrors, but there is something terrifying in that visual duplication of reality.<sup>29</sup>

And in the duplication of ourselves, most of all. — Should we conclude then that this is the negative image of Frankenstein, the south opposed to the north, and that Poe — a self-destructive character whose career reminds us of what Bloom said about *Frankenstein*, that “all Romantic horrors are diseases of excessive

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<sup>28</sup> Quoted more times than one can count, but I particularly loved what Bruce Lee did with it in *Enter the Dragon*. — “Now, you must remember: the enemy has only images and illusions behind which he hides his true motive. Destroy the image and you will break the enemy.”

<sup>29</sup> “Poetry.” In *Seven Nights*, translated by Eliot Weinberger. New York: New Directions, 1984. — Elsewhere Borges remarks that he considers *Pym* to be Poe’s greatest work.

consciousness, of the self unable to bear the self"<sup>30</sup> — is fleeing rather than pursuing himself? that when he encounters the labyrinth of mirrors he is struck dumb with terror, and thus the novel must be abandoned in midsentence?

Better perhaps to say this: that the nature of the Self is a mystery, that to pretend to resolve it would be an act of bad faith, and the only honest conclusion is to accept the enigma. Because Poe understood that the limits of his language were the limits of his world — and thus, of course, the other way around. There is the inexpressible, and it is a shrouded human figure, whose skin is of the perfect whiteness of the snow.

{...}

In Magritte's "Not To Be Reproduced" [1937], within a frame a man is depicted with his back to the viewer, looking into a mirror in which — his back is also to the viewer. The joke within the joke is that we can see a book on the shelf beneath the mirror reflected normally. This is, but of course, a French edition of Poe's *Pym*.

{...}

There is a remarkably daring shot — this was the Stone Age of cinematography — in the 1910 Edison *Frankenstein* (probably the first — certainly the earliest surviving — cinematic interpretation of the story) — in which the Monster enters upon an unsuspecting Frankenstein and makes his first appearance *reflected in a mirror*.

This idea is echoed and reinforced in the scene of the Monster's demise — in which, in the same setting, the Monster enters alone

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<sup>30</sup> Introduction to *Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*, ed. Harold Bloom, 2009.

— having pro forma barged in upon his creator’s wedding night<sup>31</sup> but for some reason *not* killed the bride<sup>32</sup> — sees himself in the mirror — is stricken with horror<sup>33</sup> — and vanishes; leaving, however, his reflection, still staring aghast back into the room. — Frankenstein then enters in pursuit, runs to the mirror, looks into it — sees the Monster, not himself — recoils — and then it vanishes. (“Overcome by Love,” suggests the title. Well, there is melodramatic convention for you.) He sees now his own reflection. The nightmare has ended.

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<sup>31</sup> It might seem a trifle too cute a coincidence that the Monster should return from his wanderings and turn up precisely on Frankenstein’s wedding night, but viewing this with the inverted causal perspective of the film historian, I am reminded of the original screenplay for *Creature From the Black Lagoon*, Freudian with malice aforethought, in which every time the male and female leads start pawing one another the Creature makes a surprise entrance to break up the clinch.

<sup>32</sup> The composition here echoes Fuseli’s *The Nightmare* [1781]. The painting is thought to have influenced Mary Shelley’s original portrayal of the scene. — It is also, unsurprisingly, the theme of the poster for Ken Russell’s *Gothic* [1986], the best film about Byron, the Shelleys, and the origins of *Frankenstein*.

<sup>33</sup> Inevitably reminding me of the mantra of the mentor-figure Professor Spielman in Barth’s *Giles Goat-Boy*: “Self-knowledge is always bad news.”





{...}

The canonical treatment of this theme, however, is that of *The Student of Prague* [written by Hanns Heinz Ewers, directed by Stellan Rye, 1913]; a film Otto Rank found so profoundly disturbing that he wrote a book about it<sup>34</sup> — the first and still the greatest essay in film criticism; though since at that point in cinematic history there wasn't that much film to write about, his illustrations for the most part came from literature.

The story goes as follows: the eponymous Student,<sup>35</sup> a ne'er-do-well who has squandered his patrimony on liquor and whores, is morosely practicing his fencing moves before a large mirror, nearly the only unpawned furnishing left in his barren rooms, when he receives a visit from a mysterious (and of course diabolical) Stranger, who offers limitless wealth on the condition that he be permitted to take anything he wants from the premises. The Student laughs, indicating the empty chambers, and readily agrees; signs the inevitable Contract, if not in blood; and is then astounded when the Stranger points at the mirror, beckons to the Student's reflection, and it follows him out. — There follow a series of misadventures in which the Student, despite his newfound riches, finds his efforts to improve his social position by marrying into the nobility thwarted by the interference of the Doppelgänger, who keeps turning up at inappropriate moments. — Finally when he's challenged to a duel by the erstwhile fiancé of the countess he's been pursuing,

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<sup>34</sup> *Der Doppelgänger: Eine Psychoanalytische Studie*. Leipzig, Vienna, and Zürich: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1925. Translated by Harry Tucker, Jr. as *The Double, A Psychoanalytical Study*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1971. — According to his prefatory notes Rank first discussed its themes in a paper of 1914, i.e. shortly after the film first appeared; clearly he was an early cinephile.

<sup>35</sup> Played by Paul Wegener, later writer/director/monster of the equally famous *Der Golem* [1920].

even though he has agreed to spare his opponent the Double gets to the killing ground first, slays his hapless rival, and ruins his romantic prospects. — Things devolve rapidly thereafter, and the Student has loaded his pistol and is putting the finishing touches to his suicide note when the Double makes a final appearance. The Student shoots him instead, uncovers a mirror to verify that his reflection is back where it belongs, and at that instant feels a pain in his chest. Collapsing, he expires. — The Stranger makes an entrance, tears the contract up over the corpse, and departs, smirking. — The final scene shows the Double sitting on the student's grave; accompanied by the raven which is the Stranger's familiar.

{...}

Rank dismisses the simplest interpretation of the scenario — that the Student is haunted by his past, which he cannot escape — and discusses various precursors and parallels, notably in the tales of E.T.A. Hoffmann, but also in Poe, Maupassant, Dostoevsky, Stevenson's Jekyll/Hyde, and Wilde's Dorian Gray (who has a Borgesian fear of mirrors). He points out that Hoffmann's obsession with the theme probably derived from Jean Paul, with whom it seems to have originated among the Romantics; notes that Jean Paul was steeped in Fichte and transcendental idealism, lived in fear of insanity, and had an unhealthy fixation on the problem of the Ego, dating from a childhood flash of insight — "I am an *I*" — which haunted him ever afterward. — Rank notes that most of the authors he cites had deviant characteristics and divided personalities and were accordingly obsessed with the question of personal identity, but that even Goethe, in *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, relates a story of encountering his own double which sounds like a sort of precognitive out-of-body experience. — Finally, and predictably, he falls back on psychoanalytic categories of explanation, and attempts to reduce everything to narcissism: self-love and the

fear of death, he suggests, motivate the doubling of the self. — Later still (in a paper titled “The Double as Immortal Self”) he appealed to the idea of duality, and the primitive conception of person/shadow.

Which isn't quite right, though it's close.

{...}

Rank notes the connection between conceptions of the soul and shadows/reflections; that there is an idea of the soul as a copy of the body, thus the image in the mirror makes the disturbing suggestion that there can be more than one copy. — To which of course compare the primitive fear of the photographic image.

There is a cosmological correlate: “Proclus reports one more significant genethliac myth concerning Dionysus: he is said to have looked at himself in the mirror forged by Hephaistos and, *led astray by this image*, to have created all things.” — Compare an idea one might attribute to Wheeler, that the universe came into being by a (quantum-mechanical) measurement of its own state.

{..}

Kracauer<sup>36</sup> emphasizes, correctly, that the early Expressionist films, *The Student of Prague*, *Homunculus*, *The Golem*, *Caligari*, all reflect an anxiety about the foundations of the self, and tries to explain it, unconvincingly, as a reaction to the instability of the social order. But, as Rank had already pointed out, it antedates the historical context of the Weimar cinema, and indeed cinema itself. So clearly its roots lie deeper.

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<sup>36</sup> Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*. [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946.]

It makes sense that in soap opera, a serial genre which made impossible demands of its writers with respect to quantity and variety of invention, that every conceivable plot device would sooner or later have been seized upon and relentlessly exploited until it was reduced to cliché, and the theme of the Double was no exception; there it became the familiar trick of replacing a character, generally some Goody Two-Shoes, with his or her Evil Twin — the literal mirror image, the inversion, the opposite of the original — not infrequently by invoking that other hoary cliché, amnesia. This provided an excuse for innumerable plot twists and reversals of expectation, and gave the actors a welcome vacation from the constraints of their normal roles, but eventually became a standing joke.

But like any good joke it raises a serious — an ontological — question: what prevents you from suddenly turning into someone else? even into your opposite? — Because after all, *why not?* — What if there were a break in your memory? What necessity entails that it be continuous? What differentiates lived experience from merely *acting a role*?

If you are both subject and *that* object, the one you see in the mirror, then what prevents that object from housing a *different* subject? What makes your subjectivity unique? single-valued? How do you *know* that you're not someone else?

The Student sees his Double as uncanny because it proves he doesn't know *who he is*.

{...}

There is a famous passage in *The Maltese Falcon* in which Spade tells Brigid O'Shaughnessy the story of a successful businessman named Flitcraft who had disappeared one day, leaving behind family and fortune, without explanation. — “He went like that,” Spade said, ‘like a fist when you open your hand.’ — It turns out the reason for his disappearance had been a near-death experience, a freak accident which had caused a radical disconnect, a rupture as it were of the Self from the Self — a severing of Self from History — and precipitated his sudden departure: Flitcraft had seen, in a flash, that nothing connects one moment to the next.<sup>37</sup> It is significant that this is the kind of case that would usually be explained by the narrative device of amnesia<sup>38</sup> — loss of memory, of continuity of consciousness — but Hammett sees that a more radical explanation is possible: that one could at any moment, at least in principle, *become someone else*. — This is paranoia beyond even Hume: the subversion of the *principium individuationis*.<sup>39</sup>

In Cartesian terms: if what I think is who I am, what prevents me from thinking something else? and thus becoming someone else? What segregates *these* thoughts from other, *alien* thoughts?<sup>40</sup>

Hammett's moral restores natural necessity, however — as Wittgenstein said, the philosopher's terror is always artificial, a

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<sup>37</sup> Sartre might call this a realization of human freedom, but that would miss Hammett's point completely: freedom is the capacity to define oneself without constraint; Flitcraft saw that *definitions are meaningless*.

<sup>38</sup> E.g., in Cornell Woolrich, who made a career of contriving such scenarios. — Alcoholic blackout is a variant; see Mailer's film noir, *Tough Guys Don't Dance* [1987].

<sup>39</sup> Though when you think about it the identity of objects from one moment to the next presents the same kind of problem as crossworld identity; and if objects, then subjects as well. I don't recall that Quine admitted this.

<sup>40</sup> As that noted band of schizophrenics Pink Floyd put it, “There's someone in my head, but it's not me.”

kind of play-acting — and is therefore strangely reassuring: after knocking about for a few years, Flitcraft ended up living almost exactly as he had before: married, successful in business, a suburban homeowner. Without even noticing it he had *become himself* again. — The thread that connects the present consciousness to its past is stronger than it looks. The Self is not *that much* of an illusion.

{...}

“I am, I know, and I will,” says Augustine. “I am a being which knows and wills; I know both that I am and that I will; and I will both to be and to know. In these three — being, knowledge, and will — there is one inseparable life, one life, one mind, one essence; and therefore, although they are distinct from one another, the distinction does not separate them.”<sup>41</sup>

But I don’t know why or who I am, I am profoundly ignorant and strangely irresolute, and I didn’t wish myself into existence and can’t learn what I want to know. — All this is founded in mystery. — Moreover my will is free. And if I can at any moment *choose* to do anything, then I can at any moment *become* anyone, who *knows* completely different things. — Really, this is terrifying.

{...}

The human condition is usually interpreted within the moral universe, and so the question becomes: what distinguishes the good guy from the bad guy? Why can’t one turn into the other?

This question is implicit in much of detective fiction — what if Holmes flipped his polarity? well, Moriarty — and film noir inherited it from Expressionism,

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<sup>41</sup> *Confessions* XIII.11. He applies this insight to the mystery of the Trinity.

Within the framework of the murder mystery *per se*, the logical conclusion — the one that lays bare the root of the ontological dilemma, the problem of Oedipus — is the mystery in which the investigator, without knowing it, seeks himself. — In *Angel Heart* [Alan Parker, 1987; based on a novel of William Hjortsberg], set in the early Fifties, Mickey Rourke plays a traumatized war veteran turned private investigator who has used the cloak of PTSD to disguise one half of himself from the other: before the war he made a pact with the Devil, and then tried to weasel out of the deal by using a voodoo ritual to transfer his soul into another body — the one he now cohabits with the detective, whom Lucifer himself has hired to track the missing person down. — No surprise, this ends badly.

In film noir and its (innumerable) derivatives, instances are various. — In *Fight Club* [David Fincher, 1999], obviously, Brad Pitt is to Edward Norton exactly as the mirror image is to the Student of Prague. — In *Face/Off* [John Woo, 1997], Good Guy John Travolta and Bad Guy Nicolas Cage surgically exchange faces<sup>42</sup> and engage in a series of contests and confrontations, the most dramatic a gunfight in which they abruptly come face to face — not with one another, but with their reflections in a two-sided mirror which stands between them. Each sees the face of his deadly enemy and instantly fires at the reflection; shattering the mirror, though not (as a particle physicist would think appropriate) annihilating one other in the process. — Otto Rank meets Gun Fu. — But best of all, undoubtedly, is Charlie Kaufman's postmodern joke in *Adaptation* [Spike Jonze, 2002], a scenario about writing a scenario: that his double is also a screenwriter, but one who can write something commercial. The

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<sup>42</sup> Here ruptures the suspension of disbelief. — I would say that even the soaps never thought of this one, but that would be too hasty, it was probably the theme of three seasons of *Days of Our Lives*.

Academy may or may not have got it, but they presented the Oscar jointly to Charlie and his imaginary twin.<sup>43</sup>

{...}

The classic treatment of the theme of anxiety about the nature of the Self in the science fiction cinema is Don Siegel's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* [1956]<sup>44</sup> — in which, famously, the inhabitants of a California town are one by one replaced by simulacra grown in cocoon-like pods,<sup>45</sup> presumably the instruments of an alien invasion; the transfer process bears an uncanny resemblance to the conclusion of Hesse's *Journey to the East*,<sup>46</sup> the replacements though not precisely zombies and superficially normal in appearance and behavior somehow seem to have lost their souls.

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<sup>43</sup> Even if it was accidental it served poetic justice that the lead here, as in *Face/Off*, was played by Nicolas Cage.

<sup>44</sup> Possibly inspired by Heinlein's novel *The Puppet Masters* [1951], though it transcends it.

<sup>45</sup> The pods, like childhood monsters, are in "the basement"; it is difficult to process how peculiarly *suburban* this horror is; something about the way the camera peers down the stairs to pose the question, What's around the corner. (And how is it that as I write this aside I am seized by memories of the cellars of the houses I inhabited in my all-too-suburban childhood??)

<sup>46</sup> "Inside the figures I saw something moving, slowly, extremely slowly, in the same way that a snake moves which has fallen asleep. Something was taking place there, something like a very slow, smooth but continuous flowing or melting; indeed, something melted or poured across from my image to that of Leo's. I perceived that my image was in the process of adding to and flowing into Leo's, nourishing and strengthening it. It seemed that, in time, all the substance from one image would flow into the other and only one would remain: Leo. He must grow, I must disappear." — Hermann Hesse, *The Journey to the East*, transl. Hilda Rosner, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1961.

Thus real people have — somehow — been replaced by persons answering their description.<sup>47</sup>

Superficially this might be read, as it often has been, as some kind of parable of Cold War paranoia — What Happens When The Communists Take Over. But it also reads as a film noir (the cinematography certainly demands that interpretation),<sup>48</sup> and in fact the real questions the film raises are not political, not even epistemological, but ontological: What is the soul? What is missing in the Turing test? If I were replaced by a simulacrum perfectly replicating my description, could anyone tell the difference? Could even “I” tell the difference? — If I don’t know *why* I am, can I know *who* I am?

Or, as Rank might put it: what if you look into the mirror, and someone else is there?

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<sup>47</sup> The belief that someone with whom one is intimately acquainted has been replaced by an identical impostor is a textbook disorder called Capgras delusion, associated with paranoid schizophrenia and some types of brain injury. (Hmmm....)

<sup>48</sup> The poster shot, as one might put it, occurs in a scene in which the protagonist and his love interest have escaped the town and taken refuge in a cave: exhausted from the chase, they struggle not to fall asleep; he steps out for a moment to investigate a noise and returns to find she has dozed off; kisses her to revive her, recoils in horror and dismay — here was the definitive Turing test — her face is displayed in exquisite noir lighting, her eyes open, and with an exchange of looks it is instantly established that, while she slumbered, she too has been replaced. It would not be an exaggeration to call this one of the most arresting moments in all of cinema. — Siegel himself said the theme of the film was “the stranger in your lover’s eyes,” and unlike amnesia this is, unfortunately, a nearly universal experience: the sudden realization that someone with whom you have been intimate, someone you thought you knew as well as you knew yourself, has inexplicably become an alien. — Indeed Siegel’s son speculates that his father’s painful divorce from Viveca Lindfors may have motivated the story.

To recapitulate, the elements are these: the pursuit, the mad scientist, the Monster, the ends of the earth. And what are they?

The mad scientist is the spirit of unbridled inquiry, about which there is always something satanic.<sup>49</sup> Mephistopheles says “I am the spirit who always negates,” meaning, the critical spirit, the spirit that questions. — In the *Blegðamsvel Faust*, this role is assumed by Pauli. — This is the spirit willing to ask forbidden questions, viz. “What is life?”

And it is of its essence that it never gives up the quest, never ceases the pursuit. — Odysseus cannot retire in Ithaca; Faust will die trying to win land from the sea; Frankenstein must expire on the ice.

The Monster is the phantom Double, a Doppelgänger, an image of self-actualization.<sup>50</sup> There is an old cartoon joke, a horse tricked into drawing a cart by a carrot dangling from a string in front of its nose; here we must picture a mirror dangled in front of a narcissist. — “I have sought for myself,” said Heraclitus. Nietzsche was his echo.

The ends of the earth are the limits of language, of the expressible — the boundary beyond which lies the Arctic desert of the real, the in-itself:

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<sup>49</sup> Tony Stark to Bruce Banner: “We’re mad scientists. We’re *monsters*, buddy. We’ve got to own it.”

<sup>50</sup> Narrative logic is most clearly exposed in parody, and thus it is not surprising that only in Brooks’ *Young Frankenstein* is the only conceivable happy ending imagined: one in which the Monster and his creator achieve a synthesis. (This idea must have originated with Gene Wilder, since it appears in his original screenplay.)

After all, one man, trying for the Pole, in the dead of winter. They thought I was insane. Possibly I was, by that time. But I had to reach it. I had begun to think that there, at one of the only two motionless places on this gyrating world, I might have peace to solve Vheissu's riddle. Do you understand? I wanted to stand in the dead center of the carousel, if only for a moment..... I'd begun to dig a cache nearby, after planting the flag. The barrenness of that place howled about me, like a country the demiurge had forgotten. There could have been no more lifeless and empty place anywhere on earth. Two or three feet down I struck clear ice. A strange light, which seemed to move within it, caught my attention..... If Eden was the creation of God, God only knows what evil created Vheissu. The skin which had wrinkled through my nightmares was all there had ever been. Vheissu itself, a gaudy dream. Of what the Antarctic in this world is closest to: a dream of annihilation.

[Thomas Pynchon: *V.*]

On this reading the resolution of the problem of identity, the reduction of the duality, the synthesis of Self and Double, is in all likelihood the merger of particle and antiparticle: a mutual annihilation. — This is the wisdom of Oedipus, and of film noir. Like the man said, self-knowledge is always bad news.

{...}

But does that matter? Do you ever get there? Here I am in the distant south, brought here by the pursuit of a woman who turned out herself to be a phantom double; diverted into — well, we're still trying to figure that out.....bewitched by a reflection that vanished and left me looking — for what? I don't know, but

I'm still looking for something. The object may change, but the pursuit continues. The cat fades away, but the grin remains.

Because what am I asking here? Am I trying to figure out what happened to the woman, or what phantasm I should next pursue, or whether there is an opening to the south that leads into an inner world of dinosaurs and cave girls in skins?

{...}

Why the Double? — Nietzsche (*Late Notebooks* 34[87]): “We *imagine* that what is commanding and highest resides in our consciousness. Ultimately we have a double brain: we encompass in the word ‘consciousness’ our capacity *itself* to *will, feel, and think* something of our own willing, feeling, and thinking.” — But perhaps even better this: in the lambda calculus, the trick with which the Y-combinator

$$Y = \lambda f. (\lambda x. f(x(x)))(\lambda x. f(x(x)))$$

defines recursion involves a doubling. — Is this wired in all the way down? I think it must be.

And leave it at that.

*Footnote*

I should note that there is of course a *literature* on *Pym*, much of it of the so-clever-it's-stupid variety; one might cite, e.g., Jean Ricardou, "The Singular Character of the Water" (transl. Frank Towne, *Poe Studies*, June 1976, Vol IX, No. 1, 1-6), which fixes on color symbolism to advance a couple of silly theories — one, that the multicolored water of the island would make it impossible for the natives to use streams to mirror their images, and therefore, etc. — two (very pomo) that blackness also excludes whiteness in any form, thus ending in whiteness suggests this is (as in Verne) a "journey to the bottom of the page", the whiteness is the blank surrounding the text — the natives, ink; the death of the last native, erasure — etc., etc.

*The incompleteness of the text (2015)*

In the scientific literature you take it for granted that any individual work, no matter how significant, is only a partial expression of some aspect of an external reality; that the work bears the relationship to this that a sentence does to its meaning.<sup>51</sup> That whatever has been stated will be better understood with further attempts to express it. — A kind of Platonism is instinctively presupposed: the text is only a partial representation of the real Idea, which additional creative labor will eventually reveal.

In literature per se, however, there is a kind of myth of the completeness of the text, an insistence on the primacy of extension over intension. That what has actually been written may only represent a partial expression of some ideal object — that more may remain to be said — seems like a misconception, because creation and discovery are supposed to be different. — Serial literature may be an exception, but it is explicitly formulaic and imitative, not creative. When something new and original appears, you think it should stand by itself. — The Hardy Boys live on through many sequels; the Brothers Karamazov, not so much.

But this is never really the case, as the Frankenstein myth illustrates. It presupposes the legend of Franklin, for instance — the man upon whom Kant had bestowed the title “the modern Prometheus” — and though the familiar iconography of the thunderstorm, the kites flying from the castle battlements, the electrical apparatus, etc., does not appear in Mary Shelley, it

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<sup>51</sup> Of course the realization that the meaning was essentially the Platonic Idea of the sentence is precisely why all devout empiricists ceased to believe in them, but for the moment let's pretend.

almost seems she left it out because it was too obvious; all that was left to be filled in by the movies, along with the missing references to Galvani and Priestley and the idea which had crept into contemporary discourse (and which thus survives a couple of centuries later in our screen mythology) that the secret of life was literally a vital spark, some kind of electric discharge that must have breached the gap between the outstretched fingers of God and Adam.<sup>52</sup>

Thus though the idea of the Monster was explored in a series of variations (constrained rather severely by the commercial success of Karloff's interpretation, which made imitation more profitable than innovation), it was not really perfected until the figure of Batty in *Blade Runner*; who appears as the Evil Twin not of his creator, but of his antagonist Deckard; also a replicant, it eventually develops, though he is unaware of his own status until the last — when, inevitably, he takes flight to the North.

{...}

### *The Palimpsest*

That there was some kind of mythological object the authors were trying to unearth is evidenced by the fact that there were six drafts of the screenplay on top of the original novel; and that, curiously enough, parts of all these were presupposed in the film as finally presented.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ironically in the famous experiments of Urey and Miller, which produced organic molecules in a chemical environment similar to that of the primordial Earth, the trick they employed was exactly that, an electric discharge: life probably *did* originate with lightning.

<sup>53</sup> The otherwise strange question put to Leon in the opening interrogation, for instance, about what he would do if he came across a tortoise on its back in the desert, was originally paired with a concluding scene in which Deckard flees to the desert and encounters exactly such a situation; and, after a moment of contemplation, flips it over to allow it to crawl away.

The finished film is only a provocative fragment of the Platonic Idea of *Blade Runner*, about which more always may be said. At least so long as people keep buying tickets.

{...}

There is a related Prime Mover fallacy, which would lead you, for instance, to suppose that the — mainly literary — movement of cyberpunk must have derived from a single source, presumably either *Blade Runner* or William Gibson's novel *Neuromancer*.

But as it actually happened this was one of those cases familiar from scientific history, when different individuals had very similar ideas at the same time.

Indeed Gibson's reaction to the movie was essentially that he had been beaten to publication. — "I was afraid to watch *Blade Runner* in the theater," he said, "because I was afraid the movie would be better than what I myself had been able to imagine. In a way, I was right to be afraid, because even the first few minutes were better... ." <sup>54</sup>

He later compared notes with Ridley Scott, and confirmed that the two of them had had very similar lists of influences they were attempting to synthesize: "I met [him] years later," he said, "maybe a decade or more after *Blade Runner* was released. I told him what *Neuromancer* was made of, and he had basically the same list of ingredients for *Blade Runner*. One of the most powerful ingredients was French adult comic books and their particular brand of Orientalia... ."

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<sup>54</sup> Interview by David Wallace Wells in *The Paris Review*, Issue 197, Summer 2011.

Gibson admits that Scott got everything right — and yet — the novel got *more* of it right. There were things that Scott *left out*.

And how can that make sense?

Only by accepting idea that there was some external object — some kind of reality — that both were trying to describe — the Platonic Idea of cyberpunk, as it were — and that both succeeded, albeit in different ways.

Frankenstein creates his Monster, and then abandons him. It is natural to read this as a reproach, aimed at a negligent Deity who creates beings with internal contradictions and then does nothing to resolve them.

And of course the geek's ideal solution to the problem of finding a mate would be to create her in the laboratory. — Here I cannot resist the gloss that in the great early variation on the cinematic theme of Frankenstein, the silent serial *Homunculus* [Otto Rippert, 1916], the only friend of the protagonist, an artificial being created in a laboratory who becomes a Nietzschean Übermensch who conquers the world to slake his rage for having been created incapable of love, is his faithful dog.

It is interesting to note that the original ending<sup>55</sup> was that Homunculus, who is, it would seem inconsistently, supposed to be emotionally distraught at his inability to feel emotion — perhaps more accurately, at his inability to feel emotion except at second order, *without reflection* — has vowed to revenge himself upon his creators and thus must of course be destroyed, but the only way to do it is to create another artificial being in the laboratory; suggesting a regress which is an uncanny image of the Faustian dilemma of modern science — and, of course,

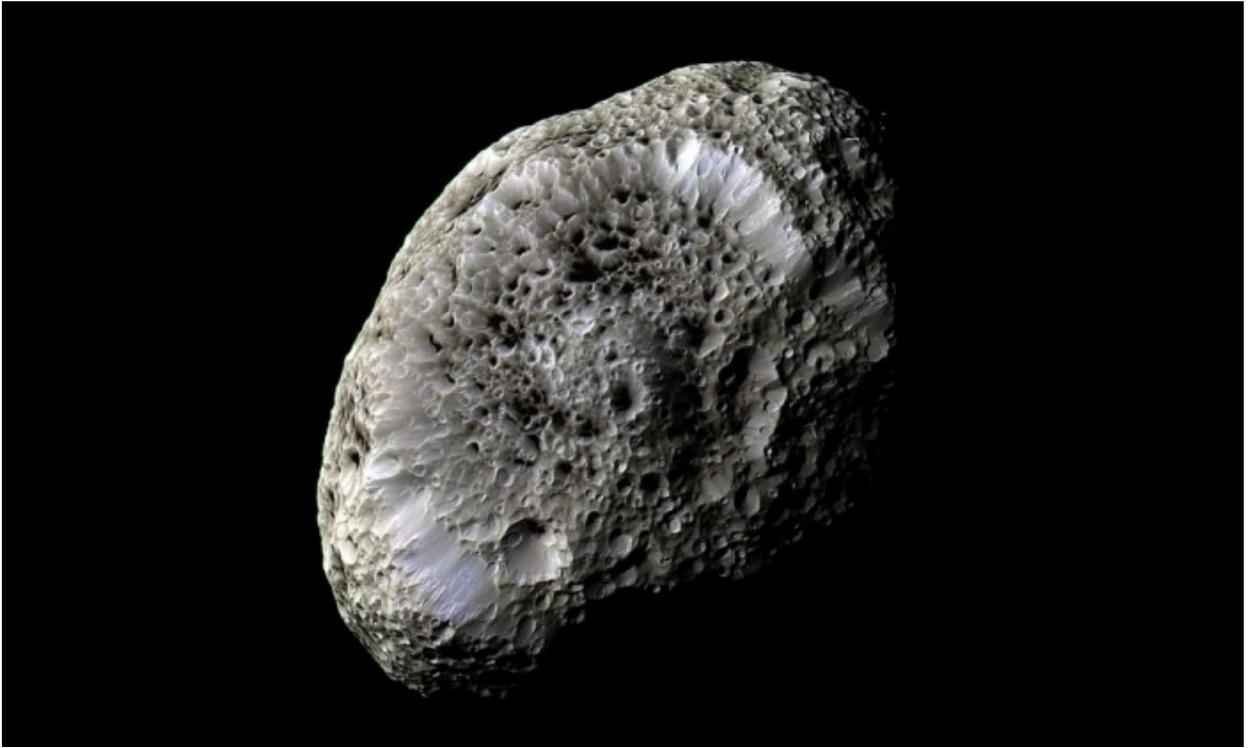
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<sup>55</sup> Lotte Eisner, who must have seen this before it was a subject for archaeology, discusses it in *The Haunted Screen* as an early specimen of, and (particularly for Lang) point of reference for, Expressionist cinema, but the film — originally a six-part serial with hour-long chapters in the style of Feuillade's *Fantômas* and *Les Vampires* — was thought to have been for the most part lost until quite recently; only a partial reconstruction of about 65 minutes (with Italian subtitles!) was available from the Eastman archives. A more complete reconstruction has been supervised by the British Film Institute, however; the result premiered at MoMA on November 21, 2015, and was reviewed in loving detail by Kristin Thomas and David Bordwell in their blog, *Observations on Film Art*. Alas, I have yet to see it.

anticipating the logic that makes Deckard himself a replicant in *Blade Runner*.

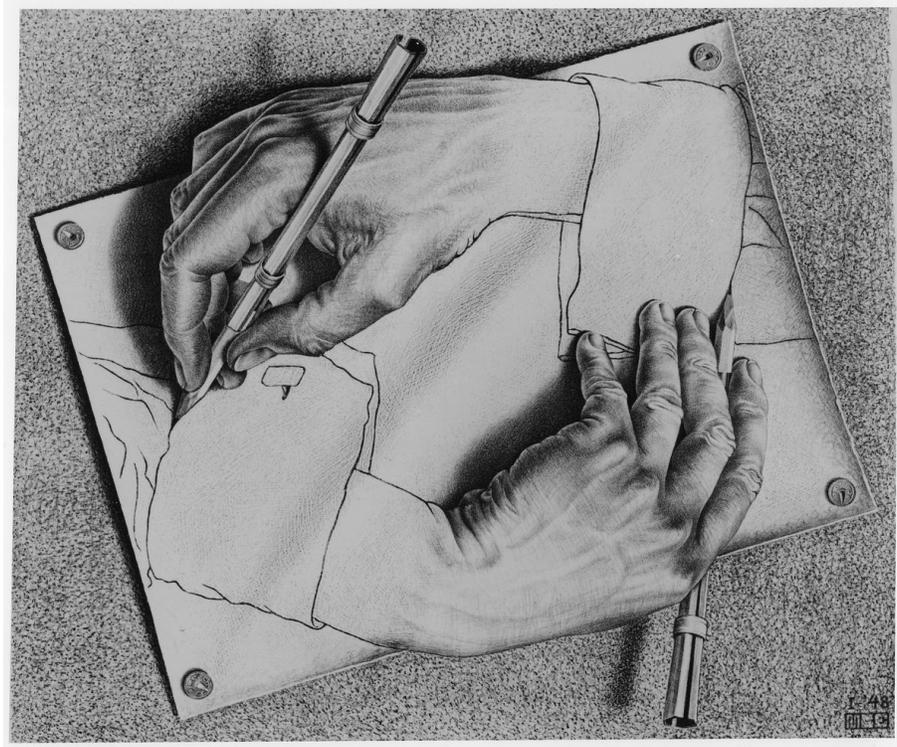
The strange insistence that the Monster has no soul. Though in Shelley — indeed, ever afterward — he is manifestly more human than his creator.

*Hyperion (4/28/2015)*



Oh, man is a god when he dreams, a beggar when he thinks; and when inspiration is gone, he stands, like a worthless son whom his father has driven out of the house, and stares at the miserable pennies that pity has given him for the road.

*Worlds within worlds (2015)*



{...}

In his later adventures<sup>56</sup> the Phantom became an ontological engineer, a surrealist intent on remaking reality, wreaking havoc with inventions like the reverse telescope, an instrument with which he did not merely passively observe the heavens, but painted new nebulae and constellations upon them. The scale of his Faustian pranks became cosmic, and his connection with his origins more tenuous. In the end he became a human outline bounding a hole in space; a cipher marking a tear in the spatiotemporal fabric. — An observer summarized what he had done as follows: “He’s hacked into the source code of the cosmos!”

Was that my ambition all along? — Was that what Newton wanted in the end? Was this the aim of the alchemist? — Translated into the modern idiom (i.e., dumbed down), I suppose it does sound like that. — This was the Promethean ambition, the ambition of Manfred: to be the equal of the gods, the architect of a new system of the world.

Of course this is obviously impossible, but there is always that Mephistophelean philosophical attitude, the spirit that negates, the need to find some way to conceive of the inconceivable, and this does suggest a way to do it: one might imagine that there was some kind of toolkit employed by the Demiurge for the assembly of universes; a hacker would call it an API,<sup>57</sup> a language mediating the interface between the programmer and the routines that do the real work at a lower level.

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<sup>56</sup> For some reason the provisional title was *Robot Lawyers from Hell*, but why exactly now escapes me. Probably that one was just burning a hole in my pocket, as it were.

<sup>57</sup> Applications Programming Interface. — Ordinarily I would scorn the use of an acronym in this context, but I’ve been using it for so long that I can scarcely conceive of any other way to refer to it. Even though I can literally feel the blood vessels that supply my brain constricting as I do so.

— Well. — In the beginning was the Word. — It does sound familiar.

{...}

But I don't think I ever had a fundamentally paranoid view of the cosmos; just a sense of unrealized possibility. And the suspicion that, as Gell-Mann used to say, anything that is not forbidden is compulsory.<sup>58</sup> If things could be much more complicated than they appeared, then surely they had to be. — This was the principle of the fecundity of Nature: that She always had more imagination than you did.

{...}

What is the fundamental problem? the relation of the mad scientist to the world in which he finds himself is that of a fictional character to the text in which he has been composed; he is the captive of narrative, he cannot claim the rights of authorship. He is ontologically derivative.

And how to escape that? — By authoring your own world, of course; but consider this twist: suppose you were to create a copy — perhaps perfect, but leave that question open for the moment — of the “real” world as it is; in extremis a Laplacian machine, whether digital or analog we aren't sure but — again — leave the question open. — Over *this* domain, presumably, you would then have the power of godlike command. — Suppose then that you begin rewriting its rules, indulge yourself in the sport of the Phantom. Is that the same?

{...}

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<sup>58</sup> According to George Zweig, this version of the principle of plenitude was known as the Totalitarian Principle. See his contribution to the Gell-Mann Festschrift, op. cit.

The question of whether you could tell the difference between the world and a sufficiently complex simulation of it should properly be an issue in the higher-order logic of quantum mechanics, but as usual it's more entertaining to discuss it by referring to a movie; in this case *The Thirteenth Floor*.<sup>59</sup> This looks like an exercise in the genre popularized by *The Matrix*, but it is actually a remake, of sorts, of a television movie<sup>60</sup> Rainer Werner Fassbinder tossed off in 1973 called *Welt am Draht*; that, in turn, was based on a 1964 novel by Daniel Galouye called *Simulacron-3*, which of course owed a great deal to the works of Philip K. Dick,<sup>61</sup> and with due diligence we could no doubt trace its antecedents back through Borges to St. Augustine, had we but world enough and time.<sup>62</sup> — At any rate, *The Thirteenth Floor* confirms the wisdom of John Sayles, that all science fiction movies are basically *The Tempest*,<sup>63</sup> and involve a fundamental

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<sup>59</sup> Dir. Josef Rusnak, 1999.

<sup>60</sup> Two parts, 3 1/2 hours, the digital restoration of 2010 may still be on YouTube; there is an elegant little essay about it by Ed Halter titled "World on a Wire: the Hall of Mirrors" on the Criterion website. My personal impression, having seen it only once, was that Fassbinder in between quotes from philosophers was trying his hand at a standard action movie, as if he had been contemplating selling out and going to Hollywood.

<sup>61</sup> Most relevant in the present context is *The Man in the High Castle* [1962], which presents an alternative history in which the Axis won the Second World War and occupied the United States. The Dickian peculiarity is that the characters in the novel gradually come to the realization that they *are* characters in a novel, and their reality is fictitious. The I Ching plays a prominent role, and Dick claimed to have employed it in the composition of the text. (He also, quite obviously, employed a lot of drugs.)

<sup>62</sup> Within the science fiction genre the theme is best exemplified, as usual, by a story of Robert Heinlein: "They", published in *Unknown*, April 1941. In this a man is confined to a mental institution because he thinks the world is an illusion created by malevolent beings who are deliberately trying to deceive him. The punchline, of course, is that he is right.

<sup>63</sup> Ironically he states this axiom in the context of his explanation of how he ended up writing a movie for Corman (*Battle Beyond the Stars* [1980]) which was pitched to him as "*The Seven Samurai* in outer space." Not at all the same.

triangle of a sorcerer/mad scientist, his beautiful daughter, and a dashing young shipwrecked mariner/lab assistant/whatever who falls for her. In this case the mad scientist is removed from the plot at the outset and the beautiful daughter isn't really his daughter, at least not in this reality, but — anyway — the mad scientist has constructed a computer simulation/virtual world which exactly duplicates Los Angeles in the 1930s, in which he and all of his associates have doppelgängers which they can inhabit (as ghosts in the machine) by some curious process which involves lying down in a sensory deprivation tank, putting on a standard-issue Movie Science wire beanie, zooming through some light-show hyperspace, and waking up in an alternate reality. He is murdered under mysterious circumstances, and the protagonist, his assistant, falls under suspicion and in self-defense must conduct an investigation which involves repeatedly inserting himself into the simulation. — The conceit of the thing is that the doppelgängers in the constructed reality pass the Turing test with respect to themselves, carry on their lives independently when they aren't being possessed, and experience their possessions as episodes of amnesia. — A mysterious woman appears claiming to be the daughter of the deceased. Complications ensue. — The punchline (Spoiler Alert, as they say) is that just as Los Angeles in the 1930s is a simulation running in the Los Angeles of the 1990s, so Los Angeles in the 1990s turns out to be a simulation running in the Los Angeles of the 2050s; the protagonist finally pops out of the 90s into the future, takes possession (revenge of the avatar!) of the body of the guy who had been playing him to murder the mad scientist, and is reunited with his mentor and the girl, who in this dimension really is his daughter. Presumably they all live happily ever after, or at least until they discover Los Angeles in the 2050s is a simulation running in Los Angeles of the 2110s.

So what is actually interesting about that? We have the picture of a simulation running in a simulation running in nominal reality, but this has to remind us of the story about the earth

being a flat stone resting on the back of four elephants standing on a turtle; why stop there, or anywhere? The chain could just as well be infinite in both directions, meaning that we would naturally be looking for a fixed point, i.e. a simulation which runs in itself.<sup>64</sup> — So isn't that the right idea? That reality, like the Ego, should be a simulation of itself?

{...}

There is also a bullshit probability argument (of course — this is the veritable Golden Age of bullshit probability arguments) that purports to establish that what we are living in is almost certainly a simulation, presumably some kind of immersive computer game, and not “real” reality, because — but you thought Descartes was paranoid? it is to laugh — because, for instance, we can imagine the world as a story written down, say, in some volume of Borges' library, and then point out that there are an arbitrarily large number of prefaces and postscripts which could purport to be frame stories into which that volume can be embedded. — If this reminds you of what Goodman said about “grue” of course no fucking wonder. — But, I reiterate: any frame story in which this one is embedded would by the same argument itself almost certainly be a simulation embedded in something else, and the question again would be whether there is any natural limit, a simulation of itself, or at least some simple closed chain (cf. *Dead of Night*), and meta-Fassbinder wins again.

Moreover this argument makes it obvious that the world could be a simulation in an arbitrarily large number of alternate realities *all at once*; and thus that (no surprise) there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of by the Wachowski

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<sup>64</sup> Yes, this really is the ontological argument. I love this shit. — Is this the moment when I remark, aside, that Georg Cantor schooled himself with a study of the medieval theologians? Maybe.

siblings. — The real question, obviously, is what it would mean for everything to be a simulation of everything else.

{...}

Of course the real question would never occur to a computer geek,<sup>65</sup> and in the post-*Matrix* era it's become fashionable to speculate that the world we see is nothing but some kind of (first-order) simulation; there are even rumors that a few crazy Silicon Valley billionaires are funding a project to bust out of it.<sup>66</sup>

(The mythology of *The Matrix* is just that of Plato's Cave, with the curious inversion that the people who have seen the revelation and have become enlightened are the ones living in caves underground, while the prisoners of illusion dwell in a very comfortable unreality.)

About which I have to say [a] this is wonderfully paranoid and [b] I have to admit that if Isaac Newton were alive today he would probably be looking for the backdoor. Just as he looked

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<sup>65</sup> Let me reiterate that, as a class, these are people with very limited educations, and a very poor grasp of abstractions; economic incentives have conspired to produce from otherwise promising raw materials an entire generation of failed scientific and mathematical talents whose intellectual developments have been distorted and compressed into a single, infinitely narrow, dimension.

<sup>66</sup> "Many people in Silicon Valley have become obsessed with the simulation hypothesis, the argument that what we experience as reality is in fact fabricated in a computer; two tech billionaires have gone so far as to secretly engage scientists to work on breaking us out of the simulation." — Tad Friend, "Sam Altman's manifest destiny," *The New Yorker*, October 10, 2016. — Speculation centers on Altman and Elon Musk. See also: Andrew Griffin, "Tech billionaires convinced we live in the Matrix are secretly funding scientists to help break us out of it," *The Independent*, October 6, 2016; Janet Burns, "Elon Musk and friends are spending millions to break out of the Matrix," *Forbes*, October 13, 2016.

for the philosopher's stone and tried to read all human history from Biblical chronology.<sup>67</sup>

Nonetheless it's difficult to believe these idiots really know what they are talking about. Let alone how to go about it.

The movies suggest there would be telltales: Fassbinder inserts rewrites of history and reality (with characteristic cues on the soundtrack) which perplex his protagonist; in *The Thirteenth Floor* people driving out into the desert discover the interstate comes to an end and the graphics fade out into wireframe. — Similarly in paranoid moods one may have wondered whether the Moon really had another side. Though when the first Russian orbiter circled round the back, sure enough there it was. (American paranoiacs then argued the photographs were Commie fakes, since the back side didn't look the same as the front, but when our own spacecraft got there of course they saw the same thing.) — But you really don't expect something so obvious.

What you might guess is more likely is something subtler — like, say, rounding error: as I discovered to my chagrin, on primitive Macs without floating-point processors a rotating cube rapidly shrank to a point, taking the fun out of premature attempts at 3D graphics; perhaps similar computational limits become apparent when the Laplacian machine is put under stress. Or perhaps if a random process is repeated sufficiently many times the answers begin to cycle. — Some signature of finite computational

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<sup>67</sup> For instance he predicted the second coming of Christ would occur in 1948. Fortunately this is not widely known, or it would further reinforce already insufferable Boomer narcissism.

capacity might exist.<sup>68</sup> — And we do, admittedly, see some such indications: the Bekenstein bound on information capacity, e.g.<sup>69</sup>

It is possible that the quantum theory of gravitation may explain the physical world as a tangled web of spin networks, a sort of monadology of quantum computers; which may prove possible to translate into the cinema of kung fu and black leather, who knows.

But the commonplace opinion is not so sophisticated. Weinberg summarizes it as follows:

Wolfram ... suggests that space consists of a network of isolated points, like cells in a cellular automaton, and that even time flows in discrete steps. Following an idea of Edward Fredkin, he concludes that the universe itself would then be an automaton, like a giant computer. It's possible, but I can't see any motivation for these speculations, except that this is the sort of system that Wolfram and others have become used to in their work on computers. So might a carpenter, looking at the moon, suppose that it is made of wood.<sup>70</sup>

No shit.

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<sup>68</sup> One might guess (as I did) that the Heisenberg uncertainty principle could be interpreted in this fashion, but the idea doesn't work. As Von Neumann pointed out long ago, any attempt to reproduce the results of quantum mechanics by using (real-valued) probabilities to explain incompleteness of information must fail.

<sup>69</sup> The surface area of a black hole can be interpreted as an entropy, and measured in bits; this defines an (enormous) upper bound for the information content of the volume contained by any surface of that area.

<sup>70</sup> Steven Weinberg: "Is the universe a computer?" *New York Review of Books*, 24 October 2002. (Review of Steven Wolfram, *A New Kind of Science*.)

{...}

That a sufficiently detailed computational simulation might as well be real is hardly a new observation. But suppose you regarded this as a branched reality: a subprocess taken seriously as a parallel world on its own. Has this some correlate in the quantum-mechanical formalism?

Suppose you *compute* the cat alive and the cat dead, in other words. Can the states be superimposed? Can a computed cat be superimposed with a real cat? Is there an ontological distinction between them?

{...}

The analysis of the simplest ideas can lead to enormous complications. Curry remarks somewhere that he only invented combinatory logic because he couldn't understand substitution.<sup>71</sup> It is only typical that attempting a complete analysis of such a triviality entailed the creation of a new branch of mathematics.

{...}

Before quantum mechanics and the digital paradigm took command of the universe of discourse, the more natural conjecture was that the universe is scale-invariant: that worlds might be contained within worlds — physically, *ad infinitum*.

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<sup>71</sup> About this problem Stoy [*Denotational Semantics*, MIT Press 1977] remarks that it is much harder than it looks, and his treatment will show that Hilbert, Gödel, and Quine among others all had it wrong. — And this only in the limited context of *computer* languages. See also the discussion of Abelson and Sussman in *Structure and Interpretation of Computer Programs*. [Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996.]

Leibniz, the inventor of infinitesimals, in a letter to John Bernoulli<sup>72</sup> which also appeals (of course) to the evidence of “the animalcules of the microscope” as proof of the indifference of the scheme of things to scale, states categorically that

Nature knows no limits. And so it is possible — indeed, it is necessary — that there should be worlds not inferior to our own in beauty and variety, in the smallest bits of dust, in fact, in atoms. And though this may seem even more wonderful, nothing prevents animals from passing over into such worlds when they die. For I am of the opinion that death is nothing but the contraction of an animal, as generation is nothing but its unfolding.

— an interesting corollary of the principle of plenitude, and (in fact) as plausible a mechanism for the transmigration of souls as any. — In a digital, or any chain-of-being interpretation of the hierarchy, no more than a countable number of variations on the theme of the physical universe might be contemplated; but in this version we might replicate the Cantor set, and generate an uncountable number of variations, rendering more plausible the idea that Library-of-Babel extensions of every world-thread might exist in some replica of the original.

(Though of course there would be an *infinite* manifold of possible extensions, and .....)

{...}

Swift:

So, naturalists observe, a flea  
Hath smaller fleas that on him prey;  
And these have smaller fleas to bite ‘em,

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<sup>72</sup> November 18, 1698; cf. Loemker pp. 512-513.

And so proceed ad infinitum.  
Thus every poet, in his kind,  
Is bit by him that comes behind.<sup>73</sup>

{...}

Curiously enough, this later became a standard trope of pulp fiction; see for instance Ray Cummings, *The Girl in the Golden Atom*.<sup>74</sup> — His hero (referred to only as “the Chemist,” in obvious imitation of Wells), says<sup>75</sup>

I believe that every particle of matter in our universe contains within it an equally complex and complete a universe, which to its inhabitants seems as large as ours. I think, also that the whole realm of our interplanetary space, our solar system and all the remote stars of the heavens are contained within the atom of some other universe as gigantic to us as we are to the universe in that ring.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Swift half-seriously assumes poets must be imitators of their predecessors, and that entropic decline is therefore inevitable; see previous remarks on Cervantes — which were equally inspired, now that I think of it, by the battle of the Ancients and Moderns in *A Tale of A Tub*.

<sup>74</sup> Other variations include the later (famous) story “He Who Shrank”, by Henry Hasse (included in Raymond J. Healy and J. Francis McComas, eds. *Adventures in Time and Space* [New York: Random House, 1946]) and the concluding ellipsis of the remarkable film *The Incredible Shrinking Man* [Jack Arnold, 1957; from a novel of Richard Matheson].

<sup>75</sup> [1922] Chapter I, A Universe in an Atom.

<sup>76</sup> The influence of Wells is (as stated) obvious; the direct influence of Leibniz less so, since it is likely the popular conception of the atom as a miniature solar system encouraged this line of speculation in Cummings, et al. — As for other influences: “The Chemist produced two small paper packages from his wallet. ‘These drugs are the result of my research,’ he said. ‘One of them causes contraction, and the other expansion, by an exact reversal of the process. ... I have made them as you see, in the form of tiny pills, each containing a minute quantity of the drug. It is by taking them successively in unequal amounts that I expect to reach the desired size.’” — One pill makes you larger/And one pill makes you small... .

— within/without which, etc. — though now it is natural to ask the question: if we shrink/expand far enough, do we eventually return to the universe in which we started?<sup>77</sup>

Cummings uses this as the premise for a pulp adventure novel, but later variations on the theme were more explicitly Leibnizian; e.g. Henry Hasse's "He Who Shrank",<sup>78</sup> in which the protagonist, the hapless laboratory assistant of a mad scientist, is fed a potion which causes him to shrink indefinitely. (In a *Wow Finish* typical of that era, after adventures without number his shrinkage finally ceases when he arrives on a blue planet which — gotcha — turns out to be the Earth.)

{...}

Scaling invariance would make it possible in principle to construct a Laplacian machine — which would, of course, instantiate the paradoxes of complete prediction and/or temporal feedback loops — which, in turn, bear a curious resemblance to the wormhole time machine. — What would a scale model of the universe look like? exactly as Thorne pictured the terminus of a wormhole for Nolan in *Interstellar*, a shiny crystal ball filled with stars.

Quantum mechanics in a nutshell, on the other hand, is the observation that you can't build a scale model of an atom — not at all obvious before the fact, indeed J.J. Thompson literally

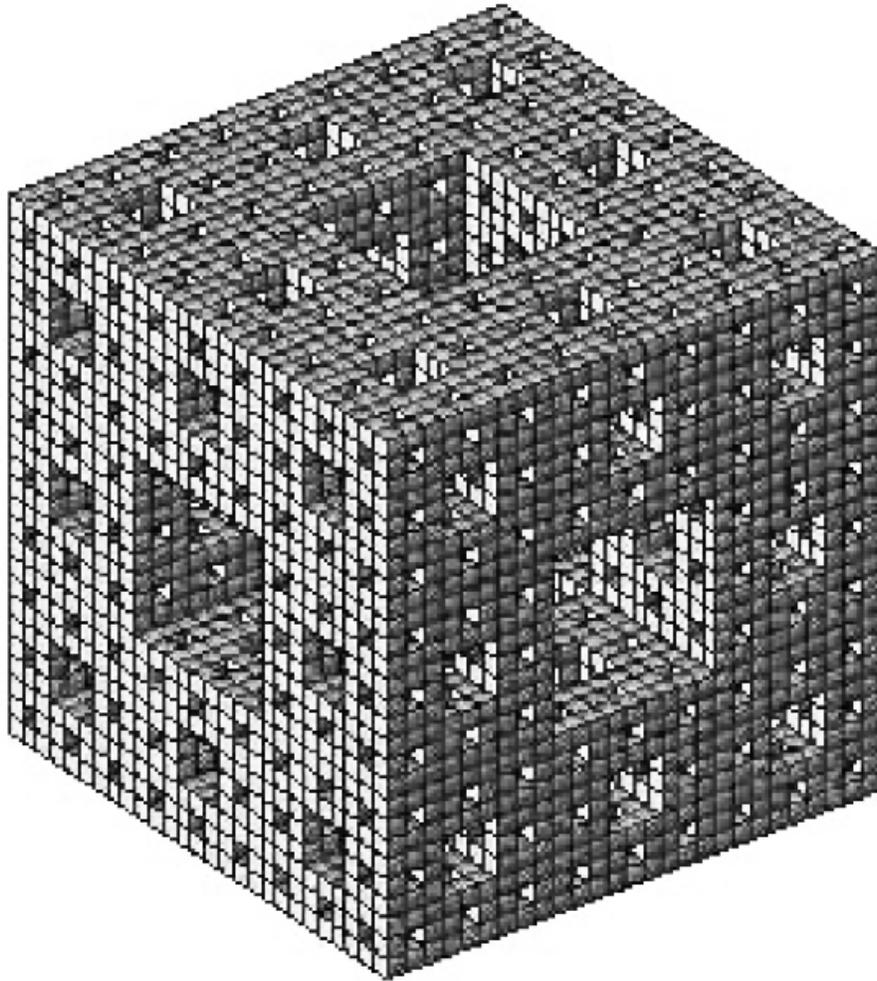
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<sup>77</sup> Consistent with a popular conception that supposes, roughly, that if you count to infinity you get back to the beginning again. I suspect this may also have been an intuitive motivation for the idea of the Eternal Recurrence. — One should note as well that in some of the crazier spatialized-multiverse versions of inflationary cosmology domains/"universes" might be supposed to be replicated, and one can "compute" an exponentiated-astronomical number representing the distance from here to here, taking the long way around.

<sup>78</sup> *Amazing Stories*, Vol. 10, Number 11 (August 1936); pp. 13-56.

tried to do it in the laboratory after he discovered the atom had positive and negative electrical constituents.

You have to wonder if there is some connection here. Is granularity necessitated by the fact that scaling invariance entails paradox?



Not possible.

{...}

*The regress*

A variation: a movie which is contained as a flashback within itself. — This suggests the problem of classifying the types of temporal loops.

(And why couldn't it work like the Cantor set? between moments A and B interpose two intervals repeating the interval [A,B] —)

{...}

There is also a sort of Gnostic version of the infinite descending chain of simulations, in which each contradicts the one enclosed within it — something like the perverse Zeno machine controlling a bulb which begins off at time 0, turns on at  $t = 1/2$ , turns off at  $t = 1/4$ , and so ad infinitum — and then you ask whether it is on at  $t = 1$  — but this by construction has no fixed point, no stable limit: the gods deceive us, but they in turn are deceived by their own creators, and so on until we tire of untangling the twists in the plot.

{...}

Charlie Kaufman employs a Borgesian variant of the simulation device — actually, two of them — in *Synecdoche, New York* [2008]: Philip Seymour Hoffman portrays a theater director who conceives of a vast production, staged in a warehouse in New York City, in which actors play the roles of real people, including the director and the actors in the production themselves. In the

version in the original screenplay,<sup>79</sup> the production is intended to be a simulacrum of the life of the city around it (the mock-adjective “verisimilitudinous” is repeatedly applied and considered for a title) and the necessity of its incorporating a potentially-infinite nested series of subwarehouses in which subproductions are being staged is explicitly recognized; in the film version this doesn’t seem to be carried past one or two steps, but the interaction between the actors and the people they are portraying is continuous and humorous, and a confusion develops between them which suggests that in creating fiction it isn’t obvious who is writing whom. In neither version is the project ever completed, though Hoffman dies trying.<sup>80</sup>

Kaufman used the device originally in *Being John Malkovich* [Spike Jonze, 1999], the plot of which turns, famously, on the premise that by crawling into a tunnel hidden behind a filing cabinet in an office in New York, anyone can enter the mind of John Malkovich and inhabit his experience for fifteen Warholian minutes. Eventually Malkovich discovers what is going on, tries it out himself, and finds himself in an Alice-in-Wonderland world where everyone is his clone and every word is “Malkovich.” — Though of course Malkovich inhabiting Malkovich *is* Malkovich.

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<sup>79</sup> Preliminary drafts and shooting scripts can be found online in various locations, notably [simplyscripts.com](http://simplyscripts.com); Kaufman’s scripts are of particular interest not simply because he is *sui generis*, but because his original conceptions for *Being John Malkovich*, *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, and *Adaptation* (among others) were much weirder and funnier than the versions that finally found their way to the silver screen.

<sup>80</sup> Truth as usual conceding nothing to fiction, the Russian Ilya Khrzhanovsky has recently concluded a fifteen-year project based on the life of the physicist Lev Landau called, simply, *Dau*, which has been conducted on similarly verisimilitudinous principles and involved a cast of 400 principals and 10,000 extras. Though it began as a simple biopic, it turned into what has been described as “a parallel world,” less a film set than an immersive environment in which as a sort of offhand corollary 700 hours of footage were shot and have, preliminary to roadshow exhibitions in Paris, London, and Berlin, been edited into 13 feature films. See Steve Rose, “Inside *Dau*, the ‘Stalinist Truman Show’,” *The Guardian*, 26 January 2019.

There could be no difference. (This *is* the being of John Malkovich.)

{...}

Still earlier I'd tried this out myself, in the context of a computer game [*Labyrinth*, 1985]: in the text-adventure genre, which briefly fascinated me, one would enter short descriptions of possible actions such as "Pick up sword," "Pull coin from pocket," etc., to navigate an imagined landscape, solve a series of problems, and acquire a legendary treasure (or whatever); it occurred to me that the semantic possibilities of even a very simple linguistic syntax would allow for the solution of the puzzle presented, e.g., by a troll guarding a bridge demanding payment of a toll of fifty cents when you only had a quarter, if you put the quarter in your pack (you always had a pack), put the *pack* in the pack, put *yourself* in the pack, reached into the pack *within* the pack, pulled out the first quarter, picked up the second quarter, and then got out of the top-level pack and handed the two coins to the troll. Because nothing in this alternate reality forbade an infinite descending epsilon-chain, did it? though it did seem unlikely anyone but a logician would think of this solution to the puzzle.<sup>81</sup>

{...}

Von Stroheim was famous for insisting on building his own sets, in grandiose dimensions — the replica of Monte Carlo he created for *Foolish Wives* [1922] was said to have cost three quarters of a million dollars, a ton of money in the Twenties. (MGM, then still willing to write his checks, bragged about it in their advertisements for the film.) Probably he was just trying to outdo Griffith's *Babylon*, but there was method in his control-freak madness, and you have to suspect that if he'd made a movie

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<sup>81</sup> But again, compare the wormhole.

about Hollywood he would have claimed the original was inauthentic, and built a copy on the other side of the hill. — Moreover, you have to suspect he would have been right.

(See also Borges, “On Exactitude in Science”).

{...}

In re *The Tempest* as a model for the science fiction scenario: the purest example is *Forbidden Planet* [Fred M. Wilcox, 1956 — IMDB, as always in on the joke, lists Shakespeare first among the writers, albeit “uncredited”], though there are many variations on the theme, older and newer: e.g. the best movie version of *The Island of Dr. Moreau, Island of Lost Souls* [Erle C. Kenton, 1932], starring Charles Laughton<sup>82</sup> was a precursor (the daughter is the Panther Woman, the male protagonist is a literal castaway washed up on the shore); the serials *The Whispering Shadow* [Albert Herman and Colbert Clark, 1933] (no island but a sort of wax museum with automata, Bela Lugosi as always is the definitive Mad Scientist) and *The Lost City* [Harry Revier, 1935] (the jungles of the Dark Continent, mad scientist enslaved by even madder scientist); *The Thing* [Howard Hawks pretending to be Christian Nyby, 1951] (Arctic outpost), *Tarantula* [Jack Arnold, 1955] (isolated desert laboratory); *Terror From the Year 5000* [Robert J. Gurney, Jr., 1958] (literally an island); and *Them!* [Gordon Douglas, 1954] — desert again but no unity of place, father and daughter are both scientists, compare of course *Ant-Man* [Peyton Reed, 2015]. — Genetic mutation of scenarios in the Fifties (no doubt the result of radiation from all those atom bomb tests) produced the inversion of making the mad scientist the romantic lead and the father a general, see *Earth*

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<sup>82</sup> And photographed by the great Karl Struss! who was also cinematographer for *Rocketship X/M* [Kurt Neumann, 1950] and *Kronos* [Kurt Neumann, 1957], the best specimens of black and white cinematography in Fifties science fiction; he worked with Neumann again on the classic *The Fly* [1958], this time in color.

*Versus the Flying Saucers* [Fred F. Sears. 1956] or for that matter the backstory of *The Incredible Hulk*; *Indiana Jones and the Ravenwoods* are another variation. *Ex Machina* [Alex Garland, 2015] also follows this template, but is perhaps more closely related to the variation (predating cinema but anticipating it)<sup>83</sup> in which the sorcerer's daughter is an automaton (*L'Ève Future*, Villiers de L'Isle Adam, 1885); compare the related variations in which the sorcerer isn't even there, just his automated virtual-reality dinner party (*La invención de Morel*, Adolfo Bioy Casares, 1940),<sup>84</sup> and *Sky Captain and the World of Tomorrow* [Kerry Conran, 2004], in which the sorcerer is dead but his robots labor on to fulfill his mad vision.

{...}

“It would be like a character in a novel beginning to write his own story.” — This sounds strange, but novelists testify it happens all the time.<sup>8586</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Cf. Geoffrey O'Brien, *The Ghost Opera*. [*The New York Review of Books*, 5/30/1991.]

<sup>84</sup> This was filmed as *L'invenzione di Morel* [Emidio Greco, 1974.] Here the action does, in fact, take place on an enchanted isle, and the shipwrecked mariner (quite understandably) falls in love with the apparition of Anna Karina.

<sup>85</sup> Elmore Leonard once described his process to Martin Amis as auditioning characters in the opening scenes, finding out which ones could talk, and then giving them free rein. In every book, he said, some minor character would be introduced en passant, usually as a means of providing a needed piece of information, and then would come to life and elbow his way into the plot.

<sup>86</sup> Obviously these could be multiplied at will — but — Harold Pinter in his Nobel Lecture [2005]: “It's a strange moment, the moment of creating characters who up to that moment have had no existence. What follows is fitful, uncertain, even hallucinatory, although sometimes it can be an unstoppable avalanche. The author's position is an odd one. In a sense he is not welcomed by the characters. The characters resist him, they are not easy to live with, they are impossible to define. You certainly can't dictate to them. To a certain extent you play a never-ending game with them, cat and mouse, blind man's buff, hide and seek. But finally you find that you have people of flesh and blood on your hands, people with will and an individual sensibility of their own, made out of component parts you are unable to change, manipulate or distort.”

But suppose a character in a novel were an author himself, and wrote a tale within a tale. (As John Barth never tired of pointing out, this postmodern device goes back to the *Arabian Nights*.) At second (or is this third?) order, it could easily be ambiguous who was writing whom.

And passing to the limit, then?

{...}

You say that that the character doesn't "really" write himself into the story, that there is some unconscious process of emulation, some internal laboratory of the imagination in which these golems are assembled and tested which can be modeled and explained in a purely mechanistic fashion, and of course this is true. — But the point is not that no such explanation exists (one always does); it is that this is not the *only* possible explanation, but that another picture may be simpler to employ in practice, and that we have, always, the principle of the Grin Without A Cat to remind us that the progress of theoretical explanation can carry us seamlessly from one ontological framework to another while leaving all our results unchanged. — It is not so much that reality is plastic, but that the symbiotic composite formed from the irreducible (perhaps unnamable) facts and their representations in imagination is. — And so you can't say, finally, that either author or character is an unmoved mover in this picture. They are related, that is all; there is a sort of differential equation describing their interaction; the motion of one is answered in the other.

(Here we might launch into a theory of demonic possession, but at that point, obviously, it is time to take leave of this line of speculation.)

{...}

When you say that a character takes on life, you mean that it has an internal logic that demands certain words and actions. It is like deriving the consequences of a set of assumptions. The internal mechanism, once described, entails behavior you may have anticipated.

This is the literary equivalent of a mathematical model. It is another kind of simulation.

There are doubtless hundreds of characters in Shakespeare that are more vivid than anyone you have met in real life. — The same applies to Quixote, Ivan Karamazov, Emma, Benny Profane.

You have the feeling with these that you do with the figures of geometry, that the diagrams you scratch in the dirt are just pale shadows of unrealized ideals. That when real people speak, they are trying to be these characters, not the other way around. — It is unimportant whether Cagney talked like real gangsters or not; as soon as he opened his mouth, real gangsters were all trying to talk like Cagney.

{...}

Additional notes on *Welt am Dreht*:<sup>87</sup>

— The action sequences must have been incorporated in part because the lead, Klaus Löwitsch, was an excellent athlete who had trained as a dancer and found it easy to climb fences, vault over railings, etc.

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<sup>87</sup> I did finally acquire a copy and watched it again; an experience which will bear repetition.

- It is explicitly stated that the computer (Simulacron) can be used to model the world to make predictions; as a scale model it can be employed as a kind of Laplacian machine.
- There are hints of the possible infinity of the hierarchy.
- The influence of *Alphaville* is obvious (Eddie Constantine even has a cameo) — there are lots of gleaming modern interiors (with overtones of Weimar decadence).
- The visual logic of *Welt am Dreht* makes it clear that Fassbinder saw what the hierarchy of simulation entailed: in every shot, in every setting, windows and mirrors reflect the figures of the personae of the drama; often their images are also distorted by refracting glass. Even when the protagonist flees to what is supposed to be a rustic cabin a la Heidegger, its interior is hypermodern (with designer furniture) and there are mirrors everywhere. — At the denouement, the protagonist waves a gun around and aims it, not at the female intruder, but *at her reflection*.
- Fassbinder must have known, intuitively, that the paradox he was addressing was also that of self-consciousness. — More than that, he must have seen that the fundamental idea is one of representation, and that the correspondence between object and reflection need not be, as a category theorist would put it, iso:<sup>88</sup> not exact, not a perfect reproduction, not one to one. No more than what is captured by film is an exact reproduction of physical reality.

That is what makes memory possible, this form of data compression, the reduction of information from one copy to the next. — It is not an analog process, like copying a tape, which

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<sup>88</sup> Really I should make this a functorial correspondence, but though the game of inventing mathematical metaphors is amusing, it is not infinitely diverting; and as Einstein said to Heisenberg in a related context, a good joke should not be repeated too often.

would reduce everything to a formless blur in a few steps. But something more like a digital copy, reducing the content of memory until some irreducible remnant remains.

{...}

Zhuangzi: “Now I do not know whether I was then a man dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly, dreaming I am a man —“

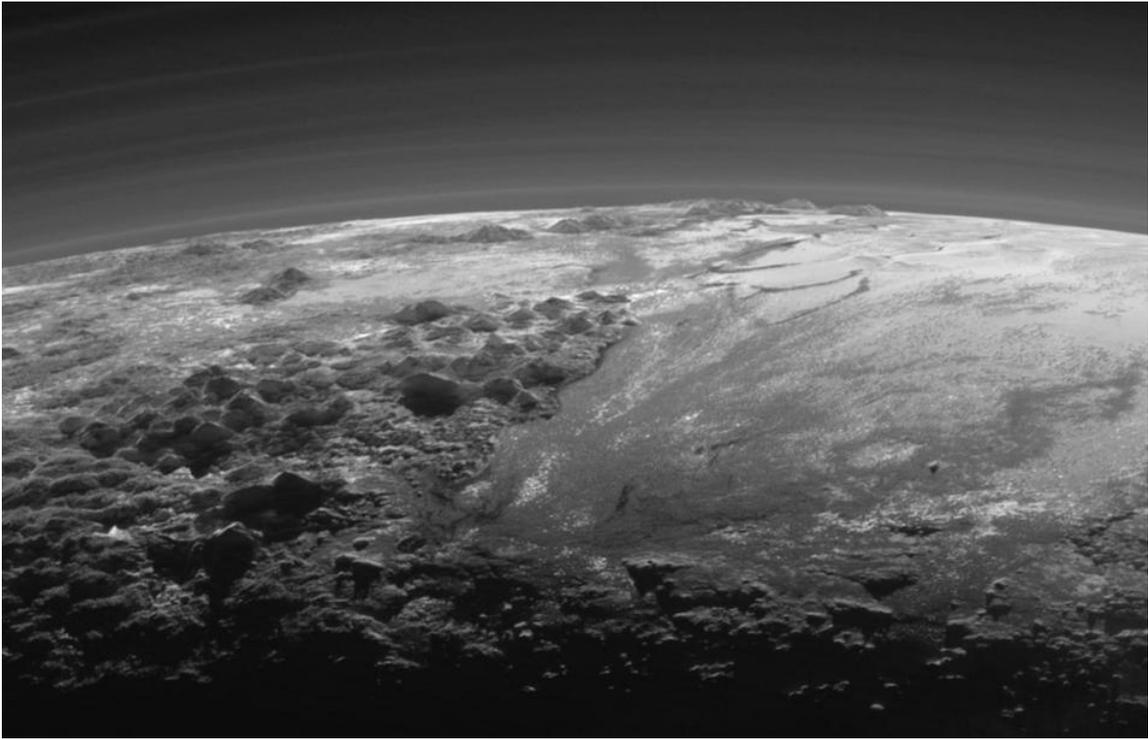
But once the question is posed this way it's obvious the possibilities are not mutually exclusive, that everything might as well be dreaming everything else; that the universe could be defined as that which dreams itself. — Unsurprisingly, this is also a definition of the Ego.

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*The regress*

A variation: a movie which is contained as a flashback within itself. — This suggests the problem of classifying the types of temporal loops.

*The landscape of Pluto (7/30/2015)*



Beyond this flood a frozen continent  
Lies dark and wild, beat with perpetual storms  
Of whirlwind and dire hail, which on firm land  
Thaws not, but gathers heap, and ruin seem of ancient pile;

[Milton]

*Ex Machina* (8/1/15)<sup>89</sup>

Yes, I like Von Trier, at least in measured doses, *Melancholia* especially; an old favorite was *Europa*. I still haven't seen *Nymphomania*. — *Snowpiercer* was a trifle difficult to evaluate, didn't the train seem rather overburdened with metaphor? or was that deliberate, and thus the point? but I love these new Korean directors, maybe they can't really be the new Hong Kong but it's great that they want to try.

And of course I watch everything on a computer. The evolution of my film library: VHS era, about ten years of painstaking labor [lots of poring over cable tv schedules and programming defective VCRs] to amass a collection of 300 tapes; DVD era, about five years to amass a collection of 300 discs, most of them in the last year I was collecting them; digital era, about 2300 films and to my astonishment I still don't seem to be anywhere near done with the original project of putting together the complete film-geek library. (I still haven't replaced all the Hitchcock I had on tape, for instance.) So now instead of needing an entire wall to shelve everything, it all fits in a couple of pocket USB drives, with much better picture quality. — As for whether all this was strictly speaking legal, no comment, though considering the amount of money I've spent in theaters over the years I don't feel at all guilty. (Still the best way to see a movie, despite the concerted efforts of multiplex owners to ruin the experience.)

I loved the concept of *Ex Machina*, but formula has an irresistible gravitational pull when you're spending a lot of someone else's money to put something on the big screen, and what he went

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<sup>89</sup> To Richard Hertz.

with here was the classic film noir femme fatale; who was usually, you may recall, trying to seduce a younger guy into killing her older husband [the familiar Oedipal triangle], and then getting rid of him, too. In the old days of Hollywood moralism the femme fatale had to die at the end of the movie, because she was a Bad Girl, see Barbara Stanwyck in *Double Indemnity*; in neonoir she usually gets away with it, see Kathleen Turner in *Body Heat*. So we leave Ava as she prepares to run amuck in the Big City because the screenwriter's fallen in love with her and thinks she's too gorgeous to die.

Whether anything like this could happen in what we laughingly refer to as "real life" I don't know. Nor am I sure whether a true artificial intelligence, at least one that could pass a Turing test, would really have to be embedded in something so close to a human body. You can make a serious argument for that from Wittgenstein, see for instance "The human body is the best image of the human soul" and the arguments in the *Philosophical Investigations* about the ability to learn and understand human languages being founded on "agreement in form of life". (Which is why I've never believed that SETI bullshit about talking to aliens on the radio, but that's another story.) — I suppose robots could do mathematics, but I'm not even sure of that. What is "geometric intuition"? — What I would guess at the moment, since Wall Street spends a lot of money on hardware and software, is that the first inkling we'll have of a breakthrough on this front will be when we wake up one morning and find out some superintelligent robotrader has suddenly acquired all the money in the world. Unless it's smart enough to conceal the fact that it owns and controls everything, which leads us into paranoid fantasy in the style of Thomas Pynchon. I think I like Alicia Vikander better, thank you very much. (And you're right, her robot look was better.)

Another recent film about an alien femme fatale was *Under The*

*Skin*,<sup>90</sup> which starred Scarlett Johansson as a sort of vampire stalking the Scottish countryside, picking up hitch-hikers and then — well, see for yourself, if you haven't yet. Scarlett gets naked to devour her prey, which will underscore the statement that the most striking thing about the movie was the soundtrack, the work of an avant garde composer named Mica Levi.

No question, however, that (as I have been predicting for decades) robohookers (“robimbos”? hmmm.....)<sup>91</sup> will be the killer app for humanoid robots. And when they can do that, it will also be possible to have virtual-reality sex with somebody on the far side of the globe. O brave new world.

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<sup>90</sup> Dir. Jonathan Glazer, 2013.

<sup>91</sup> RoboHos. Assuredly.

*Greil Marcus (12/2/2015)*<sup>92</sup>

... Even though I have read a bit of Marcus, and admire his power of invention, I don't take anything he says seriously, because it is obvious to me that he isn't writing about music (as if that were really possible), but rather about himself. The whole phenomenon of the Rock Critic who starts out ostensibly reviewing a record and somehow branches out into a discussion of the whole of Western culture seems too obviously rooted in the ancient practice of getting stoned, putting something on the turntable, and then wandering off into a potentially-infinite series of free associations which rapidly lose all contact with the original stimulus. Small wonder he can move from Elvis to Melville ... .

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<sup>92</sup> To Richard Strelitz.

*A spring afternoon in Tübingen (12/19/2015)*

“1788 — On October 21 Hölderlin enters the *Tübinger Stift*, or Protestant seminary, at the university and meets G.W.F. Hegel. ... Like all the rest of the gifted students, these two hate the narrow-minded sectarianism and conservatism of their school. Only one of their teachers dares to peek into Kant. Within two years the students will own all three *Critiques* but will have to hide them under the boulders that line the banks of the Neckar River.”

David Farrell Krell: Introduction to *The Death of Empedocles*.

Exterior pure form of sensible intuition — Day

A spring afternoon in Tübingen, 1791. Along the banks of the Neckar we discover three teenaged boys in student garb playing hooky.

They are Johann Christian Friedrich Hölderlin, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (a Wunderkind, he is somewhat younger than the others).

At a large boulder by the side of the river they pause, look about them to make sure they are unobserved, and pull a rucksack from beneath the rock. It contains their stash, their rolling papers and paraphernalia, and a severely distressed copy of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, bookmarked with a leaf and decorated with burns where smoldering joints have been used as placeholders.

They waste no time in rolling a doobie and lighting up.

“Dude,” says Hegel, toking with evident satisfaction, “this is some world-historical shit.”

Schelling inhales and nods vigorously. “This weed is empirically real but transcendently ideal.”

“The transcendental ideas have immanent use,” says Hölderlin. “Rivers make arable the land. For where herbs are growing” — he sucks on the reefer — “there men will go also.”

The other two giggle uncontrollably.

“Dude, anticipations of perception are so bogus,” says Schelling. “The use of the idea may be extravagant or indigenous.”

“Every thing stands further under the principle of thoroughgoing determinism,” says Hegel. “I think this is out.”

“In a cognition that thoroughly agrees with the laws of the understanding there is no error,” says Hölderlin. He strikes a match. “Now come, fire!”

“Was that modality problematic, assertoric, or apodictic?” Schelling asks Hegel.

LATER in the real form of inner intuition:

Schelling stares at the joint in his hand with a puzzled expression. “Why is there something, and not, like, nothing?”

Hegel fumbles in his pockets. “I thought I brought chips.”

Hölderlin lies with his ear against the ground, listening for voices in the Earth. “We are nothing, what we search for is everything.”

## Interior Dean's office — Day

The Dean, a formidable martinet, sits behind his desk beneath portraits of Christian Wolff and Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten. He hears the reports of his snitches, who inform him the trio have called in sick with nervous fever and ditched, doubtless to read forbidden texts and advocate Revolution. The Dean declares such heresy to be intolerable. "I'll show those little weasels the architectonic of pure reason," he says. Reminded that the three have been on probation since they were caught reading Spinoza last semester, he puts them on double secret probation. "Amphiboly of concepts of reflection, my ass," he says. "Philosophy is an absolute monarchy, and I am its despotic minister. A foot will come down — and that foot is me!"

As an afterthought he instructs his stooges to check the taverns. "They'll be getting the munchies."

## Interior Tavern — Day

At the "Transcendental Unity of Apperception", a favorite student watering hole, the trio are seated in the back, attempting to bring the critical estimation of the beautiful under principles of reason as they watch Kathi, the waitress, glide gracefully among the tables.

"Too fair to worship, too divine to love," sighs Hegel.

"Does she look better a priori or a posteriori?" wonders Schelling.

"Within us a god commands," says Hölderlin, with a dreamy expression on his face. His hand wanders down the front of his

breeches. — “Dude!” Hegel protests. “Hands off the Ding-an-sich!”

A sudden hush falls over the room. The Dean has entered. Flanked by his trusties, he confronts the errant scholars. — “So! the disciples of Prometheus! as usual reeking of cannabis sativa.”

“Busted,” mutters Hegel. — “So much for the progress of the consciousness of freedom,” mutters Schelling. — Hölderlin, apprehended with a mouth full of the matter of sensible intuition, imitates a zit.

The Dean laughs unpleasantly, and snaps his fingers. “My office, ten minutes, bring kneepads.” — To Hölderlin: “We’re going to make you a healthier, more German poet, skidmark. Start practicing on that bratwurst.” — Hölderlin looks curiously at the sausage and tries screwing it into his ear.

Suddenly a giant FOOT descends from the heavens and stomps the Dean flat! Totally Euripides.

“Food fight!” shouts Schelling, emptying a vat of potato salad over the heads of the Dean’s minions. In the ensuing chaos the three bolt into the street.

A PARADE is in progress. Leaping onto a float to escape pursuit, Schelling seizes a microphone and leads a dancing chorus of barmaids dressed in dirndls in a memorable rendition of “Twist and Shout”.

Hegel watches in admiration, but it is clear he is rhythmically challenged. “The valor that struggles is better than the weakness that endures,” he insists. But he still can’t dance. — All is not lost: Kevin Bacon will matriculate in the next semester, see *Tübinger II: Fussbefreien*. — In the meantime he seizes the baton

from a drum major, performs a propaedeutic interrogation of its transcendental dialectic, and leads the marching band down an alley into a dead end. “To be aware of limitations is already to be beyond them,” he assures the spastically twitching marionettes. “Those who are too fastidious toward the Finite never reach actuality, but linger in abstraction, and their light dies away.” — “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” asks someone caught in the crush. He will not be the last to ask such a question.

SUPER title advising us that Schelling and Hegel go on to become the Original Gangstas of German Idealism, but, illustrating yet again the primacy of noumena over phenomena, their credit ratings never recover from what the Dean has written in their Permanent Records.

Pursued by the Dean’s minions, Hölderlin escapes by climbing to the roof of an adjacent building. From this vantage he MOONS them, shouting gibes from the racier passages of the *Transcendental Aesthetic*. — He espies Kathi in the crowd below. “Freedom and Nature unite in true infinity!” he exclaims. Appealing to the apodictic certainty of geometric principles, he seizes a hanging rope and SWINGS from the roof to grab her.

In the universe of Becoming the convertible has not yet emerged from non-Being into Being. He throws her over the back of a horse and they gallop off into the sunset.

“We delight in flinging ourselves into the night of the unknown,” he declares, “into the cold strangeness of any other world, and if we could we would leave the realm of the sun and rush headlong beyond the comet’s track.”

“Whatever,” she says. “Did you bring any of that Schwarzwald shit?”

SUPER title announcing that when the First World War commences every German soldier will march to the Western Front carrying an edition of the poetical works of Hölderlin in his rucksack. A slender volume, alas, it will stop no bullets.