Stephen E. Huntley: Epistles

Edition One

Epistles:

Essays, Communiqués and Supplications

EDITION ONE

Stephen E. Huntley

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Aim and Purpose

Essays, Communiqués and Supplications on Various Topics.

About the Web Site

The web site at **stephen.huntley.link**[1] is an attempt to build a writing platform whose contents can be formatted for either web or print publishing from the same source, in hopes of being able to preserve its contents for the long term by producing hard copies. By itself there's nothing new about this aspiration, over the past fifteen years or so in particular a number of tools and workflows have been devised in pursuit of dual web/print publishing.

What I'm striving to produce more specifically is a matrix both for: day-to-day writing, revising, blogging, research, outlining, brainstorming and gathering feedback; and for compiling, editing and archiving a comprehensive compendium of the total creative output of my life.

That is, the web site is meant to be simultaneously a writing and publishing platform, and a project for producing and annotating a volume of "Complete Works" which stands ready at all times to be published in full and yet will be continually added to and improved. Thus I envision that my "Complete Works" will not be the product of a final retrospective stage of my life, but a goal always being approached asymptotically but never finally reached until I can write and work no more.

This vision is inspired by a desire to bridge pre-internet traditions of intellectual work into the current era in a format adapted to today's technology and expectations. And thus to recover a portion of something valuable which seems to me to have been lost.

I'm among the last generation whose memory, education and work experience will incorporate any of the practices, guidelines and wisdom of intellectual creation that arose and were routinely taught before the advent of personal computers and the popular embrace of the internet.

In times past, intellectual and creative writers created a great deal of work product: notebooks, drafts, correspondence, manuscripts, fair copies. This work product of course was and is of value to scholars; indeed creators of the past consciously collected, sorted and preserved their archives if they had any expectation of or aspiration to notability, knowing that their papers would be studied and curated. More importantly, it was valuable to the creators themselves as they worked: their papers provided a medium for review, contemplation, re-evaluation, insight, inspiration. Accumulated work product amounted to a sort of labyrinth of meditation in the medieval sense.

By way of illustration, the poet Percy Shelley, in his impecunious early years, was well-practiced in skipping out on debts and stiffing landlords for unpaid rent. When he later attained a more firm financial footing, he only ever repaid one bad debt: to a landlady in Wales who was holding a trunk of his notebooks and manuscripts hostage.

[1] https://stephen.huntley.link

This creative resource seems now largely to have been lost.[2] Who saves drafts when working with a word processor or text editor? Who among creative people has a plan to back up and preserve their work? Commercial web sites into which millions of people pour uncountable hours of creative effort disappear overnight and take everything with them. People now are deluged with email; who makes an effort to archive worthy conversations?

In place of the former ways, corporations that provide internet and social media services have constructed for us another sort of labyrinth, designed to work in the ancient Greek sense of a place to get permanently lost in. In order to make meaningful contact with others in our digital society we are expected to direct our creative efforts toward producing content for these services, and as we do our attention and concentration are run through their mazes and dissipated. Our movements through the labyrinth are recorded and quantified, and the statistical results are monetized for the corporations' benefit. In the meantime we are alienated from our own creative work, our selves and our posterity denied the opportunity to develop life-long relationships with it, and with such relationships are lost the spiritual opportunities for insight and self-knowledge.

The web site is designed and implemented with the goal of restoring some of what has been lost. A workspace to doodle with notes, diary entries and drafts, turn drafts into manuscripts and manuscripts into books, essays, monographs and collections. A resource for scholars should there ever be interest. Most importantly a retreat and reference for a lifetime of review and reflection. Every edit and revision is saved, and the full record of revisions is part of the work, in postmodern fashion. The current provisional state of each division of the site is publishable in hard copy form, however rough it may be. The "Complete Works" is a destination always aspired to but never quite reached, but at the same time always present and accessible now.

As a member of the technical world that prefers to have distinct, searchable and indexible names for software concepts and tools, I've been using the abbreviation *EDIWTB* to label this toolset/workflow, which for those requiring a technically descriptive meaning I'll claim stands for "Edit/Distribution Integration from Web Template to Binding". But for the sake of my own literary inspiration I assign to it the mantra "Every Day I Write The Books".

An experiment in simultaneous research, authoring, and digital/print publishing.

EDIWTB is:

"Edit/Distribution Integration from Web Template to Books"

or

"Every Day I Write The Book"

That is, as a matter of producing a lifetime's creative output, instead of going through separate stages of doodling, inspiration, research, drafting, editing and then posting or printing of individual works or publishable volumes, I envision incorporating every day's work into a provisional final form that is

[2] "Local literary scholars lament the lost art of letter writing" https://web.archive.org/web/20230622165727/https://www.telegram.com/story/news/local/south-west/2014/03/15/local-literary-scholars-lament-lost/38148460007/

always ready for publication on the web and in print, and asymptotically approaches but never reaches the final definitive compendium of complete works that represents a life's effort.

Thus bridging pre-and post-internet traditions of creating and distributing creative and intellectual work.

Book Club:

In early 2023 I joined a book club, focused on the classics.[1] Below are my thoughts on some of the books read.

[1] https://web.archive.org/web/20220523031332/https://www.meetup.com/1001books/

Goodbye to Berlin

Christopher Isherwood

Book Club June 18, 2023

Goodbye to Berlin reads as a tenuously connected series of character sketches and anecdotes, collected by the author during his years in the city at the end of the Weimar era, teaching English to support himself as he tried to write. The novel famously set off the chain of inspirations (another set of tenuous links) that led eventually to the play and movie *Cabaret*.

Isherwood's tone generally ranges from bemused detachment to mild disdain, and sometimes to outright alienation, as the first page contains the well-known passage: "I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking."

Christopher Isherwood

But as he is poised at his window, depicting himself as a passive observer, in the very next paragraph he relates how young men come down his street in the autumn evenings and boldly whistle up to their lovers in their own flats on the block. He is not passive in his observation of these rude, passionate, messy pursuits of the necessities of life; rather, his reaction is one of active repulsion: "Because of the whistling, I do not care to stay here in the evenings… I determine not to listen to it, pick up a book, try to read."

On the first page he thus reveals himself as a liar. He is actively on the run from life. Is he being ironic, or is he unaware of his duplicity, un-self-reflective? It is from the point of this self-revelation, knowing

or otherwise, that the work unfolds as a novel not a sketchbook, with a direction and a conclusion meaningful to Isherwood the narrator.

He describes his room as a microcosm of the dead Berlin of the past:

> The tall tiled stove, gorgeously coloured, like an altar. The washstand like a Gothic shrine. The cupboard is also Gothic, with carved cathedral windows: Bismarck faces the King of Prussia in stained glass. My best chair would do for a bishop's throne. In the corner three sham medieval halberds (from a theatrical touring company?) are fastened together to form a hatstand.

Isherwood the narrator is hiding in Berlin, among the shadows that the past still casts there. For him it is a labyrinth where he can avoid himself. The connecting thread of the novel is how the city progressively turns into a hall of mirrors, where he must at last catch glimpses of himself, but only through the prisms of other people – without seeming to realize it.

While nightcrawling with the wild English teen runaway Sally Bowles, he meets Clive, a rich American who is happy to pick up the bills as the three lose themselves in weeks of partying. Clive is typically American to English eyes, voluble and outgoing, always ready for a good time. "Yet, even as he appealed to us, I thought I could sometimes detect odd sly flashes of sarcasm. What did he really think of us?"

Isherwood seems oblivious to the notion that, in his condescending and supercilious manner with others, always masked by his charming English politeness and diffidence, he might come across to others in the same way. When Clive suddenly disappears from town, there is a glimmer of reflection: "I imagined him leaving every new town and every new set of acquaintances in much the same sort of way. I sympathized with him, a good deal."

He encounters a shuffling senior drug addict in a dive bar: "The old man had a nervous tic and kept shaking his head all the time, as if saying to Life: No. No. No." By this time it is not hard for the reader to fill in for oneself just who it is saying No.

Isherwood decides to spend the following summer on a working-class resort island, as always claiming that the move is to facilitate his writing. He shares a cabin with another Englishman, Peter, who is close to him in age, and with a German teenager named Otto. In this sketch, the narrator soon seems strangely to disappear almost entirely from the narrative, and the focus falls on Peter as he seems forlornly to pursue a relationship with Otto, without any hint given as to the goal of his pursuit (beyond the priapic association of his name).

Peter, in his lugubrious, hang-dog pursuit seems uncannily to be a golemic projection of Isherwood himself, evidently lacking self-consciousness or capacity for introspection; he seems to want to play house with Otto, but the teen is too energetic and volatile for that. Peter's desire not only dares not speak its name, but he cowers even from conceiving what he wants.

And so Isherwood's aloofness progresses via metaphor to a crippled inability to cultivate an inner life, a deficiency that comes to threaten his life spiritually and physically as the Nazi party begins its final ascent to power.

In Berlin he makes friends with Bernhard, a cultured department store manager from a wealthy family. Bernhard's life has all the trappings of success and happiness, but he is dissatisfied in ways he will not express, and is evidently paralyzed when it comes to making changes. Like Isherwood he hides behind a mask, one of culture and taste. Bernhard seems to be courting Isherwood in enigmatic fashion, but like Peter is unwilling or unable to put a name to his desire.

Finally Isherwood lashes out:

> I often wonder why you have anything to do with me at all. I feel sometimes that you actually dislike me, and that you say and do things to show it… what I can't stand is that you show your resentment by adopting this mock-humble attitude…. Actually, you're the least humble person I've ever met.

Again, Isherwood shows no self-consciousness that this is how he likely comes off to others. Their relationship ends with Bernhard saying:

> all this seems to me a little unreal, a little – please don't be offended, Christopher – trivial, I know that I am getting out of touch with existence… Do you know, there are times when I sit here alone in the evenings, amongst these books and stone figures, and there comes to me such a strange sensation of unreality, as if this were my whole life? Yes, actually, sometimes, I have felt a doubt as to whether our firm – that great building packed from floor to roof with all our accumulation of property – really exists at all, except in my imagination… And then I have had an unpleasant feeling, such as one has in a dream, that I myself do not exist.

And with this self-incrimination Bernhard indicts himself, Christopher and Berlin all at once. Unwillingness to face oneself, denial of one's inner life, leads to loss of empathy, loss of touch with reality, and paralysis; and through this spiritual void the Nazis are able to march to power.

In his soulless wanderings through the labyrinth of the city, Christopher encounters not only the rich and dissipated but also the poor, sick and debased. His encounters begin at last to awaken in him the sense that others are real, and with that comes the beginnings of empathy and a balanced sense of what life is.

He at last takes on Herr N. as a pupil, a middle-class government employee who is planning to emigrate to the United States:

> Herr N. talks to me chiefly about his family. He is worried about his son, who is very delicate… His wife is delicate, too. He hopes the journey won't tire her. He describes her symptoms, and the kind of medicine she is taking… In a tactful, impersonal way we have become quite intimate… Behind everything he says I am aware of an immense sadness.

Herr N. is grappling with the necessities of life no less than the profane whistlers under Christopher's window. Love, care and sadness, taken together over the years, compose a life. And rather than feeling repulsion from life's messiness, for the first time in the novel Christopher describes himself as feeling actual intimacy with someone.

And now at last Christopher is able to sense the reality of the Nazi threat, as something more than a joke being played on the citizens of Berlin who unlike him don't have the option to leave. He is shocked to overhear a conversation between a young Nazi and his girlfriend in a cafe:

> "Oh, I know we shall win, all right," he exclaims impatiently, "but that's not enough!" He thumps the table with his fist: "Blood must flow!"

The stakes to him now are real. Like Herr N. he at last finds the will to break his paralysis and leave Berlin in pursuit of an authentic life. On the eve of leaving, he visits a cabaret with his friend Fritz. As they leave they encounter a party of rowdy young Americans:

> "Say," he asked Fritz, "what's on here?"
> "Men dressed as women," Fritz grinned.
> The little American simply couldn't believe it… "Do you mean they're *queer*?"
> "Eventually we're all queer," drawled Fritz solemnly, in lugubrious tones…
> "You *queer*, too, hey?" demanded the little American, turning suddenly on me.
> "Yes," I said, "very queer indeed."

On the first page of the novel Isherwood describes himself as a camera, a mechanism, recording only the surface features of life without evident capacity for introspection. On the last page he is able to imagine photographic reality in its proper proportion, as something distinct from him and his personal identity and feelings, which are as real to him now as what the camera shows:

> I catch sight of my face in the mirror of a shop, and am shocked[1] to see that I am smiling… The trams are going up and down the Kleiststrasse, just as usual. They, and the people on the pavement, and the teacosy dome of the Nollendorfplatz station have an air of curious familiarity, of striking resemblance to something one remembers as normal and pleasant in the past – like a very good photograph.

[1] I made a strange and somewhat disturbing discovery when checking this quote at an online source. Instead of "shocked", the word "horrified" is used in all editions of the novel I could find but one: The New Directions Publishing edition of 1963, a reprint of which I have owned for many years. This edition is "my" *Goodbye to Berlin*, and now I find it is in its own way unique, a mutant, a *lusus naturae*. The Internet Archive let me check editions from 1954 to the present, and all the others contain the latter word. It's disturbing because in a tale of rising fascism it seems Orwellian to change a text, to amend its history silently, even if it be to no evident purpose. Also disturbing because substituting this single word changes the tenor of the ending, and thus of the entire novel. One can be positively or negatively "shocked," thus the word here suggests that Isherwood may be pleasantly surprised by the changes that have been wrought in him. But "horrified" only goes one way. The word suggests a much darker and more confused psyche in the narrator as the text ends. I can't fathom why such a change would have been made. Regrettably I don't have the energy or eyesight to check exhaustively in what other ways this edition may differ from the others.

Memento Mori

Muriel Spark

Book Club July 9, 2023

The Scottish novelist Muriel Spark converted to Catholicism as an adult and credited her new religion with enabling her to become a successful writer. But in *Memento Mori,* she shows no evidence of interest in such things as grace or redemption for her characters. The novel's main characters are senior citizens, most of them dealing with their last days of physical and mental soundness; yet Spark seems to write gleefully of them as ninnies and neurotics – wasting their time running about trying to get the most of the time they have left when they could be doing the decent thing and simply disappearing from public life into the variety of care homes and hospices waiting for them.

The only character she shows evident sympathy for is the wickedest of them, the bully and crook in her early senior phase who does her best to corral and exploit the other elders in her grasp. Spark here reminds me of what Blake said of John Milton, the intensely religious author of *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*: "The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God and at liberty when of Devils & Hell is because he was… of the Devil's party without knowing it."[1]

Muriel Spark

The main characters are being harassed by an anonymous serial phone caller, who simply says "Remember you must die" to his targets. That and the title suggest that the theme of the novel is that life

[1] *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell,* by William Blake

needs to be put into perspective by keeping awareness of death's inevitability close. There are also suggestions that there is honor in memorializing the dead: Alec Warner and Jean Taylor, former lovers, muse about the ephemerality of existence:

> "Do you think, Jean, that other people exist?… you see that here is a respectable question. Given that you believe in your own existence as self-evident, do you believe in that of others? Tell me, Jean, do you believe that I for instance, at this moment, exist?"
>
> "…One does sometimes wonder, perhaps only half-consciously, if other people are real."
>
> "Please," he said, "wonder more than half-consciously about this question. Wonder about it with as much consciousness as you have, and tell me what is your answer."
>
> "Oh," she said, "I think in that case, other people do exist. That's my answer. It's only common sense… This graveyard is a kind of evidence," she said, "that other people exist."
>
> "…They are, I quite see, they are," he said, "an indication of the existence of others, for there are the names and times carved in stone. Not a proof, but at least a large testimony."
>
> "…But the graves are at least reassuring," she said, "for why bother to bury people if they don't exist?"

Their conversation suggests a literary project of anchoring the existence of us the living, in this modern age, via acknowledgement of the dead and those near death; the novel thus becoming something of an embodiment of the title, a first draft of a eulogy. But later the narrative turns to suggest that acknowledging death means the undoing of life and certainty, rather than the culmination and crowning of them. Later, after Jean has retired to a nursing home, she says to Alec:

> We all appear to ourselves frustrated in our old age, Alec, because we cling to everything so much. But in reality we are still [in retirement] fulfilling our lives.

But in her case as in most of the others, the fulfillment seems to come from giving up, from letting go of one's life's goals and giving in to the uncertainties of meaning and existence, embodied in the uncertainty about the nature of the phone stalker. Sparks' sympathies go to the characters who retire and disappear, and directs mockery to those who continue to try living a full life.

The exception, and the turn of narrative purpose, comes in depiction of the antics of Mrs. Pettigrew, the live-in caretaker who browbeats her elderly charges into docility for her own convenience, engages in power struggles against other servants who might challenge her will, and snoops her way into blackmail opportunities. Her verve, energy and clarity of purpose distinguish her from the other characters, and she is the only one fruitfully in command of her life's direction.

The unveiling of Sparks' true attitude and agenda in her delight with Mrs. Pettigrew suggests another commentary on Milton: "was Milton trying to tell us that being bad was more fun than being good?"[2]

[2]Professor Jennings, *Animal House*

Myra Breckinridge

Gore Vidal

Book Club July 30, 2023

Myra Breckinridge is a modern warrior woman who has set herself on a quest for total fulfillment of all fantasies; chief of these being the total obliteration of traditional masculinity, thus turning humanity androgynous and averting the prospect of nuclear armageddon. She is subject and object of her heroic story, trying to save the world by saving herself.

The novel is the most unexpected and idiosyncratic of Gore Vidal's novels. It is both an exemplary product of the late 1960's and a cauldron of of the themes and obsessions that had filled his work from the beginning of his career.

Gore Vidal

In its anarchism, it undercuts and flips the table on every assertion, every expectation of the reader and every narrative breadcrumb trail laid down – to the extent that it's difficult to envision how even to start talking about it, or how to end. Narrative summary? Themes? Character development? Social and political commentary? Ultimate meaning? The novel works to frustrate analysis or engagement from any angle.

It is a work of high literature that has the internal logic and structure of a cheap porn novel. Parts of the narrative are as contrived as the poolman arriving to find a young woman home alone in a skimpy bikini. I think that is because whenever a work undertakes to undermine and delegitimize all social conventions and mannerisms, even those of the rebels, nonconformists and freaks, choices of formal

structure become limited – shortcuts have to be taken to get to the good parts. Be it a product of high or low culture the end result is often a horseshoe effect: a meeting in the middle, and the vulgar and refined wits become both targets and echoes of each other. For example when a narrative work busies itself with capturing total anarchy in the face of impending obliteration, it often turns out that there are only two acceptable choices for wrapping things up: breaking the frame (as in *Naked Lunch*, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, *The Final Programme*, *The Bacchae*, *Blazing Saddles*), or a contrapuntal reversion to conservative domesticity (*A Clockwork Orange*, *Natural Born Killers*, *Deep Throat*, Robert Heinlein's *Job*, *Candide*). As it turns out, *Myra Breckinridge* opts for the latter. The author consequently risks disappointment or fury on the part of the reader… but really, what other choices were there?

It's tempting to approach *Myra* as a work of self-examination and self-criticism on Vidal's part. But I don't think it should be necessary to reference the life of the artist to comprehend the artwork. On the other hand, with this work who knows what goes. Maybe Vidal simply considered himself one of the overblown contemporary mainstream idols to be knocked over.

Early along, Myra is clearly Vidal's voice. In her erudition and love of films, particularly her adoration of film critic Parker Tyler, she echoes him. Her thoughts run to the sublime: "Tyler's vision (films are the unconscious expressions of age-old human myths) is perhaps the only important critical insight this century has produced… Auden once wrote an entire poem praising limestone, unaware that any one of a thousand frames from *Tarzan and the Amazons* (1945) had not only anticipated him but made irrelevant his efforts."

Later she embodies Vidal's worldly cynicism: "what, finally, are human relations but the desire in each of us to exercise absolute power over others?"

And: "It is hate alone which inspires us to action and makes for civilization. Look at Juvenal, Pope, Billy Wilder."

As the story progresses, she becomes tedious – in conversation with the young people she condescends to as if children, she starts to sound like the most annoying person in a college dorm lounge:

> I was brilliant. I quoted the best of the world's food authorities (famine for us all by 1974 and forget about plankton and seaweed: not enough of it). I demonstrated that essentially Malthus had been right, despite errors of calculation… What is to be done? How is the race to be saved…? My answer was simple enough: famine and war are now man's only hope. To survive, human population must be drastically reduced. Happily, our leaders are working instinctively toward that end, and there is no doubt in my mind that nature intends Lyndon Johnson and Mao Tse-tung to be the agents of our salvation… If I say so myself, I had my listeners' eyes bugging out by the time I had sketched for them man's marvelous if fiery fate.

Vidal taking himself down a peg here? Self-satire? Acknowledging how tiresome his parlor-room polemics could be?

But as Myra's thoughts and discourse become more convoluted and profane, she is falling in love with Mary-Ann, a beautiful young woman, and losing sight of her objective of destroying masculinity. Mary-Ann's love draws Myra away from fantasies of disintegration and brings her back around to visions of wholeness, here:

> Though I yearn romantically for the classic films of the Forties, I know that they can never be reproduced since their era is as gone as the Depression, World War II and the national innocence which made it possible for Pandro S. Berman and a host of others to decorate the screens of tens of thousands of movie theatres with perfect dreams. There was a wholeness then which is lacking now

and here:

> there is something about Mary-Ann's wholeness that excites me. There is a mystery to be plumbed, though whether or not it is in her or in myself or in us both I do not know.

Yet just as Myra and Mary-Ann's love is about to reach a place of perfected satisfaction, wholeness proves to be a chimera. Myra is involved in a car accident; she is surgically undone and remade and learns to live with a new identity, her quest for rapture left behind. In its place is a new lifestyle in a different mode of incompleteness. But that is not a barrier to happiness; rather, in a broken world one may find that in one's brokenness one is, as Sam Spade observed "in step with life."

Is this the message and meaning of the novel? If so is it uplifting or a cop-out? If Myra is Vidal's voice does the ending represent a life lesson accepted by Vidal himself?

Vidal was not one for embracing domesticity. Or rather, he oscillated for decades between a mutant form of domesticity in Italy, and part-time residence ensconced in the apocalyptic vistas of California amid the illusion and self-deception he despised. Does the record of his own restless and surreal life invalidate the apparent conclusion of the novel? Can any author be held so personally responsible for the integrity of one's work?

I got a strange glimmer of insight from an unexpected source. The novel *A Clockwork Orange* by Anthony Burgess is kin to *Myra* in its anarchic and apocalyptic vision. It also features an unexpected reversion to domesticity, infuriating to some readers. In its final chapter (cut from the film) the main character Alex decides to give up his life of gang violence, sex crimes, drugs and alcohol. He resolves instead to settle down, look for love, maybe even start a family. While imagining the eagerness with which he will be replaced in his gang hierarchy, he muses, "Power power, everybody like wants power."

Alex's observation mirrors those of Myra/Vidal. But even as Alex expresses it he is already transitioning away from this mindset and resolving to find something more in human relationships. Does the fact that Alex is making this statement at this time indicate not that he believes it, but is objectifying and othering the concept, thus suggesting that he is moving beyond it?

This contradiction in a spiritually related novel made me wonder if a similar dynamic was at work in Vidal, not so far-fetched a concept I think in a genre where denial is plenary and choices of formal

approach are constrained. Was his well-practiced patter of cynical public statements concerning power, greed, empire, love, etc. not a rubric of his viewpoints (as he let his audiences assume), but an exercise in keeping himself from being entrapped by them, of defeating their neurotic power and maintaining his distance from them?

Either this, or *Myra Breckinridge* is a work of slippery cynicism, in which Vidal fits himself for a straitjacket and then wriggles out of it and disappears leaving the reader to wonder what happened.

Or perhaps what Vidal reveals is that he both believed his cynical assertions and didn't believe them, just as he was a domesticated resident of Italy and also a participant in the dreamworld of his second home Los Angeles, as he was a man who said he didn't understand love and was the creator of Myra whose life climaxed in eloquent praise of love's glory and mystery.

The only way I could satisfy myself with reading this novel was to envision Vidal as a sort of modern Dionysian priest, empowered by his visionary authorial rituals to move between modes, to partake periodically in the madness of the gods yet not be ripped apart, given the divine grace to retreat into safe domesticity when the revels were ended. As such he acted as envoy and intermediary between worlds: able to receive visions and hear voices and then bring them back to his audience's ken, untouched, but empty.

North And South

Elizabeth Gaskell

Book Club August 20, 2023

Elizabeth Gaskell was a contemporary of Charles Dickens, and *North and South* was published in serial form simultaneously in the same periodical as Dickens' *Hard Times*. But unlike Dickens she lived and worked in Manchester with her Unitarian minister husband, and was a direct witness of the social, political and economic conflicts and outrages wrought by the industrial revolution, at Ground Zero in the era when it was working the greatest and most divisive transformations in British life.

To the author's credit, the novel is not a polemic, and she does not clearly throw the weight of her sympathy to any of the main characters. Rather, she constructs an intricate labyrinth for the leading man and lady, and forces them to thread their way through it to each other; along the way requiring each to face their deficiencies and blind spots. The resolution of the story hinges on each confronting the self-imposed circumscription of their horizons. Thus despite the epochal conflicts surrounding the protagonists, the work brings down its scope in the end to necessary human and intimate dimensions.

Elizabeth Gaskell

And that is perhaps the biggest surprise of the experience of reading it, given the broad tapestry Gaskell's discursive and armillary style weaves, as one at last perceives in the final pages the intricate trap she has set and sprung on both her lovers and the reader.

Reviewers have remarked on Jane Austen's influence on Gaskell here. Teenage Margaret Hale and mill owner John Thornton superficially resemble Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy from *Pride and Prejudice*. They meet, he falls in love, she dislikes him and dismisses his advances. And Margaret's parents seem to be living a disappointing aftermath of *Sense and Sensibility*. Mrs Hale is well-bred and was raised in London society, but marries poor Mr Hale for love and resolves to live with him in a remote rural vicarage. As her middle-aged regrets mount, Mr Hale supplies the final straw by abruptly announcing that he has resigned his position as an Anglican minister for recondite reasons of spiritual conscience.

Facing imminent poverty, they move from the south of England to Manchester, the center of British industrialization, so Mr Hale can scratch together a living as a tutor of the classics to its roughly-educated citizens. Margaret, still a dedicated Christian clergyman's daughter, is appalled at the depredations that mill work with its low wages and pollution has wrought on the city's helpless poor. Thornton is an early portrait of a spirited libertarian, always ready with passionate justifications and rationalizations for his business practices despite the damage they may do.

What appears to be a soap opera-ish discursion is introduced: Margaret's long-absent older brother Frederick returns to visit their mother at her deathbed. Frederick had been a naval officer with good prospects, but mutinied against a tyrannical captain. He has been on the run for years, not daring to set foot in England for fear of court martial and hanging. He slips into Manchester just in time to comfort his mother, but as he departs he is recognized and almost captured after a scuffle.

Meanwhile, Thornton is dealing with an impending strike at his mill, but refuses to raise his workers' wages due to what he claims are the iron laws of economics and the demands of the market. Mortal bad blood arises between him and his union-led workers, and the strike is finally nullified when Thornton brings in replacements from Ireland who are willing to work at any wage.

Thornton had been taking lessons from Margaret's father, but he ultimately gets his tutoring in the humanities when he begins to form relationships with some of his workers after seeing the misery of their conditions during the strike, even as his business spirals downward due to the interruption in production and his debts being called in.

Margaret lies to the authorities about her involvement in Frederick's scuffle and escape in order to protect her brother, and Thornton finds out about her lies. Her repulsion toward Thornton is exacerbated by her Christian remorse and guilt over her lies and what she imagines Thornton must think of her. Late in the novel she undergoes a long period of introspection and self-recrimination. During a visit to her tiny home town which in her childhood had seemed ageless, she is dispirited to see visible changes in just the few years since she has left. She muses:

> I begin to understand now what heaven must be - and, oh ! the grandeur and repose of the words - "The same yesterday, today, and for ever." Everlasting! "From everlasting to everlasting, Thou art God." That sky above me looks as though it could not change, and yet it will. I am so tired - so tired of being whirled on through all these phases of my life, in which nothing abides by me, no creature, no place; it is like the circle in which the victims of earthly passion eddy continually.

This passage, as the core expression of Margaret's crisis, surprised me because of its modernity. It is exactly like the crisis pronounced in the play *Angels in America*, in which the angel Metatron demands that humanity "Stop moving!" This demand and this nostalgia are the end result of the neurotic Christian yearning for sinlessness as the only conceivable embodiment of personal integrity. For finally the only possible sinless world in the Christian worldview is a static one.

Thus the crux of the anxiety about industrialization is not due ultimately to its social or political ramifications. On the deepest level it represents (to what Orwell called 'oldbelievers') a storming of Heaven. Manchester in the novel goes by the pseudonym 'Milton', which I dare say is a reference to the poem by William Blake; which contains the lines:

> And did the Countenance Divine,
> Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
> And was Jerusalem builded here,
> Among these dark Satanic Mills?

Meanwhile Thornton is undergoing a crisis of his own, though a more positive one. He has gone bankrupt, but he is energetically trying to raise backers to restart his business with a new management approach, inspired by the empathy he learned from his workers in the last days of his previous enterprise:

> I felt that I was on the right path, and that, starting from a kind of friendship with one, I was becoming acquainted with many. The advantages were mutual: we were both unconsciously and consciously teaching each other…
>
> My only wish is to have the opportunity of cultivating some intercourse with the hands beyond the mere ' 'cash nexus"…
>
> I have arrived at the conviction that no mere institutions, however wise, and however much thought may have been required to organize and arrange them, can attach class to class as they should be attached, unless the working out of such institutions bring the individuals of the different classes into actual personal contact. Such intercourse is the very breath of life. A working man can hardly be made to feel and know how much his employer may have laboured in his study at plans for the benefit of his workpeople. A complete plan emerges like a piece of machinery, apparently fitted for every emergency. But the hands accept it as they do machinery, without understanding the intense mental labour and forethought required to bring it to such perfection. But I would take an idea, the working out of which would necessitate personal intercourse; it might not go well at first, but at every hitch interest would be felt by an increasing number of men, and at last its success in working come to be desired by all, as all had borne a part in the formation of the plan; and even then I am sure that it would lose its vitality, cease to be living, as soon as it was no longer carried on by that sort of common interest which invariably makes people find means and ways of seeing each other, and becoming acquainted with each other's characters and persons, and

> even tricks of tempers and modes of speech. We should understand each other better, and I'll venture to say we should like each other more.

The term "cash nexus" above is a contemporary one used in critiques of capitalism at the time. It was used in relation to the observation that capitalism tended to drive out of the public forum any notion that humans had any obligations or social commitments whatsoever to one another, beyond mere cash transactions.[1]

As Thornton is having these epiphanies in the novel's last pages, the tables have turned. Margaret has inherited significant wealth, yet she can escape neither the guilt and remorse of the lies she told about her brother (even though it was to save his live) nor the feeling that she is living under the silent opprobrium of Thornton and his family (despite the fact that Thornton, after his declaration of love was rebuffed, has resolved never to acknowledge any of his feelings toward her and limits himself to strictly correct social pleasantries).

Despite these complexities of plot and character, it turns out that everything works itself out literally in the last two pages. Margaret offers a loan to Thornton to help him restart his business… Thornton simply replies "Margaret!"… and after a few halting sentences and long silences, they fall into each other's arms and all is resolved between and within them.

But these two pages are enough for the trap Gaskell has set to be sprung, and for the key to be discovered. In the months preceding this scene, Margaret's ordeal of introspection and soul-searching made her more humble, more empathetic, more calm. It seemed like a sort of personal growth fitting for the wrap-up of a long novel. In fact something had gone terribly wrong; for in trying to resolve her feelings about Thornton she makes a conciliatory gesture in the form of a business transaction: "if you would take some money of mine, eighteen thousand and fifty-seven pounds, lying just at this moment unused in the bank, and bringing me in only two and a half per cent. – you could pay me much better interest, and might go on working Marlborough Mills." Somewhere along the line her self-perceived sin became an unbearable burden, and to anaesthetize her feelings she let herself fall into the worldview of the cash nexus.

On some level, Thornton recognizes the poison of her offer and evades its danger. Instead, he takes to heart his own preaching about new ways to manage relationships, drops his pride and wounded feelings, and insists on a moment of purely human interaction between them, much of which necessarily (but a bit surprisingly for a novelist) takes place in silence.

And this is enough for the breakthrough. Gaskell has resolved to show that neither Christian piety nor libertarian dynamism is sufficient to address the issues of her present moment in history. She repudiates both her own religious background and her adopted hometown's guiding animus to insist on something more.

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[1] "Cash Payment had not then grown to be the universal sole nexus of man to man; it was something other than money that the high then expected from the low, and could not live without getting from the low. Not as buyer and seller alone, of land or what else it might be, but in many senses still as soldier and captain, as clansman and head, as loyal subject and guiding king, was the low related to the high. With the supreme triumph of Cash, a changed time has entered." –Thomas Carlyle, *Chartism*, 1839

Speaking of *Angels in America*, I want to think the two works inform each other and help illuminate their endings. In the play, God has absconded from Heaven, causing consternation and panic among the angels. They want to entice Him back by removing the blot of sin from His creation, but they believe they can only do this by putting humanity into stasis. Humanity politely refuses this solution.

Gaskell's polite refusal of the options presented to her by her cultural milieu reflects Prior Walter's. And among the bereft and the lonely, the only remaining vision of how to bring God back is to call Him forth within the matrix of human relationships, in the form of the Shekinah – to regenerate Him as it were, in the milieu of a brave new Creation.

The Great Work begins…

Jane Eyre

Charlotte Brontë

Book Club October 1, 2023

> I know no medium; I never in my life have known any medium in my dealings with positive hard characters, antagonistic to my own, between absolute submission and determined revolt. I have always faithfully observed the one, up to the very moment of bursting, sometimes with volcanic vehemence, into the other…

This statement by Jane Eyre, made late in the novel, is one of her few moments of self-critical self-insight, and is I think a key to understanding the story laid out in the work.

Charlotte Brontë

It is a novel of gothic horror, but it was Brontë's genius to situate that horror not in an exotic or supernatural milieu, but in the commonplace setting that millions of her readers shared as the reality of their everyday lives. The essence of the gothic genre is the sense of being beset by relentless, implacable, pitiless forces of doom.[1] The cliches of the genre up to this point had required the likes of monsters, insane stalkers or tyrannical overlords. Here, the forces of doom are of the most horrifying kind: the ordinary but inescapable social, institutional and psychological pressures of the day.

The novel incorporates many themes and raises many issues; of class, gender, race, society vs. the individual, etc., that remain relevant and are endlessly, perhaps worthily, worked over in discussion of

[1] As in the classic expression of gothic terror from our own time, *The Terminator*: "It can't be bargained with. It can't be reasoned with. It doesn't feel pity, or remorse, or fear. And it absolutely will not stop… ever, until you are dead!"

it. But a collection of themes and issues does not constitute a story. Not even the plot itself necessarily makes up the story.

The story of *Jane Eyre* is:

Young Jane finds herself in the milieu of a gothic horror story, which is nothing more or less than the everyday life of a young, poor orphan of her time. She is beset by monsters and tormentors, and though she is exceptional enough to be aware of her plight, she is helpless within it. After her first move to a dark and foreboding location, she finds people who can express kindness toward her, but they are no less helpless than she is in the grip of their institution. She finds herself literally in the embrace of death. She moves to the home of a shapeshifting trickster in the form of a Gytrash, and a Vampyre. The former becomes a man, and in her discourse with him she finds for the first time she is able to find some freedom of action unconstrained by gothic forces, to have an actual give-and-take with someone, and this begins to humanize both of them. When their bubble bursts and she is denied this discourse, she - most horrifyingly - transforms into the monster of the story. She becomes pitiless and implacable, ruins lives, and dashes toward death. Instead of dying she crosses a threshold of some sort into a nameless place and is identified as a spectre. Her revivification begins when she gets to know her double reflecting her former life, a self-involved, love-denying pilgrim who is crucifying himself. Once she recognizes herself in him, and him in herself, time and space collapse and she is able to re-cross the threshold back into a human life, finding the aforementioned medium in which she has control of herself, and is able to love and to discourse with the world itself. Her love and discourse fix the shapeshifter into a deformed but permanent human state; and in his own return to the human world, his vision recovers; not entirely, but sufficiently that he is always in the condition of seeing the light at the end of the tunnel.

In the context above which I have tried to define, *Jane Eyre* is not only a gothic horror story, but perhaps the culminatory novel of the genre - it recasts the genre from a freak show into something set within the full context of human experience, and comes across as a classic in the sense Raymond Chandler meant: "a piece of writing which exhausts the possibilities of its form and can hardly be surpassed."[2]

The question of why she falls in love with her employer Rochster is answered by Jane herself: she is first attracted to him because she feels he is the first person in her life she is able to have an effect on, who responds to her and allows her to respond to him:

> I never seemed in his way; he did not take fits of chilling hauteur: when he met me unexpectedly the encounter seemed welcome; he had always a word and sometimes a smile for me; when summoned by formal invitation to his presence, I was honored by a cordiality of reception that made me feel I really possessed the power to amuse him, and that these evening conferences were sought as much for his pleasure as for my benefit.

In the mirror reflection of Rochester that Jane holds up to the reader, one sees by degrees that he has lived the very same kind of life as her; beset and boxed in by forces that he can't control or even contend with, even though the two have virtually nothing in common in their biographies or backgrounds. Yet

[2] from the introduction to *The Simple Art of Murder* (1950, anthology)

he sees in her what she does in him, someone who responds, who reciprocates, who affects and is affected:

> when addressed, you lifted a keen, a daring, and a glowing eye to your interlocutor's face; there was penetration and power in each glance you gave; when plied by close questions, you found ready and round answers. Very soon you seemed to get used to me - I believe you felt the existence of sympathy between you and your grim and cross master, Jane; for it was astonishing to see how quickly a certain pleasant ease tranquillized your manner… I was at once content and stimulated with what I saw…

This is of course in contrast to her experience with the Reed family, and even at her boarding school: her best friend Helen, although kind and animated by Christian grace was passive and imperturbable, the very image of someone immured by gothic forces. She did not struggle against her impending death or question her fate at God's hand despite Jane's urgings and anxious attendings. The contrasting quality and depth of Jane's interactions with Rochester proved transformative.

But when she finds out at her wedding altar that he is already married, she is not sufficiently transformed to break her pattern of lashing out at the forces she still feels oppress her. Tragically she is overwhelmed by her instinctive response and becomes what she has beheld, she is implacable and pitiless in her rejection of Rochester's earnest plea to share a simple life with him outside any institutional bounds. Like her friend Helen, she uses her inflexible Christian principles to shut herself off from a discourse of love, and imposes a horrifying fate on Rochester. In short, she becomes a gothic monster.

Jane leaves and stalks across the heath like a Gytrash dog herself, like Rochester when she first met him, and like him she gradually becomes human again, in the uncanny interzone where she finds she has a family. And it is the relationship established with her cousin St. John that catalyzes the completion of her transformation.

Jane notes how distant and taciturn St. John is in company, often disappearing behind a book or withdrawing to his study. It doesn't seem to occur to her consciously that this might be how she came across to others in her earlier life. She notes with dismay that he is pushing away his love Rosamund and passing up the opportunity to spend his life with her out of unwillingness to compromise his Christian principles. She never explicitly registers that she did the exact same thing with respect to Rochester. And when St. John proposes to her, and she counters with an offer to accompany him to India as a partner, to pursue a missionary passion outside the socially-expected institutional fetters of marriage, Jane does not perceive that Rochester made quite the same kind of offer to her. She turned him down flat, just as St. John refused her offer, and for the same reasons: Christian principle and social convention.

Though blind on the conscious level to the parallels between them, St. John works on her on a deeper level and she finds herself empathizing with him. She senses

> a depth where lay turbid dregs of disappointment - where moved troubling impulses of insatiate yearnings and disquieting aspirations. I was sure St. John Rivers - pure-lived, conscientious, zealous as he was — had not yet found that peace of God which passeth all understanding; he had no more found it, I thought, than had I; with my concealed and

> racking regrets for my broken idol and lost elysium - regrets to which I have latterly avoided referring; but which possessed me and tyrannized over me ruthlessly.

To encounter one's opposite number, and to recognize oneself in the other and the other in oneself, is the beginning of *psyche*; that is, development of a sense of identity not socially given, but internally generated, strong enough to resist the buffets of terrifying external forces and act out of one's own passion and will. When Jane gives as good as she gets from St. John, and she neither submits nor revolts as previously, she shows that she has found her medium, reached a new equilibrium. Upon leaving him finally she says: "It was my turn to assume ascendency. My powers were in play, and in force."

Psyche is the formerly absent necessary prerequisite for real love. To attain it Jane had to go on her journey through the looking glass, and encounter her shadow, which at last clarified her to herself. From there she resolves to claim her love and seeks out Rochester without any thought to what social or institutional framework her love might be realized in. She is out of the matrix of the forces of horror that formerly oppressed her. It is simply her good fortune that Rochester is now free to marry, a literary trick in a literary milieu.

To portray in *Jane Eyre* the power and danger of gothic horror as it arises in the everyday, with such fluency in the language and images of the genre, was a great imaginative accomplishment. To go beyond that and endorse passionate discourse between fugitive allies and antagonists as the counter-strategy to terror and despair is to make the case for literature itself. And in that sense the novel completes the gothic genre's cycle of development, and redeems it.

At The Mountains Of Madness

H.P. Lovecraft

Book Club October 22, 2023

A lot of science fiction concerns itself with the question 'what will encounter with the unknown be like?' Sometimes, as in the first science fiction novel, *Frankenstein* the imagined answer is horror in the face of what lies beyond death. In Lovecraft's short novel *At The Mountains Of Madness*, encounter with the unknown is set in the then-unexplored interior of Antarctica. The story takes the form of a manuscript whose writer, a scientist himself, is attempting to warn the world that his expedition has discovered an ancient and malevolent evil lurking beneath the polar ice. He is adamant that his fellow scientists dare not risk disturbing that evil with further exploration, at the risk of all human civilization.

H.P. Lovecraft

But it's important here to start with the understanding that the look and feel of the unknown is not really a mystery. For example: the Spanish conquistadors' first sighting of the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan in 1519 – the city was built by an alien civilization, ten times larger than any city in Europe, with temples larger than any cathedral, and streets filled with tropical flowers and brightly-costumed people. A soldier, Bernal Diaz del Castillo, wrote of the experience years later:

> we could compare it to nothing but the enchanted scenes we had read of in Amadis of Gaul,[1] from the great towers and temples and other edifices of lime and stone which seemed to rise

[1] A collection of medieval romantic fantasy stories.

> out of the water. To many of us it appeared doubtful whether we were asleep or awake; nor is the manner in which I express myself to be wondered at, for it must be considered, that never yet did man see, hear, or dream of any thing equal to the spectacle which appeared to our eyes on this day.

In the face of the total unknown, space and time collapse, dream, fantasy and reality intermingle, and consciousness becomes a mirror. It is in the blind spot hidden by reflection where mythmaking begins; where landscapes are embroidered from threads of self and memory.

Just as was depicted in *Frankenstein*: when Victor first sees his creature stir with life, he does not react with elation, or joy, or triumph or vindication. Strangely, he flees his laboratory, goes to bed, and dreams of his fiancee and dead mother fusing into one.

Or as Nietzsche said, simply, "gaze not into the abyss, lest the abyss gaze back into you."[2]

The novel's title itself comes from a story by Lord Dunsany,[3] denoting a liminal barrier to a world of drugged dreams.

The objective of mythmaking is to obscure the abyss, to safeguard consciousness from the terror of it. It is left to literature to uncover the mirror, if the threads can be untangled, and acknowledge the reflection.

When the novel was published, Antarctica was one of the last frontiers of the unknown on planet Earth. As the expedition ship of the narrator, geologist William Dyer, approaches the coast, he sees several examples of what today are called *fata morgana*, weird mirages (like ships hovering in air over the water) caused by the extreme atmospheric conditions of the polar region: "On many occasions the curious atmospheric effects enchanted me vastly; these including a strikingly vivid mirage… in which distant bergs became the battlements of unimaginable cosmic castles."

After the expedition makes landfall and subsequent events make necessary a rescue mission by airplane into the continental interior, it is a particularly vivid mirage seen from the air that Lovecraft portrays as a portal into the unknown. Dyer states:

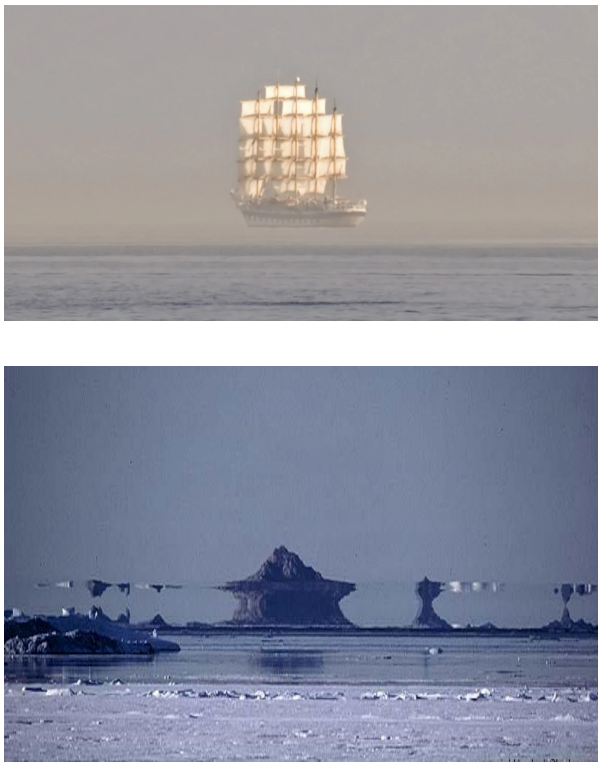
> I had seen dozens of polar mirages during the preceding weeks, some of them quite as uncanny and fantastically vivid as the present sample; but this one had a wholly novel and obscure quality of menacing symbolism, and I shuddered as the seething labyrinth of fabulous walls and towers and minarets loomed out of the troubled ice-vapours above our heads.

[2] This is the quote as I first encountered and remembered it. But I found it has a curious literary history. In the original German, it was phrased more as an observation; first translated into English as: "if thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee." It was successively misquoted over the past century or more, and underwent a pop-cultural transformation; from observation to warning, from a description of the confoundment I'm talking about to an example of it.

[3] Dunsany was perhaps the first writer of completely invented fantasy, unconnected to any existing mythology or body of legend, woven completely out of his inner being. Lovecraft was of course a fan.

> The effect was that of a Cyclopean city of no architecture known to man or to human imagination, with vast aggregations of night-black masonry embodying monstrous perversions of geometrical laws and attaining the most grotesque extremes of sinister bizarrerie… the implied scale of the whole was terrifying and oppressive in its sheer giganticism.

The mirage turns out to be an uncanny vision of collapsed space and time. Unknown to Dyer at the time of sighting, the mirage was an accurate portrayal of a vastly ancient city in its prime millions of years ago, whose ruins lay far away from his location, to be discovered later by him and his companion.



Fata Morgana

His passage into the void had a visceral effect on him, marking what he recognized as a caesura in his experience:

> Every incident of that four-and-a-half-hour flight is burned into my recollection because of its crucial position in my life. It marked my loss, at the age of fifty-four, of all that peace and balance which the normal mind possesses through its accustomed conception of external Nature and Nature's laws. Thenceforward the ten of us – but the student Danforth and myself above all others – were to face a hideously amplified world of lurking horrors which nothing can erase from our emotions, and which we would refrain from sharing with mankind in general if we could.

Dyer and Danforth try to come to the rescue of an exploratory party that had awakened a group of weird aliens from hibernation, and track the aliens into the ruins of the city. Dyer claims that while there he learned the story of the aliens and their city by examining plentiful bas-relief murals carved by former generations of aliens, still visible on the walls of ruined buildings.

As he and Danforth penetrate deeper into the city in search of survivors, Dyer's feelings of revulsion, obscenity and antipathy increase, but he is driven on by scientific curiosity as well as the urgency of rescue. But he unexpectedly reaches a critical point of information about the aliens, whereby his horror is somewhat replaced by a sudden empathy. The aliens he was tracking had gone into suspended animation thirty million years ago for unknown reasons, when Antarctica was a lush tropical paradise and their civilization was at its peak. They were awakened by human explorers into a harsh and brutal snowscape, their city and civilization in ruins, and an even greater horror awaiting them below it:

> After all, they were not evil things of their kind. They were the men of another age and another order of being. Nature had played a hellish jest on them… and this was their tragic homecoming.
>
> They had not been even savages – for what indeed had they done? That awful awakening in the cold of an unknown epoch… poor Old Ones! Scientists to the last – what had they done that we would not have done in their place? God, what intelligence and persistence! What a facing of the incredible, just as those carven kinsmen and forbears had faced things only a little less incredible! Radiates, vegetables, monstrosities, star-spawn – whatever they had been, they were men!
>
> They had crossed the icy peaks on whose templed slopes they had once worshipped and roamed among the tree-ferns. They had found their dead city brooding under its curse, and had read its carven latter days as we had done. They had tried to reach their living fellows in fabled depths of blackness they had never seen – and what had they found?

Why did these aliens subject themselves to a sleep of millions of years, to find they had outlasted their own kind? There is no answer within the narrative. There are only hints, contained within the story presented in the city's many mural carvings:

> according to certain carvings the denizens of that city had themselves known the clutch of oppressive terror; for there was a sombre and recurrent type of scene in which the Old Ones were shewn in the act of recoiling affrightedly from some object – never allowed to appear in the design – found in the great river and indicated as having been washed down through waving, vine-draped cycad-forests from those horrible westward mountains.

This is a remarkable passage. It creates a parallelism of thematic structure. Just as the human explorers faced the boundary of the unknown and penetrated into a mythical landscape beyond it, so the aliens within that landscape faced a boundary of their own. The problem of what the unknown looks like is not solved, because the problem recurses, to a more deeply embedded bourn before another unglimpsed mystery. Thus the limitation of mythmaking is revealed, and by stacking of metaphor becomes literature. The reader is again left before a mirror.

And so the mythical question of origin is replaced by the literary question, handed down in a direct line from the fount of science fiction: what does the mirror reveal?

Dyer's sudden burst of empathy for the aliens, the "Elder Things", shows that there is an alternate interpretation of their story, and calls into question his initial reactions of repugnance and condemnation. So I will attempt another reading of the facts of their eons-long history on Earth as they are presented, a theory of their motivations hinted at by the stark flare lights of irony on the Antarctic plain:

The Elder Things are space spores, floating or flying through space without ships, exposed bodily to the void. They are intellectually advanced and have built civilizations. And they are aware of the many dangers and threats that exist in the universe, and flee from them when necessary. Some of them make their way to earth as spores do, perhaps inevitably, and settle here, over three billion years in the past.

At this point in Earth's development, the Archaean era, it is a lifeless ocean planet; sunny, silent, sterile. But the Elder Things' adaptable physiology allows them to absorb the ocean's rich nutrients directly. They find Earth ideal for their needs, they can hide from their enemies at the bottom of the sea and simply be, in a paradise of mere existence. And there they stay for a half billion years or more.

They come to love Earth and think of it as home as much as an alien race can. They understand that they are vagabonds of the universe, and are grateful for their refuge. But they also come to understand the creative potential of the nutrient-rich oceans under the warm sun, and can't deny it or retard it forever. So they create life, or allow it to germinate, and guide and nurture its development.

They eschew the technological forms of civilization that their ancestors had mastered elsewhere, and choose in this place the opportunity to live in harmony with nature as it develops.

Where previously they would flee from danger, here they fight costly wars to defend their home against invaders. Eventually they evolve to lose the capacity for space travel altogether, and become as close to true Earthlings as they can.

They also become city builders, leaving behind their serene benthic rurality to further their global project of fostering the development of life. Rather than employ industrial technology, they create shoggoths, protoplasmic life forms that assume shapes and sizes necessary for large scale construction.

But their lives are so long, and their civilization has such continuity, that they witness a succession of their greatest urban projects consumed by tectonic plate action as continents are born and die over eons. They realize that in their perception of time, life is the only legacy of theirs that has a chance of lasting.

And so their ambition for their project grows. The shoggoths, formerly automatons, had developed a form of restive consciousness. This inspires the Elder Things to breed intelligent life, proper heirs, with the awareness to recognize and show gratitude to their creators, as the Elder Things were grateful for their Earth home.

As the first apes appear in Africa and Asia, at last a species with rudimentary awareness, the Elder Things resolve to create one last great city in Antarctica; to carry out their project, and to make an exhaustive record of their time on the planet for when the descendents of the apes can understand it.

They capture some ape specimens and implant into them the genetic potential for consciousness, as well as the brain mechanism for a visual trigger that will activate when an ape descendent views the basilisk-like geometric patterns the Elder Things have placed next to the carved illustrative tableaux on their building walls. The trigger will initiate complete coded transmission of the Elder Things' story straight into the conscious mind, so it will be known even if the Elders themselves no longer exist by the time the tableaux are found.

In order to be able to welcome their heirs even if the Elder civilization is wiped out, fifteen Elder Things agree to seal themselves in an underground cave in suspended animation, as a living time capsule. They stock the cave with fossil records of every era of life, as a sort of museum to demonstrate the continuity and consistency of effort that led to the ultimate arising of the heir species. Once the cavern is sealed, onee Elder applies to the other fourteen their race's ancient technology invented to allow survival during their spore-distribution in space, adapted to allow an indefinite sleep in the cave. The one Elder survives the long treatment process by consuming animals stocked in the cave for provisions. Once the job is done on the fourteen, the one artisan maintains the seal on the cavern and accepts death by starvation.

On the surface, the shoggoths participate in the city building and the fostering of conscious life, but eventually they realize the full scope of the project. They are being replaced, by a fully welcomed and valued conscious culmination of the Elder Things entire sojourn on earth. However problematic the history between Elder and shoggoth had been, they had a shared history and a shared home. Now the Elders were making them redundant, treating them merely as a means to an end.

Where the shoggoths had previously rebelled for freedom, now they did so for revenge, and all the more violently. As they murder their creators, they scream in mockery a phrase that the Elders had intended to use to welcome their creation when the new species was mature enough to come exploring. They write the phrase in Elder blood on the walls of the city as an execration and an anathema.

With the Elder civilization destroyed, the shoggoths emulate their creators in their earliest innocent phase of millions of years at the bottom of the sea, and retreat into the vast subterranean body of water below the city, to sulk and try to forget their insults and indignities.

When the new species finally arrived, they were in a degenerate state, the Elders not having been able to guide them to their final intended form after the shoggoth revolt. The first meeting of humans with the cavern Elders awakened from suspended animation resulted in fatal confusion and misunderstanding. The encodings in the walls meant to activate information transfer to the human brain worked only partially, and transmitted a message of horror rather than enlightenment. Worse, left as orphans for ages, humans had fallen out of communion with the order of nature, and had developed a technological, objectifying, alienating scientific mindset. This mindset led the humans to interpret the idea that they were part of a continuity, with a past, with creators who had intended to make them heirs – rather than self-made and supreme to nature – as so repugnant it had to be expelled from consciousness.

The novel incorporates some of Lovecraft's oeuvre-wide mythos, but stands independent of it, and shows awareness of the mythmaking as an incomplete and abortive obsession. The novel completes a tragic story of its own, beyond myth, illuminated by irony. That is to say, there is no point devising a

literary mirror without the possibility of showing the reflection. Parallel thematic structures point the way to how the irony incorporates and implicates the reader, and perhaps even the author:

The tragedy revealed is that we are exiles, castaways in time, which is too vast for us ever to get the advantage of – eventually it will do worse than kill us, it will dispossess us and make us vagabonds, no matter our pretensions.[4] The power of life can encircle the void of meaninglessness, but never extinguish it. The only option is – like Sisyphus – to embrace the futility rather than contend against it, and keep pushing on. The only Hell is to try to push alone, or to exclude some in the common effort. Yet our objectifying, stratifying scientific mindset prevents us from seeing this.

Through the novel runs the thread of mystery of what exactly Dyer's young companion Danforth saw in the mirage they encountered on the plane trip back from the cursed city, a sight that finally unglued him and immersed him in unremitting horror. But what he must have seen is clear. Just as happened on the plane trip in, space and time collapsed within the mirage, and he saw a reflection of himself, superimposed on a vision of an Elder Thing in its prime of thirty million years ago, and saw the family resemblance. The Elder spoke to him across the ages, and at last Danforth understood the meaning and implications of the phrase in the Elder language that the human exploring party had heard echoing in the halls of the city's ruins, the phrase the shoggoths had screamed mockingly at the Elders as they did their murder…

"My Children!"

[4] When Diaz was writing of his experiences in Tenochtitlan, the city was already gone: "I beheld the scenes that were around me, I thought within myself that this was the garden of the world! … but all is destroyed, and that which was a lake is now a tract of fields of Indian corn, and so entirely altered that the natives themselves could hardly know it."

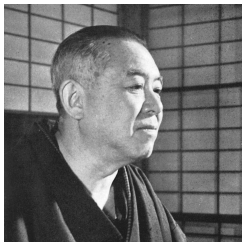
Some Prefer Nettles

Junichiro Tankzaki

Book Club December 3, 2023

Some Prefer Nettles is a dry, arch domestic comedy with a hidden dark dimension, about an affluent married couple who have determined that their marriage is over, but can't bring themselves to take the final step of seeking a divorce – each waiting on the other to make the decisive break. And so they carry on in a years-long exquisite expectant misery. Extended stasis is hardly something that a narrative can be crafted from, and the novel indeed upends any notions of a western-style progression of conflict, climax and resolution. But the work is so full of meticulously crafted observational ironies, that it is carried forward on the momentum of successive revelatory insights, carefully hidden from direct view but nevertheless breaking through the confusion of piled up puzzles and contradictions. It presents an alternative concept of the novel form, resembling the making of a color woodblock print: as each color ink is patiently applied to paper by a separate block, the total composition of the work eventually resolves itself.

The story takes place in and around Osaka, over the course of a spring season in the late 1920s, as the couple Kaname and Misako are drawn into her father's retirement enthusiasm for classical Japanese puppet theater. This lead-off level of irony is easy to spot; as the couple endure the awkward social demands of attending performances together with her father (and waited on by the old man's mistress O-hisa), it is clear that they are driven by the external imperatives of social convention, while the tragic romantic plots of the puppet plays invite comparison to the couple's own situation.



Junichiro Tankzaki

On top of this, Kaname observes that his father-in-law has put great effort into training and shaping O-hisa, in her early twenties, to fit the role of the ideal hostess of the antique classical Japanese culture, just as it is being replaced by the country's rapid Westernization ("She's one of the antiques in his collection, exactly like an old doll," Kaname remarks to Misako). There's no mistaking the identification of people with puppets and dolls. But…

Kaname slowly reveals his dark side in the way he is becoming consumed by his sensual obsessions. At first this side of him is presented in amusing fashion, as he fantasizes being free of his wife and reliving the pleasures of his youth with fresher women. Before long his cousin delivers to him an expensive Western volume he has requested from a specialty bookseller, an edition of *1001 Arabian Nights* with lavish erotic illustrations which he flips through languorously but with intent notice of the charms of women of another race. Later, free from Misako for a day, he visits his favorite prostitute Louise in a brothel that specializes in offering white women. But Louise has some Asian blood and worries that her complexion is too dark, so she covers herself in white cosmetic powder to lighten herself. Kaname finds that after their rendezvous much of the powder has adhered to him.

This calls back to an earlier erudite discussion of the fine points of puppet artistry, which includes the comment, "The Osaka craftsmen, in their efforts to produce the effect of the human skin, leave a coating of powder over the paint." Kaname is first figuratively, then literally identified with a puppet or doll, captured in transition to something refined but monstrous. After encountering Louise, the scent of her powder "seemed to sink deep into his skin, it permeated his clothes, it even spread through the taxi when he left and overwhelmed the room when he got home."

Thus all Kaname's comparisons of O-hisa to a doll directed by his father-in-law become twisted up in irony. He himself is transforming into something of an automaton, driven only by yearnings, lusts and social expectations, but with no inner life. It is a depiction of a modernist form of the ancient Buddhist concept of *samsara*.

O-hisa, by contrast, gradually embodies a striking form of liberation. Although by no means free in the role put upon her as servant/mistress, she acquires an archetypal power as she comes to embody the meeting of the present and past, rather than simply cosplaying it as her master intends.

Again, this is depicted at first in subtle, wry fashion. Although not particularly attractive herself, her name is shared by a well-known classic beauty of the eighteenth century, who was depicted many times in the woodblock prints of her era. Early on, Kaname remarks on her unappealing dentition: "her two front teeth were as black at the roots as if they had been stained in the old court manner…." But as he himself notes, stained black teeth were fine ladies' court fashion for centuries in classical Japan. In her present poverty and lack of dental hygiene, she effortlessly echoes the most refined details of the former era.

Kaname notices that she and his father-in-law have unexpectedly achieved a degree of intimacy, they have a free and easy discourse, he asks her advice and follows her instructions. He deeply envies this aspect of their association which is lacking in his own marriage.

Much later, Kaname visits a remote rural town said to be the birthplace of the puppet theater, accompanying his father-in-law and O-hisa, and the sight of her there drives him into a sort of reverie:

> Kaname felt a deep repose come over him. "These old houses are so dark you have no idea what's inside."
>
> Kaname thought of the faces of the ancients in the dusk behind their shop curtains. Here on this street people with faces like theater dolls must have passed lives like stage lives. The world of the plays – of O-yumi, Jurobei of Awa, the pilgrim O-tsuru, and the rest – must have been just such a town as this. And wasn't O-hisa a part of it? Fifty years ago, a hundred years ago, a woman like her, dressed in the same kimono, was perhaps going down this same street in the spring sun, lunch in hand, on her way to the theater beyond the river. Or perhaps, behind one of these latticed fronts, she was playing "Snow" on her koto. O-hisa was a shade left behind by another age.

This collapse of space and time, of reality and metaphor, represents something of a last chance for Kaname, a *koan* of incommensurates, an opportunity for a modern analog of enlightenment, a recognition of the futility of putting his energy into the pursuits of sensual pleasures, which comes at the cost of failing to develop a spiritual identity, a *psyche*.

In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Kate says to her father who is trying to to foist her on eligible men in marriage, "I pray you, sir, is it your will to make a stale of me amongst these mates?"; a stale being a prop, an effigy, a lure. On some level she understands that the chief threat that marriage presents to her is not being shackled to a man, but to convention; to be a static part of the background behind active players, to give up her inner life and identity.

O-hisa faces a similar challenge and has made headway against it. After Kaname says goodbye to her and his father-in-law after their rural theater excursion, he sees them depart for a tour of Buddhist temples and tries to comfort himself again by imagining her as a doll whose only purpose is to please her master. But his unbidden reveries betray him:

> The pious Buddhist aphorism written in large characters on the sections of O-hisa's sunshade (part of her pilgrim's equipment) gradually faded away: "For the benighted the illusions of the world. For the enlightened the knowledge that all is vanity. In the beginning there was no east and west. Where then is there a north and south?" It seemed to him, as he watched them there on the dock with their sunshades in the growing distance, that between the two of them there was indeed "no east and west" in spite of the thirty years' difference in their ages

O-hisa exhibits an uncanny form of power. Her role suggests the aesthetic concept of *wabi*, the flaw or contradiction in the work that indicates its limitations and points the way out of abstraction into the frame of reality. Although not free, she retains her humanity, her identity, her capacity for discourse, and a modernist ability to make the old new. Like Kate at the end of *Shrew*, her horizons are for the moment unbounded despite the paradoxes of her situation – suggesting a new age equivalent to *nirvana*.

The threads of irony come together at the end of the novel in disturbing, though still oblique, fashion. Kaname and Misako have at last let her father-in-law know of the possibility of their divorce, and the old man has invited them to his traditional Japanese home to talk it out, eventually taking Misako out

to dinner to try to talk sense to her one-on-one. Kaname is left behind to be tended by O-hisa. At this point his last chance for spiritual self-awareness has passed, and he is at the mercy of events. O-hisa offers him a bath in their dark traditional bathroom, which he takes in their uncomfortable traditional tub, sitting glumly in fetid water, unchanged for days according to tradition. In contrast to O-hisa, he is cloistered in by the materiality of the old.

She ushers him to his room to stay the night. He again tries to comfort himself by objectifying O-hisa in his mind. Sitting alone in the dark room, he suddenly thinks he sees O-hisa in the corner – but it is just an antique puppet the old man has bought as a souvenir.

The previous layerings of irony suggest that Kaname is however mistaken in who he mistook the puppet for. The puppet is now fully a reflection of him. The novel suddenly ends when O-hisa enters the room with reading material and redirects Kaname's attention away from the puppet to her. No suggestion is given as to what is to happen next. But…

The reader is fortunate that Tanizaki's wicked wit provides keys to how to approach his ironies. Earlier in the text, while Kaname is still in the phase of bemused observation of his father-in-law's enthusiasms, the old man asks Kaname's opinion of an ancient folk song they have just heard:

> "Did you understand the words, Kaname?…"
> "I have the feeling that I understand vaguely, but I'd probably come up with something wild if I tried to go at it grammatically."
> "Quite true… . The composers didn't think about grammar. If you see generally what was in their hearts, that's really enough. The vagueness is rich in its own way… that first part is about a man who visits a woman secretly at night. Instead of anything direct we have the moon stealing in through the window. And isn't it better really to leave things only hinted at?"

The title itself is a sort of key. It is derived from a Japanese proverb corresponding roughly to the English "one man's poison is another man's meat." But upon what meat precisely do Kaname and Miyako feed? The experiences of the novel are not a pleasure for them, not a fulfillment of alternative preferences; they are not iconoclasts or rebels. They are not nourished, they are miserable.

An ironic reflection is required to complete the meaning of the title. The ironic reading is closer to another proverb in English: "As a dog returns to his own vomit, so a fool repeats his folly." Some gorge on poison, knowing what it is they do. *Samsara*.

After the layerings of Kaname's cruelty and lust that have been depicted over the course of the novel, his next move is easy to project, and thus the circle of dehumanizing obsessions is closed by irony in its purest form, that of total darkness. Kaname will try to seduce O-hisa away from his father-in-law, or to share her with him; and by stepping on this path he will enter Hell.

Home

Marilynne Robinson

Book Club March 10, 2024

Many readers interpret and assimilate a novel solely within the context of their own experience, viewpoint and opinions. For them the work is a mirror, and they typically evaluate it based on whether and to what extent it validates the reader's perspective. But there is such a thing as independent viewpoint. If it were not vital to understand perspectives other than one's own and take them into account, there would be no point to literature. Because the story of a work of literature is not in the narrative that is reflected from the pages onto the reader, the story is the traces of the author's efforts to make the reader recognize that an independent voice exists and to transmit it.

In 2015 a blogger calling themselves "Issendai" published a lengthy series of posts titled "Down the Rabbit Hole: The world of estranged parents' forums".[1] In the introduction, Issendai explained that they have had a long interest in stories of abuse suffered at the hands of people with narcissistic personality disorders. They wanted insights into the viewpoint of the abuser as well, but assumed it would never be possible to find an honest recounting of offenses from the offender's side.

Marilynne Robinson

That is, until Issendai stumbled onto the world of online support forums for estranged parents of adult children. In those forums, parents give lengthy and detailed accounts of their relationships with their children, the breakdowns, the estrangement, and the parents' attempts to reconnect.

[1] https://www.issendai.com/psychology/estrangement/index.html

In reading their stories it quickly becomes apparent that the parents are narcissists with long histories of abuse of their children. It is also apparent that a symptom of that narcissism is refusal to assimilate their children's perspectives:

> The default position is "estranged parent good, estranged child bad," and members treat their children's and grandchildren's boundaries as a display of defiance that must be crushed.

The most haunting theme of the stories is the parents' wondering about the reasons for the estrangement:

> one of the cries of the estranged parent movement is, "Why won't they tell us why?"

But reading the accounts in depth makes it clear that the children have told the parents in excruciating detail why they broke contact, and their conditions for reconciliation. The routine reaction of the parents is to brand the testimony given them as lies, or simply to dismiss their childrens' reasons as invalid.

The question "Why?" hangs over Marilynne Robinson's novel *Home* like a pall. Set in 1956 in the small town of Gilead, Iowa, where a woman named Glory Boughton is caretaker for her elderly retired Presbyterian minister father Robert, the domestic routine is disrupted when their estranged brother/son Jack suddenly communicates that he is going to try coming home after a disappearance that has lasted two decades.

Why did he leave? Why had he always been so stand-offish? Jack, the bright, talented, charming one in a close-knit, gregarious family of eight children always seemed to hold himself back, preferring an inner sanctuary to participating in group events. His reserve degenerated to delinquency and petty theft in his teens. He drank and caroused through his first two years of college until he impregnated a local girl but refused to marry her – the one crossed boundary his father couldn't overlook. Jack then disappeared, thereafter (as understood by sparse accounts of him filtering back) living hand-to-mouth, on the road, in and out of menial jobs and jail.

Reverend Boughton professes that he is honestly eager to reconcile with Jack, and Jack seems game to try himself, but they can't find ways to approach one another; they are oil and water.

Robert has a life-long friend, Congregationalist minister John Ames, who serves as his confidant, confessor and good-humored antagonist in decades of debates and religious disputes. Ames is so close to the Boughton family that Jack sees him as amounting to an alternate father. Jack makes an attempt at rapprochement with him as an entree to breaking the impasse with his father, but finds himself the subject of a stinging rebuke in the form of a Sunday sermon from Ames, as he relates to Glory:

> "Ah, little sister, these old fellows play rough. They look so harmless, and the next thing you know, you're counting broken bones again."
>
> "What happened?"
>
> "He preached. The text was Hagar and Ishmael, the application was the disgraceful abandonment of children by their fathers. And the illustration was my humble self, sitting there beside his son with the eyes of Gilead

upon me. I think I was aghast. His intention, no doubt. To appall me, that is, to turn me white, as I am sure he did."

The crux of the novel comes when Jack tries finally to confront both Ames and his father about his state of estrangement from them; angrily, but stealthily, in a form that his father is predisposed to give ear to – a theological debate:

"I've wondered from time to time if I might not be an instance of predestination. A sort of proof. If I may not experience predestination in my own person. That would be interesting, if the consequences were not so painful. |For other people. If it did not seem as though I spread a contagion of s ome |kind. Of misfortune. Is that possible?"

Ames said, "No. That isn't possible. Not at all…"

Jack said, "I'm sorry. I don't mean to be disrespectful. My question is, are there people who are simply born evil, live evil lives, and then go to hell?"

Ames took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes. "Scripture is not really clear on that point. Generally, a person's behavior is consistent with his nature…"

Boughton chuckled. "Do I detect a little circularity in your reasoning, Reverend Eisenhower?…"

Lila said, "What about being saved?… If you can't change, there don't seem much point in it…"

"Mrs. Ames has made an excellent point," Boughton said, his voice statesmanlike… "Yes, I worried a long time about how the mystery of predestination could be reconciled with the mystery of salvation."

"No conclusions?"

"None that I can recall just now." He said, "It seems as though the conclusions are never as interesting as the questions. I mean, they're not what you remember." He closed his eyes.

This exchange lays bare the natures of Boughton, Ames and Jack, and the irreconcilable differences between them.

Boughton may be capable of a measure of charity and of hope, but he lacks faith. He has filled the hole missing faith has left in his soul with certainty of the rightness of his arguments – and the price of relationship or reconciliation with him is never to challenge that certainty in any meaningful way. That is why he mail orders trunkfuls of books on theology but doesn't read them (for years Jack hid money, bad report cards and teacher's notes in their pages, knowing they'd never be found). That is why he revels in his decades-long debate series with Ames, interpreting their lack of resolution as confirmation of the unassailability of his positions. More likely Ames has taken his measure and discreetly allows him to believe the debates go on, for the sake of their friendship, when actually Ames has already dismissed him out of hand.

Ames has neither faith nor charity. He is a pharisee. That is, he values the Word and the Law over compassion for his charges. And what he most values about the Law is that it validates his position as preacher, minister and head of the church, which makes him the decider as to who is to be a member of the congregation and who is to be cast out. And the price for his grace is never to challenge or point out the irreconcilable contradictions in his beliefs and actions, the cracks in the foundation of his religion that the Word and the Law plaster over.

And so Jack can't communicate with his father because he is unwilling to profess a faith or salvation that he doesn't believe in. But much more passionately, he can't bear Ames' hypocrisy. He lays out to Ames that the Word and the Law require that Ames must either accept predestination entirely (in which case the preacher has no special place in God's plan), or he must accept Jack back into the community with an open hand and a forgiving heart. To do otherwise makes Ames a sinner. Damningly, Ames understands perfectly well the thrust of Jack's argument, and continues to rebuff him anyway, doing what he has always done with the senior Boughton: sweep irreconcilable conflicts under the rug.

After the above exchange, the Whys of the story are illuminated – Jack's independent viewpoint can at last be understood. As the brightest among his siblings, Jack from an early age sensed his father's shortcomings and his godfather's hypocrisy. Though perhaps he could not articulate his misgivings, neither could he ignore them and join in family activities wholeheartedly as the other, duller children did.

At some point Jack realized consciously just what his father was and was not. And like Biff in *Death of a Salesman*, the insight shattered his world in a way that he could not recover from. Like Biff, he cleared out; and ate the bitter bread of the exile, mixed with the dust of the road, in penance for sins that were not his. And like Biff, after long painful years he allowed himself to forget somewhat why he left, and thence hoped that perhaps there was a way he could return. What he found, however, was renewed clarity about what drove him to depart, and acceptance of why he can never come home.

But with illumination comes grace, and on the last page the reader discovers that Jack is despite all in a state of grace; unlike his fathers, who ultimately are revealed to be narcissists. Though lacking faith, Jack is a penitant, mourning the world's sins and able to feel compassion and charity toward those who truly suffer. And because he is in a state of grace his prayers will be answered: after the passing of more long years has washed the family's sins down the river, Jack's son will be welcomed into his house the way he never could be.

Democracy

Joan Didion

Book Club June 30, 2024

> I am a thirty four year old woman with long straight hair and an old bikini bathing suit and bad nerves sitting on an island in the middle of the Pacific waiting for a Tidal Wave that will not come. [1]
>
> I spent what seemed to many people I knew an eccentric amount of time in Honolulu, the particular aspect of which lent me the illusion that I could at any moment order from room service a revisionist theory of my own history, garnished with a vanda orchid. [2]

I knew little of Joan Didion other than from stories in the media and talk show appearances until I read *The Year of Magical Thinking* when it came out in 2005, her memoir of coming to terms with her husband John Gregory Dunne's sudden death. At the time I was reading a biography of Mary Shelley, which detailed the derangement of grief she suffered after the deaths of her small children Clara and William, the one following not long after the other. I wanted to understand that state of consciousness better, the better to understand Shelley's literary work.

Joan Didion

[1] "In the Islands," The White Album
[2] "The White Album," ibid.

Fortuitously for me and my reading history, correspondences appear between *Democracy*, published in 1984, and *The Year of Magical Thinking* that make the latter seem designed to complete the former. More precisely, the two seem written to complement each other, the earlier book in an uncanny sort of anticipatory mode. Didion is part of the American literary tradition of mourners who express a grief that is at the same time retrospective and prospective, alongside Emily Dickinson and Nathaniel Hawthorne; expressing a grief that works as prophecy as well as remembrance.

Didion grew up in California and lived there for most of her early writing career in the 1960s through the '80s, an explainer of the ways of that state to the public. Hawaii must have appeared to her as a living analogy: as California to most of her readers was a distant and exotic place – nominally white American but with a mixed heritage, and folkways, history and loyalties of its own – so Hawaii must have felt to her – an other America one step further removed. And so the novel's protagonist, Honolulu native Inez Victor, is something of a many-layered analog of the author: born and raised in relative privilege, had a romance with an older man but turned from him to marry and start a family with someone nearer her own age, shuttled between her home state and New York building the family business. But Inez is something of an orthogonal analogy if there can be such a thing; an example both of a conventional life path fortunately narrowly avoided and a fulfilling destiny regrettably slipped through the fingers – a shadow self, with multiple projections onto the backdrops of possibility.

And this shadow is fugitive, seen in the corners of eyes and grainy snippets of film, standing in the wings at conventions and speeches. She has the anticipatory stare at the horizon through dark glasses of a native of the frontier. Her native Pacific horizon is where the flares of nuclear tests appeared, and where the tidal wave would come from. Didion the narrator says: "As for wanting to work with refugees, she finally did, in Kuala Lumpur, and it occurred to me when I saw her there that Inez Victor had herself been a kind of refugee. She had the protective instincts of a successful refugee. She never looked back."

Democracy was published two years after Didion's niece was brutally murdered by her boyfriend. But if the grief of that made a mark on this work, it is not reflective, but if anything works simply as validation of the prophetic mode of the watcher at the frontier, the mourner in waiting. Was that mode born in Inez when her mother left her father and returned to the mainland, abandoning her and her older sister Janet as well? Or when her lover described the light of the nuclear tests to her? Or when she left him to go to college on the mainland, married a young man with good prospects, became the wife of a senator, of a presidential candidate?

> I recall being present one morning in a suite in the Hotel Doral in Miami, amid the debris of Harry Victor's 1972 campaign for the nomination, when a feature writer from the Associated Press asked Inez what she believed to be the "major cost" of public life.
>
> "Memory, mainly," Inez said…
>
> During the 1972 campaign and even later I thought of Inez Victor's capacity for passive detachment as an affectation born of boredom, the frivolous habit of an essentially idle mind. After the events which occurred in the spring and summer of 1975 I thought of it differently. I thought of it as the essential mechanism

> for living a life in which the major cost was memory. Drop fuel. Jettison cargo. Eject crew.

In *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Didion tells her husband:

> "You should have married someone more like Lenny." Lenny was my sister-in-law, Nick's wife. Lenny entertained and had lunch with friends and ran her house effortlessly and wore beautiful French dresses and suits and was always available to look at a house or give a baby shower or take visitors from out of town to Disneyland. "If I wanted to marry someone more like Lenny I would have married someone more like Lenny," John would say, at first patiently, then less so.

Inez and Lenny, shadows, ruminations on a life avoided. Of course, Inez like Lenny could not have known what lay ahead, what shadows even this conventional life portended. Inez's father went to North Africa "looking for himself" (that is to say, finally exploring his latent homosexuality, another haunting alternative life shadow); he comes back with a young friend named Mark and develops a revulsion for the hypocrisy and corruption of his privileged class – which culminates in him walking into the lanai of his daughter Janet's house and shooting her to death, as well as a congressman Janet had been having an affair with.

Didion could not have known about the shadows ahead either, but in grief's prophetic mode she wrote about it in *Democracy* before she memorialized it in *Year*. When Inez runs away from her family mess, her former lover Jack Lovett appears and takes her into his care. He has remained faithful to her all these years in his own way, even through two marriages, quietly keeping tabs on her as he worked for the CIA in the Pacific region. They rekindle their affair, but their time together is short. He dies suddenly of a heart attack:

> She had sat on the edge of the pool with Jack Lovett's head in her lap until the Tamil doctor arrived. The Tamil doctor said that the twenty minutes she had spent giving Jack Lovett CPR had been beside the point. The Tamil doctor said that what happened had been instantaneous, circulatory, final. In the blood, he said, and simultaneously snapped his fingers and drew them across his throat, a short chop.

There is a correspondence between this passage and Didion's description of her husband's death after he collapsed at their dinner table – EMTs were called, they worked on him for some time, took him to the hospital, where she was informed he was gone. Much later, she got around to reading the autopsy report:

> "Lividity." Post-mortem lividity…
> I looked up "lividity" in the handbook on forensic pathology that John kept on the shelf above his desk. "Although lividity is variable, it normally begins to form immediately after death and is usually clearly perceptible within an hour

or two." If lividity was clearly perceptible to the triage nurses by 10:10 p.m., then, it would have started forming an hour before.

An hour before was when I was calling the ambulance.

Which meant he was dead then.

After that instant at the dinner table he was never not dead.

I now know how I'm going to die, he had said in 1987 after the left anterior descending artery had been opened by angioplasty.

You no more know how you're going to die than I do or anyone else does, I had said in 1987.

But she was wrong of course. But was the similarity of descriptions of the suddenness of the two men's deaths really prophetic? Or did Didion shape the description of her own husband's death to conform to the fiction she had written decades earlier? Does the prophetic nature of grief make a mockery of attempts to create plausible narratives?

She added a memory of her husband triggered by the sight of the stained glass window at St John the Divine church:

> …the Christmas of 1990, the Christmas during which John and I had been doing the crash rewrite on the picture that never got made, had involved that window. We had staged the denouement of the picture at St. John the Divine, placed a plutonium device in the bell tower (only the protagonist realizes that the device is at St. John the Divine and not the World Trade towers), blown the unwitting carrier of the device straight out through the big rose window.

But that movie was made, that is a description of the climax of a film called The Peacemaker[3], released in 1997, starring George Clooney and Nicole Kidman, whose screenplay Joan played no role in writing. It seems she saw and remembered the movie, picked out a shiny piece of it set in a place she was intimately familiar with, and nested it into her story, like a magpie. And why not? If grief takes over memory and leaves room for nothing but reflection and anticipation, why bother to construct a believable story? Do these derangements of narrative play a role in her literary project of depicting the nature of grief? Is freedom to order up a new personal history one of the compensatory gifts of grief, a prophet's prerogative?

Didion arranged a new narrative for Inez. After Jack's death she did not return to her family, but realized her ambition to work with refugees, as an administrator of camps in Malaysia. This narrative seems to have been inspired by a couple Joan and John met a few years before the writing of *Democracy*, and were described in *Year*: Joseph[4] and Gertrude[5] Black. The two couples socialized while participating in cultural exchange programs in Indonesia. The Blacks were a successful academic couple who, late in their careers, went to work for the Roosevelt Foundation, traveling the world to teach and administer

[3] Except in the actual film, the presumptive target is the UN Headquarters building, not the World Trade towers. Another example of back-projection of tragedy, reflection transmuted into prophecy.

[4] https://dimes.rockarch.org/agents/Np7ZppjH83SJj9N9vu6b3x

[5] https://www.legacy.com/us/obituaries/legacyremembers/gertrude-black-obituary?id=28657004

aid in undeveloped regions. John later spoke of them regretfully as emblematic of a road not taken by him and Joan, a life of service.

Regrets and service are the products of the parallel retrospective and prophetic natures of grief, which collapse narrative. For in the end, the tidal wave came; not to Hawaii where Joan had been hiding, but to Indonesia and Malaysia, where Inez was working. It came one year almost to the day that John died, marking the end of the year of magical thinking. It made refugees and mourners of everyone in its path that it did not kill; rich and poor, tourist and resident, equally in need of aid. Joan anticipated it, but she could not have predicted it; just as she could not have predicted that her own daughter would be dead less than a year later, at almost exactly the same age Joan and Inez were at the publication of Democracy.

These are simply correspondences, notions that prophets and the grieving trade in. But Inez found correspondences more reliable than narratives in keeping the dead and their memory with her. And eventually so did Joan. She caught up with her shadow. The watchers on the frontier know they must be prepared to run, to escape, to warn at any time, and the watchers and the mourners know they are one. The final prophecy of grief is refugee status and mourning for all survivors, each producing the other. That prophecy is in the end a gift of compassion; in other words, roll up your sleeves now, because you know the wave and the survivors are coming.

Ephemera:

What news

What news, what news in this our tott’ring state?

System

“I must create a system, or be enslaved by another man’s.”

– William Blake, Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion