

Collected Prose

David Borodin

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NOTE: See p. 3 for the Table of Contents and pp. 491-5 for notes on the author and the work.

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(*See the colophon on page 496 for a note regarding dates of composition of individual items.)

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Essay #1: *The Dangers of Sentimentality*

The Dangers of Sentimentality

A Book-Length Essay

On the Aesthetic, Ethical, Educational, Economic, and even Posthumous,
Consequences of Emotional Dishonesty

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(*This essay of 190 pages was composed largely between 2015 and late 2019 and then revised somewhat in March of 2020 before a 53-page addition—Section XIV (Ethical Consequences, part 11)—was added in July and August 2020, all followed by what now constitutes section XV (Educational Consequences) in 2023.

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Essay #1: *The Dangers of Sentimentality*I. *Introduction: Preliminary Definition, Etymology, and Thesis**The Dangers of Sentimentality*I. *Introduction: Preliminary Definition, Etymology, and Thesis*

“Sentiment” is an English noun that has been used for centuries to signify at least three closely related cognitive dispositions: a view of, or attitude toward, a situation or event; a feeling or emotion with regard to something; and, more generally, an opinion. Deriving from the Latin *sentire in mente* (“feeling an idea”), this English word “sentiment” still bears the bulk of its traditional associations with an endearing quality of human behavior – perhaps even one of the central attributes of what it is to be human.

Yet the morphological derivations of this lexeme, such as “sentimental,” “sentimentalist,” and “sentimentality,” have gradually come to denote in the minds of more sophisticated speakers an incompatibly different sense from that still prevalent in our root word, “sentiment” – this despite an increasing *popular* confusion that treats these derivations as if still synonymous with it.

Indeed, the informed distinction made today between “sentiment” and “sentimentality” is anything but a superficial one and has as its close parallel in the difference *even popularly recognized* between the meanings of “grandeur” and “grandiosity.”

This latter term is widely understood to represent an unrealistic, excessive, and pretentious delusion of the former. For example, an

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astute critic might praise the “grandeur” found in a particular painting, poem, or musical composition under her scrutiny, but certainly *not* by referring to it as “grandiosity” which, to the contrary, would be understood by her appropriate readership as a *disparagement*, cuing them in on what she perceives to be the artist’s indulgence in mere cheap effects in place of rigorous control over the materials at hand.

Now, this disparity in usage seems to me roughly analogous to the one observed by Mark Twain as existing between “the right word” and “the *almost* right word,” which Twain likened to “the difference between lightning and a lightning *bug*.” Nevertheless, we often find “sentimentality” and its two sibling derivations still used (or, rather, *abused*) by many in an *approving* way, as though to recommend the sentimentalist as a person on whom we can count for a reassuringly human sensitivity to the personal experience of feelings and emotions that we refer to collectively as “sentiment.”

And while all these words may indeed have conveyed this related sense to English speakers back in the mid-18th century, when the word “sentimentality” was first introduced, it appears to have taken little more than a generation or two before these honorifics began to ring in the ears of more attentive practitioners of our language as pejoratives — and I believe with ample justification.

For, unlike the original root word “sentiment,” which has rightly retained much of its respectable sense, “sentimentality” had rather quickly come to serve the more sensitized users of our language as a

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kind of red flag: one warning of a type of *emotional dishonesty* or *disingenuousness* in operation, wherein fears of engagement with the confusing complexities of real life are assuaged by exhibitions of emotions inappropriate to the occasion, all indulged toward the conventionalizing delusion of a safer, simpler reality.

But before moving on to an expanded definition of sentimentality, along with an exploration of what I believe to be the predictable psychic underpinnings of this mindset (surveyed in Section IV, below), I would like first to invite my readers to easily recognize the syndrome when they see it. And I believe there to be no more obvious place to start than where we are right now: *in words*. By this I mean in the aesthetic perspective afforded by the literary experience. I offer two well-known examples below to start: one in verse, the other in prose.

II. Aesthetics, Part 1: *Knowing it When We See it: Sentimentality in Poetry*

When Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, in their influential textbook *Understanding Poetry* (1938), vigorously chopped down “Trees,” the infamously famous poem by Joyce Kilmer (1913), it was because Kilmer's arboreal keepsake lent itself so easily for dissection as the quintessential example of sentimentality at work in (bad) poetry. I transcribe this exquisite specimen here to remind us of the aptness of their selection of “Trees” in this regard:

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I think that I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.
A tree whose hungry mouth is prest
Against the earth's sweet flowing breast;
A tree that looks at God all day,
And lifts her leafy arms to pray;
A tree that may in summer wear
A nest of robins in her hair;
Upon whose bosom snow has lain;
Who intimately lives with rain.
Poems are made by fools like me,
But only God can make a tree.

Now, let us put aside the *technical* reasons Brooks and Warren have put forth in demonstration of how "Trees" fails to work persuasively *as a poem* (i.e., *as a work of art*, to be judged on formal grounds, rather than *as a piece of devotional rhetoric*, to be judged solely on the emotional appeal of its "message"). Kilmer's lack of poetic skill is not my real concern here; rather, it is his lack of the ability to excite an honest emotional commitment in his reader. So, where precisely does such an ability fail him? What *is* it exactly about these dozen lines of wholesome leafy goodness that, on purely human terms, makes sensitive readers reach reflexively for the chain saw? I maintain the answer here is simple: *emotional insincerity*, which we can feel dripping from these lines like sap.

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This is because instead of expressing what it feels like to live mindfully, or even *reverently*, in the presence of a sublime example of the natural world around him, Kilmer simply offers us up a cute dashboard ornament in the vague outline of a tree. For example, no fewer than nine of these twelve lines comprise simplistic anthropomorphisms, allowing Kilmer to pretend his subject is *not* a tree but a person—sort of. Yes, even as a human, his subject may be discerned only dimly, having been reduced to a mere posturing of pious faith. In other words, in place of an artistic intensification of experience, Kilmer proffers us a mere *souvenir*.

Yes, Kilmer has managed to reduce our rich associations of a vast and august family of living beings with which our species has enjoyed a long, complex, and vital relationship into a simplistic devotional image suitable for enclosure in a snow globe. Indeed, the pious adulation with which his icon is revealed to us could easily be borrowed for the worship of Jesus, Mary, or Kim Il Sung. And if we still harbor any doubt about the real intent of the poem, its hypocritically foolish couplet makes it abundantly clear: “Trees” is but a *devotional relic*, one to be memorized by impressionable young minds toward their proper worship of God, whom Kilmer congratulates for the most intelligent design of this all-purpose perennial he has just rendered unrecognizable. In other words, Kilmer has bequeathed to us a *pious*

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fake. For, it seems he is simply too mawkishly teary-eyed to be in a condition to actually see the tree standing before him. What he relates to us as having been observed is unrecognizably distorted in the emotional blur of his simplistic idealizing. I read these lines and wonder whether our poetaster would even know a *real* tree if he walked into one. (For my own rather irreverent parody of this superlative specimen of the sentimental, see my sonnet “In Praise of Plain Pornography: A Meditation on Smut,” which may be found listed under Section F., “Assorted Musings,” in the table of contents of my *Collected Poems*.)

But let’s be clear: The danger I warn about in this essay is not just the *aesthetically* unpleasant reality of yet another bad poem. No, lovers of poetry—or of any other form of art, for that matter—learn naturally to navigate around unsatisfactory examples in their pursuit of artistic satisfaction, and most succeed in doing so without succumbing to the narcissism of actually feeling injured by each bad poem they find. I believe the real danger of the sentimental mindset that made “Trees” possible is less its bric-a-brac aesthetic than the ethical implications of its inherent *insincerity*: the elaborate posturing after deep feeling that ultimately cripples one’s ability to communicate genuine sentiment.

III. Aesthetics, Part 2: *Knowing it When We See it: Sentimentality in Prose*

Here, as promised, is another famous example of sentimentality in literature, this one from a novel rather than a poem. It is a passage

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cherished both by the sentimental readers for whom it was dished up and, ironically, by those shrewd and assiduous critics rightly offended by its unabashed expression of sentimentality. Commonly referred to as “The Death of Little Nell,” it is a passage from Dickens's novel, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, in which the omniscient narrator describes to us the impact of the death of young Nell Trent, the beautiful, egregiously virtuous, and hopelessly selfless 13-year-old orphaned heroine who had been found dead at the end of an impressive trajectory of uncomplaining, selfless deeds of valor:

For she was dead. There, upon her little bed, she lay at rest. The solemn stillness was no marvel now.

She was dead. No sleep so beautiful and calm, so free from trace of pain, so fair to look upon. She seemed a creature fresh from the hand of God, and waiting for the breath of life; not one who had lived and suffered death.

Her couch was dressed here and there with some winter berries and green leaves, gathered in a spot she had been used to favour. "When I die, put near me something that has loved the light, and had the sky above it always." Those were her words.

She was dead. Dear, gentle, patient, noble Nell, was dead. Her little bird—a poor slight thing the pressure of a finger would have crushed—was stirring nimbly in its cage; and the strong heart of its child-mistress was mute and motionless for ever.

Where were the traces of her early cares, her sufferings, and fatigues? All gone. Sorrow was dead indeed in her, but peace and perfect happiness were born; imaged in her tranquil beauty and profound repose....

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Well, given the right circumstances—perhaps a tumbler of Scotch and a comfortable chair by the fire after a satisfying meal—and this passage can be experienced as nothing short of *delicious*. Indeed, Oscar Wilde famously appraised the syrupy sentimentality of this passage as follows: **“One must have a heart of stone to read the death of Little Nell without dissolving into tears...of laughter.”**

Why? Why would anyone erupt in tears of laughter rather than of heartbreak and compassion after reading these words? Well, because they are words chosen precisely with the intent to *extort our sentiment*: to coerce from us via deceptive means some *gratuitous* emotional reactions the author had predatorily fixed in his crosshairs. Yes, this passage represents little more than a sanitized idealization, both of a child *and* of death—one consciously designed to jump-start our pity and taste for tragedy. We are the attempted victims of an emotional hoodwinking, wherein an author has misrepresented the world his readers know in order to obtain from them a desired emotional response. For, this was not the death of a *child* but rather of a *poster image of child-like perfection*, one in which the unrealistic attributes of perfect goodness that are the dream of all unrealistic parents are shamelessly exaggerated in a cheap effort to make our little heroine's demise seem all the more tragic. Indeed, it would be disingenuous of us to shed tears of anything *but* ironic laughter at the ludicrous incongruousness of the emotional deception offered us.

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We *all* agree—those of us who cry here out of despair as well as those who do so out of ironic hilarity—that there is nothing at all laughable about the death of a child. And Wilde was quite obviously *not* suggesting that there was. Rather, he was criticizing the author's lamentable lapse of taste demonstrated in stooping to try and *cheat us of our tears*. For, Dickens yearns to have us *try on* the feeling of great loss, and not so much the loss of a fictional character intended to represent a child with whom we can actually associate, but that of an unrealistic stereotype of thankful, uncomplaining, inhuman goodness *posing* as a little girl. In other words, he wants us to shed tears for the tragic injustice of the death of *especially good* children.

But we needn't take the word of literary critics toward such an appraisal; the author's ever-so-reliable narrator apprises us of this quite unequivocally. Take, for example, the second paragraph, which would have us see our heroine as one who “seemed a creature fresh from the hand of God, and waiting for the breath of life; **not one who had lived and suffered death.**” Yes, we are informed outright, with a directness precluding the need for well-honed interpretive skills, that our Nell is but an *effigy*, not a character suggesting a flesh-and-blood child afflicted with the quirks and ambivalences of a real human being.

“The death of Little Nell” is not an isolated example of sentimentality among Dickens's novels, only a particularly famous one. The melodramatic death of poor little Jo the crossing sweeper in *Bleakhouse*

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(possibly too poor to afford even the final letter of his name) as well as the pitiable life of poor little crippled Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol* and a small schoolhouse of other tragic poor little poster-boy caricatures of downtrodden innocent childhood goodness testify to the effective following for sentimentality in Victorian reading material.

Now, despite his penchant for such tear-jerkers, Dickens happened also to be an accomplished literary artist, and numerous of his admirers have come forth in defense of the author for these lapses in taste, declaring them to be examples rather of the great writer's compassion for the infamous plight of children in Victorian England. And indeed, Dickens *was* genuinely moved by this plight and *was* genuinely successful in awakening a consciousness of it among his vast readership. These are surely good things. But one need not be a cynic to be made uncomfortable with the way our author attempts to elicit our pity *dishonestly*—yes, by means of conspicuously simplified, prettified idealizing. In other words, that he wants his reader to feel compassion for the downtrodden is commendable; that he stoops to insure his success in this by exaggerating his victims' virtues (beyond the recognizably human) until our compassion is less elicited than *coerced*—now, *this* is contemptible, artistically as well as morally.

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After these two literary examples, let us move on from what had been basically an *aesthetic* argument to one more centered in the *ethical* ramifications of the subject mindset—one in which we can explore the detrimental effect sentimentality can have on the day-to-day living of our lives as social creatures. But in preparation for this I offer an attempt to closely define our subject and explore its roots.

Sentimentality is a form of emotional dishonesty characterized by the flaunting of emotions inappropriate to the occasion. It is a mode of thinking about one's world that allows its practitioner the avoidance of direct engagement in the unpleasant realities of life by proffering a surrogate currency of superficial, *conventionalized* coinage. From within the safety of this choreographed response to an uncomfortable situation, the sentimentalist can pretend to an investment in a difficult question while actually ignoring it. In other words, sentimentality's seductive call to the emotionally fearful is but the opportunity to purchase at bargain price an anaesthetizing distance from the honest work and responsibility of rational thinking and honest communication. And like any cheap gratification, the sentimentalist's indulgence tends toward generalized, yet exaggerated, expression. Its conventionalized theatrical display provides a necessary distraction to the emotional sleight of hand being staged.

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At bottom, therefore, sentimentality is an appeal to a shallow, uncomplicated response to circumstances that reasonably call for something more involved. It is a smoke-and-mirrors attempt to manipulate both practitioner and audience into believing there to be easy, unambiguous answers to inherently complex questions, inviting the latter to share in the former's delusion of an idealized world, cleansed of ambiguity, that feels safer and more reliable than the one that might otherwise be explored rationally, honestly, and bravely. *It is the relishing of souvenirs in place of experiences.*

Sentimentality, usually a symptom of narcissism and nearly always the result of inhibition, allows its self-indulgent user to play-act in counterfeit emotions. The sentimentalist's need to circumvent experience of negative emotions from behind masquerades of meretricious exhibition is accomplished easiest through the obfuscation of one's true feelings, thereby sabotaging any honest communication with others and resulting in an inevitable social dissonance of thwarted expectations and mounting resentments.

The language of dissimulation necessary toward effecting this state of avoidance tends toward the disingenuous, generic, and pre-packaged rather than the honest, specific, and qualified. And, therefore, sentimentalists tend to find their hunger for validation unsatisfied by the social engagements of negotiation and dialogue, preferring the more dependable prerogative of Validation by AUTHORITY. This authority,

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an amorphous abstraction of an all-purpose, nonspecific nature, is typically recognized by its worshippers *not* upon careful consideration of persuasive evidence but simply on the strength of reputation. It is a ghostly notion that may be conjured from nothing, appealed to, and upheld on high amid the empyrean of an uncritical imagination, all effected through any number of mind-clenching adherences to the dictates of dogma—that form of obedient power worship in which a belief is validated as *necessarily and incontrovertibly true* only because *it is said to be so*.

The convention of dogma admits various expressions, such as tradition, received opinion, God, or some other entity outside of reason. Whatever the source, however, our practitioner's longing for the safety of reductive, one-dimensional answers to life's most subtly complicated questions, reinforced with this gratuitous, unquestioning reverence for authority, conspires to provide the best possible conditions for the flourishing of ideology, especially in that most virulent strain of brain-sanitization known as religious fundamentalism.

And so, it should not be surprising how often we find religion, particularly in its fundamentalist strains, closely linked with attitudes of a sentimental nature. For, the ceremony of magical thinking known as religion continues not only to survive, *but to thrive*, in the scientific age, where the language of evidentiary-based belief is widely spoken, principally because of religion's savvy adaptive talent for *ignoring what is being said*—yes, by hearing only what it wants to hear (namely, that

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which does not threaten to invalidate its reason for being). And this may be effected most comfortably through the aforementioned phenomenon of dogma, the irrational privileging of something authoritatively expressed (typically *written*) over that which is *demonstrably* true. Indeed, dogmatists congratulate themselves as being *especially virtuous* in believing whatever flapdoodle they wish to believe true not only in spite of, but *because of*, its flagrantly inconsistent relationship with evidentiary testing. It's as if the heroic obstinacy necessary toward sustaining unprovable fantasies in the face of contrary evidence were, *in and of itself*, proof of high moral virtue.

Now, take this proud resistance to the discipline of reason, and add to it that most welcome protection against skepticism lent by the taboo of blasphemy, and it becomes obvious how religion offers the ideal mental climate in which fearful, irrational minds may live vicariously in the safe, unlikely, make-believe world of eternal justice, goodness, and ultimate perfection—far from the less-than-perfect realities of life on earth.

“A sentimentalist,” Oscar Wilde succinctly observed (in *De Profundis*), “is simply one who wants to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it.” “The sentimentalist is always a cynic at heart. Indeed, sentimentality is merely the bank holiday of cynicism.”

William Butler Yeats, emphasizing the self-deceptive, disingenuous nature of this mode of mental existence, distinguished it from rhetoric as follows: “Rhetoric is fooling others; sentimentality is fooling

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yourself.” Arthur Koestler described the sentimentalist's psychic world as a “metaphysical brothel for emotions.” And pushing our exploration into more threatening territory yet, James Baldwin (in “Everybody’s Protest Novel,” a critique of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*) warned that sentimentality “is always, therefore, the signal of secret and violent inhumanity, the mask of cruelty.”

Yes, *cruelty*. For, counterintuitive as such a formulation might ring in many an ear still today, the sentimentalist, in his teary-eyed worship of sanitized symbols of love, childhood, freedom, homeland, and authority, effectively distances himself from the seemingly imperfect *living* entities for which these serve as comforting simplistic *surrogates*. His theatrical cheer-leading, flag-waving salutes to the mere bromides of life concerning women, babies, God, and homeland are only so many goosesteps removed from the cruel fascistic menaces of misogyny, homophobia, nationalism, xenophobia, racism, and totalitarianism. His world is a place not of commitment but of *amusement*, preferring as he does the *sights and sounds* of engagement in the world to the actual experience of living it.

In other words, rather than love someone the sentimentalist loves *the idea of loving someone*. Therefore, as a stranger to the world of genuine feelings, he is most susceptible to the cynical distrust of these most human qualities he finds so threatening, as well as the living beings that harbor them, making it that much easier for him to discount the value of *actual* human beings in relation to the *ideals* against which he

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measures them. And historically, the sense of social disenfranchisement that becomes the last refuge of the sentimentalist leaves brutality as his most desperate solution.

V. Ethical Consequences, Part 2: *From Chocolate-Box Art to Teary-Eyed Despots*

Thus, we should not find it surprising to read accounts of blatant sentimentality exhibited by history's preeminent virtuosos of brutality, such as Adolf Hitler, whose utopian idealism of racial purity provides us a virtual GPS map of the sentimentalist's world. Worthy of our critical consideration in this regard is a painting in oil and idealism executed by the budding young despot, age 23, that shows a rosy-cheeked, golden-haired Aryan Christ child safe in the rustic paws of a *Völkisch* Virgin emblazoned to the foreground of a stage-set landscape of sun-beamed purity and promise. These are pigments that have been deliberately coaxed into a visual cliché *easily* the pictorial equivalent of Kilmer's "Trees." Indeed, it is an expression of vapid sentimentality surpassed only by that more recent master of chocolate-box art and mail-order living, the late "Thomas Kinkade, Painter of Light™." (More on the fabulous Kinkade later. In the meanwhile, I reproduce a thumbnail image of this masterpiece of *kitsch*, Hitler's *Madonna and Child* of 1913, on my website, found both on the *Poems [& Prose Works]* and *Images* pages.)

What we apprehend in this painting needs no requisite training to see: an icon of philistinism revealing the emotionally bankrupt worldview of a man capable of crying at the thought of some *idealized*

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blond cherub while perfunctorily consigning *real* human beings to their grisly death in the gas chambers. You may examine the tear ducts of the sadistic tyrant of your choice; chances are you'll find them similarly set to leak sentimentally at the sanctified images of impersonal perfection rather than to the inhumanly cruel treatment of actual people.

Vladimir Nabokov, as so often, said it best of all (this time in a Cornell lecture on Fyodor Dostoyevsky later published in *Lectures in Russian Literature*):

We must distinguish between “sentimental” and “sensitive.” A sentimentalist may be a perfect brute in his free time. A sensitive person is never a cruel person. Sentimental Rousseau, who could weep over a progressive idea, distributed his many natural children through various poorhouses and workhouses and never gave a hoot for them. A sentimental old maid may pamper her parrot and poison her niece. The sentimental politician may remember Mother’s Day and ruthlessly destroy a rival. Stalin loved babies. Lenin sobbed at the opera, especially at the *Traviata* [literally “woman gone astray,” Giuseppe Verdi’s 1853 melodrama after Dumas, *filis*, showcasing a pitiable prostitute dying from tuberculosis in the throes of love]. A whole century of authors praised the simple life of the poor, and so on. Remember that when we speak of sentimentalists, among them Richardson, Rousseau, Dostoevski, we mean the non-artistic exaggeration of familiar emotions meant to provoke automatically traditional compassion in the reader. Dostoevski never really got over the influence which the European mystery novel and the sentimental novel made upon him. The sentimental influence implied that kind of conflict he liked – placing virtuous people in pathetic

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situations and then extracting from these situations the last ounce of pathos.

VI. Ethical Consequences, Part 3: Women's Rights v. God, History's Worst**Abortionist**

Yet, examples of dangerous sentimentalists are hardly confined to the ranks of baby-kissing genocidal despots; they may also be seen to include the rallied masses of ostensibly moral-minded folk who, under the influence of religious thinking, perversely argue for a deeper obligation to the mere *conception* of a human life, such as represented by an *insentient* embryo, than to the *complete and fully conscious* life suffering unmistakably before their eyes in the form of a pregnant woman. Astonishingly, this is to say they feel a stronger commitment to a nascent *prospective* organism – one not yet possessed of a fully working nervous system and still bearing a high chance of being spontaneously aborted *naturally*, with or without the mother's knowledge – than to a fully developed human being in whom there can be *no question* of anything but a *profound* capacity for conscious suffering. It should be clear to all *rational* people at this sad point that sentimentality has here proudly volunteered as *midwife to misogyny*. For, let's face it: Were the males of our species the ones who gave birth, the question of an adult parent's rights over his own body would *never* have been on the table to begin with. No, it takes the basic sentimental preference for ideas over real beings, reinforced by the tribe-loyalty tests of patriarchal

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religious authority, as well as a dollop of plain old misogyny on top for good measure, to put such a question there and keep it there.

VI(a). Ethical Consequences, Part 3(a): A Belated Caveat Regarding the Importance of Context and Moderation: This Essay Does Not Endorse the Either-For-'em-or-Against-'em Approach

But before proceeding with our inquiry, it is important to affirm a crucial caveat: namely, that we be vigilant against succumbing to the same reductive dichotomizing distinguishing the very mindset we have targeted in this critique. If, in our attempt to identify the offending behavior, we fail to moderate in the light of appropriate *context*, we risk assuming that seductive *either-for-'em-or-against-'em* approach we know to be more congenial to the complaint than to the cure. It is *critical* to the overriding sense of this essay to observe that upon close enough inspection, the boundaries separating “sentiment” from its “sentimental” posturings (or, as Nabokov succinctly put it, distinguishing the “sentimental” from the “sensitive”) reveal themselves to be quite as porous as those boundaries observed between anything else in this world of ours and *cannot* be appropriately appreciated outside of *context*.

A remark, gesture, or attitude that smacks of sentimentality in one particular scenario may seem innocent of such indulgences in quite another – this dynamic being no different than the proportioning

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nuances observed in operation everywhere else in human psychology and sociology, as illustrated time and again by the work of great playwrights and novelists. What counts more than the mere *event* of a specific behavior is the way that behavior interacts with others in the chemical flux that is the economy of human social intercourse.

A person observed to be performing an example of sentimentality is not necessarily, therefore, a genocidal despot in the making. No, in the spirit of the celebrated, *though likely apocryphal*, remark long attributed to Sigmund Freud regarding the occasionally inconsistent meaning of a cigar, it is possible to cry at the sight of a baby without wanting to then go off and annihilate a large group of people.

This study aspires only to recognize and come to terms with observable *tendencies* and *patterns* that seem to be predictive, *to some extent*, of certain likely outcomes in our social interactions. It is *not* intended to provide yet one more precision tool toward the simplistic profiling, judgmental labeling, and divisive treatment, of our fellow humans. For example, I continue to enjoy satisfying relationships with people who have demonstrated behaviors similar to those I have identified in these pages as sentimental – people whom I love and trust and feel enriched by having known – all despite any uncomfortable feelings aroused in me at such performances.

Likewise, I realize their feelings for *me* must be the end result of having to cut an equally wide berth around *my* most irritating behaviors, none of which, hopefully, relegating me, *ipso facto*, to the

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politically convenient pigeonhole of “bleeding-heart liberal,” “amoral atheist,” or some other timely way of distinguishing *them* from *us*. Rather, if we’re *really* paying attention, it should be difficult to avoid the sobering observation that we’re *all* mixed accumulations of often contradictory attributes.

Now, back to my rant.

VII. Ethical Consequences, Part 4: *Gay Rights (and God's Ignorance of Science)*

And what about homophobia and our nation’s current war over the basic rights of same-sex partners in love? This embarrassing chapter in our nation's struggle to free itself from the tyranny of ignorance provides yet one more demonstration of the ultimate dangers of sentimentality. For, at bottom, what *is* this political nightmare of self-righteous discrimination *really* about if not the sentimental preference for a simplified *idealization* of human affairs over its *complex reality*? In this case, an explainable instinctive revulsion we might feel toward the different, *and therefore confusing*, sexual orientation of some other person – a disgust reflex bequeathed to us naturally through evolution, though one many of us learn to contravene through the civilizing influence of knowledge – remains in the minds of the fearfully superstitious something symbolically menacing and adversarially threatening.

And as a justification of this fear of the confusing real world – a

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place where behavior patterns evolve outside of any teleological “purpose” – the superstitious cling to their idealized, unreal, and therefore *dehumanized*, image of inherent sanctity they understand to be the “Godly” institution of marriage. Of course, there are many of us who are happily married enough to consider wedlock to be “sacred” as well, though more typically in the secular connotation of special or important rather than the devotional sense of meeting a judgmental creator's cumbersome expectations. But to us marriage is sacred *not* because *it just is* but rather because we happened to *make it so*.

Yes, those brought up on a strict diet of religious scripture tend to find it difficult to avoid the conceptual indigestion involved in seeing marriage for what it is: a purely human institution. Like morality itself, we know marriage to be a man-made social contract that evolved, variously by region and epoch, as a means of setting helpful boundaries against the potential social chaos unleashed by dangerous proprietary transgressions. Yet, superstitious believers in a hypocritically judgmental (albeit *invisible*) celestial parent figure will vigorously maintain (as sanctioned by their stalwart ignorance of anthropology, of course) that marriage is defined for all people, times, and circumstances strictly as a union “between a man and a woman.”

Let us ignore for the moment the inconvenient fact that this definition is attributed to the inerrant authorship of the same creator who gave them homosexuality in the first place (along with all those

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other behaviors He hypocritically finds repugnant and punishable). Now, what is the one piece of conceptual apparatus essential in this mindless maintenance of justification toward a cruel discrimination of their fellow human beings? Of course, I argue it is the sentimentalist's predilection for unrealistic models of the world wherever they offer the seductive lazy comforts of denying life's unpleasant realities. For, it's simply cozier for the fearful deniers of science to trust the moral authority of received opinion than one of their own assessment, especially as the latter involves education and the unassuming spirit of open-minded inquiry on the basis of persuasive evidence.

VIII. Ethical Consequences, Part 5: *Received Opinion: Black Boxes, "The Good Book," and Obscenity*

The source of this received opinion in the gay rights argument remains the very same one that is relied on to confuse the debate over a woman's rights to her own body: namely, the authority of scripture – in this case, of course, specifically that book called “Good” by folks who don't read books. Remember that this same Holy Bible, recognized as the “infallible word of God” (by those who obviously know *nothing* about textual scholarship, let alone physics and biology) is in reality a politically contrived miscellany of incompatibly divergent writings by various authors spanning many centuries – all well before the advent of antipsychotic medications and their efficient treatment of such

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physiologically predictable inspirations – eventually to be canonized as we know it today only after hundreds of years of political sausage-making that would make our Congress look like kindergarten.

Yet, this anthology of iron-age slave-society morality, whose numerous authors collectively understood *zilch* of the actual reasons why things happened the way they did, is still worshiped by millions as a veritable “black box” of authority – an authority superstitiously guarded from questioning by the taboo of blasphemy. And true to the nature of any “black box,” the user of this book is satisfied to rely on it without understanding anything of its contents. (Indeed, that *is* the point; the *mystery* of its operation is, *ipso facto*, sufficient confirmation of its unquestionable truth.) So, in place of the unambiguous directives one might expect from a judgmental creator of the world impatient with his recalcitrant creations, one finds in “black box” texts the fecund opportunity for divining such directives through the all-too-human art of *interpretation*.

Thus, as if this bigoted discriminatory position of religious zealots against women and homosexuals were not reprehensible enough in its own right, it is relatively rarely founded upon *concrete* pronouncements in their sacred texts but more often upon ingeniously elaborate *interpretations* of those certain passages – cryptic extracts conveniently offering themselves up for use as such in the way that tea leaves or animal droppings might have served the shamans of other cultures and eras.

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Now, we know that homosexuality is found at a relatively consistent rate throughout the world, and not at all limited to our own species. Science can help us understand the evolutionary physiological mechanisms underlying this predictably natural tendency in so many types of creatures. Homosexual goats, for example, typically escape the derisive labels of “immoral,” “ungodly,” or “depraved” – even by your more judgmental zoologists – largely because their sexual behavior is easily recognized as being inescapably tied to their specific neural wiring. And few among even the God-intoxicated would find argument with this, particularly since the historically recognized lack of a damnable soul in a goat makes the point irrelevant anyway.

Yet the same legal loophole is not afforded members of our own species. No, due to the daunting complexity of the science of sexuality, the ranks of the intellectually lazy continue to cling jealously to their ignorance of scientific facts surrounding sexual behavior and its preferences and will salute to whatever indestructible truths they have endeavored to hear confided to them by their invisible, *mysterious* authority. Therefore, this “black box” of scripture can become for the faithful a kind of Enigma Machine in which irrational fears and confusing ambivalences can be routinely translated into a guiltless code of conventionality and acceptability. And with the help of such a magical mechanism, the pious are emboldened to gather forces and punitively legislate the fate of a minority of people who quite naturally

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derive one of life's deepest satisfactions somewhat differently than do their persecutors... perhaps.

That's right, *perhaps*. For, lurking behind the uniform trench coat of "family-value" morality is often found the lechery born out of repressed desire. This tendency exposes itself as a most exquisite example of the agile acrobatics of hypocrisy, wherein the salacious impulse to judgmentally censor sexual desire is engorged by the self-loathing acquired in the guilty desiring of it. Yes, sexual appetite is a perfectly natural, healthy, and necessary phenomenon. Due to its high-priority role in securing a future for our genes in the next generation, this instinctive hunger for a particularly delicious reward-system payload has become intrinsic to our brain architecture – not far behind that for glucose and oxygen.

And along the way, this powerful appetite for intimacy has become deeply rooted in our capacity for sustaining loving human relationships on various levels (such as the erotic, spousal, parental, filial, friendly, etc.), all of which based upon the cultivation of feelings and capacities for trust, loyalty, protectiveness, concern for another's wellbeing and, not least of all, that state of one's own satisfied well-being that serves as the very foundation upon which healthy social relationships of a less intimate nature can be built as well.

But because the *uninhibited* promiscuous indulgence of erotic appetite would wreak political havoc upon our human social system, the sex act itself has come to be treated by most religious guardians of

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morality as a contraband commodity—one to be weighed, tested, approved, and taxed under the strict control of its own usurped authority. Consequently, a culture of priggish prudery has developed around this most wholesome of hankerings in an attempt to cloak the tantalizing attractiveness of its erogenous zones. Therefore, certain body parts—those that have become associated in our brains with sexual excitement—have been condemned by the anthropologically ignorant as unhealthy to our social wellbeing and censured accordingly. The reasons include: first, because impertinent acceptance of these body parts risks revealing our true nature as flesh-and-blood animals rather than reflections of the divine; and second, because the consequences of *blindly acting upon* the erotic impulses with which they are associated proves socially complicated and ultimately dangerous. And so, by designing a moral standard wholly indifferent to the physical and psychological realities of this most natural, indeed *fundamental*, need—by which I mean sex, of course—religious officialdom can threaten its congregants with the punishment of inflicted remorse to anyone deemed to be in violation of it, hence extorting an undeserved obedience from them that is difficult, when not impossible, to maintain. And in the strict enforcement of that maintenance, religious authorities ultimately create a black market for forgiveness, one on which this natural emotion of erotic desire is considered contraband unless repurchased by its original owner at a usurious rate (one it's been made

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official by a blessing procured from the church).

This particular market event, in which the congregant is resold his own emotion, is transacted in the counterfeit currency of unnecessary guilt-ridden self-condemnation. So, just as if the church had itself invented or developed the intrinsic human emotion of erotic love, it now usurps the authority to offer the promise of love's enjoyment to its congregants at the costs incurred in obtaining the church's much-desired stamp of approval toward social, or at an even higher premium, *celestial*, redemption.

Yes, as insightfully observed by Sam Harris (in his *Letter to a Christian Nation*), this emotional extortion orchestrated by religious "moralists" over their adherents is achieved with little more than the congregant's own appetites and natural proclivities toward guilt. Successfully employed, it ingeniously protects the exorbitantly high price set on this otherwise free commodity of eroticism, thereby transforming a natural gratification into a contraband commodity that now may be relished only guiltily and surreptitiously.

Why then are we surprised to learn of the existence of a pervasive juvenile sex slave market operated by that most rigorous of sex deniers and guilt enforcers, the Catholic Church? Where else but underground is this powerful pressure of erotic desire expected to go when suppressed from its natural expression (through sexual gratification) by

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means of the *unnatural* rigors of fear-extorted abstinence? After all, forcing a man to repeat to himself that sex is shameful doesn't diminish his visceral desire for sex but only the esteem in which he holds both himself and the target of his desire.

Now, of the various cult sects that have mustered a flock size entitling them to the privileged (though meaningless) euphemism of "religion," Catholicism has been one particularly disapproving of the complete human experience of erotic love – that is *beyond* the justifying idealization of the sexual act as a vehicle for "procreation," which has become a devotional buzzword for the guilt-free farming of additional souls necessary toward the Church's own survival. And having created this black market in absolution and redemption, the Church has everything to gain by sustaining in its adherents the delusion of the possibility of a comfortable abstinence, an aspiration as futile as attempting to placate a starving man with news that there is virtue in hunger.

In the meanwhile, the culture observed to have accrued around this nefarious secondary market cannot help but foster an atmosphere of inhibition and excessive modesty with which to cover the flesh of voyeuristic lasciviousness. In other words, we have learned to feel ashamed of our bodies and, even worse, to consider them obscene.

This sentimentally-induced preference for unreasonable ideals demands of us a state of denial as to the true nature of our existence as a species of animal sharing a planet with unknowable numbers of

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cousin species tracing back to common ancestors. Now, given that *we* are our bodies and that our bodies constitute *us*, any mindset that trains us to be ashamed of our bodies and see them as sources of obscenity should seem, to any rational mind, to be nothing short of *obscene* itself.

The very notion of obscenity is, of course, just another manmade convention, a conception that differs in its threshold parameters and consequences from culture to culture, epoch to epoch, like any other. Although the term describes a state of repugnance, stemming usually from the display of behavior offensive to moral principles established by an official cultural tradition at a particular time, it has come to be used as a gag reflex alerting us to the presence of any behavior that threatens to tarnish our species' conception of itself as being (somehow) above nature. It has long been, therefore, a convenient rallying cry for the sexually repressed and easily scandalized in their God-backed war against the reality of human sexuality and its cravings.

I refer, of course, to the predictable, tedious, and interminable campaign by religious sentimentalists against the satisfactions of erotica – or, if you prefer its pejorative synonym, *pornography*. As in all wars, this one being fought against the pornography industry and its adult customers in this country is cheer-led by rallying slogans that have little actual relevance to the purported offense itself and more to do rather with its most unsavory manifestation: in this case, *child pornography*.

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Lest I am misunderstood pertaining to something of dire seriousness: Child pornography should be, *ipso facto*, repugnant to us all and should be swiftly and mercilessly eradicated and prosecuted to the full extent of the law wherever it is found. Most pornographers would agree with this. The fact that *all* do not is a situation no different or more surprising than that touching any other discussion of human rights. My point is that like any true sentimentalist, the pornography crusader uses our appropriate concern for the plight of innocent children *inappropriately* to the proportion of its appearance in the larger genre in which it may be found. (Let's not lose sight of the point that the plight of victimized innocent children remains universal currency for use by sentimentalists worldwide. Remember the effective exploitation of them toward the extortion of cheap tears by Dickens, discussed and alluded to above.)

It becomes for religiously motivated moralists an easy ace-in-the-sleeve in their attempt to win over converts to the cause, all by appealing to a healthy reflex of repugnance toward child abuse found instinctively in (most) rational adults. Armed with this card, they are therefore better able to deflect the thrust of the argument to concentrate on that portion of the genre that few can find fault with. Thus, knowing that even most pornographers among us would agree that only the clinically depraved could want to subject our sexually innocent young to the trauma of sexual abuse and the other ramifications of the business

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of child pornography, they go on to use this ready-made rallying cry toward mustering troops for the bigger, unrelated, campaign: that to persuade us of the evident evils of pornography as a whole. The problem with this highly effective call to arms is that it is largely misplaced and irrelevant to the issue at hand.

The pornography industry is not *about* child pornography, though its darker periphery clearly encompasses it. The vast majority of the pornography available out there in any mode or conduit portrays consenting adults in action, all without the slightest reference to children. Few enthusiasts of pornography and its right to exist would wish this any other way (with the obvious exception, of course, of child pornographers, who should not be given a vote). But to stamp out *all* pornography only to be certain of taking with it whatever *child* pornography can be swept with the same shove of the broom is tantamount to the idea of our medical community aspiring to rid our bodies of *all* bacteria – those necessary to our wellbeing along with the harmful strains, so as to preclude any opportunity for the latter type. Forget that it's not cost effective; *it doesn't work*.

And as to the oft-voiced feminist argument that (all) pornography is explicitly degrading to (all) women, a closer, more objective, look at the question might just reveal a more tempered response here too. For, while there is certainly *some* truth to this concern, as evidenced by *some* purveyors of pornography, it can't possibly characterize *all* types made available. An obvious exception might be, for example, pornography

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intended for the eyes of women or gay men, two genres of erotica in which the male is typically staged to be viewed as the sex object of desire.

Remember the lesson we learned from the fiasco of the Eighteenth Amendment to our Constitution, when we attempted to protect women and children from abusively drunken husbands and fathers by attempting to enforce a prohibition against *anyone* imbibing *any* alcohol at *any* time. Now, it is this *precise* dynamic we face in the pornography question. For example, should pornographic material be removed from fertility clinics, where it openly continues to play a constructive role in stimulating contributions from sperm donors and patients? And how about consenting adult lovers engaged in lovemaking? Should the many of them who naturally derive pleasurable success employing erotica as a normal component of foreplay be denied *their* pleasure? And what about the well-documented clinical use of hardcore pornography in the treatment of voyeurism? The answers to these questions should be obvious, unless we let the judgmental moralizing prejudices of religion cast its inevitable dark shadow over the process. Surely part of the political tension surrounding this debate can be assigned (once again) to ignorance of anthropology, sociology, and in particular, *human sexuality*.

For example, even the most concise course in world art history should dispel, early on, the conservative notion of the pornographer as

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an evil force operating out along the fringe of society and/or mental health. Our most respectable museums continue to enthusiastically acquire and display examples of art that easily qualify unambiguously as pornography—items created and enjoyed toward salacious satisfaction—including artworks and utilitarian objects made by gifted artists and artisans from various cultures and epochs over many millennia. Should these cultural institutions be closed down, or at least forfeited of their funding, in retribution for the one-size-fits-all allegation of degradation to women or of setting an inappropriate example to our young?

For that matter, the practices of the big three Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam *necessarily* involve the humiliating act of penitent groveling to an imaginary angry sky parent in fear of the retribution earned from displeasing him. This is behavior that *unequivocally* demeans and degrades all of us—men, women, and children. Indeed, to my ear the priggish euphemism “oh my gosh” in place of the conventional “oh my God” sounds *far* more obscene than the word “fuck” could *ever* seem—this because its use is wholly predicated on a servile respect for the superstitious blasphemy taboo that punitively prohibits the use of “the lord’s name in vain,” thereby making it an expression of obsequiousness that I find absolutely *disrespectful* of our own human dignity. Yet, few among even the most stalwart humanistic atheist critics would argue that the practice of these admittedly harmful religions should be made *illegal*—this despite the

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insurmountable fact that religion has cost *abundantly* more bloodshed, anguish, and destructive emotional disturbance than could *ever* be attributed to pornography (...that is, by anyone other than a religious zealot).

It is well known that our cousin primates share this pleasure we humans enjoy from pornography. For example, male chimps offered photographs of females of their species in estrus at the expense of their typical allocations of juice will tend to sacrifice the juice reward to pay for the pornographic one. And recent statistics among human users of pornography show that the vast majority of males between the ages of 18 and 34—as much as 70 percent of the test population—visit a pornographic website in a typical month.

Clearly, we are not talking about the fringes of either society or mental health here but rather a common (and therefore *normal*, in the true sense of the word) appetite that has more to do with our inherited brain wiring, with its powerfully inspiring dopamine reward system, than to the traditional religious-inspired argument that sees it as certain proof of moral depravity.

IX. Ethical Consequences, Part 6: *Reckless Pretenders to the Fourth Estate*

But all this fear-inspired injustice toward our fellow humans, be they women, homosexuals, or honest *sexuals* of *any* predilection, would be more difficult to accomplish without official sanctioning by *professional*

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purveyors of sentimentality. I refer now to such popular and profitable institutions of the fourth estate as conservative talk radio and television. See for yourself how, for example, a Rush Limbaugh, a Bill O'Reilly, or any random selection of Fox News reporter or commentator will predictably stoop to the seductively safe authority of received opinion in place of any fresh attempt at contextually *understanding* a particular event. Rather than invite their audience into a dialogue with evidence, they will stoop to appeal to their “fight or flight” emotions of fear and disgust toward selling their sponsors’ perspective.

The language artfully employed by these purveyors of conventional morality, even while posing as objective reporters of fact, reveals (to those not buying it) little more than a manipulative rhetoric of buzzwords laced with coercive subliminal promptings that reinforce, in each of the tightly clenched minds imbibing them, the rewarding feeling of righteousness.

Take, for example, the ubiquitous political phrase, “what the American people want,” a laughably hopeless cliché heard, ad nauseam, every election season. Of course, this is a locution that cannot possibly mean *anything* if intended sincerely, as it concretely aspires to the miraculous prospect of a consensus achieved among a few hundred million individuals of widely disparate cultural, philosophical, religious, and socio-economic background (let alone educational and cognitive competence!), all motivated by widely divergent competing interests! But while it does not require graduate work in logic to intuit

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the inherent factual *impossibility* of such a ludicrous proposition, you will nevertheless hear this egregiously meaningless catchphrase bandied about by even our nation's more respectable politicians, journalists, and editorialists.

X. Ethical Consequences, Part 7: *Received Opinion Shielded in Blasphemy Taboo*

And there is no safer source for the bulletproof authority of Received Opinion than the concept of DOGMA, religion's great contribution to world ignorance—a stunt of mental acrobatics in which an absurd proposition increasingly gains the outward appearance of incontrovertible truthfulness purely on the authority of its incessant repetition. Armed with this trusty tool of cognitive stealth, numerous religions around the world have managed to survive even the most rudimentary assaults from the world of reason by means of supplying their troops with that most effective model of cognitive flak jacket: TABOO AGAINST BLAPHEMY.

All three of the Abrahamic religions indulge in the benefits of this ingenious protective shield against critical inquiry. One has only to read a few gruesome pages of the history of post-reformation Britain to obtain a glimpse of the brutal effectiveness of this threat afforded by the practice of Christianity, both Catholic *and* Protestant. Yet the most egregious examples are found less often in Christianity and Judaism than in Islam, where even mainstream (non-extremist) believers

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presume to expect obedience to their own barbaric blasphemy laws by people *outside* their religion as well.

Why, even many *non*-Muslims defend this ludicrous presumption that a person's right to believe and practice patently preposterous ideas should extend to their immunity from any criticism for doing so. Forget for the moment (if you can) that the punishment for offenders in *this* case, at least in the hands of a *conspicuous* minority of today's Muslims, is nothing short of DEATH—no, not some equivalent of financial reparation for the provable injuries of slander, but *decapitation*—and just try to imagine some truly *rational* endeavor that would be protected from criticism in this way. Clearly, blasphemy taboo proves an indispensable implement in the proper washing of brains—so much so that minds developed with this magical property, even amid distinctly different cultures, will still tend to yield instinctive vicarious deference to even its most repugnant examples.

Examples abound. On the morning of January 7, 2015, two Islamic terrorists broke into the offices of the French weekly satirical newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris, killed eleven people, and injured as many— all on the grounds of blasphemy committed by the newspaper for the portrayal of their prophet Mohammed in cartoons. To a religion as protective of its patent absurdities as is Islam, perhaps it should not be surprising to find the handy mechanism of blasphemy taboo enforced with such especial vigor—a zealotry that sees a prophet's visual depiction *itself* (i.e., even *before* the level of its well-deserved satire) as

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disrespectful and, therefore, an insult to the entire faith and all its adherents.

In answer to the news of this unjustifiable savagery, Bill Donohue, president of the Catholic League, told CNN news that while “killing in response to insult, no matter how gross, must be unequivocally condemned...*neither should we tolerate the kind of intolerance that provoked this violent reaction.*” He explained that *Charlie Hebdo* had a “long and disgusting record” of mocking religious figures, including unflattering depictions of the Prophet Mohammed as well as Catholic popes, and that Stephane Charbonnier, the paper’s publisher (himself one of the victims of the shootings) “didn't understand the role he played in his tragic death.”

Well, neither do I, nor should *anyone* who considers him or herself to be a *moral* human being. Death for insulting someone, *or* that someone’s religion, is BARBARIC, *period*. Now, Donohue *was* good enough to condemn the murder of the newspaper employees, but note that he still *did* think it appropriate to express his opinion of what he believed to be the *culpability of the victims in their own slaughter*—culpability for *the drawing of cartoons*, for Christ’s sake!

And perhaps that’s precisely our key: for *Christ’s* sake. Yes, as a religious sentimentalist himself—thereby one for whom the privileging of invisible mythic entities over real live human beings is central to the dynamics of his faith—it appears that retribution for an insult to a belief *can* be ultimately rationalized and justified. (Yes, an insult to a *belief!*)

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Imagine, if you *possibly* can, Niels Bohr *murdering* Albert Einstein for the latter's perceived disparagement of the former's quantum mechanics. Of course, Einstein's great respect for his friend would have precluded taking his admittedly serious criticism of the latter's theory quite to the level of insult, but that's not my point; only that *if he had* worded his misgivings with the other's ideas less felicitously, this theoretical murder would still need to *remain* an unthinkable reaction. Why? Our knowledge of the man himself aside, this is largely because our imagined murder suspect was a scientist in search of truth rather than a sentimentalist in search of defending the honor of his commitment to dogma.

And how does Islam succeed in bullying so much of the rest of the world into slavishly honoring its presumed right to a despotic, medieval blasphemy taboo? Fear mongering. For, instilling fear is the easiest way to coerce the appearance of respect where said respect has not been earned. But Islam, though an *impressively* adept exponent of this practice, is hardly alone among the world's religions in utilizing fear toward such an end. Christ's threats of the punishments of hell awaiting those who didn't follow him are born of precisely this same instinct.

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So, we should not be surprised to find conservative talk radio and television gurus exploiting the endorsement power of such talismans of unquestioned authority as Fear of God or Love of Country, Guns, and Sports Team, all toward the profitable trafficking of their received opinion (which tends, not coincidentally, to be almost indistinguishable from that of their sponsor's as well). Nor, in this regard, should we be caught unprepared to realize how sentimentality, with its inherent predilection for neat, simplified idealizations over threateningly complex and unattractive realities, serves its practitioners with the most efficient rhetoric for use toward this end.

For, all in all, a sentimental mindset provides the ideal environment for the successful breeding of that most irksomely manipulative form of discourse in which our species indulges: namely, CHEERLEADING: the practice of coercive persuasion, whether overt or subliminally covert, toward that state of gratuitous, manufactured conformity in which to easiest enjoy the warm and fuzzy feel of ingroup solidarity. This term "cheerleading" was originally associated with the specific promotional task of eliciting cheers, applause, and related expressions of enthusiasm from crowds at sporting events. But due to the striking functional similarities between this blatant type of crowd persuasion and the more insidious variety we can observe at work in the smaller circles of our social discourse, it should not be surprising to find the term used at

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times to refer to this day-to-day variety as well, particularly as pertains to politics. And I believe that when we examine the language of this form of discourse more closely, we'll discover in its underlying syntax none other than our roving malefactor, *sentimentality*, particularly in light of its prominent penchant for the coerced response over the more expensive reasoned one, and for the gratuitous over the genuine. The vocabulary of this language of cheerleading requires no lexicon, as its semantic payload comprises little more than its essential mantra of “rah-rah,” regardless of one’s specific wording.

No doubt, we’ve all witnessed this form of motivational conditioning at work, even amid otherwise polite group conversations and public speeches, though we've probably often failed to recognize it as anything more specific than an aggressively manipulative form of behavior. An obvious example would be the cheers shouted by audience members at a speech, be it a political rally or just a donor-appreciation party for a nonprofit fundraiser.

These shouts of encouragement, often resembling war-cry whoops, are characteristically issued in response to comments felt (by the practicing cheerleader) to benefit from an amplifying emphasis – sort of the auditory equivalent of italics, bold print, and/or full caps used in journalistic print. In the political speech, such comments would typically be those felt to touch emotionally charged divisiveness, thereby helping to demarcate the enemy territory of contradictory opinion; in the philanthropic reception, they would more likely fall

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under the more benign category of the aforesaid candidature for amplification. In either case, however, the end result tends to be quite similar in one important way: that of the the transmutation of that comment into a commodity of higher significance status than it might have contextually deserved.

For example, when the speaker expresses the typically exaggerated but nevertheless stirring statement that “we can’t possibly thank Mrs. X enough for her selfless generosity,” the whoop-like cheer by a loyal congregant might indicate little more than the latter’s vicarious pleasure in having been invited into such a group that *could not possibly thank one of its members enough*. So, just like those motivational hurrahs utilized by cheerleaders of the traditional sports field variety, these social-discourse cheerleaders aspire at length to put into play a motivational reinforcement of ingroup solidarity.

Now, this might appear on its surface to be little more than a rather friendly brand of social adhesive—one useful in unifying energies toward the accomplishment of a desired goal. And it is often largely that. But like anything else, it may also be seen, quite legitimately, as something more as well, and in this case something with an insidious potential to it. For, even the seemingly benign nonprofit variety of cheerleading still tends to act as a subtle reinforcement of a subliminal world where we are no longer free to choose for ourselves, case by case, what seems good, better, or best.

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The same may be witnessed operating amid certain television talk shows, particularly those indulging its viewers with sensational, suggestive, or otherwise divisive subjects. Nearly every sentence uttered by some celebrity or other during such a show is characteristically punctuated with predictable and annoyingly distracting whoops, cheers, whistles, and applause from the crowd, subtly indicating the pleasure of its individual members as to their invitation to be temporary compatriots of such a speaker.

Yes, cheerleading one's home team, whether at the stadium, the party caucus, or the dinner table, tends to condition our target audience to acquiesce uncritically in the embracement of whatever idea is being marketed. But the insidious art of cheerleading adopts *many* forms in its various manifestations throughout the gamut of human interaction across its various media. And to my mind, the most obnoxious *non-verbal* technique in modern popular culture is the phenomenon of "canned laughter," that electronically prepackaged likeness of laughter (reproduced from a synthesis of 100% organic human hysterics) judiciously sprinkled onto recordings of actual acting by those producers of television situation comedies who consider their audiences to be too stupid to know where to laugh, or just how hard.

Of course, were the product *itself*, by virtue of its writing, directing, and acting, humorous to the necessary degree, such audio cues of egregiously blatant propagandizing would be unnecessary from the get

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-go. It's just quicker and cheaper to slap on a happy face where the requisite smile proved inconveniently difficult to coax.

XII. Ethical Consequences, Part 9: *The Religion of Competitive Team Sports*

Now, where is cheerleading found in its most conspicuous, concretely recognizable form? Well, of course, before the bleachers of its above-mentioned birthplace, that of competitive team sports events. For, even were we to succeed in throwing off the degrading shackles of religious dogma (as exemplified in those blood-thirsty, penitent superstitions of abusive sky parents with which we torture our vulnerable young minds), most of us would still find ourselves chained to religion's modern *secularized* byproduct, *competitive team sports fandom*.

Yes, competitive team sports fans tend to accumulate in congregations no less dogmatically divisive in their tribe loyalty than those gathered by your local church. Indeed, team sports fandom is historically based on even less *individualized* motivation than that of religious devotion, especially since sports fan loyalty tends to be grounded on little more than *identification through location*. For, where even the least engaged of church congregants might still consider the content and tone of the homily they're expected to swallow at their chosen church as a couple of the flavor components that makes attendance there worthwhile, sports fans, on the other hand, tend to be

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seduced toward *their* adoption of the team they're to back via a much simpler drop-down menu.

In order to qualify for zealous support of one's competitive sports team, a candidate fan need not even go so far as actually embrace what is publicly perceived to be that teams' particular rank of sportsmanship, ethics, morals, technical guidance, or even *competence*, so long as this prospective fan meets the following rigorous test: a.) that he or she resides, or at least *has* resided, in some sort of close physical proximity to where a team is registered; or b.) that he or she attends, or at least *has* attended (or maybe even *wished* they had attended) college in some sort of physical proximity to where this team is registered. Those candidates who do indeed pass this demanding test and qualify as team groupies are then free to crack open a beer, sit back, and allow the team's promoters to construct for them new meaning in their lives. And this is achieved via the cheer-led marketing phenomenon of "branding," wherein the fan's personal identity becomes but a reflection of the name-brand *collective* one being promoted.

The devotion paid a team by its devotees represents a sacrifice of individuality to the comfort of communal solidarity, all toward validation of the individual by the congregation of fellow devotees – and this through little more than, well, *cheerleading*. Indeed, team sports fans typically report the feeling of having *inherited* rather than acquired their devotion to their team, as if it had been passed to them through

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their genetic material rather than their observational and interpretive experience.

In his 1957 book, *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries*, the distinguished scholar of mythology, Mircea Eliade, argued that the “cultural text” represented by athletic contests may be one of the modern modes in which the profane is made sacred, this by means of offering a residuum of, or substitute for, what he terms the “magico-religious time” of earlier societies. Now, let us put our reading glasses on a moment and take a closer look at such “texts” toward a clearer sense of their actual semantic content.

Competitive athletic team sports appear to have at least three major characteristics in common: those of being: a.) goal-oriented; b.) non-utilitarian; and c.) essentially *inconsequential* (despite their *symbolic* significance). And the targeted goal of these combined attributes would appear to comprise at least two more requisite characteristics: d.) the proud defeat of rivals; and e.) the breaking of records (or, in other words, the defeat of even *one’s own team*). Yes, in a ritual grammar comparable to that found in most religious systems, as well as in the rival tribe warfare waged by our early ancestors, team sports fandom offers its participants an opportunity to experience a sense of *ultimacy*, that sense of transcendence, typically group-validated, toward an identification with an *ideal* self.

An example of this identification has been observed in recent tests showing that testosterone levels in male sports fans rise markedly after

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their team's victories and drop as dramatically after their defeats. And the "beneficial stress" associated with the euphoria felt by celebrants of such victories is thought by many researchers to lead to a dangerous form of addiction. But this addictive quality exists whether this stress is of the consequential type (i.e., relevant to the *actual* obliteration of an enemy) or of the subject *inconsequential* strain (as in the *symbolic* obliteration of our foe in the shape of a rival sports team). The end result remains the same *to the psyche*, however, for this ideal *collective* self of team sports fandom easily fits the brain architecture inherited from real warriors and may be easily sustained *symbolically* through a mythologizing process artfully cheer-led to reinforce the beliefs, values, and traditions requisite to that much-sought state of manufactured conformity that proves the most comfortable recliner for the intellectually lazy.

Having already discussed the art of cheerleading, it is time now to observe how that sacred space of its practice—the sports stadium—further serves its users as a safe arena for nothing short of the guilt-free practice of overt sexism. For, ever since at least the mid-20th century, the sports team cheerleader has come to occupy the job slot filled almost exclusively by attractive young females who rigorously prepare to find themselves subordinately relegated to the objectified role of dancing on the fringes of a male world, where they've been trained to excite a largely male target congregation toward the appropriate worship of male achievement. But unlike the role women would have played as

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booty in our ancestors' tribal conflicts, here in this modern symbolic practice they become little more than life-size fantasy trophies lending further branding power to an already over-valued event.

And as to the aptness of our continuing religious analogy, a superlative example comes to mind in the form of the Super Bowl, an annual testosterone tournament seemingly (when not *literally*) on steroids – indeed a prime-time gladiator spectacle that has awkwardly bulged into one of the two or three of our country's most sacred *national holidays*. For, what is this event, when viewed from an anthropological perspective, if not a major religious rally demonstrating nationalistic fervor? Consider, for example, its distinctive ceremonial trappings: the protracted feasting on high-caloric, low-nutrition foodstuffs (largely packaged specifically for the occasion via predatory marketing strategies); the highly ritualized performance of the nation's anthem; the artfully preserved vestige of pre-game prayer (such as to emphasize the role of supernatural intervention and/or backing); and the proud display of fetishistic attachment to symbolic objects in the form of ceremonial costume.

Now, this last-mentioned ritual relates specifically to the wearing by devotees of football jerseys imitating those official garments worn by actual members of their team, a practice perhaps analogous to the ceremonial donning of animal headdresses by participants of religious rites in numerous pre-industrial cultures, wherein the particular spirit

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being worshipped is thought to temporarily reside in the officiant dancing in it.

But even at a more basic level, this sense of ultimacy we defined above as an individual's pursuit of a group-validated transcendent identification with an *ideal* self – a satisfaction long enjoyed by religious celebrants among their congregation – is one similarly available to our modern team sports fan as well. And as if this intuitively obvious correlation required corroboration, it could be found even in the etymology of this term “fan,” which is, after all, a mere abbreviation of the word “fanatic” (in turn deriving from the Latin for “inspired by a god,” or “of a temple”).

XIII. Ethical Consequences, Part 10: *Nationalism: God, Guns, “Freedom,” and Eagles*

But it should inspire little wonder in us that this appetite for hero worship we find greedily indulged in the world of competitive sports is so readily available in the minds of its spectators. For, this innate predilection is quite easily cultivated into high ritual through even the most rudimentary religious indoctrination, wherein the worship of mythic heroes and their implausible exploits reinforces the congregant's hunger for still other larger-than-life protagonists. And the subservient attitude necessary to this practiced obeisance is easily nourished later on in life with those instant gratifications obtained through witnessing

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on mere *symbols* of these mythic preoccupations.

These restorative emblems, sanitized of their original context like nutrients from over-refined breakfast cereals, act upon the glyceimic index of the adult attention span like insulin. They include such unambiguous visual cues as team uniforms, fluttering “stars and stripes,” and, not least, those unavoidable bald eagles. But none of these representations need convey any appreciable *meaning* in order to achieve the desired Pavlovian conditioning effect; the empty image or sound is sufficient to raise, reflexively, the hand to the heart. For example, the salubrious ring of that one hallowed word in the English language that has lately come to bring a tear to every sentimental eye in our nation: FREEDOM.

Those who’ve been trained to salute the sound of this long-emptied locution do not feel the need to inquire as to its relevance in any particular proposition. When sung as part of the chord encompassing the G-major triad of God, Game, and Guns, it represents a pitch that needs no semantic context in which to be properly appreciated. Never mind that the concept of freedom itself, whether in politics or physics, once divorced from context and consequence, becomes as potentially dangerous as it is superficially alluring *and ultimately meaningless*. In much the same way, the word “obedience” tends to lose a good bit of the warm and fuzzy association it’s long enjoyed in the minds of exasperated parents once it has been re-applied to characterize the

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servile behavior of adult citizen toward some despotic ruler (real or not). As usual, *context is everything*.

The “FREEDOM!” you read of on the pick-up bumper ahead of you has precious little to do with what might make our country a better (or worse) place in which to live, and even less regarding certain hook-billed birds of prey. Yes, despite the best authorities found at your local sports bar, the American bald eagle is *not* free and *cannot* symbolize with any meaning you could take to the bank the virtue in some childish fantasy of living unhampered by governmental laws. Though a bird of prey (and of *ruthless* kleptoparasitism when theft promises the lesser effort), these creatures struggle against their evolutionary environmental pressures as desperately as do the lowliest of rodents. (Indeed, given how recently this exemplar of freedom was removed from the Endangered Species list, a reasonable argument could be made for the significantly greater liberty of rats and mice.) It’s only that the bald eagle’s size, speed, and fierceness of feeding skills makes it the more *ostensible* symbol of independence.

But the reality remains that unlike many of those folks who have the time to indulge in the political fetishizing of these creatures, none of the actual flesh-and-blood examples of the species can afford to retire from their profession and adopt a hobby. I have witnessed American citizens struggle against tears at the mere thought of one of these birds and all that they purportedly represent of the “uniquely American” spirit of entrepreneurial courage and God-fearing respect for “family values” –

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this despite the fact these same folks might thoughtlessly waste the lives of countless of their equally noble cousins in sport. And were it not for the inconvenient fact of illegality, even these live symbols of “American independence” would not be quite so sacred – except, perhaps, to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife authorities whose job it is to keep its free and proud citizens from hunting these poor creatures into extinction.

Thus, religion, with its ubiquitous deference to blind authority over individualized reasoning, as well as its obsessive preference for ideals over flesh-and-blood particulars, serves as a requisite primer for yet another of our deleterious adult cravings: namely the yearnings of *nationalism*.

This term, ironically viewed as an honorific by its proud adherents (though clearly pejorative to any open mind before it), refers to a brand of chauvinism in which excessive patriotic feeling becomes glorified into pernicious imperialist fervor, seductively justifying the alienating adulation of certain chosen peoples over their necessary adversaries. No, nationalism is *not* the benign and wholesome practice of loyal citizenship we've been assiduously trained to see it as since childhood. Rather, it is a *divisive* mindset, one predicated on the positing of a rival group, nation, or culture seen by the home-team group to be an inevitable threat to its safety and presumptions.

Given the fundamentally irrational nature of any such fear-induced worldview, nationalism's proponents characteristically succeed in their

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campaign to promulgate flock loyalty not through a dialectic of evidentiary reasoning but rather through the simpler and more trustworthy mechanism of *conditioning*. Yes, instead of attempting to teach our youth the benefits of loyalty by demonstrating its intrinsic and indispensable role in healthy relationships—those ranging from the intimate expression among family and friends to its expanded social version among communities and nations—it proves quicker to just *inculcate* it in them via *blind allegiance*, especially during the formative years. Hence, it is clearly not for educational reasons that we require our children to place their hands over their hearts when gazing at our nation's flag while reciting their Pledge of Allegiance or perfunctorily chanting our national anthem to it.

Now, just think about this. If we were to train a child accordingly to respond with mere *blind allegiance* to a particular work of visual art, music, literature, philosophy, or science, would we then be preparing him or her to actually *appreciate* it? If by "appreciate" we mean to recognize the worth of or to understand (especially on the basis of discernment, taste, and knowledge), then obviously our answer must be an unequivocal *no*. If, on the other hand, we merely wish to indicate the act of *responding reflexively* (i.e., without the benefits of these skills and goals), then, sadly, we have indeed succeeded in wangling our desired affirmation. When we tell our children "our nation is the greatest on earth," we provide them the huge disservice of teaching

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them to pretend that misinformation can be true and of importance to their wellbeing, *which it cannot*. For, such a statement as “our nation is the greatest on earth” is necessarily both erroneous and unhelpful on several counts, including, most obviously, the fact that it *cannot possibly* be true, *but* just as importantly because even *were* it true, its statement endorses an unhealthy perspective of chauvinism that privileges judgmental attitudes in a child’s mind, encouraging him or her to grow up to be a sentimental bigot.

Of course, the fact that *it cannot possibly be true* has nothing to do with the identity of the specific nation you happen to be boasting about at the moment but only the more obvious fact that such a proposition depends entirely for its meaning upon some subjective preference and, hence, cannot be objectively measured for accuracy (such as, for example, the proposition that Russia is, *in landmass*, the world’s largest nation, or that China is, *in population*, the same, etc.).

Now, the most effective tool toward the clean implantation into fresh young minds of such simplistic memes as nationalism, racism, or sexual chauvinism remains the above-mentioned apparatus of blasphemy taboo. Though more traditionally associated with use by religion as a protection of its central memes against unwanted and inconvenient critical inquiry, blasphemy taboo can be seen operating effectively in ostensibly secular spheres of human endeavor as well.

Start, for example, with the above-mentioned sharp-toothed Muslim prohibition against desecrating respect for Muhammad in any way,

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shape or form (including the mere visual representation of him). How much substantive difference is there between this taboo and the one still being proposed by American lawmakers in the form of prohibition against the desecration of our nation's flag? For, although the U.S. Supreme Court has most recently (via *United States v. Eichman*, 1990) reasserted the refreshingly sober view that utterances of "symbolic speech" nonetheless deserve Free Speech protection by our country's First Amendment (i.e., not differently than if such statements had been expressed in signs of speech we recognize as *words*), there have been no fewer than 40 proposals to date since then by U.S. lawmakers to reverse this perspective and enact stringent laws prohibiting the desecration in any way, shape, or form, of our nation's flag. In the weeks following the Court's 1990 decision, *Time Magazine's* Walter Isaacson offered a eulogy for the long-venerated tradition of mandatory flag worship:

Reverence for the flag is ingrained in every schoolchild who has quailed at the thought of letting it touch the ground, in every citizen moved by pictures of it being raised at Iwo Jima or planted on the moon, in every veteran who has ever heard taps played at the end of a Memorial Day parade, in every gold-star mother who treasures a neatly folded emblem of her family's supreme sacrifice.

Remarkably, Isaacson has managed within this one sentence to pull out every stop on the sentimentalist's keyboard console. While holding down the sacrilege nerve as his pedal point he artfully works the upper manuals with arpeggiated chords around the keynotes of the sacrosanct

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until coercing our consent as to the inherent reasonableness of equating our emotional investment in a *mere symbol* of our country with that of the actual flesh-and-blood citizens who have been sacrificed for it. But what he has more importantly revealed here is the full register of rhetorical flourishes available to the accomplished sentimentalist toward this technique for ideological recruitment.

By orchestrating his observation with the reverent sound effects of ceremony, children, and bereft mothers, a deft emotions artist is then free to employ an incremental repetition of the diminished sacrosanct interval that inevitably urges us back to the tonic of righteousness – this by inferring the ubiquity of this feeling throughout a whole population and thereby reinforcing that sense of the sacred through mere repetition.

Now, a sociologist or anthropologist might have approached the same phenomenon to quite different effect by commenting on the successfulness of social conditioning in humans during their formative years, such that it is possible to predictably coerce from them certain reflexive emotional responses simply by touching on certain triggers in our conditioned sense of what is sacred. Indeed, it is really the symbolic damage associated with *the violation of the sacred* that generates the heat in the above passage by Isaacson, *not* the particular griefs of mothers and veterans.

This is how the sentimentalist practices his scales. For, at bottom, how different in terms of *appreciable damage realized* is the desecration of

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a *symbol* of a country to that incurred by the doodled *representation* of some dark-age warlord? While we Americans remain rightfully proud of our inherent collective right to speak up in public against injustice through the medium of words (i.e., desecrating cherished ideas by means of a megaphone or printed editorial), many of us are nevertheless *scandalized* at the thought of expressing this same moral outrage more symbolically through the desecration of *representations* of these ideas.

The blatant hypocrisy in this distinction should be easily apparent to anyone not sentimentally inclined. Burning a flag is *not*, after all, tantamount to bombing a building or injuring a person. Much like words, flags are bereft of a nervous system and cannot suffer or serve as a means of physical protection or accommodation of business, and typically represent only negligible property value. They are manifestations of *signs*. Declaring a sign—whether manifest as a string of words or a piece of cloth—to be *sacred* and therefore *legally inviolate* is no less ridiculous than declaring Mohammed, Christ, or Zeus to be the unlawful object of criticism or unflattering images. Just as it should be simply beneath our dignity as human beings to live in fear of disrespecting an imagined authority, such as a god, it should be considered equally reprehensible as aspirants to democracy to wish for a society in which the mere symbols of that democracy are protected by so medieval a practice of mindless superstition and group coercion as is the malignant meme of blasphemy taboo.

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This notion was echoed by Justice William Brennan, Jr. in his wording of the majority opinion to the above-mentioned 1990 Supreme Court case, where he observes, "The mere destruction or disfigurement of a symbol's physical manifestation does not diminish or otherwise affect the symbol itself." He then concludes this opinion with an eloquent succinctness of reasoning as follows, "Punishing desecration of the flag dilutes the very freedom that makes the emblem so revered, and worth revering." Yes, as has been observed before (though not often enough), it is only reasonable to expect that in a true democracy, one wherein each citizen wields the right to voice his or her opinion without fear of retaliation by the group, that same inherent right must be *sacrificed to some degree* in the individual practice of it in order to still accommodate the competing needs, interests, and opinions of the whole society. Therefore, any symbol of such a democracy will need to bear the dignity allowing it to suffer the consequences of the protected rights it represents. To the contrary, any "respect" extorted through enforced obedience to some taboo protecting a fetish of its faith is no respect at all but merely a pitiful surrendering to coercion. It is contemptible.

But this ideological tension between the individual practice of rights on the one hand and the enjoyment of the benefits of those rights *by all* on the other is the pivot on which so many political wars are poised. For example, the continued campaign by the National Rifle Association to make dangerous weaponry available to all. Since its inception in 1871,

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this gun-advocacy forum has eventually garnered a membership of over 5 million gun-lovers and become one of the three most influential lobbying groups in Washington, D.C. And with every schoolyard massacre that proved the unnecessary tragic outcome of the need for gun control the NRA's printing presses and website managers are thrown into overdrive toward a blitzkrieg of *alternative facts* about the correlation between gun ownership and needless gun fatalities.

Another quote from Justice Brennan, again in regard to the above-mentioned 1990 flag-burning case, may prove helpful toward focusing on the most salient source of the problem, namely runaway idealism:

The idea that there is no right in American society that is pure and unlimited is an established concept in American jurisprudence. The rights of the individual are always being weighed against the interests of the society as a whole as represented by the Government.

What could be more reasonable? It doesn't take a graduate degree in law, philosophy, sociology, or history to find this observation comfortably consistent with what we've learned in life from our attempts to get along with others. Yet, any public discussion of this dilemma regarding guns has long since become politicized into a zero-sum game, wherein advocates of government restraints on individual ownership are craftily identified with treasonous saboteurs of "all that we stand for as Americans." Through the cheerleading techniques of the NRA and numerous other conservative propaganda institutions, the

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popular consumerist appetite for the satisfactions of righteousness is cleverly thrown the bloodiest of red meat available: that special cut called *sacrilege* – here in the form of an alleged disrespect by gun control advocates to “our founding fathers,” here identified as those sacred ancestors who had courageously endeavored to leave us in their unblemished wisdom one of the central tenets of faith in our country’s greatness, The Second Amendment to our Constitution. I use here a terminology conspicuously laden with overtones of religious worship only because *it is appropriate to the subject*. Indeed, the language in which these feeding frenzies are typically staged is as carefully nuanced in the grammar of sentimentality as is Isaacson’s organ-loft eulogy for the flag.

This is the language of Nationalism, another of the many regional dialects of Standard Bigotry (along with such colorful local manifestations as racism, xenophobia, misogyny, homophobia, etc.) that share as their underlying grammar the conjugation and declension of simple verbs and nouns into charged emotional states of ingroup / outgroup affiliation and rivalry. By translating the aridly philosophic and cumbersomely complex discussion of shared rights that remains the heart of this legal debate into the easier and more colorful public spectacle of Christians and lions, these gladiators for the ideal of unbounded gun ownership are careful to appeal to that reliable hand-over-heart reflex of loyalty to the symbols of citizenship that had been so methodically instilled in so many of us while young. But in the true

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spirit of sentimentality, this is a loyalty to *symbols* rather than to the more complicated system of attributes for which those symbols stand.

And this propensity toward proud, unquestioning loyalty to mere symbols in place of real people or issues easily becomes, in the hands of the politically savvy, an efficient implement in the consolidation of political power. For, a mind conditioned to swoon at the sight of a flag, uniform, or slogan is one especially vulnerable to coercion toward the wholesale purchase of toxic (when not merely irrelevant) ideas under its inferred endorsement. Of the many embarrassingly blatant examples of this tendency revealed to us during the occupation of the White House by that archetypical sentimental bully, Donald Trump, one of the most salient of these concerned his sanctimonious condemnation of National Football League team members who elected to kneel rather than stand during that now-inescapable national liturgy we know as the national-anthem-at-American-competitive-team-sporting-events.

Although the impetus to kneel had begun as a peaceable protest against racial inequality in our country, it was immediately read by sentimentalists as a demonstration of unpatriotic feeling, some of whom further reading into this simple physical gesture as overtly dishonoring not just the flag as symbol of what it is to be American but more specifically the fallen military and police officers *who died in service to us all*. (Please try to keep in mind, if it's not too late, that we're just talking about a *fucking ball game* here, not an inauguration, a funeral, or a national catastrophe!)

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It is interesting to note, by the way, that Colin Kaepernick, the player responsible for initiating the practice, as well as his San Francisco 49ers teammate Eric Reid, describe their action as having been carefully considered in an attempt to retain an attitude of *respect*, despite their wish to protest. Said Reid, "We chose to kneel because it's a respectful gesture. I remember thinking our posture was like a flag flown at half-mast to mark a tragedy."

Kaepernick explained the initial impetus in an interview as follows: "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color. To me, this is bigger than football and it would be selfish on my part to look the other way..." adding that he intended to continue his protest in this manner until he felt the American flag came to represent finally "what it's supposed to represent."

What seems to me most obvious from these comments, as well as the controversy aroused by them, is that the commodity perceived to be at stake here is little more than a proper understanding of just what the U.S. flag *actually represents*. To the protestor it has become primarily symbolic of that basic democratic value of citizenship equality from which it is perceived our country has strayed; to the enraged responders it is rather that sense of obligation the living ought to feel for the memory of those who have died in service to their country.

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Of course, both readings may be seen as just one of many, each of which partly valid and abundantly incomplete. For, a flag, like *any* symbol employed by a working mind toward sharing with others, can never be neatly circumscribed into one definitively determined and unchanging meaning, especially given the fact that the various minds that take it up (in order to keep it alive) are each the product of different lives and their remembered association trains.

Yet, in the exquisitely poor taste we've come to expect from this impresario of received opinion, Trump grabbed his cellphone and weighed in publicly on the issue with a seat-of-the-pants ethical judgment on what remains at bottom, really, a *non-issue* (by which I mean the kneeling-versus-standing business, *not* the inequality that prompted the protest in the first place). Using his preferred conduit of Presidential editorializing, the Twitter tweet, Trump issued the following directive: "Very important that NFL players STAND tomorrow, and always, for the playing of our National Anthem. Respect our Flag and our Country!" And soon after this, among a flurry of schoolyard-style bullying, he bolstered this sentiment with the following fatwa: "If NFL fans refuse to go to games until players stop disrespecting our Flag & Country, you will see change take place fast. Fire or suspend!"

Let us try to put aside for the moment, if we possibly can, the egregiously undignified inappropriateness of such directives *issuing*

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from a President. (One would hope the President of a major nation would have more pressing responsibilities to attend to than policing patriotism etiquette at sporting events.) It seems possible to cobble together from the incoherence of Trump's various rants on this subject a unified declamation of sorts. I offer here a possibility:

I, Donald Trump, President of this country, hereby proclaim it factual that any sports professional not standing during the performance of our national anthem is, ipso facto, disrespecting our flag and, therefore, our country; moreover, that any such disrespect needs to be swiftly eradicated by means of punishment, namely by the elimination of any such player from the profession.

Now, of the many mindset loops conducive to this kind of "thinking," the most salient seem to me to be the four following beliefs: **one**, that a person's decision not to stand during a performance of our national anthem is necessarily indicative of disrespect to our flag; **two**, that any perceived disrespect of our flag is necessarily synonymous with overt disrespect of one's country and those who have died in its service; **three**, that anyone showing such lack of patriotism as associated with this perceived disrespect deserves swift and severe punishment in order that this insufficiency may be eradicated and the country restored as quickly as possible to that desired state of totalitarian respect for authority befitting the privilege of living in the greatest nation on earth; and last, but hardly least, **four**, that a sporting event is an appropriate arena in which to test all this.

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Yes, it is actually this last belief that remains for my money the most curious and remarkable. As explored above in Section XII, the religion-like worship of competitive team sports may be seen, time and again, to offer the ideal arena in which to consolidate ingroup loyalties, especially through establishing the rivalry boundaries of a perceived outgroup. This may explain why it doesn't seem strange to most American citizens that an inconsequential, goal-oriented entertainment symbolizing the vanquishing of enemies, such as a football game, should have come to be such a trusty testing ground for religious and patriotic feelings. But this tradition is hardly *inherent* in this, or any, sport; it has merely accrued in time through the aegis of a culture hungry for the worship of authority.

It is interesting that Kaepernick's protest, along with the predictable storm of hatred showered on him and his sympathizers, was not anything novel in American history; a very similar event happened, with a very similar public response, a couple of decades earlier. This was back in 1996 when Mahmoud Abdul-Rauf, then a guard for the Denver Nuggets, was suspended by the National Basketball Association for his refusal to stand for the same compulsory performance of our anthem. Not surprisingly, Abdul-Rauf's reasoning was quite similar to Kaepernick's: Our flag represented something different to him than it did to those who went on to burn down his

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home, repeatedly threaten his life, and conspire to steal from him his prime years of deserved NBA stardom.

Initially, by the way, the crisis had been resolved only when Abudul-Rauf agreed to stand during the anthem, though pray instead of sing. Such is the deep convictions of sentimentalists that they can be appeased by a mere gesture of *ostensible* conformance to tradition rather than an actual change in behavior. Yes, as long as he could be seen *posing* as he should for the required ritual, despite the continued transparency of his refusal to mouth the words he believed hypocritical to his belief system, the world of professional basketball would deign to allow him to continue operating as its cash cow. Interestingly, all these years later, Abudul-Rauf *still* refuses to stand for the anthem, despite this severe, abusive retribution he has endured from scandalized sentimentalists.

But a look at the history of the musical anthem at the center of this ridiculous controversy might help reveal the arbitrary nature of such highly emotional commitments of belief.

"The Star-Spangled Banner" is a patriotic song with lyrics derived from "Defence of Fort M'Henry," a poem of 1814 by Francis Scott Key (as well as from his earlier song, "When the Warriors Return") about an incident in the Battle of Baltimore during the War of 1812, particularly as set to the tune of a popular British club song ("To Anacreon in

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Heaven," the official song of an 18th-century London gentlemen's club of amateur musicians).

Although recognized for official use as early as 1889 by the United States Navy and played soon after across the country at Army posts (at evening retreat), it was not until 1931 that it had been *officially* adopted as the nation's anthem. Until then, it was merely one of a number of patriotic songs serving this purpose at appropriate public events (e.g., July 4th celebrations), including "Hail Columbia," "My Country, 'Tis of Thee," and "America the Beautiful."

In 1916, President Woodrow Wilson issued an executive order recognizing "The Star-Spangled Banner" as *the* national anthem to be played at military (and other appropriate) occasions. The following year, he asked the U.S. Bureau of Education to prepare an official version of this anthem out of the many existing ones, and on December 5, 1917 the version we know today was first performed at Carnegie Hall. But although this anthem was indeed performed at a baseball game as early as the 1918 World Series, it was not until a quarter-century later (during World War II) that the tradition became a ubiquitous feature of baseball games and, still later yet, of various other public sports events.

Until 1942 there had been no prescription authorized as to appropriate behavior during the playing of this anthem in the United States. During that year, a couple of revisions to section 301 of title 36 of the U.S. Code regarding its performance were made: the first on June

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22nd, which indicated that those in uniform should salute while others should simply stand at attention, with men removing their hats and women placing their hand over their heart, *though only if the flag was present*; the second on December 23rd of the same year, further prescribing those at attention to face in the direction of the music and specifying that women *and* men place their hand over their heart, though, again, only in the presence of the flag.

As recently as 1976, this part of the code was again revised (ironically, in an effort to simplify it!), wherein both men and women were instructed to place hand over heart, though now whether or not the flag was present. In 1998, it was tweaked further to stipulate that members of the Armed Forces and veterans should salute during performance of it, whether or not the flag was displayed. However, *all of these* changes refer to what are known as “statutory suggestions” or “behavioral requirements,” *not* to enforceable, binding law. According to legal scholars, this distinction between binding and non-binding law relevant to 36 U.S.C., §301 is easily recognized in the context of the subject discussion in at least two clear ways: first, the conspicuous lack of criminal penalties included in the code toward dealing punitively with violations of its provisions; and second, the pointed use of the auxiliary modal verb “should” rather than that of “shall” in each instance of usage—a distinction of consistent significance to American legal history.

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Yet, despite this rather lucid legal distinction, sentimental zealots for patriotic display continue to treat violations of these statutory suggestions as if they were criminal violations of binding law. Example: the Trump-friendly tirade by Roy Moore, an ultra-conservative former judge then running to fill a U.S. Senate seat. (Yes, founder and president of the Foundation for Moral Law, an Alabama 501[c][3] dedicated to promoting the privileging of Christian values in American politics, this is the same former judge who was forced out of the Alabama Supreme Court for refusing to obey a court order to remove a monument of the Ten Commandments and then forced out yet again for directing judges to enforce a ban on same-sex marriages that was ruled unconstitutional.)

Moore claimed that NFL protesters who kneel rather than stand during the national anthem are not only unpatriotic *but lawbreakers too*. "It's against the law...It was an act of Congress that every man stand and put their hand over their heart. That's the law," he told *Time* magazine in October of 2017. Now, it would seem to me a *judge*, of all people, might possess the legal background alerting him to the elementary distinctions between binding and non-binding laws, but in the heat of the sentimental reflex to judge others, subtleties such as this might easily be forgotten or overlooked.

Regardless, a consensus among legal scholars is that even if 36 U.S.C., §301 *had* been intended to be legally binding (i.e., despite its

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deliberate wording and conspicuous lack of punitive remedies), the First Amendment itself would prevent the prescriptions for behavior found here from being enforced anyhow. For example, the Supreme Court held in *West Va. Bd. Of Ed. v. Barnette* (1943) that public school students can't be required to salute the flag, nor adults be required to stand at attention with hand over heart and hats removed during the national anthem. (The opinion declared that "no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein.")

So, why do men like Donald Trump and Roy Moore react to peaceful protests expressed through non-criminal refusals to embrace statutory suggestions as if these protesters were engaging in a behavior that proved a dangerous threat to a stable society? I believe the answer to be found in a type of social conditioning most of us undergo during our formative years, but one that adheres more indelibly or inflexibly in some than in others in adulthood. This conditioning involves the sensitizing of our youth to the symbols of patriotic feeling, much as religious parents strive to sensitize their children to the requisite symbolism of their own religious practice.

While a Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist parent might typically show little concern over their child's lack of overt, or *worshipful*, respect to the sight of a Christian cross, a practicing Catholic would typically find this same lack of *overt* respect to that cross by their school-age child

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to be commensurate with active *disrespect*. Something of this same difference in defining “disrespect” can be found at the intersections of numerous other cultural traditions, religious or otherwise. Likewise, children of any of these households might ignore to the point of insensitivity the cultural importance of certain native-American religious relics, and this with impunity simply because these objects or ideas fail to show up on the parents’ “radar” as worthy of this type of respect. With something less than cultural smugness, these parents would be unlikely to consider such of their children to lack this respect to be overtly *disrespectful* in our usual sense of the word.

But the social obligations we lay down as nations in the best interest of the integrity and safety of the state tend to require of us more *active* respect by its citizens than do any overlapping or competing cultural priorities. Chief among these is the citizen’s loyalty to their nation, a feeling of support for, allegiance with, and commitment to, the state. But loyalty is an associational attachment involving a potentially costly commitment to secure, or at least *not jeopardize*, the well-being of the practitioner’s object of loyalty. Therefore, it should not be surprising that loyalty, particularly at this level, tends to be easiest gauged by the *lack of harm rather than extent of benefit* extended to their object by said practitioner. And for this reason, a citizen failing to show adequate overt or active respect to a symbol of the state tends to be viewed more warily than the one showing that same want of this respect toward a

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religious relic (particularly one *outside* one's parents' religious tradition).

Since actual "mindreading" (as opposed to subtle clue-reading) is not *really* a human faculty (at least not at the implied level of extra-sensory perception), it tends to be difficult to know whether an underperformer of overt respect is therefore capable of active *disrespect*, the end result of which, of course, being the potential for *disloyal* subversive actions that are dangerous to the continued well-being of the state.

This may explain why the practice of conditioning in young children these feelings for flag worship has enjoyed such a long tradition in our country, even among parents otherwise sensible to the dangers of brainwashing, which this practice remains at its most basic level. For, the only reason, *really*, to teach a malleable young mind the virtue of "trying on" the emotions involved in worshipful reverence of a flag is an inherent distrust in that child's later ability to be seen as faithful to their country. It is an attempt to permanently wire that child to a desired reflexive response, freeing them of the dangers of behavior that might be judged subversive. The problem with this practice should be obvious though. A citizen who *reflexively* stands, salutes, kowtows, or cries at the sight or thought of a mere symbol is that much less likely to *actively* engage in mindful commitment to the actual entity or endeavor for which that symbol is

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thought to stand. When Pavlov's dogs salivated at the sound of a bell, it was no longer reflective of the animal's feeling of, or attention to, the valuable survival instinct of hunger and only a blind reflex.

Of course, it is also true, as the Italians say, that "the appetite comes with the eating" and that ringing the bell can also *awaken* feelings of hunger (through a reverse-engineered association train of the emotional connections in the brain). But surely this is no recommendation of the practice, as the only benefit of this type of control over a subject is dissociating its natural inherited inclinations toward energy maintenance in an unnatural effort to fatten it up. Hopefully, we wish our children to grow into considerate, thinking individuals and citizens rather than sure-fire solid-state circuitries of approved knee-jerk reactions.

This problem in perceiving the attributes of loyalty in ones other than ourselves can be further complicated by the existence of *varying types* of loyalty, as formally recognized by psychologists, sociologists, and philosophers. For example, Stephen Nathanson, a philosopher at Northeastern University, distinguishes between *exclusionary* and *non-exclusionary* forms of loyalty. The act of sustaining a loyalty of the former type would necessarily involve excluding loyalty to other people, groups, or ideas, thereby creating *disloyalty* to one or more in order to *sustain* it toward another. Patriotism, at least as it is characteristically inculcated in our young people, tends to be best described by this type, especially as a deep commitment to the values

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of a nation other than one's own can be perceived by overcautious citizens as necessary proof that such commitments were made *at the expense* of those toward one's *own* country.

Of course, this notion is predicated on the erroneous assumption that there is only a finite quantity of this feeling of commitment to be spent and that being wholly committed to one's country should leave zero percentage available for employment elsewhere. I say *erroneous* because we can easily reject this notion through the analogy of love. Most parents are not afraid of losing their feeling of love for one of their children by feeling and bestowing it upon another. (This is not to say that the *recipients* of this love, the children, might not *interpret* the parent's love shown to a sibling as being bestowed at his or her own expense; however, such a reading rarely reflects the true feelings, or even *actions*, of the parent.)

Yes, when we look around us, we see it is not only possible, but quite common (and therefore *normal*), to observe individual loyalties sustained among friends and family without endangering those loyalties the individual might sustain toward other entities, causes, or belief systems. These, therefore, may be considered *non-exclusionary* loyalties. By remaining indifferent to such distinctions, it is far easier to pose in such a way as to fill in the outline of the poster image of patriotism to which a nationalist typically aspires. Hence, this unremitting instinct to want to instill in our young these reflexive

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reactions to symbols we associate with respect, loyalty, and responsibility.

But once again, a brief look at the history of this inculcation can easily dispel any romantic notions we're likely to savor of it. Let us turn to The Pledge of Allegiance, that oath-centered conditioning ritual that remains the mainstay of American patriotism indoctrination. Although there are many other countries that sustain a tradition of oaths of allegiance for specific purposes, the United States remains in a conspicuous minority of those using such an oath *as a component of childhood education*.

Interestingly, this statistic is in direct inverse proportion to the predominant role of religion in American politics as compared with most other industrialized nations. It should not be surprising, therefore, to learn that the inspiration and driving force behind this tradition of teaching The Pledge of Allegiance to our children was of both a religious and a business nature.

Although other oaths of allegiance to our nation existed before it (such as one devised by Rear Admiral George Balch, auditor of the New York Board of Education), The Pledge of Allegiance as we know it today was, with only a couple of minor changes, the creation of a Baptist minister (Francis Bellamy, 1855-1931) at the recruitment of a zealous magazine marketer (James B. Upham) for a popular children's monthly (*The Youth's Companion*). In preparation for the national public school

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celebration of Columbus Day in 1892 (commemorating the 400th anniversary of the arrival of Christopher Columbus in the Americas), Upham devised a promotional scheme for this magazine that would effortlessly take out two fowl with one projectile: first, to realize his decidedly sentimental dream of instilling devout nationalism in impressionable young minds; and second, to make an *unprecedented killing in the sale of American flags*. Yes, this marketing scheme Upham devised toward enriching the magazine's coffers aspired to nothing short of profiting on the sale of at least one flag *to every school in the country!* Once again, anyone wishing to better understand the role of religion in American politics need only *follow the money*. After Upham and Bellamy had then conspired to lobby Congress and President Benjamin Harrison sufficiently, the latter (not coincidentally) made a public proclamation (Presidential Proclamation 335) that the public-school flag ceremony, including said pledge, would be the center of the nationwide Columbus Day celebrations. Consequently, The Pledge of Allegiance was first used in public schools on October 12, 1892, during the Columbus Day observances. After this, various minor adjustments were made to the wording, most notoriously the addition of the phrase "under God," which was made under President Eisenhower in 1954 as part of his campaign to infuse Capitalism with Christianity as a bulwark against the threat of communism. (And in 1956, "In God We Trust," which had been used on some coinage since 1864, would be adopted as the official U.S.

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motto, replacing the unofficial *E pluribus unum*, and mandated to appear on all currency.)

The audacious unconstitutionality of this addition is, of course, not hard to see; indeed, it's nearly blinding to those who recognize in it an insidious example of government-sanctioned endorsement of religion, one that clearly violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment and constitutes yet another erosion of the all-important notion of a separation between church and state, a defining feature of our constitution.

But equally telling of the perceived benefits of indelibly imprinting nationalism into our vulnerable young minds was the specific physical performance aspects surrounding the recitation of this pledge. Placing the hand over the heart, as has been prescribed by the U.S.C. since 1942, symbolically offers up one's heart (i.e., life) as forfeiture in the event of failure to fulfill the pledge. Photographs abound from the early 20th century showing children reciting their pledge to the flag while performing a precise set of gestures eerily discomfiting to modern viewers. These constitute something known as "the Bellamy Salute," named after the same author of our pledge, who, in 1892, modified the then-current "Balch Salute" of some five years earlier.

The instructions for the "Bellamy Salute" were published specifically for the above-mentioned National School Celebration of Columbus Day, for which The Pledge of Allegiance itself had been created, packaged, and marketed. These instructions read as follows:

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At a signal from the Principal the pupils, in ordered ranks, hands to the side, face the Flag. Another signal is given; every pupil gives the flag the military salute – right hand lifted, palm downward, to align with the forehead and close to it. Standing thus, all repeat together, slowly, "I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands; one Nation Indivisible, with Liberty and Justice for All." At the words, "to my Flag," the right hand is extended gracefully, palm upward, toward the Flag, and remains in this gesture till the end of the affirmation; whereupon all hands immediately drop to the side.

This kiddie performance is closely reminiscent of the so-called Roman Salute, a militaristic group conformance gesture in which the arm is held out forward, straight, with palm down and fingers touching. But although scholars are now dubious about the likelihood of this precise salute having actually been employed in classical Rome, it did manage to become the subject of romanticization by Italian fascists of the 1920s who were propagandistically bent upon drawing parallels between their august classical heritage and their own tawdry vision of a totalitarian martial society. Similar forms of this salute were adopted by nationalist movements in various countries throughout the 1920s and 30s, including France, Spain, Greece, Estonia, Yugoslavia, and Brazil. But it was to become most recognizable to modern memory in its Nazi German adoption as the *Hitlergruss* ("Hitler Salute"). Indeed, because of the close identification of this type of salute with militaristic nationalist movements worldwide, it has been banned in most countries

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since World War II, though its presence survives unofficially among diverse hate groups wishing to preserve something of the militaristic totalitarian spirit of fascism. And back in 1942, it should not be surprising that Congress, wishing to distance American culture from the fascist world, amended title 36 of the U.S. Code to replace this goose-stepping militaristic one with the more oath-oriented hand-over-heart version still in use here now.

But no matter how we try to dress it up, and *even without* the insidious atheist-baiting verbiage of that flagrantly unconstitutional insertion of the words "under God" in 1954, this ritual of coerced flag worship easily coalesces into the following morally unsettling image: that of children of an impressionable age standing in rigid, mindless conformity, engaged in the reflexive religious worship of a symbol of their country by means of an on-demand protestation of proud, blind faith in their home team of governmental ideology, all this by means of a precise, choreographed, verbal mind-conditioning formula. This sad scenario, with its unavoidable reminders of militaristic, authoritarian nationalism and salivating laboratory canines, should rightly strike any rational believer in democracy as ignominious. (Indeed, this should seem so to no less a degree than to the sordid business of school prayer, which represents a brazenly unconstitutional agenda of eroding the carefully conceived and protected right of each citizen of the state to remain free from the yoke of the church and all the medieval absurdities its various cults wish to sell him or her from the comfort of its

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unconstitutional enjoyment of government subsidization through tax exemption.)

Nor did more recent rulings making this performance “voluntary” provide *realistic* relief to our children from this obligation; the importance of peer approval to children of this age, coupled with coupled with their fear of being targeted for outgroup bullying, manages to keep this practice *effectively* mandatory for a huge cross-section of kids in our country.

Yet, it is this very state of mindless worship of authority for the mere sake of authority that remains most dear to sentimental politicians made uncomfortable by the prospect of free thinking. And I believe such displays of reflexive, righteous zeal for unexamined received morality so proudly brandished by sanctimonious bullies like Messrs. Trump and Moore are traceable in large measure to this venerated tradition of childhood conditioning in flag worship.

Let us give up this medieval practice of indoctrination by conditioning and raise our children to actually *think* about their country and not just wait for the cue, assume the position, and worship its symbols. Remember Justice Brennan’s judicious remark about flag desecration which, with only the necessary switch of relevant abstract noun, can be made wholly appropriate to flag *observance* as well: *punishing those who [observe] the flag [differently than do you] dilutes the very freedom that makes the emblem so revered, and worth revering.*

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And this brings us back to a theme touched on above but now deserving closer examination, being as it remains one of the crucial tenets of this essay. I speak specifically here of my argument that the panoply of attitudes associated worldwide with religious practice—these including prayer, worship, dogma, and the superstitious fear of profanation—contribute significantly toward the shaping of the sentimental mindset and the myriad indignities it is heir to. After all, how different really is the disgust reflex triggered in a pious nationalist at the thought of a desecrated symbol of their nation than that sparked in a pious religionist confronting blasphemy or heresy against their god? I contend, little...if any.

As observed above, one of the societal protections afforded religious memes from the potential embarrassments of critical inquiry is *blasphemy taboo*, an evolutionarily ingenious means of keeping vacuously incoherent ideas safe from the light of reason by, in effect, drawing the blinds. This taboo achieves its consummate state of censorship with remarkable efficiency, as it merely capitalizes on our own inherent capacity to be scandalized by the violation or debasement of that which is held to be sacred.

The state of being “sacred”—meaning special, hallowed, holy, consecrated, venerated, or protected by religious doctrine—is a status enjoyed by certain entities or ideas on the basis of cultural convention.

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After all, there is nothing in this world that can be *inherently* “sacred” – not any more than something can be *inherently* beautiful, dangerous, or costly – as these are all *values*, which are merely relative standards with which we humans evaluate things, actions, and ideas. In other words, they are merely constructs of the human mind developed under the aegis of culture, just like virtue, morality, pornography, justice, etc. Even the most universal-seeming concept, such as “holding life sacred” will, upon close enough examination, reveal *a spectrum* of commitment, in both degree *and* type, according to a wide variety of considerations and circumstances, such as religious doctrines, secular laws, traditions, or plain old context. Sure, they are *built upon* inherited behavioral tendencies and instinctive reactions, but in that same sense in which the acquisition of any *specific* human language is built upon the foundation of an inherited universal *instinct for language*.

So, when we demote the status of a concept we had formerly held to be “sacred” to the more general, popular, and available category of the profane (non-sacred), we engender a type of ambiguity, fleeting as it might be, wherein one thing is seen to have two values, even if only while in transition. This confusion of status seems to me to be a type of cognitive dissonance—an inconsistency of attitude or view that threatens our desired sense of certainty and stability. It is as if two mutually exclusive realities have been assigned for the moment to the same entity. And our nervous systems seem to have evolved a natural

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mechanism with which to recognize and react to this state of dissonance: our own hardwired repugnance reflex.

This feeling of repugnance is one that most of us have inherited in varying degrees through a seamless blend of genes and cultural environment. It is an emotion of disdain, usually accompanied with disgust, in response to something sensed as potentially dangerous. Although the earliest manifestations of this reflex were likely limited to *literally* toxic entities found in our *physical* environment – an example would be the gag reflex to the sight and smell of, say, excrement – this reaction seems eventually to have evolved into a psychological one pertaining, by association, to potentially dangerous *ideas* as well. And in particular, such ideas might be those that subversively threaten the seeming “rightness” of a recognized source of authority.

In his 2007 book, *god is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, the late Christopher Hitchens maintained, and I believe quite persuasively, that there is an essentially human proclivity toward confusing what is at any time sanctioned to be sacred from its opposite, the profane. (He writes, “this mad confusion between the sacred and the profane is found in all faiths and at all times.”) And it is this tendency, he further suggests, that lays the best foundation for explaining such cultural phenomena as the prohibition against eating pork in both Jewish and Muslim societies. (Specifically, he sees the roots of such a prohibition to be the rather human-like qualities that make pigs particularly easy for us to anthropomorphize and, thereby, associate their consumption by

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us with the instinctively repulsive act of cannibalism.) This emphasis on the ease with which our species can confuse the sacred and profane, along with the ensuing ramifications of this confusion, seems to me to map rather neatly onto the concept I introduced a few paragraphs ago about the cognitive dissonance we often suffer in attempting to navigate between the sacred and profane.

Since the politics of loyalties is one of the central features of human society, the *testing* of loyalty remains a key arena in which divisiveness among us thrives. Put more than two people in a room and you have the foundational requirements for ingroup/outgroup perceptions, identifications, practices, and conflicts. And exacerbating this tendency for divisive allegiance-making is the authority baggage we all bring along with us from our formative years, when we were subjected to parental authority that operated outside our own rational understanding. For, it is reasonable, and often necessary, for a parent to exercise less-than-democratic authority over their young child, who is not yet capable of making sound decisions regarding its own survival. After all, appealing to the reasonableness and good judgment of a two-year-old as to the danger of automobiles is considerably less conducive to that child's longevity than unequivocally maintaining a prohibition against playing in traffic, no matter how seemingly arbitrary and unfair it remains in the young mind being prohibited.

But this sort of "blind" respect for authority, once it is no longer necessary, can be difficult to shed, or at least to *reinterpret* for usage

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as a responsible adult. And those who have most trouble making this transition seem, in my experience, to struggle through their adulthood with how to effectively and gracefully meet authority in society. Typically, instead of exercising *reasoned respect*, such as when one follows traffic laws that may be *personally* inconvenient but are nonetheless beneficial to the common good, these strugglers tend to confront authority with their minds set for either *inculcated worship* or its converse, the rebellious resistance of *apostasy*. And it is in this all-or-nothing rigidity of response, which is inherently inflexible to the sensitive nuance of power relations operating among adult humans in the real world, that the compromising spirit of cooperation loses out to the more aggressive dictates of competition.

Conversely, we have also evolved a *positive* reinforcement mechanism – this by way of our neurochemical reward system, wherein an increased release of the neurotransmitter dopamine along our brain’s “mesolimbic pathway” (including such regions as the ventral tegmental area, the nucleus accumbens of the ventral striatum, the amygdala, the hippocampus, and prefrontal cortex). This release mediates an experience of pleasure that has a reinforcing effect on a performed behavior – typically one that had proved beneficial in and for some way to our ancestors over the millennia. Thus, behaviors associated with aspects of righteousness, such as empathetic concern, fairness, and reciprocity, can also trigger a reflex sensation that reward us with the

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pleasurable feeling we associate with righteousness, all by means of the stimulation of reinforcing neural chain reactions released by our own cerebral drugstore. And in this way “rightness” has the feel of rightness even before the consequences of our action in the world around us can be judged as to its actual candidature as a “right” or “proper” action.

These automatic mechanisms of our nervous system, insidiously tweaking our behavior in small increments in both directions, may be harnessed by any number of cascades of events to prompt more developed directions in behavior. For example, not only can this ancient disgust reflex toward the pollution of our *physical* environment be manipulated via psychological means to enhance our dislike of certain *ideas*, but this newly adopted stance can be reinforced *positively* by the converse system of dopamine reward- system payload. Through these inherently seductive behavioral modification systems of our brain we are left vulnerable to the pleasurable accommodation of useless, or even toxic, ideas. And this is where religious thinking comes in.

XIV.11-[a] Religion as Evolutionary Byproduct

For, religion, or *any* psychological system of dependency on authority-inculcated “truth” (dogma), is given free reign by such reinforcing pleasures of routine, repetition, and social solidarity. An otherwise useless, if not downright dangerous, idea in the context of individual application can evoke positive reinforcement in our mesolimbic pathway when enough members of our fellow in-group

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perform it, despite the continued lack of evidence as to the idea's soundness or efficacy. This reinforcing feeling derives from the historically helpful feeling of solidarity *but hijacked now to reinforce something unrelated to its original use.*

Evolutionary biologists and psychologists refer to such a phenomenon as an “evolutionary byproduct,” otherwise known as a “pre-adaptation,” or this latter term's more recent replacement, “exaptation.” (This was the term coined by Stephen Jay Gould and Elizabeth Vrba in 1982 to replace “pre-adaptation,” a term they believed to have become bogged down with the baggage of *teleology*, the goal-oriented explanation of phenomena by way of the purpose they serve rather than by their causes).

These designations are used to describe the same proposed mechanism: namely that a trait might shift along its evolutionary trajectory. In other words, having evolved on the basis of a function it served that was beneficial to the passing on of genes, it then remained in use to serve another, *unrelated*, function. Of the many examples of exaptation, one of the most commonly offered relates to the evolution of feathers, which are believed to have initially evolved in certain dinosaurs that were incapable of flying but that were benefitted by the heat-regulating and/or mate-attracting display properties of these structures, only to become co-opted for use in flying much later on in birds.

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It has been argued by some that religion is itself such an exaptation (evolutionary byproduct), in that neither religious beliefs nor behaviors really qualify as adaptive traits in an evolutionary sense and should be viewed rather as incidental byproducts of the cognitive architecture of the brain – features that served early humans well toward their survival but that remained in the behavioral repertoire for reasons of other, unrelated, benefits.

This argument as pertains to the genesis of religion concerns the evolutionary role of something referred to as “agent detection,” and even more specifically the exaggerated development of this form of awareness known as “hyperactive agent detection device” (or HADD, a term coined by the experimental psychologist Justin L. Barrett). Plain old “agent detection” is the general term used by evolutionary and social psychologists to describe a survival strategy in which predilections that evolved to become hardwired into the brains of many animals (including humans) cause it to presume the purposeful intervention into their awareness of an intelligent “agent” in a particular situation. This “agent,” in its simplest description might be any creature possessed of intentionality, though it is most specifically relates to those, such as a predator, rival, or other enemy, whose detected presence presents a likely threat.

Now, the later development of this tendency into the exaggerated variety mentioned above – that is, the hyperactive model – is actually

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the specific mechanism seen by those who embrace the byproduct theory of religion as the source for the religious sensibility. They see the very belief in creator gods as the evolutionary byproduct (exaptation) of this ancient reflexive predilection to detect agency with the sort of hair-trigger sensitivity that results in *lots* of false positive responses.

An excellent introduction to this theory is offered by Daniel C. Dennett in his 2006 *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. Dennett posits a very benign example of the HADD phenomenon in dogs relating to the common behavioral response of your house pet jumping up from out of a nap and barking at the sound of snow falling off an eave. He goes on to describe the use of this detection mechanism toward an animal's ability of adopting "an intentional stance," in which the animal treats some other thing in its world as a.) agents; b.) more specifically those agents with *limited beliefs* about the world; c.) those same with *specific desires*; and finally d.) "enough common sense to do the *rational* thing given those beliefs and desires."

Others who have written extensively on this subject have offered various thought experiments to illustrate the likely way this mechanism might have evolved. A common example of this is the following. Two early humans were walking together into a clearing where a large dark mass showed up in their peripheral vision. The one with a healthy (i.e., in this case *hyperactive*) agent response device reflexively reacts as if the mass were a large predator animal, even though in this case it just happened to be a boulder, while his companion, having a less

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hyperactively tuned version, presumes it is just a boulder or something else non-threatening and, accordingly, pays no attention. Though the unexcited human just happened to be right in this case, the false response he saved himself from wasting in this particular instance proves, in the final analysis, much less costly than the outcome of presuming each such instance to be likewise benign. Therefore, the one most likely to pass on his genes to us is the one with the extra-sensitive detection system, not the one likely to consider each possible threat benign. In other words, sooner or later, he might be eaten by the “boulder” whereas his more trigger-happy friend has merely wasted a little time and attention to his endeavor.

Now back to Dennett, who claims, regarding the above-mentioned “intentional stance,” that “so powerful is our innate urge to adopt the intentional stance that we have real difficulty in turning it off when it is no longer appropriate.” And it is in this way that belief in a creator god may be seen as an evolutionary byproduct of agent detection. Once our ancestors added *hyperactive agent detection device* to their repertoire, enabling them to adopt the *intentional stance* at the drop of a fruit from a tree behind one, it is not a reach from there to attributing any unexplained phenomenon to some invisible agent in possession of an unlimited number (because perceived) of intentions, beliefs, desires, rational motivations, as well as ample wherewithal, to intervene in our lives.

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Our brain's reward system, which developed as a means of reinforcing behaviors that, for one reason or other, worked in helping ancestors to live long enough to pass on their genes, offers this reinforcement potential blindly to *any* dynamics that come along, including even the unsavory or unhelpful. So, perhaps we don't so much experience the good feeling of having made a *specific* right decision so much as we enjoy the generalized feeling of being right or in the right. In other words, this evolved reward-system payload of dopamine accompanying any of our behaviors that we feel to be righteous makes us at the same time vulnerable to sign onto other, *potentially less propitious*, behaviors that similarly "feel" right.

And it is this same automatic response that helps preserve the various secular forms of manufactured conformity permeating societies around the globe, such as tradition, ritual, received opinion, or the inherent urge to consolidate and sacralize ingroups, be they sports teams, schools, political parties, or national institutions. But since these brain mechanisms of behavioral reward rarely distinguish with any precision between such societal concepts as what specifically, technically, or legally constitutes the sacred versus the profane, they tend to flourish on the basis of that more coarse-grained, *categorical* distinction between the two. And this may be how our inherited disgust reflex toward pollution and desecration may subvert what inclinations we might have toward any truly open-minded inquiry about an event

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or topic.

I believe this all boils down to a key truth about our cognitive life as social creatures: The cultural construct of religious worship tends to play a key role in shaping our accommodation with, and indulgence in, *uncritical thinking*.

XIV.11-[b] Worship and Prayer Defined

But let's pause a moment in order to reign in our language by identifying terms. By "religious" I do not mean any *specific* religion, denomination or sect, nor even more broadly "organized" versus unorganized, disorganized, or what have you. Rather, I mean the whole set of culturally developed behaviors and practices, replete with their consequent morals, ethics, worldviews, and politics, that constitute the act of WORSHIP.

Now, our word "worship" originally derives from the Old English word "weorthscipe" (i.e., *worthship*), which meant both the state of *worthiness* itself as well as the practice of acknowledging said *worthiness*, as in the recognition of honor and renown. And it appears to have retained this sense, without necessary reference to superstition and its respect for the supernatural, well until the early 14th century, when we see it increasingly take on the specific use of describing the adoration of *the divine*. Indeed, in recent centuries, "worship" has come to be so closely focused on religious devotion that the occasional secular use of it tends, ironically, to be understood only by analogy to the

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religious one. So, when we hear someone today say he or she “worships” him or her, we understand it to mean that the target of this esteem is held as high *as if they were divine*. In other words, “worship” has, by and large, lost its general meaning of honoring a person, so loaded has it become with the baggage of god(s).

Similarly, the English word “prayer,” meaning an act of supplication or intercession towards a god, or else an invocation of praise or thanks to same (or a few other minor variations), derives from the Medieval Latin word “*precaria*,” meaning *petition*. In light of this, it should not surprise us to learn that anthropologists recognize a close relationship between prayer and the concepts of surrender and supplication. And indeed, the words for “prayer” and “supplication” are one and the same in several ancient languages, such as Greek, Latin and Hebrew.

Though religions may differ among each other in some manner as to the way “worship” (or at least its translation) is understood in a particular devotional context, it appears the most common usage among them all would be what is expressed by the Greek word “*proskuneo*,” as often found used in the texts that would come to comprise the New Testament. Central to the constellation of meanings associated with this word is that of performing obeisance toward a supernatural being, or at least a person of superior rank. By this is meant the obedient deferential show of respect offered by a subordinate to a superior, such as the act of kissing his or her hand or the deep bowing

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one's head before them, or even the touching one's forehead to the ground in servile supplication.

But whatever the subtle nuances of differences discerned in the context of a particular passage, the common thread in all this is the spirit of obsequious self-abnegation communicated by and with this exchange. It is impossible for me to grasp, hard as I try, how the denial or abasement of one's worth could *in any way* be seen to *ennoble* rather than *egregiously demean* the practitioner. After all, such a performance is intended only to emphatically memorialize the practitioner's subordinate status to some other being. Rather, it seems to me that any civilized human being would naturally aspire to eradicate this servile role for themselves as well as for others; **it should simply be beneath our dignity.**

XIV.11-[c] Subordination and Submission as Practiced by Our Cousins

Of course, this demeaning act of deference to the mere status of a higher authority is a behavior pattern in no way confined to our own species; it can be observed in varying manifestations and degrees throughout the animal kingdom, though perhaps most recognizably as practiced in the societies of our primate cousins. Robert M. Sapolsky, in *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst* (2017), lucidly and insightfully discusses these features from a primatologist's (and neuroscientist's) perspective, especially in his chapter entitled "Hierarchy, Obedience, and Resistance" (chapter 12 on pp. 425-77).

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With admirable succinctness Sapolsky defines hierarchy as a “ranking system that formalizes unequal access to limited resources, ranging from meat to that nebulous thing called ‘prestige,’” adding that these hierarchies ultimately “establish a status quo by ritualizing inequalities.”

Though Sapolsky’s research career has focused on baboons in the wild (with a special interest in the effect of the stress derived from such politics on the animal’s physiology), his observations on the practice of dominance hierarchy observable among our cousin primates in general reveal a highly nuanced vocabulary of body language, gestures, and vocal utterances that memorialize the inequality of subordinate and dominant roles.

Another important translator of, and commentator on, this language of “ritualized inequality” across its various dialects is the distinguished Dutch primatologist Frans de Waal. For example, see de Waal’s *Chimpanzee Politics: Power and Sex Among Apes* (1982 and 2007), where he analyzes the “submissive greeting” and its reception by the dominant male in articulate detail (pp. 78-81). De Waal notes that this “greeting” by a subordinate male chimp offered to the dominant male – a sequence of short, panting grunts made while assuming a corresponding posture of bobbing bows from which the dominant male may be viewed upwards from below – is answered by the dominant male by his adoption of a “big” presence, standing tall with hair raised in an aggressive stance – this while the greeter adopts a protective

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stance, as if to avoid a punch. Therefore, the greeter and greeted each have their ritualized vocabulary of posture, movement, and even sound to memorialize the status of their differing rungs in the social hierarchy.

XIV.11-[d] Not All That Different than When Practiced by Humans

Now, as an example of just how far we humans have evolved from these rather rudimentary displays practiced by of our cousin primates, we have only to watch footage of Nazi rallies and their ubiquitous performance by attendees of the *Hitlergruss* (“Hitler Greeting”) salute. This non-verbal gesture of allegiance, described above in reference to the “Roman salute” (or “Bellamy salute,” as later adopted for children in U.S. schools) became named for its most notorious usage as a brainwashing tool by Adolph Hitler, though it had been copied from the Italian fascist salute instituted by Benito Mussolini years before.

In Hitler’s version, this reflexive gesture was accompanied by the verbal utterances that identified the appropriate target of worship: Adolf Hitler himself. These utterances included the militant grunts, “Heil Hitler,” “Heil, mein Führer,” or simply “Heil” as well as a special-use variant specific to public rallies – a catechism-like performance of antiphonal nature wherein the German word *sieg* (“victory”) was called by an initiator to be answered by *heil* (“salvation,” “safe,” “whole,” “intact,” etc.) by the respondents. Notably, however, this repeatedly reinforced demonstration of submissive loyalty to history’s most notorious dominant male was answered, or “accepted,” with a gesture

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by the receiver that differed dramatically with the greeting in its choreography and implicit message. I'll call this gesture of acceptance by the "greeted" alpha "the receiver pose." In this response, the recipient of the proffered submissiveness gesture (the *Hitlergrüss* itself) shows himself in the attitude of deigning to accept the submissiveness offering in a way that further memorializes his greater status. This pose may be described as the proffering of an open hand supported shoulder-height upon a bent right arm. In direct contrast to the physically strenuous gesture of the greeting, this "receiver pose" is conspicuously relaxed, as if to emphasize the lesser physical effort involved in taking than giving, thereby emphasizing the receiver's comparatively luxurious dominance.

Tilman Allert, professor of sociology and social psychology at the University of Frankfurt, in his 2005 book, *The Hitler Salute: On the Meaning of a Gesture*, posits a significant connection between the *Hitlergrüss* and the German nation's "regression into a state of moral disregard." And that connection, he contends, pertains to the sacralization of the greeter's publicly emphasized submission and inequality. Allert suggests that the swearing of an oath moves a commitment to action into a sacred sphere in which the pledge taker never has to reevaluate his intentions and reconsider his oath. The gesture invokes the addressed authority—in this case Adolf Hitler, leader of the Nazi party—as a transcendent protective presence, helping

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to “pave the way for the individual’s self-negation in the ostensible moment of his self-assertion.”

Surprisingly, Allert does not specifically address the above-mentioned “receiver pose” and therefore does not weigh in with an interpretation of any likely hierarchical meaning in it, such as I have ventured some two paragraphs ago relevant to its contrast with the “greeter pose.” Pertaining to this memorialization of submissiveness, however, he argues that with the help of this ritualized reflexive gesture, allegiance now meant “participation in what had become a sacralized reality, and moral scrutiny of one’s own actions became superfluous.” Ultimately, therefore, “the Hitler salute was tantamount to disassembling one’s own distinct identity.” Allert sums up the inherent danger of such a ritualized “greeting”:

These two phenomena – erosion of sense of self and moral disregard – together formed a vicious circle that impeded Germans’ interactions with one another and encouraged them to prefer a ritual to actual human contact. The story of the Hitler greeting is a tale of how Germans tried to evade the responsibility of normal social intercourse, rejected the gift of contact with others, allowed social mores to decay, and refused to acknowledge the inherent openness and ambivalence of human relationships and social exchange.

...We are still living with the history of the fatal gesture that was the Hitler salute, and one of the lessons of that history was that we need to be wary of obligatory rituals, especially when they are imposed from above.

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It is ironic that much as we humans pride ourselves in our ability to transcend the “primitive” behaviors of our evolutionary cousins through our cultivated exercise of reason, the spirit of subordination remains a perversely cherished staple of *our* repertoire as well—and this, I believe, thanks largely to religion. For, most religious systems across the globe have cultivated into an art the language of fearful submission and supplication as part of daily worship ritual. (Islam goes at least one step further by virtue of its very name, which means no less than *submission* or *surrender* [to the will of God].)

XIV.11-[e] Ritualized Protestations of Unworthiness Before a Parent Figure

In the numerous cultures and tongues in which superstitious submission, surrender, and self-abnegation are practiced, the formula is as simple as it is irresistible: The supplicant assumes the body language and verbal formulae developed by their particular tradition to be expressive of the “individual’s” unworthiness before an imagined figure of authority. This helps emphasize the greatness of the object of power being worshipped, thereby heightening (by contrast) the imagined power of the worshipped. For example, the practice of kneeling in the various traditions of Christianity – whether as a posture for proper prayer, for receiving the host, as an after-communion ritual, or during mass—along with the gesture of joining hands, palms touching, before one’s breast in an attitude of prayer; these ritualized gestures help sustain an attitude associated with the submissiveness

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necessary to approach a higher authority without the risk of offense. And that offense is imagined to be the supplicant's disrespect of the inequality in status between him or her and their imagined (and then feared) authority.

I say "imagined" here for obvious reasons of course, as the supplicant enters this game as one would into *any* delusional conspiracy of belief, be it the love of their god, the existence of good and evil as forces of nature (as opposed to mere constructs of human brains), or the statistical likelihood of walking out of a casino with more money than one brought into it. He or she enters only after having checked one's critical faculties at the door in exchange for a conformance ticket redeemable everywhere *within the premises*. While inside, no proof of *anything* is required; the neurochemical satisfactions of ingroup conformance prove sufficient, excepting perhaps those recalcitrant cases for which the persuasive threat of punishment looms large.

It cannot be merely coincidental that this instruction manual for "black box" authority maps so closely onto the conditions naturally forming around the developing mind of a young child—a creature whose very survival in a dauntingly confusing and dangerous world is predicated on a form of this presumed and unconditional authority from its parent(s) or other caregiver(s). For, as stated above, due to the obvious danger of any *truly* democratic independence for a youngster of a tender age, even the most loving, supportive, non-abusive parent or other caregiver imposes, even if only implicitly, a sense of "black

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box” authority by the simple virtue of the child’s inability to understand exactly why sufferance of that authority is actually necessary to its day-to-day protection from serious injury or death.

XIV.11-[f] Parental Authority for Worship by Adults

But then we grow up...or at least *some* of us do, and to varying degrees. And as we thus mature and learn about the world around us, we also discover the edges of this provisional type of authority assumed by our parents and how *their* feet too are made of mere clay – clay that nonetheless supported the weight of authority that kept the two-year-old alive and out of traffic. Yes, we come to see that behind its impressive façade, authority is revealed to be contextual, malleable, ambiguous, or even arbitrary seeming, when not *truly* arbitrary. The fact that this authority was presented as *necessarily* right and, better yet, the *only* necessary right, has merely to do with the requisite simplicity of a child’s menu at life’s oh-so-complicated banquet.

How different then is this young child’s role in an adult household from his or her later role, as an adult, in a religious community? Doesn’t the latter take on something of the role of the former by ritualizing this power and judgmental consequences of authority? I believe the answers to these two questions are obvious: *not much* and *yes*, respectively. This is to say that religious practice seduces us as adults to stay in, or at least revisit, the comforting non-responsible world of our early formative years, where things happen because of rules and actions that need not

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be understandable to us because they emanate from above our sphere of intentionality. But typically, this delusion of innocent impotence the adherent buys into does not protect him or her from judgmental blame and abasement.

So, when I see a practicing Christian, Jew, or Muslim, for example, pray to the mercy and forgiveness of a stern, albeit *obviously* unprovable, father figure, I am filled with sadness that a fellow human being can be so easily indoctrinated into open-armed acceptance of impotence—yes, the willing though unnecessary renunciation of ultimate self-responsibility in their adult life. Sadder yet is the fact that this same father figure to whom the adherent has gladly, wholly, and proudly surrendered this most necessary sense of responsibility happens in most cases to be little more than a petty, petulant, impatient, jealous, narcissistic, vengeful, tyrannical, bigoted, misogynistic, patriarchal son-of-a-bitch with absolutely no social skills and a truly breathtaking incompetence. Why would *anyone* abandon their dignity to *even a real parent* who behaves like the god portrayed in any of the big three monotheistic religions, let alone to one that's no more at bottom than an inadvertent hiccup in our cognitive apparatus, a mere byproduct of the mental acrobatics we compulsively perform around our fear of the finality of death?

But while this is to me heart-wrenchingly sad, what makes it downright contemptible is the religious tradition that conspires to pervert such mindless acquiescence into nothing short of a sign of *virtue*.

Yes, the victim of this brainwashing technique is rewarded for each coerced protestation of unworthiness by the lie that this state of degradation is evidence of the victim's—well, *worthiness*. Yes, I'll repeat this undiluted inanity in hopes of being able to unpack it: by attesting to one's unworthiness—be this due to sinfulness, pride, lust, avarice, etc., or all the above—one comes closer to actually attaining *virtue*. In other words, by saying “I am a sinner,” I become *less sinful* than some good citizen who doesn't even believe in the ludicrous notion of sin.

XIV.11-[g] Which Brings Us to “Sin”

For, this whole concept of “sin” rests upon a core belief that is inherently incompatible with the basic laws of nature—namely, that any creature of The Process of Evolution by Natural Selection can somehow be guilty of transgressing against such a thing as the “divine law” of a “supreme intelligence.” After all, intelligence itself is a property of *nervous systems*, and in particular a property found developing *quite late* in the evolution of nervous systems. What had been little more than a few on-or-off reflex responses to environmental conditions, like we still find in use in the simplest life forms, would in the course of millions upon millions of years develop into actual networks of nerve tissue, eventually integrated into vast swaths of these more primitive robotic mechanisms until the evolution of cortices allowed for the conduction and integration of the increasingly intricate and complex texture of these countless reciprocal interactions, all gradually giving way, through millions more years of tweaking, to such advanced abilities as self-consciousness, future planning, retrospective

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reverie, and creativity itself (including none less than the creation of gods).

So, the more complex and far-reaching an intelligence appears to be depends *directly* on the degree to which the nervous system that creates it has evolved over the last half a billion years of its biological development out of the veritable on-or-off switches of primitive organisms. “High” intelligence—say of the sort so many humans are said to enjoy—therefore, can only arrive *much* later in such a game rather than earlier, *but at any rate, certainly not prior to it!* And a “supreme intelligence,” such as we find attributed to a deity entity capable of creating the universe from nothing, would *necessarily* be one operating *that much further* upon this same trajectory of the genesis of nervous systems. Therefore, it is blatantly self-contradictory to say that any creation of this bottom-up accrual of events, such as a “supreme intelligence” would by definition need to be, should *precede* even the most rudimentary hints of nervous systems of a half-billion years earlier in the life of our earth and then, to make matters even more ridiculous, exercise exclusively top-down causality on its own source, thereby intelligently designing...itself.

XIV.11-[h] “Divine Law” v. The Laws of Nature

Yes, even those who try to have it both ways by simplistically asserting that “divine law” *is* the law of nature (as created and maintained by God) are simply playing a philosophical shell game. This

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is easily revealed by contemplating the following: *Were*, indeed, the *non-judgmental, non-teleological, part-random, mutation-driven mechanisms of Natural Selection just another way of describing “divine law,”* then this same “divine law” would necessarily have every one of the attributes of the process of Natural Selection and *not* the judgmental, teleological, punitive parent features most appreciated by believers. One does not need a degree in philosophy to see this “divine law” argument as a pathetic attempt at paying mere lip service to science while eating one’s theological cake in comfort. It is an argument that easily qualifies as that most unpardonable of “sins” of logic in philosophy: an *absurdity* – that which can be defined as a proposition of truth conjured into being via inconsistent reasoning.

This is an attempted shortcut to “truth” that is simply unworthy of our attention excepting, perhaps, in stand-up comedy. (Exempt from this critique, however, is the specific notion of “divine law” posited by Spinoza, for whose system the contradiction I have just outlined does not really apply, despite superficial appearances. This is because Spinoza’s radical and heretical concept of God is one that is *truly* synonymous with that of Nature, and so any “divine law” gleaned from his system can be no more than *a description of how nature works*. And this, of course, presents no contradiction to the mechanism of Evolution by Natural Selection, which, after all, merely describes how the biological reach of nature works.)

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The pride with which today's superstitious practitioner of worship boasts their somehow-virtuous fear of this imagined parent figure I see as somewhat analogous to the comfort taken by most citizens of medieval Europe who could acquiesce to their particular rung of hardship on the social ladder via the concept of something called "Great Chain of Being." This was an idealistically tidy hierarchy of the status of just about everything in the universe, from God down to dung, all following a kind of ladder model, its rungs dedicated to just about every possible role of subordination conceivable by the medieval mind. In this great encyclopedia of the descent of inferiority we can learn which animals rank higher than the next, from lions down to sheep, as well as which people, from nobility down through clergy into peasantry, until even the lowliest beggar had been explained. Even angelic beings – those creatures that get by, somehow, without their brains – may be found carefully ranked in descent from their chief executive officer down through the constabulary branch to the oh-so-nearly human.

This "Great Chain of Being" is the ultimate caste system, one that leaves no entity out, from primordial soup to nuts. And it looks ahead to more systematized attempts at codifying inequality, such as articulated by the rules of hypo/hyperdescent. Examples practiced in the U.S. include the state of Louisiana's antebellum art of skin-tone stratification in which children were officially classified on the basis of the color blend of their family tree, and this to an unprecedented degree

of precision. Beginning at the top, of course, with “white” (where no less august than God would be were this still just the “Great Chain of Being”) we find all those considered to be completely free of African “contamination” of European blood.

Of course, this scientifically nonsensical distinction was conjured up as a convenient retrofitting of pseudoscience in support of racist idealism, and it remains breathtakingly free of any the truths of what genetics reveals to us concerning the whole baseless notion of “race.” But anyway, the best thinking by racists at the time concluded that anyone in possession of a “traceable amount of African blood” of less than a one-thirty-second portion qualified as “white.” And it is from this lofty height of blood “purity” that we descend down through the more and more perceptible traces of the above-mentioned encroachment of African “contamination” of European blood, such as conceived of in the “hexadecaroon” (one-sixteenth black), the “octaroon” (one-eighth black) and the “quadroon” (one-quarter black) down through the “free mulatto” (designating any non-slave born of a black and white parent) and still on down to that almost unthinkable *yet oh-so-necessary* job description of “negro.” This last was the designation for someone of African descent who unfortunately lacked *any at all* European ancestry, leaving them necessarily lower than a mere “person of color” and hence completely unredeemable by society—except, of course, as a chattel to be used for money-saving forced labor.

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Now, all of this attention to finding one's appropriate rung on the inequality ladder, from wanton privilege down to the lowliest slave or serf, addresses the astonishing amount of nuance found in the human pursuit of subdividing subordination, whether from God down to pig iron or from white aristocrat down through the various shades of "black" of which human pigmentation is capable. As we have discussed above, the instinct for subordination may found in vast numbers of life forms on our earth but has been raised to a level of sophistication in humans that is simply awe-inspiring. And being so key to the human psyche, let us take a closer look at the psychical ramifications of this obsession.

When, say, an evangelical protestant (or *any* pious believer, really) brags about being a "god-fearing" citizen, he or she certainly does *not* intend this to be read as a confession of naiveté or cowardliness but rather of evidence of this person's highly *moral* character as the obedient "child" of an all-powerful parental authority. This is a pathetic reminder that an otherwise mature and educated adult can actually believe that good behavior is attainable and sustainable only through the fear of punishment, or hunger for reward, by an angry, judgmental parent figure from whom is voraciously hungered acceptance, validation, and even tangible reward.

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Of course, *without* that insatiable invisible parent figure we can maintain good behavior more consistently and honestly by simply harnessing the innate altruistic tendencies evolutionarily wired into our brains, tempered with the rational understanding of the emotional economics of a society that cannot operate harmoniously when more than one of its citizens enjoy unbridled freedom. Therefore, while it is reasonable that we *respect* the laws we create to keep our society operating as smoothly as possible, it would prove *counterproductive* to go that step further and actually *worship* those same laws. For, where respect, appreciation, admiration, and critical-inspired emulation are natural and useful components of the level playing field aspired to in any secular democratic society, "worship," on the contrary, is a fear-inspired reflexive behavior that thrives best in a dynamic of exaggerated competitive contrast between power and powerlessness, high and low, right and wrong, pure and corrupt, light and dark... good and bad. Worship necessarily exalts one party onto the metaphoric pedestal of the ideal unobtainable by the unworthy congregants gathering fearfully around its base. When properly practiced, Worship's congregants cannot see *each other* beyond the peripheral blur obtained when one is looking up beyond this world to that more ideal one where, *sentimentally*, a symbol has more value than the real. This is why pedestals were created in the first place: to raise the object of apprehension to an elevation appropriate to (or at least necessary to) the

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reinforcement of a simplistic hierarchy in which bigger, higher, less obtainable is better than smaller, lower, and reachable.

XIV.11-[1] Iconoclasm Unnecessary Were it Not for Hero Worship

And perhaps this explains the common practice of iconoclasm at times of transitions of social power. For, one of the first steps of a political revolution or coup is the ritualistic toppling of monuments of leaders from their pedestals—monuments that had been used to identify and reinforce the rightness of the particular ingroup wielding the authority. But we need not forage through historical film archives in search of these ceremonies of toppled symbols of authority; decade after decade, they remain all around us. Yes, these are the same types of pedestals from which so many public monument statues have toppled across our country even as recently as June of 2020.

Following the sadistic racist murder of George Floyd by white policemen in Minneapolis, crowds of protesters not only in that city but in cities around the world, became sensitized to the need to desacralize famous personages associated with the subjugation of underclasses. What began as protest against the accepted tradition of white authority subjecting those of a different skin color to the socio-economic class of the underprivileged quickly grew via obvious association to extend to a protest against *any* ingroup subjecting their chosen outgroup, such as in the case of the representative of a colonialist power that once did, or still continues to, subjugate the members of its colonized culture. Thus,

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statues not only of slave-owning American Confederates, but also of British, Belgian, and other former imperialist/colonialist authorities, became associated with the ingroup that now needed to be out.

XIV.11-[m] Real History Versus Mere Monuments

Yet when these protesters of our nation's ongoing pandemic of black subjugation were moved by their anger and frustration to bring down monumental sculptural relics of Confederate leaders, huge numbers of conservative southern whites objected to having their "history" and "legacy" disrespected. In other words, though the moral ramifications of Confederate society have, by and large, become repugnant to our nation's sense of self, the culture that created, nourished, and sustained Confederate society came to be respected as if separable from this morality. This is comparable to rewarding the nostalgic impulses of a post-war German found confessing to the fond memories of some "good old days" of Nazi-era society. While it may be reasonable from a purely psychological perspective that the formative years spent in a corrupt social system can still summon up warm associations of family, friends, and affiliations that have become inextricably connected with one's identity, any attempt to justify or rationalize the *moral values* inherent in these feel-good moments is accomplished only with the help of blurring the border between one's personal and societal commitments. Among other things worthy of consideration in regard to this is how much this sense of scandalization speaks about the role of

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public monuments in a nation's psyche. For one thing, the vast majority of these monuments depicting slave-owning Confederates were produced generations after the Civil War, not as attempts to record "history" but rather as monuments of white supremacist nostalgia for a "golden age" of genteel whites flourishing on the backs of black lives that didn't matter. Yes, these larger-than-life mementoes were mostly intended symbolically as religious glorifications of a lost lifestyle rather than appreciations of specific individuals who were beloved by their community for their moral virtues.

XIV.11-[n] Monuments as Advertising the Good Old Days of Racist Subordination

I emphasize "religious" here for good reason, as the installation ceremonies of these monuments were richly studded with references to that God who, not surprisingly, looked kindly on their racist endeavor, thereby reinforcing what was to white supremacist minds the authority that condoned the practice and entitlements of white supremacy. For, let us not forget that this was the era of Jim Crow, when it became necessary in the minds of most segregationists to emphasize in the minds of those blacks whom they were subjugating the concept of white domination that had been legal during the halcyon days of their grandparents.

It may be true that the real meaning of these monuments to proud southerners is not specifically their identification with bigotry and injustice but rather the valor and sacrifice of fellow citizens who gave

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their life to protect their beliefs and practices. If that is so, so much the more reprehensible. The mere fact that I'm willing to die for a cause bears little that should be deserving of respect and admiration *unless the cause itself is worthy of sacrifice*. And anyone who thinks that the cause of white supremacy is such an example is, I'm afraid, a white supremacist. Period. No, let's not hide behind big words like valor and determination, as these attitudes can as easily be marshalled toward cruel exploitation as toward world peace and justice.

XIV.11-[o] History?

Now, a common complaint among objectors to the removal of these monuments is that in doing so we are destroying our nation's history which, for better or worse, is not something that can just be rewritten to suit modern taste—at least not without indulging in the dark art of censorship. And until we take a closer, more sober, look at this argument, I confess it can *sound* quite persuasive, particularly to those sensitized to the consequences via real-life examples of brain-numbing state censorship from the cold war era. (For example, witness how, in 1953, subscribers to the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* received re-edited pages of the fifth volume of the second edition— pages that were to be dutifully pasted into their own copies, along with precise scissors-and-paste instructions for doing so, all for “decontamination” purposes. These offending passages in need of pasting over included *former truths* about their late Minister of Internal Affairs—i.e., secret police chief—

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Lavrentiy Beria, whose biographical details had become inconveniently obsolete after his arrest and execution.)

Now, I sincerely believe we *should* be vigilant against any temptation toward state censorship and should *stalwartly* resist the rewriting of history as a convenient means of burying the dead. But this principal is *irrelevant* pertaining to the Confederate memorial argument and is used merely as a red herring by most objectors. Indeed, the removal of the public monuments in question does *not* represent the act of destroying and rewriting history—not by a long shot. For, despite any such removal there remains a *rich* repository of the history of what actually happened in the lives of our citizens in these regions—this to be found in the usual repositories of libraries, historical societies, and online databases, all bursting with books, articles, peer-review scholarly papers, and podcasts, documentaries, and films, and all of which available to anyone able and willing to read, listen, or view.

The point is that public monuments have rarely ever been a reliable source of actual history. They tend rather to be the billboards on which history revisionists can advertise comfortably memorable take-aways from historical events and shape the way future generations (who age further and further from the real-life experience of the facts) will remember such events. And in the subject case, these larger-than-life advertisements celebrated the comfortable feel of brave righteousness that is the self-satisfied luxury of any oppressor class.

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Stephen Marche, in an insightful op-ed for the *Los Angeles Times* (“Confederates, Columbus and everyone else: Let’s just tear down all the public memorials to ‘great’ men,” October 6, 2017) argued for tearing down ALL public memorials to “great men,” as they have “outlived their purpose.” He goes on to argue:

Statues to the Confederacy were consciously created to impose white supremacy as a dominant ideology. But the intention behind statues is often more muddying than clarifying of their function. Statues to Columbus were often raised to celebrate the contributions of Catholic and Italian Americans. The Ku Klux Klan explicitly resisted monuments to Columbus, seeing them as “part of a conspiracy to establish Roman Catholicism,” as one Klan lecturer put it.

Statues never represent the people on the monuments: They represent the interest of those who build them. [emphasis added]

It is interesting to note too, by the way, that President Donald Trump, who has never failed to provide us just the right jingo for any bigot to remember and repeat on any particular occasion, found it appropriate to placate his racist constituency by claiming these Confederate monuments to be worth preserving because of being “part of our heritage.” Remember please that this heritage he pretends to covet was not at all “ours” but *theirs*, meaning those disloyal traitors to our country who were willing to shed their blood and ours in order to protect the comforts of their slave-based economy, itself possible only on the basis of a pervasive immorality. Again, this would be little

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different than Germany deciding it best to keep all and any memorials to the Third Reich in place, despite the message this sends to its citizens and the world's because it was, alas, their heritage. Some heritages are simply not worth preserving.

XIV.11-[p] Beauty is in the Eye of the Oppressor

Then there is the occasional pathetic excuse of the “artistic loss” to be suffered from their removal. Even a breathlessly perfect philistine like Donald Trump, who wouldn't know a Vermeer from plain veneer, objected that removing Confederate memorial sculptures meant removing “beauty,” a beauty that would, in his own inimitable syntax, “never able to be comparably replaced.” Let's take a close then at this “beauty” lamented by our self-proclaimed aesthete.

The majority of Confederate memorials were made by the Monumental Bronze Company of Bridgeport, Connecticut, a business specializing in the mass-production of largescale copies of sculptures in what the firm called “white bronze,” a euphemism for zinc. (Unlike a high-temperature copper alloy such as bronze, which allows for sensitive articulation of complex and subtle design patterns, zinc and other softer, low-temperature, metals and alloys sacrifice this clarity potential for easier, quicker, and cheaper manufacture.) The artist and artistry behind the original sculpture reproduced by this veritable Walmart of monuments mattered as little to these crafty marketers as to the nostalgia-ridden white supremacist women who commissioned

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them. In fact, many of these cheaply cast oversized keepsakes were really just identical copies of sculptures by northern sculptors commissioned for Union memorials. (For example, the ubiquitous “Silent Sentinel,” the hundreds of examples of which distinguished from their northern counterparts by little more than the replacement of the initials U.S. with C.S. on the soldier’s belt buckle.)

Granted, occasionally a memorial made in this manner would be cast and assembled following as its model an original of a truly talented sculptor, but the mass-produced faux-bronze zinc souvenir that left the factory represented as much artistic integrity as might any photomechanical halftone print of an old master painting. So, when Trump decries the loss of beauty with the destruction of these memorials, he almost certainly has to have in mind a form of “beauty” less beholden to aesthetics than to concepts – like, for example, the good old concept of white supremacy.

XIV.11-[q] *And Now for Really Monumental Kitsch: A “Magnificent, Incredible, Majestic Mountain” ...Ruined*

With the desecration of monuments in mind, it should not at all have been surprising to learn of Donald Trump’s choice of location for his shamelessly divisive Nuremberg-style reelection rally posing as the country’s July 4th birthday celebration of 2020. It was, of course, that monument of monuments to American monumentalism: Mt. Rushmore National Memorial in Keystone, South Dakota. Yes, after watching monuments that *can* be toppled come tumbling down all around him,

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wouldn't any impotent desperado intent on looking tough to "anarchist" monument topplers arrange his next photo op in front of the *one* monument that truly qualifies as, well, *topple proof*? Why settle for anything less, well, *untoppleable* than a granite mountain? Better yet, a mountain hewn with 60-foot high icon reliefs of American expansionist presidents dynamited out of the austere natural beauty of a particularly prized and ancient specimen of our nation's geology? O.K., you leftist anarchists. Here's a goddamned mountain. I dare you!

And not only that. Mount Rushmore, aside from its distinguished place in world art as a grotesque monument to American gargantuan kitsch, also has the dubious distinction of having achieved nothing short of a *monumental* irony: namely, that it's *raison d'etre* as a memorial to American democracy and freedom from oppression speaks largely to white nationalists and those others willing to ignore the injustice toward the indigenous people from whom this site was brazenly and mendaciously swindled.

Yes, to the Lakota Sioux, who were granted this territory *in perpetuity* by the Federal Government (as part of the 1868 Treaty of Fort Laramie), only to have it abruptly taken back, *without legal remedy*, some eight years later when the government found more profitable use for this land than some increasingly inconvenient appeasement gesture, this monument looks *a lot* less like a monument to American democracy and freedom than to the ruthless racist subordination of an American underclass.

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You see, George Armstrong Custer had arrived here in the 1870s in order to map the Black Hills for the Federal Government, but as soon as gold was discovered there, the place was dynamited open for the inevitable rape-and-pillage invasion of the get-rich-quick gold rush horde, thereby leaving the valuable Fort Laramie Treaty but a worthless piece of paper in the hands of the land's true *and* legal owners. And this irony grows deeper yet, as it extends to the fact that this land that had been considered sacred to the indigenous people on it for countless centuries (on the basis of its ancestral and mythical associations) would within a couple of generations be monumentally defaced with the seventy-five-times-life-size likenesses of white expansionist leaders representative of the very government that stole it from them.

The idea for defacing this sacred granite mountain traces back *not* to an idea of promoting the concept of America as the land of democracy so much as an expedient gimmick to bring in desperately needed tourist industry dollars to a forgotten backwater state. Doane Robinson, the South Dakota historian credited with conjuring up with this publicity stunt, had commented that "tourists soon get fed up on scenery unless it has something of special interest connected with it to make it impressive" and had actually coveted for this project not presidents but oversized representations of the nation's sacred mythology of the American West, including, for example, such selfless philanthropist patriots as "Buffalo Bill" Cody.

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However, the sculptor chosen for this Brobdingnagian marvel, a publicity-hungry salesman-cum-showman named John Gutzon de la Mothe Borglum, had something somewhat more in the way of teary-eyed attention-catching in mind. Yes, fresh from an aborted sculpture commission for the massive bas-relief memorial to Confederate leaders on Stone Mountain Georgia (one originally sponsored by the above-mentioned United Daughters of the Confederacy in unofficial coordination with the Ku Klux Klan and other philanthropic groups), Borglum opted rather for the representation of U.S. presidents, this due to their understandably stronger recognition value and valuable patriotic appeal.

In particular, Borglum thought that a couple of schoolhouse staples like Washington and Lincoln, complemented with a couple of great American expansionists, such as Louisiana Purchase purchaser Thomas Jefferson and rough-riding Spanish-American Warrior Teddy Roosevelt, would wring just the right amount of sentimental lacrimal-duct seepage from the American tourist industry. (By God, American-style patriotism is a hard act to follow!)

Federal funding for this patriotic mission after tourist dollars began not until 1927 and would not be abandoned until 1941, when the mere suggestions of costume covering the original waist-length images was deemed perfectly satisfactory, if not preferable, given the circumstances of loss of interest and financing. Unlike contemporary critics of the project, who had the traitorous temerity to respond to aesthetic

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considerations and consider the mountain's defacement tantamount to "keeping a cow in the rotunda of the Capital building," true patriots, untroubled by artistic sensibilities, continued to proudly defend this ruination of good granite, hiding behind the sentimental comfort of nationalist, xenophobic mantras.

Today, Mount Rushmore proudly joins the ranks of such famous American theme-parks as The Mall of America, Magic Kingdom, and other notable examples of America's traditional fetish with the grotesquely oversized, the dumbed down, and the profitably exaggerated. And it is hardly coincidental that it was nowhere else but here that Donald Trump – supreme sentimentalist, petty tyrant, would-be dictator, and consummate philistine – came on July 4th, 2020, to bash the principles of democracy with his polarizing rant against the thinking people of his country. It fits like a fucking glove. As does the fact that this same colossus of self-admiration, in one of his countless twitter-platform self-promotions, communicated the self-obvious truth that his own self-sacrosanct image deserves to be added to the Rushmore lineup of greats. (The presidential tweet reads: "Never suggested it although, based on all of the many things accomplished during the first 3 ½ years, perhaps more than any other Presidency, sounds like a good idea to me.") But although it would be hard to "ruin" the Mount Rushmore monument *aesthetically speaking*, the *logistical* challenge to such an undertaking would be in how to handle the

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inevitable stipulation that Trump's smarmy likeness loom larger than those of his predecessors.

XIV.11-[r] Public Monuments and Hero Worship

And it is this precise psychic dynamic at work in the veneration of historical personages, especially through the erection of public monuments, that may be seen, to derive from the religious reflex—a response in which the object of veneration is never seen as a complex organic whole composed of seemingly contradictory desires and ideas, as we might recognize an individual to be. Rather, it is always the simple, undiluted ideal of an unrealistic goodness that is easier to perceive as such from the upward-looking distance imposed by the pedestal of hero worship. Public monuments to national leaders tend toward the hagiographer's art, sanitizing our memory of real people, for better or worse, into the unblemished stuff of saints.

But one doesn't need to look far from the pulpit to see the bequest of religious obeisance in the practice of the primitive ritual of hero worship. For, the worship of, as opposed to *respect for*, significant players in the game of history is a psychological/ sociological phenomenon that has flourished throughout the world for millennia, whether associated with actual personages or imaginary supernatural ones.

Relevant to the former category (historical figures), in the hands of such philosophical advocates as Thomas Carlyle and Friedrich

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Nietzsche, the concept became articulated beyond the mere description of a natural human response into something much closer to a *prescriptive* imperative. Carlyle's 1840 essay "On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History," would quickly inspire a generalized "Great Man" theory of history (in which the history of the world was seen to be little more than the collective biography of "Great Men").

Of course, the "Great Man" theory is an absurdly unrealistic and sophomoric worldview. It's lack of women, for one, as well as of behind-the-scenes motivators and collaborators of *both* sexes, easily reveals how foreign its romantic idealism is to the actual nuts-and-bolts workings of history, which unfolds in unpredictable cascades of reciprocal interaction, though all the while appearing to untrained eyes as monolithic, inevitable historic moments.

Yet, realistic or not, this delusional, simplistic theory nevertheless prepared the ground for the *Übermensch* (variously translated into English as "overman," "beyond-man," "superior human," and, alas, "superman"), a concept Nietzsche introduced a couple generations later in his 1883 book *Also sprach Zarathustra*. In Nietzsche's concept, certain individuals (men, *of course*), through their superior intelligence and character, etc., may aspire to develop new values with which to transcend the common herd of conformist robots and become one with the "eternal recurrence." Although philosophically much more sophisticated and nuanced than this concept might appear in a short

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paraphrase, it is easy to see how Nietzsche's concept would become so seductive to Nazi ideologists, who would pervert it for their own pernicious use toward framing the characteristics of their own ingroup and outgroup of good guys and bad guys.

XIV.11-[s] The Use of Pedestals in Reinforcing Worship and Subordination

But the one element that remains indispensable to this whole "Great Man" tradition is the *fixture* of transcendence, most typically the physical fixture of *the pedestal*. Throughout human history, symbolic representations of real and imagined personages were held aloft, quite literally, for their proper veneration. When placed on a raised support, such as a pillar, column, base, platform, or dais, the symbol becomes not only better visible by its *literal* transcendence above any competing optical information (i.e., framed against the sky as opposed to a miasma of terrestrial objects and hence retaining a more robust figure-ground distinction) but also by its *figurative* transcendence as something higher than the observer (worshipper).

The psychological significance of this type of transcendence lent to public monuments by the use of physical pedestals correlates neatly with what happens when placing real people on metaphorical pedestals. When we speak proverbially of "putting someone on a pedestal," we mean really that we worship them rather than respect them. The "Madonna-whore complex," first identified by Freud (as "psychic impotence") but gradually embraced in various ways and to

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differing degrees outside of the psychoanalytic literature, offers a recognizable example of this mapping. Men with this psychological complex are said to see women in a stultifying dichotomy of Madonna v. prostitute—thereby leaving the complex sufferer in a seemingly unsolvable dilemma of desiring a sexual partner whom he as degraded to the status of whore the while remaining unable to desire the respected partner identified as “the Madonna.”

Now, whether or not one accepts Freud’s characteristically elaborate, mythologized explanation, the dynamics seen operating behind the props are easy enough to see—namely, the difficulty in obtaining a mutually satisfying intimate relationship with a partner held aloft, metaphorically, on a pedestal. In simpler terms this means *truly respecting what we worship*.

While worship is a form of respect unsuitable for a target of status lower than a deity, respect is an acknowledgement, in communication *and* action, of the target’s capability and worth. When one worships a god, the worshipper has, by definition, no hope (or even desire!) of achieving the level playing field of intimacy and trust in a truly democratic nature, such as can be found in an all-human loving relationship (of any basis, sexual or otherwise). After all, subservience to something higher, better, more important and powerful, *is the point* in worship. This foundation of inequality cannot produce good results toward loving relationships, though it works exquisitely well in the creation of those between masters and slaves.

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World literature may be seen brimming with examples of the psychological and sociological effect of implementing pedestals in our relationships with one another. A particularly brilliant and deftly insightful one is Alexander Pushkin's magnificent narrative poem, *Medny Vsadnik: Peterburgskaya Povest* ("The Bronze Horseman: A Petersburg Tale," 1833), considered by many experts to be the greatest poem of Russia's greatest poet (and even, by some, to be the best poem written *anywhere* in the 19th-century). Our poet has his protagonist, a pitiable poor young clerk named Evgenii, who contemplates spending the rest of his life with his love, Parasha, only to find himself stranded atop a marble lion in Peter's Square surrounded by water after a great flood of the River Neva, all alone were it not for the menacing monumental bronze statue of the horseback Tsar Peter the Great dominating the attention of that square. After discovering that he has lost his beloved to this disaster, Evgenii goes mad and curses the only authority he can see – the menacing horseback autocrat who feigns in his gesture to protect the inhabitants of this city just destroyed. And in response to this disrespect of ultimate authority, the statue comes to life and relentlessly pursues our poor protagonist, hunting him down to his death.

The statue itself, now known as "The Bronze Horseman" (in honor of Pushkin's poem) and completed by the celebrated French sculptor

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Étienne Maurice Falconet in 1782, as commissioned by Peter's granddaughter-in-law Catherine the Great, is celebrated for its ambiguity: The Tsar's outstretched arm reaching westward toward the Neva seems both to be a gesture of protection *and* of threat. This ambiguity of gesture dovetails neatly with a key theme in the poem: that inescapable and complicated conflict between the state and the individual, an unequal playing field wherein is left little room for a disinherited individual.

It may not be coincidental that monuments celebrating the authority of statehood tend, according to an old tradition, to depict a militant-looking man astride a brave steed and raised high on a tall base or pedestal to enhance the menacing impact of untouchable authority and reinforce a response in the viewer that is not merely respectful but worshipful. The bronze horseman of Pushkin's poem fits this bill exquisitely and makes for the perfect icon of domination of the individual by the state.

Although shelves of books and articles have been written exploring Pushkin's sensitively complex treatment of this theme, suffice it to say that the effect of such monuments on the citizen's psyche is not accidental but intended; indeed, it is intended specifically to reinforce a feeling of the viewer's inferiority, if not downright subjugation, to the authority being depicted.

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Now, turning back to our main theme – the common correlation of the act of worship and the mindset of sentimentality – let us turn to the style of inscriptions that are commonly found on these Confederate monuments we speak of. For example, on the Pine Bluff Confederate Monument (aka David Owen Dodd Statue) in front of the Jefferson County Courthouse in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, erected by the United Daughters of the Confederacy in 1898, we find the following inscriptions:

1861-1865 / CONSECRATED TO THE MEMORY OF THE CONFEDERATE
SOLDIERS AND SEAMEN // FAME'S TEMPLE BOASTS NO HIGHER
NAME, / NO KING IS GRANDER ON HIS THRONE; / NO GLORY
SHINES WITH BRIGHTER GLEAM, / THE NAME OF 'PATRIOT' STANDS
ALONE. // WHEN THIS HISTORIC SHAFT SHALL CRUMBLING LIE /
IN AGES HENCE, IN WOMAN'S HEART WILL BE, / A FOLDED FLAG, A
THRILLING PAGE UNROLLED, / A DEATHLESS SONG OF SOUTHERN
CHIVALRY. //

THESE SEAMEN OF CONFEDERATE FAME / STARTED THE
WONDERING WORLD; / FOR BRAVER FIGHT WAS NEVER FOUGHT, /
AND FAIRER FLAG WAS NEVER FURLED. // THE KNIGHTLIEST OF
THE KNIGHTLY RACE / WHO SINCE THE DAYS OF OLD, / HAVE KEPT
THE LAMP OF CHIVALRY / ALIGHT IN HEARTS OF GOLD. // THIS
CORNER STONE WAS LAID BY / JEFFERSON DAVIS. / PRESIDENT OF
C.S.A. / APRIL 29, 1886.

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Wow! For connoisseurs of sentimentality, this may just well be the motherlode. It's hard to know what to admire first, the tinsel cheapness of its purple prose or the cloying redolence of medieval romance wafting throughout with its flagrant anachronisms of "southern chivalry" and "knightliest of the knightly race." The art of "golden-age" nostalgia, a staple of the sentimentalist's repertoire, is performed here on a 24-karat harp with the stunning completion of that golden line: "...who since the days of old have kept the lamp of chivalry alight in hearts of gold." One can easily imagine the tear that welled in the eyes of the good old racist society ladies of the UDC who paid for this memorial to the good old days of their daddy's and granddaddy's age of chivalry, when both ships and men were made of the forced labor of owned and abused human beings of dark skin color.

XIV.11-[v] Sir Walter Scott, "Chivalry," and the Medieval Romance of Reconstructionist Racists

Yes, in these inspired words one finds the cheap appeal of proverbial good old days to anesthetize the reader from discovering a paucity of actual message. What exactly are the great deeds being memorialized here? Chivalry? And what in the hell does chivalry, a long-extinct social code of medieval Europe, have to do with mid-19th-century new-world owners and exploiters of human chattels? Well-dressed wealthy white men opening doors for well-dressed wealthy white women and ordering their black servants to serve them like the queens they want

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their daughters to be? This coating of empty gestures with a plating of nostalgic posturing is the essence of sentimentality.

Of course, I am not the first to remark about this curious fascination that medieval social customs had for American Southern aristocracy. Numerous scholars have written about the curious cult in the South for the novels of the early 19th-century Scottish historical novelist and poet Sir Walter Scott, whose works were redolent of a romanticized nostalgia for the medieval. In the minds of 19th-century Southerners, Scott's romantic interpretations of feudal life offered a parallel with the ideal life of manners and aristocracy the South so craved as a way of feeling comfortable with their much-criticized caste system. They named their steamboats after characters from *Ivanhoe* and adopted numerous other fixtures from Scott's writings to help them keep alive the mythic life they desired to have. Indeed, one of the most popular anthems of the Confederacy was "Chivalrous U.S.A."

Mark Twain went so far as to coin the term the "Sir Walter Scott disease" referring to the effect that the author's embarrassingly romanticized visions had on the American South, such as observed in *Life on the Mississippi* (p. 376 of the 1893 edition):

It was Sir Walter Scott that made every gentleman in the South a major or colonel, or a general or a judge before the war; and it was also he that made these gentlemen value these bogus decorations. For it was he that created rank and caste and pride and pleasure in them.

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Twain went on to declare, quite obviously with his tongue firmly planted in his cheek, that Scott “had so large a hand in making Southern character, as it existed before the [Civil] war,” that he is “in great measure responsible for the war.”

All this romanticizing of the medieval should be seen as highly ironic, of course, given the fact that medieval life was, excepting what was being enjoyed by a tiny fraction of the populace, *wretched* to say the least—even by mid-19th century American standards! This was not a case of historicism but of plain old-fashioned mind-numbing mythologizing. Southern society was conjuring up a lifestyle that never actually existed in medieval Europe but had been, rather, simply patched together from idealized imaginings, more from contemplation of the dress and furnishings of the period, as well as quotes from romance literature and novelists like Scott, than from studies of actual history.

Sir Walter Scott’s influence in the antebellum and Civil-War South was huge; mid-century authors such as Joseph Holt Ingraham had learned to channel this romance of medieval Europe introduced by Scott to the local appetite for mythic palliatives. Ingraham’s Colonel Peyton, for example, is a classic example of feudal lord dressed up for antebellum plantation taste as an aristocratic Cavalier. The feminine ideal of the “Southern Maiden,” for another, was taken right out of the romance culture of medieval times, being an imagined vessel of

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unapproachably pure, chaste, servility that needed to be protected from the black brutes working around her.

This vessel of purity was given away by her father as a major piece of social currency, one that would be easily devalued by any lack of submissiveness in her—this because subordination to father and husband was essential to preserving the patriarchal family structure necessary to the South’s antiquated version of a feudal land-owning agricultural economy. Any truly strong woman, meaning one that could wield authority beyond that which touched the maintenance of her slaves, threatened to undermine the entire power structure of plantation patriarchy.

XIV.11-[w] “Chivalry” Continued

What is most interesting is that the loss of the Civil War by the South did not end this mythologizing element of Southern life. Although it grew increasingly more difficult to sustain this delusion during reconstruction, that didn’t keep anyone from trying. And the notion of “chivalry” became more meaningful to this culture than ever before in its desperate attempt to retain the look of aristocracy that this nostalgic culture so craved. Between the early 1880s and late 1960s some 5,000 black men are known to have lynched. Add to this the uncounted deaths of blacks in numerous white-supremacist riots. And behind all of this brutality was lingering the myth of chivalry, wherein one could find some sort of analogy with the notion of delicately submissive white

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maidens in need of protection from rape by brutish, uncivilized black men. This imagery was kept alive by the Ku Klux Klan, who saw the endeavors of the white knight saving the pure maiden from the dangerous black beast as the central trope of their own narrative that allowed them to perpetrate and rationalize their unconscionable deeds. Thomas Dixon, one of the most popular authors of the turn of the century South, produced novel after novel that romanticized the brutality of racism and the over-sweetened nostalgia for the good old days of slave society, always emphasizing that most precious commodity of such a culture: the pure white maiden.

XV. Educational Consequences: *Sentimentality's Serious Threat to Our Education*

It may be said that many of the subsections to the preceding main section have already dealt—at least in their ultimate reach—with the educational ramifications of sentimentality. But I believe it necessary to become more specifically focused on this topic now, both regarding the education of our children as well as the ongoing learning experiences of the rest of us (whether on the academic or plain old “life level”).

Let’s start by picking up where we left off regarding the curious romance of chivalry sentimentally preserved in many parts of the southern states of our country, even to this day. Historically speaking, I see this as a longing for a mythologized lifestyle that can provide the necessary atmosphere of ritualized delusion in which the possessors of

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conscienceless social ideals might have gotten a better night's sleep. And given the close connection we've observed above between zealous religious devotion and sentimentality, I believe it to be no mere coincidence that religion has gained a more tenacious and dangerous foothold here than most other regions of our country. Of course, an exception should be made for parts of the west as well, for this had become the new promised land for many disenchanting southerners during and after Reconstruction, such that made it possible by the third quarter of the 20th century for the consolidation of a far-right Christian Nationalist platform embedded in the modern Republican party in an effort to extend the south's white supremacy tradition of subjugating women and minorities. This is a modern-day version of the Manifest Destiny, wherein growing numbers of Christian nationalists set their crosshairs on the wall of separation between church and state in their effort to undo the enlightenment ideals of our Constitution's framers and reduce our country after all from democracy to a Christian Theocracy. And the modern Republican party (i.e., from about the 1930s on), in its blind greed to expand its base at any cost, would come to legitimize these once-fringe zealots by catering wholesale to their hate mongering under the unified banner of conservatism. The eventual result of this pandering to the lowest denominator became the collective right wing's effective stranglehold against the future of reason and

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science in our country – one that would gradually leave us lagging way behind so many other countries, *particularly in education*.

For example, ever since the 1960s our nation's school textbooks have suffered an insidious process of degradation by being dumbed down to evangelical standards in order to represent a parochially prudish, puritanical, nationalistic, xenophobic, Christ-centered, anti-science culture attractive to conservative Southern states. Due to the boycott by the Texas School Board of any textbooks that attempted to teach real science (such as Evolution by Natural Selection) instead of pseudo-science (such as "Intelligent Design" [Creationism]), as well as refusing to soften criticism of the history of slavery and black oppression, textbook publishers in this country decided they could not afford to lose such a big customer as the Texas State Board of Education and therefore prostituted themselves to the almighty dollar by accepting the Board's rewrites of their history books. It has been estimated that one out of every 10 public school students in the U.S. currently is a Texan. It didn't take very long for the bean counters at major publishing houses to figure out that printing books that can't be used in Texas means bringing in far too few beans. See the excellent 2012 documentary by Scott Thurman, entitled *The Revisionaries*, for a frightening look at this evangelical crusade to dumb down our nation's youth and, therefore, our future.

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For example, you can hear with your own ears a board member shamelessly proclaiming the apparently self-evident truth that “education is inherently religious.” I say “shamelessly” not just because this statement is flagrantly untrue, let alone vacuous, but because its presumptuous implementation directly contradicts and threatens the intensions of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment of our Constitution. Not that so blatant a contradiction as this would occur to such a group which, after all, launches each working session with a prayer to that same almighty that they see as the ultimate author of this “history” narrative they’re intent on re-writing to suit their defiantly uneducated needs.

But while it may be true that the influence of Texas on the school textbook industry has become *somewhat* less powerful than it was at the time of the making of this documentary, these basic dynamics may still be seen at work not only in Texas or elsewhere in the darkly evangelical South but in many other regions of our country as well. Take sex education, for example. When the state of Washington passed a bill in 2020 requiring public school districts to teach comprehensive sexual health education (including, most contentiously, the age-appropriate teaching of “affirmative consent,” defined as “conscious and voluntary agreement to engage in sexual activity”) it met with vehement push-back from religious conservatives who saw this educational requirement as “removing the innocence from our youth.” In other

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words, argue these consummate sentimentalists, it is preferable to leave children in blissful ignorance of one of the central realities of life rather than to prepare them with the real-life information they will need in order to safely navigate its often-dangerous waters. This is yet one more illustration of the power of sentimentality as a corrosive force in society.

But this threat is not limited to the education of young minds; it extends way beyond our children's schools into the world in which adults try to navigate an increasingly dumbed-down consumerist culture. And what poses as education becomes increasingly closer to entertainment and, of course, advertising. Although examples proliferate like invasive weeds all around us, a more recent strain of this trend invites special notice, if only because of its deceptively "educational" appearance. I call this phenomenon The Immersive Experience of Theme-Park Edutainment. By this I refer to the growing business in staging "immersive experience" exhibitions, a highly successful business model for high profit posing as serious cultural education for the whole family. This model calls for the systematic dumbing down of the subtle art of viewing art and commodifying it into a simplified, sensationalized entertainment – one that has evolved to become less in keeping with a visit to a museum than to an amusement park.

Let us take a closer look. Historically, one attended an art museum exhibition for the rare opportunity to confront important and otherwise inaccessible artworks in person and in context. Standing in close

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viewing proximity to the created object, especially in the light of a competent curator's process of selection and presentation, such a visit can facilitate our engagement in a personal relationship with an individual's unique world view. It can prove a meaningful and enlarging experience—perhaps even exciting and uplifting, like the feeling of having made a new friend.

In recent years, however, a new type of art exhibition has evolved, originally by well-versed museums intent on increasing their institution's visibility, but then (predictably) garnering competition from the entertainment business sector, which need only substitute high-tech special effects for the connoisseurship stuff. This type has come to be called the "Immersive Experience" exhibition, and it can be traced back, in some shape or form, nearly a decade and a half now. The basic idea is to entertain the visitor well enough to make their museum experience enjoyable and memorable. A noble endeavor, sort of. The problem is that if a trip to look at objects of art is not my idea of a good time in the first place, just what is it I am gaining by going and *not* looking at them? What am I really getting out of pretending there's more to the artist's efforts than what was left on the canvas and that this something more might be available only through the attention-getting titillation of special effects?

Even in the competent hands of a major curatorial staff, the very structure of such an exhibition tends to depend less upon the creative power of the artworks referenced than on the branding power of the

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artist's current celebrity. We are there not so much to be informed than to be seduced and entertained. In other words, we have been coerced into thinking ourselves the lucky recipients of a privileged glimpse of the artist at work when really it was only a sacramental clipping from his or her hem.

A useful analogy toward the differentiation of these two types of exhibition might be the following two very different endeavors we might attempt toward a better understanding of our national history: one, reading the key historic documents on which the U.S. was founded – the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, etc. – or two, just showing up for a big Fourth of July blowout. The first can be directly informative of the way our world operates; the second is a birthday party. Worse though, it is a party contrived to make us feel we know the birthday person being feted when, actually, we're just taking part in perfunctory entertainments built around the good feeling of having been included in the festivities. Or, perhaps, one might decide instead to make a pilgrimage to Mt. Rushmore, hoping to gain a closer look at the character and accomplishments of a representative handful of past presidents. But does one actually need to try this in order to discover it's a fool's errand? Can't one know this from merely contemplating it? Sure, there's something to be had from the experience, but not what you went there for. Just the same as seeing it in a documentary, a trip to Mt. Rushmore will give you a bigger-than-life view of the sociological phenomenon of American nationalist idealism

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in its distinctively gargantuan tradition and not any valuable insight into the lives and careers of these particular men. As I observed above, this monument was created as little more than a tourist-dollar publicity cash cow intended to pander to America's hunger for gargantuan patriotism statements, for theme parks, and for dumbed-down expansionist mythologies of the American West. And this is not merely a critical judgement of the finished product (or, in this case, *abandoned* project, really) but, conversely, a clear-eyed historical look at the very intention of its creators. And my only reason for returning to this defaced mountain is to suggest a common theme here: the sentimentalist's predictable preference for dumbed-down idealizations over real life.

But back to the show. In December of 2021 my wife and I, while visiting Seattle, were persuaded by a friend there to attend an exhibition entitled "Van Gogh, the Immersive Experience." This title might suggest (to those, like me, who'd never attended such a thing) an opportunity for deep learning, and when pertaining to an artistic legacy of such magnitude as that of Vincent Van Gogh, this sounded promising indeed.

But this particular kind of promise proved to diminish upon proximity. The event was staged in a 44,000-square-foot warehouse and was seemingly powered by at least that number of kilowatts of electricity – enough to generate the tsunami of noise and light pollution essential toward entirely distracting us from the subject matter. Yes,

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without all the fireworks, we might have sooner discovered the one element that was so conspicuously missing here: the artist's achievement. Not the achievement of his posthumous branding power, wherein an image of a severed ear can turn a cotton T-shirt into a worthwhile souvenir. No, *that* was *robustly* present.

It might be relevant to explain here that this exhibition was produced not by, say, Amsterdam's Van Gogh Museum, but by a high-end purveyor of 360-degree video, light, and music extravaganzas called *Exhibition Hub Entertainment* in collaboration with a "live-entertainment discovery tech platform" event-promotion company called *Fever*. What could go wrong?

Once the exorbitant entrance ticket was proffered and the sheep were prodded through the gate and into the chute, we caught glimpse of images we recognized, often only *barely*, as paintings by Van Gogh. Sometimes these were paintings in their entire composition stretching, bigger than life, around the room, but just as often only in some snippet, such as an iconic face or hand wrenched from one of his better-known works. These were either projected on or printed on screens and banners amid elaborate lighting effects, all to the accompaniment of voice-overs and sound effects apparently intending to conjure up the world Van Gogh lived and suffered in. But if this was an "immersion" experience, in *what* precisely were we being immersed? Surely not the world Van Gogh would have known and responded to in his art, nor the finished products of his imagination and hard work. For, staring up

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at a huge, grainy, washed-out reproduction image of an oil painting by Van Gogh offers us no insight whatsoever into the experiencing of that artwork itself, where so much of the way the painting means is the way the paint was applied. How different would this be to constructing an exhibition of magnified excerpts of the score of, say, a Mahler symphony and expecting it to immerse us in the “Mahler experience” as thoroughly as would the simple act of attending a convincing performance of one.

And how would sensationalizing the sad and troubled life of this unfortunate man help us to appreciate the persuasive formal aspects of his art? Turning him into the hero of some romance our culture hungers after concerning the tragic lives of great artists teaches us nothing about the effectiveness of his artistic creations. The man’s name has become the philosopher’s stone with which big business can turn the base metal of our sentimentality into pure profit. To use this and further capitalize on the man’s suffering rather than attend to his accomplishment seems to me little short of obscene.

I could go on, but I won’t—largely because the explicit vulgarity of this affair is not really my point. It is, rather, the pointlessness and insincerity of the concept that deserves our attention. For example, a couple of paragraphs ago I mentioned for rhetorical effect the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. This distinguished and highly authoritative

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institution itself launched one of these immersive exhibitions of the artist's work. I have not seen it and therefore cannot compare it to my experience in Seattle. Indeed, such exhibitions have been devoted to many other artists as well, by museums and other promoters, all over the world, for well over a dozen years now. But not having seen them all doesn't disqualify me from contemplating the value *of the concept itself*, no matter how successfully some versions might have been brought off.

For, even in the best hands, I simply can't imagine a Van Gogh experience more totally immersive and memorable than that of hungrily viewing his originals in a quiet, sufficiently-lit exhibition space – *anywhere*.

XVI. Economic Consequences, Part 1: Sentimentality in the Marketplace:***Dashboard Ornaments and the World of Manufactured Collectibles***

One of the categories of tangible personal property that invites the *most* amount of misunderstanding among the clients of art professionals these days is that of "manufactured collectibles," an increasingly prevalent term for a now-ubiquitous category of commodities in various media that share as their most recognizable unifying characteristic the dubious distinction of having been manufactured *specifically for collecting*. Indeed, it is a genre of objects that came into being solely to feed the collecting instincts of a new sector of the public

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hungry to acquire material culture though lacking exposure to the sophisticated tradition of collecting it.

The prolifically varied manifestations of this genre amid a wide array of media (including ceramics, glass, metal alloys, printed paper and canvas, and even fully appointed homes) all share a common denominator: the pretense of being something worthy of a collector's savor while remaining but a mass-produced reproduction of a symbol of such a thing. This is, quintessentially, *sentimentality on wheels*, let loose, downhill, on the economy.

Until relatively recently, the term “collectible” (without the modifier “manufactured”) was understood without much ambiguity to designate an item of tangible personal property that was *of interest to a collector*. And since the noun “collector” traditionally conjured up a constellation of associations surrounding the concepts of connoisseurship, aesthetic taste, historic importance, etc., it was intuited that collectors endeavored to build collections of those kinds of things worthy of connoisseurship.

For example, “fine arts” and “decorative arts” objects (i.e., “art and antiques”), particularly those examples by established makers of the past whose work could be sought out for study toward a deeper understanding of what one was collecting—these were the kinds of things that came to mind when one heard the term “collectible object.” And wherever there is connoisseurship at work, discerning bad from mediocre from superlative examples of any chosen genre of

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collecting, the qualitative ranking process utilized towards this end creates a complicated network of supply and demand easiest navigated with *money*. Not surprisingly, *huge* economies have sprung into being to protect stakes in this continuum of the acquisition, and later sale, of ranked objects of material culture.

Now, historically, there had been a relative parity between the acumen necessary to play this game and the disposable income necessary to finance it. But gradually, particularly since World War II, and especially in the U.S., a dramatic increase in disposable income quickly surpassed the rate of growth of collecting acumen, leaving a conspicuous vacuum to be filled by entrepreneurs savvy enough to discover an important principle – namely, that it's way easier to collect *without* acumen than with it.

Yes, it is simpler and less painful to just skip the connoisseurship training on which qualitative ranking turns and invite buyers to jump in with nothing but their enthusiasm, naiveté, and, last but not least, CASH. And since this new genre would still need the requisite obstacle course of a ranking hierarchy (in order to keep all its players from remaining undistinguished among themselves), such could be quickly satisfied *artificially* – yes, with the establishment of *arbitrary* rankings that would invite the same supply/demand dynamics hitherto inspired by connoisseurship. Now, what was the easiest method of *artificially* stimulating the collector instincts in this emerging class of “collector,” you ask? Answer: the *limited edition*.

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Of course, editions of artwork multiples across the various media had already been *limited* for centuries. Since a woodblock, engraving plate, lithographic stone, or casting mold would erode through use, the makers, purveyors, and buyers of these published multiples were sensitive to the qualitative ranking potential of the various pulls taken from a particular matrix before it had lost its viability to produce competitively "collectible" commodities. But the new proletarian entrepreneurs found they could salvage the glamour associated with this particular relic of art connoisseurship and use it as a means toward a simpler end: *creating* rarity and then treating that rarity *as if it were something to be coveted in and of itself*.

In other words, they found they could create the necessary supply/demand ratio on which their desired market would need to balance without having to inconvenience their impatient target audience with the prerequisite acquisition of taste. What built-in obsolescence became for the American auto industry, "limited edition" objects would be for its bauble-collecting market: a mechanism for *predicting* future sales.

Yes, it was a prophesy-come-true stratagem involving the promotion of a thing as worthy of collecting until it became...well, *worthy of collecting*. So, in place of the subtle differences distinguishing specimens of serious art creations would now be the low-hanging fruit of an edition fraction indicating only that a certain mass-produced object

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belonged to a *finite* supply of identical mass-produced objects—as if rarity in and of itself was, somehow, a virtue and not just an adjustment to a complex combination of other, more meaningful, components of value. Hence, the promoter of a “manufactured collectible” became one who could train his target audience to hunger for the consumption of what he contemplated selling—whatever that might be—by seducing them with their own ignorance of the role of rarity in value. (Remember that rarity by itself—that is, without *desirability*—is almost *never* a feature of marketability. To the contrary, a genre represented by very few examples is unlikely to garner the necessary exposure to develop the demand that rarity can magnify.)

This target audience has been trained for the instant gratification of procuring objects for which no criteria of selection are necessary beyond simple brand recognition. *In other words, “manufactured collectibles” are the fast food of the tangible personal property market.* And those who been properly trained toward a taste for this food tend to overeat in compensation for the short-lived satisfaction obtainable from it. The collector of important paintings can be satisfied with a mere handful where the collector of “collector plates” is rarely satisfied with an entire closet full.

And as if this were not sad enough, the horrible irony in all of this is that when all has been said and bought, the promised (or at least implied) benefits of ownership of “manufactured collectibles,” which

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tend to center chiefly on those of a monetary investment-return nature, *nearly always disappoint*, especially in comparison with the same type of return enjoyed on the traditional "collectibles" on which these artificial markets are carefully modeled.

One of the most well-known brands of earlier years to have engaged in this type of misleading promotion is the so-called Hummel (actually Hümmel) figurine. This refers to the ceramic creations of the W. Goebel Porzellanfabrik GmbH of Rödentel, Germany following designs by Berta Hümmel (German, 1909-46), known as Sister Maria Innocentia, a Franciscan nun at the convent of Siessen in upper Swabia. Berta Hümmel's syrupy drawings, and the unctuous baked clay clichés created in their image, represent idealized images, not of *actual* children, but of the unrealistic, wishful *profiling* of children—yes, puritanically posed lumps of rosy-cheeked innocence and goodness. This egregiously incomplete assessment of the formative years of development in hominids of our particular species seems particularly congenial to the sentimental mindset of Christian teaching (which tends to idealize children as "gifts from God"), though it remains typically *unrecognizable* to less pious parents experienced in the raising of *real* children.

All in all, therefore, it should not be surprising to find such pretenses to the sensibilities of collectors and investors so consistently interchangeable with the feel-good world of religious sentimentality, particularly as associated with Christianity. A host of Christian-targeted

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manufactured collectibles makes its way down predominantly Chinese assembly lines as we speak, including the mountains of mawkish, fundamentalist-inspired, mail-order tchotchkes churned out for sale by predatory Christian entertainment promoters, such as Precious Moments, Inc. But it would be hard to imagine a more perfect embodiment of the high hypocrisy essential to the proper practice of both sentimentality *and* Christianity than the above-mentioned “Thomas Kinkade, Painter of Light™.”

Shortly before his debauched downfall and death, evangelical America's favorite “painter” (read: *hack*) was considered to be among a handful of our country's most financially successful “artists” (read: *living lifestyle brands*). Kinkade made his fabulous financial fortune cranking out saccharine icons of idyllic creature comfort, images in which cute Cotswold cottages glow over-warm with family values and the unblemished happiness of relentlessly misremembered childhoods. These canvases and their exponentially proliferated paper progeny serve as dashboard ornaments for the wall; they beckon, like a Hallmark card or a trip to Disneyland, to the disenchanting hearts of those good souls discomfited by more recognizable representations of human life.

Our self-styled “painter of light,” whose trademark invites only fleeting confusion with the epithet of a *real* painter named Joseph Mallord William Turner, RA of Britain over a century and a half earlier, typically signed his chocolate-box affirmations of idealized social values with a stylized fish (the Christian symbol of Jesus) and the

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biblical citation: “John 3:16.” This citation alerts us to that particular verse of morally incomprehensible gibberish that has been translated for us by King James’ scholars as follows: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

Now, *whatever* you want this nonsense to mean, Kinkade has appropriated it, like so many other biblical validation seekers before him, as a veritable bumper sticker of use in alerting anyone behind him at the moment as to his moral navigational abilities. And this should be seen as no mere coincidence: Kinkade’s images are trite visual bromides, as easy to swallow in one glance as are large-print bumper stickers. They are optically perceptible platitudes that prove particularly congenial to the evangelical pipedream of the perfect life (be it one lived here on earth or, *somehow*, later on).

This close identification with Christian values has contributed to an intrinsic misunderstanding concerning the consensual disparagement of Kinkade's paintings by professional art critics. As with his spiritual brother of an earlier era, Joyce Kilmer, the poetaster of “Trees,” this lack of esteem in which Kinkade is unanimously held by serious painting critics (or anyone at all with an eye for what paintings are actually about) has really *nothing at all* to do with the biographical reality of his hypocritical religiosity and *everything* to do with the incompetence of his visual constructs to accomplish what it is that memorably satisfying works of art do: create an arena, through the demonstrated mastery of

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a specific chosen medium, in which to engage us in an exploration of the meanings and values of life experience.

In other words, like Kilmer's *Trees* and Hitler's *Madonna*, Kinkade's platitudinous oily indulgences fail as *artworks* even before they do as sincere expressions of a worldview. Like the predictable output of a mere poetaster in comparison with that of a poet, they stoop to *tell* because they are unable to *show*. Rather than representing well-met challenges in the handling of line and color toward the creating of intensified worlds of expression, they remain little more than visual souvenirs of shallow, unattainable lifestyles. The fact that they also happen to represent a disingenuous trying-on of emotion and a posturing after artistic depth, only further exacerbates the critical response to his flock's continued delusional insistence that his work is indeed worthy of be taken seriously.

But even on the level of the spirit in which these visual pastiches were actually conceived—that of the marketplace—they prove *hugely* disappointing. Given the artificially high prices obtained by this master businessman for his cheesy images on the *primary market* (i.e., sold to ultimate consumers of his factory's fresh output), it may seem surprising to bystanders how attempts by those devotees of his who eventually attempt to get rid of these same commodities of the commonplace upon the *secondary market* (i.e., as previously-owned items) prove, *alas*, disappointing, to say the least. (Truth is, you can't *give 'em* away.)

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However, Thomas Kinkade was hardly a unique phenomenon, only an *embarrassingly* successful one. (Kinkade’s contribution to world kitsch went *way* beyond the two-dimensional confines of pretentious mats and frames, metastasizing as it did into entire neighborhoods of mail-order homes, each approximating those seen in his hokey images, and replete with appropriately kitsch household contents ready to ignite the instant living of the good life.) No, the manufacture and trafficking of visual hokum has been, and remains, a *powerful* industry.

And with this appetite our country displays on such grandiose scale for the souvenirs of disposable manufactured conformity we will leave an even bigger, uglier, more long-lasting footprint on the natural order of our planet: one made of discarded non-biodegradable expressions of sappy sentimentality, such as snow globes, dashboard ornaments, “collector plates,” and the acres upon acres of pretentiously framed canvas and paper indelibly stained with visual gestures of grandiosity posing as great art.

Of course, it makes no difference to our mother earth, at least in terms of her continued ability to sustain *us*, weather we choke her fragile, breathing surface with pretentious baubles or with genuine artistic expressions of the deepest humanity. For, even were we to conspire in finding all this crap of the former variety highly satisfying as cultural relics—say, perhaps, in a witty, *ironic* way—*litter is litter* where the rubber meets *our* road. The absorptive skin of our planet is

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all-too-quickly vanishing beneath the proliferation of acres-large storage facility campuses. Appropriately, these life-long holding tanks for our manufactured refuse are typically found springing up throughout the reaches of our inescapable urban sprawl *directly* across the street from the acres-large retail markets that have been built to sell the very shit that will then need to be so expensively abandoned there. But this hardening of the earth's crust into asphalted parking lots cordoned by corrugated metal doors would not be the less sad, *environmentally speaking*, were these omnipresent lockers to be found crammed with *real* treasure rather than fake.

No, the most tragic impact of sentimentality in the marketplace is neither its contribution to the cultivation of bad taste over good, nor to lost investment capital, but rather to the fact that these losses are sustained so widely *by those who can least afford them*. For, were it only the upwardly mobile professionals who were taken for fools by the predatory practices of "manufactured collectibles" marketers we might at least take some solace in their loss as an opportunity for further education. But, sadly, the most prevalent victims of these crooked vulgarians remain widows, pensioners, and other vulnerable innocents (of *both* sexes) who cannot afford the costs incurred by such an education and who nevertheless end up hoodwinked into investing their precious nest eggs on costly junk that not even these same market vultures could ever retranslate back into cash for them.

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And although markets are inherently risky places, even for seasoned professionals, it is the added lure of sentimentality that helps seal the fate of the next innocent in offering up his or her meagre hard-earned sacrifice to the kitsch promoter's feasting table. Sentimentality has never been a *necessary* component of the art of bait-and-switch; one only needs the dishonesty associated with willful misrepresentation to keep *that* fishing boat afloat and operating. What sentimentality *does* lend to the endeavor, however, is that wider net with which to haul in fresh victims.

XVII. Economic Consequences, Part 2: *Lackluster Marriages Launched by Extravagant Weddings*

One of the ways in which sentimentality remains an attractive refuge for a mind in fearful denial of certain basic facts of life is the allure it most readily provides minds toward the confusing of dreams for realities. Instead of exploring the frightening, albeit *natural*, ambivalences felt in regard to a major event in one's life—like prospective matrimony, for example—it is far easier to just throw more money at its *symbol* (the wedding ceremony) than to attempt to build or strengthen the actual *material* (the marital relationship). At least that's how it has appeared in practice increasingly in recent decades, especially in the U.S., where, according to a recent survey of 13,000 brides and grooms by the "Real Weddings Study" (on the TheKnot.com

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wedding website), the average amount of hard-earned (or, more typically, *borrowed*) financial resources spent on a single wedding during the year 2014 was just over \$30,000.

Yes, thirty thousand dollars! This is the equivalent of a complete down payment on what in most neighborhoods in this country would be a most satisfactory *home* for the starting couple, an asset of particular value to newlyweds, who typically struggle with financial challenges as significant components of their introduction to a shared life. Granted, other surveys, based on different sampling methods, have yielded a wide range of averages – those from as low as \$18,000 to as high as \$75,000 or more (especially in certain high-cost regions, like New York City) – but even \$18,000, *as an average*, is ridiculous.

Of course, those to whom tens of thousands of dollars for a party is an insignificant expenditure should be free to spend their money as they like. The problem is only that so many less affluent families feel the need to sell themselves into serious debt and stress in order to meet the precedents perceived by them to have been set by these bigger spenders. Taking their cues from our aggressively consumerist culture, such folk feel obliged to spend money they don't have, all in superstitious investment in the fortune of the marriage. The sad truth is, however, contrary to their superstition. Indeed, a study recently conducted at Emory University found that women whose wedding cost over \$20,000 divorced at a rate more than one-and-a-half times *higher*

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than those who spent only between \$5,000 and \$10,000. It would be interesting to learn the statistics for the \$100,000 weddings as compared with those kept within the budget of \$3,000-5,000. I, for one, would have no trouble believing a divorce rate of much higher separating these two groups.

One has only to visit the local bookstore, drugstore, or supermarket magazine aisle to follow the money back to the culprit: our nation's out-of-control wedding industry. The top 10 wedding magazines (yes *top ten!*) represent a combined circulation of over 2.3 million copies! And showcased like centerfold pinups across these slick, perfumed pages are the come-hither overtures of countless caterers, wedding gown retailers, formal wear rentals, "beauty suppliers," photographers, stationers, florists, musicians, honeymoon travel agencies, and gift purveyors of all types, let alone those now-indispensable spin-doctor gurus of the industry: the *wedding consultants!* If it's not already too late to remember at this sad point, these big-tent displays are, theoretically at least, mounted for one essential reason: to publicly memorialize the marital union of two people *who are about to learn how to budget a domestic economy of reciprocal sacrifice.* Is there any better demonstration discoverable in all this hypocritical world of the centuries-old idiom of throwing the baby out with the bathwater? Why, the only item missing in action from the above insolvency inventory is *marital commitment:* that promise of loyalty to one another's happiness through all imaginable tests of sacrifice, a promise that in the best of all worlds

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should be sustained *at least* past the point at which the party had been paid for. Sadly however, the *ultimate* benefactors of this feeding frenzy of consumerism remain, more often than not, well-fed divorce lawyers.

A wedding is *not* the measure of a marriage; it is a handful of rice and a heartfelt wish for continued happiness bestowed upon a loving couple. In fact, it is quite possible, and not at all uncommon, to commence a powerful, enduring marriage from off the inexpensive ceremony of a trip to the justice of the peace and a night at the local motel – given, of course, the inclusion of those two basic ingredients of love and respect.

Conversely, it is nearly *impossible* to do so *without* these fundamentals, *even launched from a party the size of the Super Bowl*. And this rather obvious point turns something that might have otherwise been merely pathetic into something downright *unconscionable*. For, what the wedding industry in our country *really* reinforces in the minds of our young couples is not just the emotionally shallow, capricious, and ultimately destructive notion that healthy marriages can be built upon gorged and distended weddings but, worse yet, that to *not* indulge in such aggressively consumerist competition with one's friends, neighbors, and even *family*, for the most opulent, vogueish, and expensive party obtainable is to undervalue the solemnity of the occasion and the significance of the couple in the ranks of the tradition. Consequently, families go willingly into significant debt, stress, and even anguish over the staging of a pageant of competitive

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manufactured conformity that remains little more than a heavily photo-archived *symbol of something real*—something that now, once it’s been encumbered with the unwelcome weight of all this gratuitous financial burden, political tension, and raised expectations, tends to stand *less* of a chance of healthy, long-term survival than it might have stood before. Now, once and for all, let us forget pornography; *this* is obscene!

XVIII. Economic Consequences, Part 3: *Our National Debt to Santa*

And mention again of obscenity brings to mind yet another sad example of the *economic* consequences of sentimentality—that of our nation’s budget-busting spending compulsion on Santa. For, what has been observed in the preceding section regarding the increasingly prevalent and pitiful confusion of meaningful marriages with memorable weddings may be seen to operate *full bore* in shopping malls, virtual malls, ATMs, and pawn shops across our country in response to the benefaction burdens of the “Holiday Season.”

Don’t be fooled by the politically correct euphemism though; this consumerist cult, whose swarm-like flock descends on retail stores and dot-com websites like a desperately welcome plague during the last couple of months of each year, has little at all to do with the traditions of Hannukah, Kwanzaa, Mödraniht, Yalda, Saturnalia, Dongzhi, or Pancha Ganapati and *lots* to do, perversely, with the unmistakably Christian tradition of *Christmas*. I say “perversely” because the long-

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popular and increasingly global sport of going broke in the pursuit of perfunctory gift giving on this hallowed day bears scant relation, *theologically speaking*, with celebrating the birth of a specific Roman-era preacher from Judea who labored under delusions of divine pedigree.

First of all, a consensus exists among even pious experts on the history of Christianity that December 25th had been selected back in 336 A.D. as the date on which the birth of Jesus Christ would be commemorated *not* because of its likelihood—indeed, all but a few agree that it is quite *unlikely*—but rather because of the shrewd business acumen of early church fathers in contriving to employ a celebration date that had been long infused already with pagan significance (the winter solstice), thereby ensuring the survival of this tradition amid its competition.

Second, despite the claims of purists that the big-tent blow-out into which this observance had grotesquely grown over the course of the last two centuries actually represents a secularized consumerism that is *inverse* to the “original” spirit of this holiday, *it really doesn't*. Or, at least, it does only if indeed there *is* such a thing as a precisely identifiable “original” spirit to *any* tradition, let alone one so continuously and diversely cobbled, repackaged, and remarketed as is Christian theology. As Stephen Nissenbaum so eloquently argues (in his fascinating history of the Christmas tradition[s], *The Battle for Christmas* [1996]), although this holiday may indeed be correctly identified today as an “invented

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tradition,” such a label, in and of itself, does not render the tradition *inauthentic*, since, as he observes, “it is difficult...to imagine such a thing as a tradition that was *not* invented – and reinvented, and invented yet again” [emphasis added].

Nissenbaum traces the sundry social needs this observance ritual has satisfied among Christians and non-Christians alike during its ongoing development and dissemination, from old world into new, including its early Saturnalia-like rowdy revelries (such that seduced the New England Puritans to strictly suppress Christmas observance altogether), its later guise as civic pageant, and still later, its divergence into the twin prongs of private (indoor) celebration and grandiose public (outdoor) spectacle in the later 19th century. And he suggests that those of us made uncomfortable with the conspicuously consumerist mood of this holiday as practiced today would do well to consider how effective certain early 19th-century entrepreneurs (of both capitalism *and* sentimentality) were in making it that way. Included among the key players in this new teary-eyed business venture were such prominent early New York impresarios of commerce and golden-age nostalgia as John Pintard, Washington Irving, and Clement Clarke Moore.

By the 1820s, with the widespread publication of Moore’s Christmas poem “A Visit from St. Nicholas” (beginning “’Twas the night before Christmas” and placing Santa Claus front and center in the observance of what had once been Christ’s mass), the stage was already set for the

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large-scale merchandizing of this feast day of sentimental indulgence. Of course, the publication a mere generation later of Charles Dickens's sentimental novella, *A Christmas Carol*, would only fan the flames of this particular indulgence in the sentimental idealization of indigent children, but already the best minds in the burgeoning mercantile industry were fast conspiring to capitalize on producing the costly fuel for this exquisitely inefficient fire. Producers of toys, novelties, greeting cards, decorations, and confections vied with one another for access to the wallets of the average (and better yet, *above-average*) American household in what would eventually become, by far, the holiest day in all commerce.

And it was with the help of sentimentality, in this case specifically the lure of antiquarian nostalgia for a golden-age past of child-like purity and innocence, that kept the menacing wheels of this merciless machinery so well oiled. Those who could not afford to partake in these displays of Christian benevolence were helped to feel a wee bit less Christian-like than their more affluent (or, at least, *overextended*) neighbor. Conspicuous shows of premeditated charity soon became a way of wielding a competitive edge in the raging war to build one's own church upon the rock of this newly redefined Christian holiday. And by the final decade of the century, Nissenbaum observes, "well-to-do New Yorkers had begun to arrange new and larger kinds of Christmas visitations to the poor, and these gala events reeked—strongly—of exploitation." For, he explains, New Yorkers "began to

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treat charity, almost literally, as a kind of spectator sport, performed on a large scale in arena-like spaces before a paying audience.” He goes so far as to describe these spectacles, wherein children were scheduled to put on such performances at different holiday venues, “as if there were something erotically charged about watching hungry children eat.”

And it is here that we are given a particularly rich insight into the darker moral and ethical ramifications of the practice of sentimentality. For, destructive enough as emotional dishonesty proves in a relationship of two or three people, when practiced *en masse*, as a public spectacle, its manipulative features tend to magnify into dangerously coercive “bandwagon” thinking that challenges the group’s members to decide as to which side of the *either-for-’em-or-against-’em* stance they belong. Peer pressure tends to obscure the obvious fact that there’s plenty of room to flourish comfortably in between and take what one likes from each. The sound of “cheerleading” all around you in a situation like this can act as a coercive reinforcement of the rightness of an act, despite one’s private critical responses to the contrary. The adrenaline pumping through the bleachers of competitive team sports events and political rallies has this same bonding effect in subordinating one’s critical astuteness to the sacrifice of flock thinking. And this is sentimentality’s most cozy lair.

The Czech novelist Milan Kundera articulated this notion quite succinctly in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1982; 1984), though

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using in place of our word “sentimentality” the nearly synonymous German term *kitsch*:

The feeling induced by kitsch must be a kind the multitudes can share. Kitsch may not, therefore, depend on an unusual situation; it must derive from the basic images people have engraved in their memories: the ungrateful daughter, the neglected father, children running on the grass, the motherland betrayed, first love. Kitsch causes two tears to flow in quick succession. The first tear says: How nice to see children running in the grass! **The second tear says: How nice to be moved, together with all mankind, by children running on the grass! It is the second tear that makes kitsch kitsch.** The brotherhood of man on earth will be possible only on a base of kitsch. And no one knows this better than politicians. Whenever a camera is in the offing, they immediately run to the nearest child, lift it in the air, kiss it on the cheek. Kitsch is the aesthetic ideal of all politicians and political movements. [Emphasis added]

Yes, it is the second tear, the one that says: “How nice to be moved, together with all my fellow philanthropists, by watching starving children eat!” that makes sentimentality truly Sentimentality. Now, whether we choose to call it “kitsch” or “sentimentality,” this is the same emotionally insincere mindset that makes possible the moral world described by Nissenbaum above regarding certain large-scale charity affairs in late 19th-century New York society. Poor children, who might otherwise have elicited feelings of compassion from those without worries about their next meal, are merely idealized

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simplistically into pitiful poster images of innocent vulnerability, then exploited for the entertainment value of the guilt-ridden wealthy, turning what might have led to actual altruism into an erotically charged spectator sport, where the audience pays to engage in a self-congratulatory group hug of guilt-ameliorating “good deeds.” And Nissenbaum is not slow to point out the terrible irony that makes this spectacle even more immoral: enticing a starving child, whose body is unused to regular quantities of food, to suddenly gorge himself (to the appreciative oohs and aahs of the sponsoring crowd) represents not only condescendingly cruel exploitation of a child but a serious danger to his health, *often with fatal consequences*.

But while the unrealistic idealizing of children that made all this predatory charity attractive and possible could hardly be attributed to the mindset of one person, such a cultural tendency surely had among its sources key intellectuals of the day. And one of these, either by direct quotation or by a kind of cultural osmosis, almost certainly had been the Swiss clergyman and educational reformer Johann Pestalozzi (1746-1827), a man who (somehow) managed to see children as vessels of purity, innocence, and innate unselfishness that adults would be well to emulate if they were to achieve a peaceful, productive society. (As you might have guessed by now, Pestalozzi did not have children of his own; otherwise it might have proved more challenging to cling to such visions of purity and innocence.) In Pestalozzi’s mindset, which

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through numerous of his followers in Europe and America became integral to the “festival of feelings” that was to be Christmas, the giving of gifts by parents to children during this holiday became conflated, symbolically, with nothing less than the presentation of gifts to the Holy Child. This is what idealizing offers: substituting the real thing for a souvenir of an unobtainable simplification of it. (Oh, were kids only allowed to be kids, *real* human beings, possessed of real human instincts and learned responses, in the process of learning to be older, more responsible real human beings!)

But I digress. My focus in this section was supposed to be specifically another of the *economic* consequences of sentimentality and not more of the moral and ethical ones explored variously above. The problem is in the erroneous notion that economics can be cleanly excised from the surrounding tissue of human behavior and examined, full flourishing, by itself. It can't because *everything is economics*: ethics, morality, politics, law, the arts, and the rest of human endeavor; all operate as economies wherein assets are weighed and negotiated against liabilities in a sacrifice of individual, for overall, well-being. And the disproportion we witness concerning the moral and ethical consequences of sentimentality's disingenuous behavior finds its direct parallel in the world of household finance as well, as observed above concerning the confusing of weddings for marriages—and often with miserable if not disastrous results effecting significant challenges to human happiness and well-being.

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It has been estimated recently that the average American household spends just under a thousand dollars on Christmas every year. It has also been estimated that this same average American household has an annual income of less than sixty thousand dollars. So, out of 365 days, this one day costs, on average, six times the amount earned for it. It would not be irrelevant to question whether this average six-fold expenditure may be said to have purchased all the benefits expected of it.

What *do* we expect to get out of such an expensive day, especially as compared with the other 364 days of the year? I believe the commodity most likely to be answered here would *not* be *things people buy for us that we would not have bought for ourselves but are now feeling obliged to pretend we don't want to get rid of* (such that we might return ourselves to a pre-Christmas state of somewhat less clutter in our lives while spending that same amount of money we don't really have toward effecting the same dishonest and uncomfortable state of affairs in other people's lives). Rather, it would more likely be something along the lines of *a feeling of love, fellowship, family ties, and reconnection of meaningful relationships*.

Now, what are the essential ingredients of this latter state of feeling? Love, fellowship, family ties, and reconnection of meaningful relationships, of course. And of the former? Just under a thousand dollars, on average. The latter may be had without much in the way of financial outlay: be there, listen, trust, and share. And in theory, the

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emotional benefits of these relationship pursuits can be enjoyed on the former—our \$1,000 day—just as well as it can on the other, less cost-driven days of the year. In practice, it's *depressingly rare*. With expectation and responsibility ratcheted up come-true. Children impatiently tearing good paper into trash to unveil the evidence as to whether their parents love them more or less than they do their siblings. Parents, who have just overspent on igniting their children's ugly rivalry instincts, preparing to compete against themselves over what they spent on their spouse the previous year.

And down the line. Political intrigues surrounding which family member hosts the big dinner and who's been invited to stay over. This, that, and the other, all compared against last year's performance. And all for just under a thousand dollars (*if you're lucky enough to be "average"*).

The most lasting legacy of all this, sadly, may be measured in the mountains of chattels manufactured for our ever-proliferating storage facilities to hold in their cold confines; entire industries calibrated for the production of perfunctory purchasing, each widget of which spending as little as a day or two in the limelight of the recipient's attention deficit before predictably fading into the oblivion of something used, soon to be forgotten, returned, abandoned to storage, or disposed of.

Now, for those poor folks who find themselves outside this picture of normality and, for whatever reason, *not* excited about the approach,

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yet again, of Christmas there is reserved a special punishment: that of *Christmas music*. The stuff is inescapable! Unlike the visual input of garishly glittering tinsel, to which one still retains the power to ignore, when desperate enough, by covering one's eyes, sound is viscerally invasive, stealing into your ears like an invisible torrent of liquid distraction that seeps deep into your skull, demanding to be reckoned with.

Now, in the right mood and under the right conditions, few experiences prove more satisfying to me than the that of hunkering down to lose myself in an artistically stimulating, satisfying and rewarding cultural artifact formed out of the sophisticated, emotionally sensitive, highly nuanced language of music. But “White Christmas”? Sentimentality of this potency should be sampled, *if it must*, only in small doses, unless one is properly medicated. But to be subjected to such saccharine auditory input, over-amplified, indoors and out, 24/7, for as much as seven hundred hours per “Holiday Season” is little short of cruelty.

Christopher Deacy, in his *Christmas as Religion: Rethinking Santa, the Secular, and the Sacred* (2016), writes that “to observe or not observe religious holidays—these are counted among our most basic political freedoms” but that “when it comes to Christmas it is difficult if not impossible to escape the festival.” To those who find these vapid ditties as sickening as do I it is little different than encountering along every street you choose to walk a sudden proliferation of giant billboards

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displaying in foot-tall letters the text of Kilmer's *Trees* or "the death of Little Nell."

Why is it so hard to escape? Easy. Think *the emperor's new clothes*. Yes, just as in Hans Christian Andersen's presciently timeless tale about pluralistic ignorance (and more), it's quite easy to find oneself conditioned to think something good or true on the mere strength of our society's acquiescent pretense to the same.

Example given. When I'm asked by a bank teller or shop cashier the inevitable "Holiday Season" question as to whether I'm "ready for the holidays" (a query I read as a touchingly cautious probe to discover if I'm surviving the mayhem, though couched in the expected language of conformance), I typically answer honestly "no, I'm not" (and sometimes even more boldly that, in fact, my favorite day of the year just happens to be December 26th!). Remarkably, my subversive response is typically greeted *not* with the scandalized disbelief of a Catholic learning of the pope's closet atheism but rather with a look of knowing *relief*, as if of someone winked at from outside an oppressive conspiracy maintained all around them.

Yes, typically *they agree with me*, though usually with the circumspection of one venturing out into the uncertain safety promised by my preemptive confession. And some have even taken the opportunity of this welcome moment of trust to spill their guts about it and share their frustrations and anxieties over the whole nightmare. Included in this unburdening I have inventoried the predictable culprits

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of tarnished expectations, familial political tensions, and mounting debt—*but mostly mounting debt*. And since everything is economics, and since, therefore, this particular anxiety around the high cost of the holiday cannot be successfully excised from the surrounding tissue of well-being, *it tends to taint everything*.

Of course, to those whose response conforms to the conditioned mindset of the question posed, this same questioner is not necessarily committing an act of hypocrisy, since the question was really only ever meant as a social icebreaker anyway rather than a genuine attempt to procure valuable information. (He or she would have little reason to give a good goddamn whether or not I'm ready for Christmas, at least any more than they would be interested in the details of my health when they ask "how are you?") It is simply a piece of discourse prompted by the comforts of manufactured conformity. In other words, I had performed the role of Andersen's innocent child who asked the logical question about the emperor's *obvious* nakedness because he didn't know that his majesty's lack of clothing was *to be seen* (through the quiet conspiracy of unquestioned group conformance) rather as being most elegantly attired. (Moral: Most folks will do *anything* to sustain the comfort of conformance.)

Following this same phenomenon of social behavior, there is a widely embraced presumption, invented by sentimentalists, reinforced by retailers, and willingly suffered by the emperor's citizenry, that Christmas Music is Good for You: that its feel-good nostalgia for

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simpler, better days can relieve the stress associated with living in the brutal real world (thereby promoting purchase of more Christmas product, coincidentally). Therefore, it's played everywhere, all the time. (What's good for some *must* be good for all.) But this is nothing more than a particularly shameless specimen of cultural smugness. Now, I happen to believe the chamber music of Brahms to be good for you—largely because it proves conducive to *my* wellbeing. But it would never occur to me that loudly broadcasting recordings of it through my neighborhood would be understood as a public service.

Whether or not there is, after all, any truth to the long-attested statistic of especially high rates of depression and suicide during the “Holiday Season,” I would wager that a good-size portion of what *can* be confirmed as factual is due, at least in some significant measure, to Christmas music. And as to my characterization of this music as sentimental in the first place, if this surprises any of my readers by this point in the essay, they haven't been paying attention. (After all, how many more sacred cows are there to slaughter?) For the sake of (sentimental) skeptics of this particular strand of my thesis, I offer authoritative corroboration by yet another well-respected scholar of the American Christmas tradition(s), Penne L. Restad, who writes (in *Christmas in America* [1995]) so approvingly of the Irving Berlin song (made *outrageously* famous by Bing Crosby), “White Christmas,” as follows:

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Appealingly sentimental, “White Christmas” endures as the holiday’s quintessential expression. It has no dark side. War is forgotten. It bears no hint of commerce, not even a gift, but only describes perfection.

Not Wilde, nor Nabokov, nor Kundera could have summed up the verdict with more memorable succinctness—and this from an unapologetic champion of the modern holiday as we know it!

“White Christmas,” that quintessential musical expression of the modern Christmas holiday spirit, is in Restad’s quintessentially oxymoronic description, an “appealingly sentimental” place to which one can retire to the safety of misinformed, unrealistic, golden-age nostalgia, where life is not as we know it (from life) *and therefore much more appealing*. In other words, it is the musical equivalent of a snow globe souvenir available for purchase on a tour-group visit, *not to life itself* but to its fabulously successful theme-park-size gift store nestled safely outside its city walls.

Thank you anyway, but I choose *life*.

XIX. Posthumous Consequences: *And then We Die...*(aka, *The Burial Business*)

And then we die...which, for many folks, *is just the beginning*. Yes, after all the above-described costs of sentimentality have been suffered and paid for, there is *yet another* world of mindless manufactured conformity awaiting the sentimentally inclined once their brains have shut down *officially*. The industry to which I now refer is none other than

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the interment business, the last (though not least by a long shot) in a seemingly endless lineup of products and services a body can be subjected to before it ceases to qualify as a viable consumer. This is a trade specializing in the transmutation of base superstition into the profitable long-term waste of precious real estate.

The *magnum opus* of this ancient profession is the proper harnessing of that powerful yet incoherent human desire for eternal life without our brain and then investing this urge into a seemingly eternal lease of living accommodations for the dead, complete with every comfort the non-existent clearly will no longer need.

But let us back up a bit to begin right at the announcement of a loved one's death. Apparently, the laws of sentimentality do not permit use of the word “death” or its morphological derivations, such as die, died, or dead – this out of deference to its religion's central oath, which promises to avoid unpleasant realities at all costs. Therefore, hiding behind the ostensible gesture of protecting the feelings and dignity of the bereaved (though really only safekeeping those of the *speaker*, as the bereaved typically *do not want their tragedy ignored*), the sentimentalist will immediately translate this very useful word into a more palatable euphemistic denial of what can only be called *reality*: in this case the obvious, inescapable, fully provable, *fact* that this living organism that was once animated will not ever again be so.

The euphemism arsenal at the sentimentalist's disposal toward this obfuscation is broad, though its superstitious etiquette suggests the

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following current favorite dissimulation of “passed.” No, not even the old fashioned “passed *away*,” a safely meaningless-enough term that still manages to allude to a scientifically *unimaginable* process, but one apparently now considered too long (by a syllable) and cumbersome on the tongue to avoid *total* avoidance of peripheral reference to the subject at hand. Let’s compare this particular red herring, the euphemism “passed,” with our good old realist’s term “died.” While the former vaguely suggests a mere transition from one sphere of endeavor to another, *leaving it quite open as to the actual availability of the deceased*, the latter makes no mistake about what has just happened to the departed and then goes on to prevent all possible misunderstandings about what he or she might do next, which is, of course, *nothing*.

Once the announcement has been made and the emotional impact of the news carefully avoided, those individuals who would prefer to cremate the remains of their beloved deceased are often met with a shudder of scandalized disbelief that the dead could be subjected to such indignity. (Never mind that the loved one in question is currently nothing more than a memory in the minds of his or her survivors and no longer has anything at all to do with the corpse laid before us.) No, we are bullied into cordoning off yet more of our increasingly unavailable earth's surface—whatever has not yet been compacted to receive new vending potential and the inevitable indefinite storage of purchased commodities—in the fool’s errand of attempting to preserve the dead in our conspired state of denial of the physical reality of death.

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This conspiracy manages to win for each new corpse the one particular advantage it most certainly does not any more have need of: a cordoned plot of ground all to itself in which to molder. And it is at this inappropriate point that the undertaker steps in with his heart-felt recommendations to the bereaved (and otherwise emotionally vulnerable) of the timeless virtues of the super-deluxe extra-reinforced, lead-lined, button-tufted silk-cushioned, mahogany casket, a veritable strongbox for the rotting loved one sufficient to keep the decaying remains of the deceased from returning to the ashes of the earth until the rapture, *and beyond!* This curious cult of standing watch over the inevitable decomposition of once-living flesh is obviously yet another ancient bequest of religion, a cult that centers on the belief of a life after this one, thereby confusing the living as to where his or her energies are best invested.

XX. Conclusion

Throughout this essay, I have attempted to examine human social customs operating in various arenas of endeavor, including: a.) religion and our sacrifice of precious livelihood to insatiable, invisible, and otherwise unprovable entities; b.) competitive team sports and our surprisingly similar investment; c.) nationalistic political propaganda, especially by way of the sacralization of the commonplace through the practice of blasphemy taboo; d.) the comfortable reliance on received

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opinion over fresh observation and reflection, especially as achieved via the employment of the same taboo against sacrilege; e.) the flagrant waste of large amounts of revenue on worthless symbols; f.) the epic spending on ceremonies without regard to the relationships they merely symbolize; and, finally, g.) the delusional, idealistic denial of the oh-so-obvious reality of death.

Now, I have argued in this essay that the mindset that lends itself most readily toward the continued practice of these modern vestiges of ancient “magico-religious” rites is that very one that so seductively promises refuge to the emotionally fearful and intellectually lazy from the uncomfortable complexities of life. I refer, of course, to Sentimentality. In other words, these social habits are all rooted, I argue, in that type of pusillanimous preference for sanitized symbols over real people and their institutions that we have observed to be central to our working definition of “sentimentality.”

I believe the reason that epithet “sentimental fool” tends to ring as a pejorative to *all* ears (i.e., ironically, even to those sentimental types who lovingly deprecate *themselves* with this appellation) is not because it is thought to denote a person considered foolish by virtue of indulging in sentiment but rather because that person’s customary indulgence in a disingenuous *posturing after* sentiment identifies them as perpetrator of a special brand of foolishness fraught with significantly deleterious social consequences.

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No, “sentimentality” must cease to be understood as some benign synonym for “sentiment.” On the contrary, this word actually represents the potentially dangerous idealizing that aspires to the *extortion* of sentiment. I believe we do ourselves an injustice by indulging the continued use of this term as a mere decorative honorific when, in fact, it represents a serious psychological dysfunction that hampers our ability to be emotionally honest and engaged, caring, empathetic, rational, and just.

Essay #2

*The Belief Machine and its Propensity to
Dream Delusions of Gods*

An Essay

Published in J. Allan Hobson's

London Bridges: Essays on Collaboration

(East Burke, VT: Allan Hobson, 2016)

This essay, like the volume as a whole in which you find it, is the result of a refreshingly unconventional vision of acquiring and sharing knowledge that has become the fully realized dream of that indomitable dreamer and dream scientist, J. Allan Hobson. As this book is intended to illustrate, Professor Hobson's vision of an egalitarian "university of the mind" operating outside the corridors of academic publishing politics is no mere pipe dream but an exhilarating waking reality. Allan's idiosyncratic preference for fresh ideas over stale conventions is perfectly suited to the ease with which contemporary technologies allow us to communicate our inspirations to like (and better yet, *unlike*) minds while still hot enough to kindle further intellectual fires.

This university is chartered solely by his indefatigable enthusiasm for learning as well as the inspiration he sparks with it in those lucky enough to fall within his ever-widening circle of colleagues and friends.

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It is an arena of thought open to all, without regard to what might be traditionally considered the requisite credentials or affiliations.

My own inclusion in this book serves as an example of Allan's facility to inspire people well outside his field and to embrace their own contributions (when worthwhile) despite any shortage of official credentials. As a professional art appraiser with amateur interest pursuits in the fields of music, literature, philosophy, and science, I myself lack the formal education necessary to the professional scientific world in which Allan's careers as neuroscientist and psychiatrist had taken root and flourished. So, were it not for Allan's characteristic open-armed inclusiveness into this world of inquiry so beloved to him, the chapter you are about to read would have necessarily been written by someone else. But more on that later; in this essay I offer observations derived from my long-standing interest in the idea of religious faith as a type of virus to which the human brain is peculiarly, yet *understandably*, susceptible. You may well recognize in it a conspicuous debt to my deep friendship with Allan and the reciprocal free flow of ideas that has characterized it. That *is* the point here.

On a recent visit to Rome, while standing in front of Michelangelo's magnificent marble sculpture of the *Pietà* in St. Peter's Basilica, I was asked by a fellow tourist why this celebrated artistic relic was sequestered behind a thick plate of impenetrable glass. Upon explaining the incident of its significant damage in 1972 by a psychotic armed with a geologist's hammer and an erroneous notion of his own identity as the

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“real” Jesus Christ, my questioner responded in disgusted disbelief as to the height of depravity to which a mind can descend, especially concerning the ludicrous delusion under which this vandal labored of being himself the son of God. But I could not stop from wondering out loud to my outraged inquisitor just how different was the case of the man depicted *in the sculpture* who, after all, some two millennia earlier, fervently believed and proudly proclaimed *precisely the same thing about himself*, i.e., that *he* was the son of God. The followers of Jesus seem to have had little trouble in accepting the factual truth of *his* preposterous assertion rather than question the man’s sanity, yet a *contemporary* pretender to the same imaginary throne is, on the other hand, *obviously* bonkers. Of course, without religion, it would be impossible to distinguish the claims to truth of these two men. I contend in this essay that the mindset whereby one of them is seen as an incarnation of the creator of the universe and the other a mere garden-variety lunatic is but a natural byproduct of one of the evolved brain mechanisms that helped us to become the most resourceful species on our planet. I will attempt to distinguish the natural, necessary process of belief from its insidious mutation, religious faith.

The human brain is the most complex and expensive object in the known universe, the ongoing creation of half a billion years of evolutionary tweaking that gradually refined the simplest of reflex mechanisms into the most sophisticated of navigational machines – an engine of belief and narrative-weaving so powerfully resourceful as to

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conceive its own authority and scrupulously confuse its dreaming with objective truth. What began as a simple reflex device, allowing our earliest ancestors to negotiate their environment, rudely but satisfactorily moving from danger toward sustenance, eventually evolved into an unimaginably complicated narrative machine capable of watching itself watch itself predict and change its future, as well as recreate its past.

But the very features of this magnificent apparatus that help its owners navigate the dangers, necessities, and pleasures of life to such a high-yield degree are those same ones that allow them in less propitious circumstances to founder on the sand bar of fantasy. These beneficial attributes comprise the workings of the human brain mechanism we know as BELIEF, a sophisticated thought construct central to our human ability to weave narratives that help us acquire and share knowledge, practice rational, moral, social behavior, create art and, alas, *wallow in the murky depths of delusion*. For, while leaving us *constructively* vulnerable to the acceptance of new information about our world, belief also leaves our brains susceptible to its hijacking by highly contagious toxic ideas as well.

The mental correlate in the human brain of an immune system to toxic ideas is easily compromised by the insidious pathogenic parasite of RELIGIOUS FAITH, a virulent mutation of belief that resembles a grotesque exaggeration of belief and works by closely imitating the antigens of reason until eluding its target host's defense mechanisms

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and gaining entrance to its ill-protected cache of fears and desires. Once there it is free to feed, relatively undisturbed by its occasional border skirmishes with knowledge, quietly converting the glucose of reason into the glycogen of complete and utter folly.

The continuous refinement over the eons of our ever-resourceful belief machine is driven by that elegantly simple yet indescribably fecund algorithm of reproduction, mutation, recombination, and selection we now know by the name of Evolution by Natural Selection. But this is a formula that yields such well-adapted products only because it harnesses the opportunities of chance—and this at the expense of waste—to continually test them against the pressures of environment. And since this powerful algorithm unfolds by selecting for *reproductive success* rather than for more seductive concepts like perfection, beauty, reason, morality, or similar “end results,” the work in progress that is our brain remains an irrepressible generator not only of poetry and politics, but also of delirium and delusion. In other words, in the slow accrual of the heritable architecture that is our human brain, the useful benefits of belief have simply outweighed the deplorable liabilities of faith.

Now, the benefits are easy to see. Belief allows the privileging of selected data long enough for use toward refining our predictive model of the outside world and reducing its prediction error (known as *surprise*). Our brain has developed through its reliance on the mechanism of belief as a means toward efficiently favoring what works

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and discarding what doesn't while avoiding the fatally expensive waste of an exponentially expanding redundancy of data testing. In other words, the mechanism of belief invites such a machine to read not only what is out there in the world but also what *might* be there, allowing us to efficiently prune predictions while we feed them. In this process, the benefits from the imagination's tendency to see what might connect the dots and fill in the blanks appear to outweigh the liabilities of doing so. Hence, our ancestors were those who erred on the side of seeing something that wasn't there *but might have been*, like a dangerous beast of prey in the peripheral vision where happened to be standing merely a bolder, and *not* those less fortunate (and therefore less *propagative*) ones who *misinterpreted* the dangerous beast shape as a mere mound of harmless rock.

An evolutionary byproduct of this art of *seeing what is not there if only because it might be* is the equally human art of Magical Thinking, which may be most simply defined as the interpretation of coincidence as cause. It is a perversion of an inherited tendency of brain process elevated by culture to higher status than enjoyed by plain old delusion. And this type of thinking requires no dual-citizenship passport to visit the hocus-pocus world of religious faith, as it is easily smuggled back and forth across sanity's porous, shifting border clothed only in TABOO, that most impenetrable protective coating for a bad idea ever developed. You see, some ideas are just so dumb that their only chance of surviving reason's lamp in the transfer of their dull cargo to the dark

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corridors of another brain is the irrational threat of some irrelevant consequence in questioning it. Religion survives around the world in large measure thanks to the reason-resistant properties of this important protective coating, wherein euphemisms, such as “mysterious” (for “ridiculous”) are felt, absurdly, to be appropriate under the circumstances.

Of course, all of this happens in the same three pounds of human flesh that made it possible to put a man on the moon. It is all, alas, a natural byproduct of thinking outside the container of mere veridicality. Evolution made possible the eventual development of a nervous system so immense, complex, and finely tuned as to achieve a continuum of narrative that anticipates its outside world, gathers sense data to map its findings of that world against its own model, and acts upon the world of which it is a part. This process, known by the variously understood catch-all term, *consciousness*, was traditionally conceived to operate only during what might be thought of as the body’s normal “business hours,” those of wakefulness, and not during the time the brain was then thought to have been “turned off” during sleep. Of course, we now know that the brain is *never* “turned off,” unless it has died, and that it is often as busy while asleep as it is when the rest of its body might be, say, sitting for the bar exam. What the scientific study of the sleeping and dreaming brain reveals however is the liberating fact that sleep dreams are *not* the “top-down” outcome of censorial intervention by some tutelary spirit exercising free will over

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the dumb flesh of its bodily machinery but rather the outcome of spontaneous regulatory neuronal firings and the collateral effect of these completed circuitries on various other circuitries. And the result, a fluid, *reciprocally-interactive* continuum of bodily brain process, known as “mind,” may be seen to operate through the dovetailed pressures of both “top-down” and “bottom-up” mechanisms.

Yet, no matter how much is learned in the lab about the material cause of this phenomenon we call “mind,” obscurity is amply shed on the subject via a tendency of our brain to interpret this reciprocal-interaction dynamic ontologically as that of *spirit versus matter*. We in the western world are probably most familiar with the machinations of this tendency in the ghostly legacy of Cartesian dualism. Though long dead and buried among elite philosophers, the specter of this far-fetched use for the pineal gland continues to haunt the back halls of the thought structures of most of the living members of our species, spooking the scientific reason out of even professional practitioners of mental health and medical research, and thereby further complicating their reasonable diagnosis and treatment of patients possessed of bodily brains not quite running smoothly. This insidious legacy of theological thinking, leaving its sticky ectoplasmic droppings in the machinery of even our most secular, scientific endeavors, may be seen as a historic failure of simple recognition, namely, seeing the mind for what it is: the *process* of the bodily object that is our brain while it is alive and working amid its environment. To see the mind as anything else, particularly

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anything actually *separable from* the brain as part of a physical body, cannot avoid the subliminal inclination toward a woefully unhelpful model—one that may be seen infiltrating the furthest reaches of our otherwise enlightened brain-minds, including those powering our scientific community. It ignores the truth of the nature/nurture relationship the brain *as body* enjoys with the brain *process* we call “mind.” And it also misrepresents what we like to call “free will,” a myopic concept that easily serves as poster-boy for the Cartesian ghost in anyone’s machine. Since we now know through brain imagining that our conscious impression of having decided to do something percolates into our conscious awareness only *after* the causal chain to achieve that end had already been set into motion elsewhere in our brain, we’ve come to see that truly “Free” Will ain’t what it used to be.

This tendency we have of seeing ourselves as ghosts at the controls of our machine-bodies, though it has its roots deep in our evolutionary physiology, is also in part the unfortunate cultural legacy of religion. The indoctrination of innocent young children with dangerous memes of slave-society authority worship and its discontents by their well-meaning religiously obedient parents tends to have far-reaching consequences in the way the former put their brains to endeavors later on, even as apostate adults. This institutionalized insistence on preferring unseen, untested “truths” solely on the basis of authority rather than the reasoned contemplation of evidence can leave its mark on structures of thought difficult to distinguish from “wiring.” Such

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knots in our circuitry tend to result in subliminal validation, if not outright privileging, of the acceptance as *fact* of other unseen figments of the fecund creative imagination. The usual suspects include of course gods, prophets of gods, and their deplorable incarnation in politicians respectful of the rights and entitlements of prophets of gods.

And even the narratives we enjoy losing ourselves in among the arts, such as fiction, verse, visual arts, and music seem to be born of these same architectural features of the brain as are used to conjure up worshipful attitudes toward unseen authorities – though typically to more benign ends. That “willing suspension of disbelief” described by Coleridge in reference to the creative imagination and its apprehension appears after all to be less a quirk of human unreason than a necessary structural feature of the brain’s efficiency in delegating trust in veridical experience to only front-burner challenges rather than inefficiently duplicating its efforts at verisimilitude-testing at all levels. For example, my brain is wired to find it comfortable to accept the fact that a man named Leopold Bloom masturbated to the sight of an attractive young woman on the strand in Dublin in the afternoon of June 16th, 1904 – at least while I am engaged in reading, remembering, or discussing the novel *Ulysses* – all this *despite the fact* that I also know, *hopefully with at least slightly more certainty*, that this event did *not* transpire as described.

Now, this capacity for belief in untested things is instrumental not only to my enjoyment of literature and other products of human imagination but also toward maintaining my propensity for exercising

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reason, especially as the latter depends so much upon the weighing of contrasting assets and liabilities observed to exist within the very same event, choice, response, etc. Contradicting the obsolete “blank slate” model of learning once thought to characterize our gathering of information, we now know that we come programmed in the library of our every cell with the wiring potential for expectations toward what we will find in our world and the ability to map our findings against these expectations. This efficient mechanism of suspended comparison is achieved amid the buoyant solution of memory. Belief seems, therefore, as *integral* to human consciousness as is memory. For example, we board an airplane with the reasonable trust that the vessel’s design, manufacture, maintenance, and operation is all consistent with the mutually-interactive relationship it will need to maintain with the unchangeable laws of physics, all of which conspiring to keep the plane in the air until it safely lands. This trust, which gradually becomes relegated to a less conscious awareness the more we fly (unless we are phobic about flying), may be seen as an excellent example of healthy, constructive belief. Our reasonable reliance on it helps us circumvent the inconvenience of pulling out our computer to figure out our survival chances before boarding each plane, leaving us freer to concern ourselves with less redundant, more interesting, endeavors.

But what if we have more than sufficient evidence in hand that the plane we are about to board *cannot* stay up in the air as long as it needs

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to in order to accomplish a successful flight. Let's suppose we can discern by eye alone and without dependence on a requisite knowledge of physics and engineering that the plane is obviously *unsound* for safe flight – say, perhaps because one of its wings is missing – yet are urged to board it anyways because a certain authority on astrology, palm reading, tea leaves, or the New Testament assures us of its guaranteed safety. (And let's assume for the sake of this argument that these same authorities have *no* authority on the subjects of aviation and physics.) Our only evidence of the appropriate safety of this vessel in this case would be the authority of, well, AUTHORITY itself, an entity that is impossible to test in such a case without taking one's life in danger.

The only type of non-suicidal passenger who might willingly board such a plane without a gun to his or her back could only be one deeply deluded as to the true relationship of successful aviation and the laws of physics. Religious faith is sufficient for the accomplishment of such a delusion. In this case it is an unreasonable trust extorted by untestable authority from out our tested belief in the predictable consistency of the laws of physics. Therefore, unlike the more constructive phenomenon of belief described above, the corrupt cousin we know as religious faith represents a mutation into an unwarranted belief in something *in the face of the flagrantly ample evidence of its untruth*. And as if this were not enough, this loss of reason is further granted the status of a *virtue* unattainable by its victim's more reasonable fellow creatures. This special virtue in the practice of unreason demonstrates a subservient

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submissiveness apparently attractive to the scribes of scripture (who, more typically than not had scribbled their gods' wishes during an iron-age slave culture that, not surprisingly, prized such submissiveness in their slaves). And this mindset necessary to religious faith comes so close to that necessary for the smooth operation of delusion, that it seems necessary here to ask whether it is any longer reasonable to continue to pretend that the former is anything more than a euphemism for the latter.

Yet religious faith is only one of the many hiccups to which our narrative machine is vulnerable because so well suited. For example, we are each one of us delirious during the night in our dreams. And if we are psychotic, such dreams are then not confined to our sleep but are found infiltrating our waking daytime consciousness as well. Hallucinations, too, can happen to healthy individuals, given the appropriate conditions. But each of these deviations from the smoothest route amid our brain's processes is made of the same stuff: completed circuits of neuronal firings. In other words, whether we believe ourselves to be directly experiencing a current physical event or whether we are reliving it in a night dream, daydream, or even pipe dream, we can never know *the thing itself* but only the experience of the translation of its readings into the language of our neuron circuitry – this via the electro-chemical grammar of charged ions crossing synaptic clefts. Memory seems to be the common denominator in this process, the one outcome of these connected neuronal firings in common with

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all experience, whether seemingly immediate, as in the so-called *remembered present*, or “relived” via the recombined recollections of day or night. But given the necessarily malleable nature of memory, it is highly vulnerable to change by the fingerprints of its each handling, resulting in potentially substantive transformation in its content with each (figurative) viewing and re-shelving. This being the case, any attempt to separate into concrete classification boundaries these different memory-driven tributaries of this ever-flowing river of brain process we call consciousness seems understandably doomed to ambiguity.

Yet, traditionally the practice of psychiatry has preferred the convenience of categorization to the more challenging continuum model. For example, the current professional handbook for psychiatrists, *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (or DSM), despite its prefatory claim to avoid considering each category of mental disorder as a “completely discrete entity with absolute boundaries,” nevertheless remains a categorical classification system of prototypes, one that tends to invite patients to come lie down on a particular chalk outline and see if they can be made to fit satisfactorily within it, thereby qualifying them for the requisite treatment, health insurance, or compassion.

Enter Allan Hobson, who has ever so stalwartly pioneered this intrinsically important concept of a continuum of conscious states in place of the more traditional predilection for our instinct for

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compartmentalization. Beginning with the landmark Activation-Synthesis hypothesis of dreaming he devised with Robert McCarley (in the 1970s), and continuing with his update of the Reciprocal Interaction Model posited in that theory refined into the AIM Model of Sleeping, Dreaming and Waking Consciousness (in the '90s), and even more recently with his far-reaching Protoconsciousness theory (published 2009), Professor Hobson has continued to inspire colleagues and general readers alike to glimpse a more integrated picture of the continuum of consciousness that is the process of a working human brain.

And just as Allan has eschewed the mythologies constituting Freud's Disguise-Censorship Model and has likewise rejected as unscientific (because *untestable*) the latter's insistence on interpreting dream *content* rather than dream *process*, he has also refused to toe the traditional line separating consciousness into clearly outlined products of the brain rather than state-dependent positions along a fluidly modulated continuum. His long and distinguished careers in neuroscience and psychiatry reveal a consistency that fingerprints Allan as a true scientist in his yearning for nothing short of the whole picture as opposed to the transitory gratifications of savoring only the most acceptable passages.

In short, Allan Hobson has been unafraid to consider the seemingly odd bedfellows of creativity, delirium, and delusion to be merely symptoms of the same affliction: *being human*. And it is this human character of Allan's scientific vision that brought a scientific layperson

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such as myself into the confidence of his beloved friendship. Allan's paradigm-shattering first opus, *The Dreaming Brain*, left me forever changed upon first reading. But it was not until a few decades later that I got up the nerve to contact him and tell him so. I asked with unnecessary trepidation whether he might deign to read a poem I'd written on dreaming, inspired by his book. Of course, he would and did. And characteristic of his open-armed disregard for credentials, invited me to write not only more such poems for him but also this very essay you've just read.

Essay #3

A Foreword to Allan Hobson's *Godbrain*

(East Burke, VT: Allan Hobson, 2019)

A mind is merely the fullest process of a working brain. It is no more than what the brain *does*. Kill the brain and you have permanently wiped out the mind. Poof! This is one side of the ultimate point of everything you will read in this book. The other side, however, of equal consequence to whom we are as living minds, is the inescapable importance of the first-person *experience* of this material process. It is the private, untranslatably subjective *isness* of experiencing this brain in operation—the end result of a complex physical process that nevertheless remains stubbornly irreducible to those component parts of brain physiology that brought it into being. The main ambition of this book, therefore, is to recognize and appreciate *both* these aspects of a wholly physical process so that we may avoid succumbing to the seemingly instinctual desire to sacrifice one of them to the other in our attempt to understand *either*.

The philosophic position adopted toward our exploration in this book is something called “dual-aspect monism,” a way of seeing the world as being made solely of one substance—in this case of physical materiality—yet one in which we *observe* this physicality via two different properties of that same substance: the objective physical and the subjective mental. This “monist,” or one-substance approach, is in blatant contrast to the so-called “dualism” that has pervaded our

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culture (and many others) for centuries, especially since its most emphatic framing by René Descartes in the mid-17th century. (Those who wish to go straight to the source should read “Meditation VI: Concerning the Existence of Material Things, and the Real Distinction between Mind and Body,” which is the sixth and last of the distinguished French philosopher’s famous *Meditations of First Philosophy*, published in 1641.)

But it is important to recognize that Descartes was a respectful practicing Catholic, and his understanding of the world was, understandably, shaped and informed by Christian notions of an immaterial substance capable, somehow, of surviving the death of the physical body and taking with it into a more ethereal, eternal life all the best features of the body’s experience it had acquired while living.

Not enough was understood about the physiology of the brain in Descartes’ day to predict the rather sobering fact that in the mere probing or cutting of a live brain we can causally and necessarily change the thoughts, feelings, and “personality” in this seemingly intrinsic sense of self. And so, it would have been unlikely for him to question just *which* “I” might leave my body for that other world that is imagined by Christianity. Would it be that of my present state of brain physiology or rather the one found at the precise moment of my death, by which time I might have suffered the unintentional disabilities of brain lesions, tumors, trauma, viruses, or other changes to the mere flesh of my being? Because such a scientific perspective was not available to Descartes

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when he formulated his system known as “substance dualism,” he ended up envisioning a system based on the practical convenience of ignoring the whole business of how the brain actually *created* these thoughts, feelings, emotions, and various conscious states that comprise that same sense of “I” with which my body and its processes are identified.

Of course, the most important thing that must be overlooked in order for such a philosophic system to retain its necessary sense of coherence is, unfortunately, that very physical environment in which each thought is actually made. I refer to the chemistry, biology, physics, physiology, systems organization, etc., underlying, in strict adherence to the reciprocal interaction of these various laws, the very process on which conscious thought supervenes as an emergent property. For, we now know, unequivocally, that a thought is the outcome of a complex physical process involving the precise characteristics of, and relationships between, such various physical entities as nerves, neurotransmitter chemicals, electric impulses, and an elaborate organization of all this signaling into a meaningful system informed by both “bottom-up” *and* “top-down” processes. In other words, each thought is the necessary product of the physical environment of a brain in the context of a body in its world.

To take this end product we call a thought and remove it to a less sustaining environment, such as thin air, which we now know to be entirely devoid of neurons, neurotransmitters, and all the rest would

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involve ignoring *a lot* of essentials. Such an unlikely event can be envisioned only if we imagine the mind to be something *other than* what the brain *does*—perhaps some magical entity that lives (somehow) independent of all nourishment, like some ghost—one that is typically envisioned in the driver's seat of all this bodily machinery. Critics of this rather short-sighted view often refer to it as (among other things) “the ghost in the machine.”

The problem is that even now that we have uncovered such overwhelming evidence of the direct and inescapable relationship between the physical workings of the brain and all the features of consciousness created by it, most of us still find ourselves comfortable with thoughts informed, at least to some degree, by this unfortunate legacy of what is now called “Cartesian Dualism” (i.e., the [substance] dualism theory of Descartes). Yes, it seems as if this dualistic thinking, wherein an incorporeal spirit directs mechanical processes from a cockpit-like home theater in the brain, seems not only congenial to the very architecture of our brain but even difficult to escape. Indeed, it still informs much of our public policy touching on important aspects of our wellbeing—this despite its *complete* irrelevance to how things really work.

And this unhelpful legacy is kept alive in large measure due to the powerful influence of religious dogma, wherein scientific truths are obliged to take a back seat to that *unproved* authority of a purely speculative supreme intelligence presumed to have been the author of

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it all. Never mind the inconvenient additional fact that this supreme intelligence *itself* lacks, as does thin air, the requisite biological environment necessary for producing thought, supremely intelligent or otherwise. In other words, the mental acrobatics necessary toward the achievement of religious thinking in itself reinforces a sense of rightness about substance dualism.

Now, returning to that crucial question of the complex environment necessary to realize thought, it is worth observing that we humans spend an enormous amount of our time on earth making artifacts out of our thoughts toward the convenient storage, retrieval, revisiting, manipulation, and recommunication of these veritable instruction manuals for mental events. However, these artifacts we make are not thoughts, *per se*, any more than a drawing of, or a poem about, a tree is *really* a tree. Each time we open a book and peruse the symbols we find meaningfully ordered across its pages we are able to imitate in our own brain some reflection of this same state of organization that represents, again to varying degrees of precision, the thoughts of its author. But then, once we've closed the book and redirected our attention to unrelated business, it is safe to say those thoughts are no longer living entities, at least not until we have again endeavored to configure our brain circuitry sufficiently to recreate the live event of such a thought. Otherwise, these symbols remain mere recipes, as yet unrealized, for recreating that specific neural event.

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But this modern understanding of the physical relationship of body and thought was most presciently gleaned from within the rigorous argument of a philosophical system developed within only a generation or so of Descartes' death—this despite the still-lacking physiological knowledge that would have helped demonstrate how this relationship might work. This was achieved by a remarkable maverick of thought whose daring lack of deference to the dictates of religious dogma, to which Descartes had been so closely bound, was considered heretical and dangerous by his contemporaries. I refer to the rationalist metaphysical system conceived by Benedict de Spinoza, a Dutch philosopher of Sephardic Portuguese ancestry. Spinoza's magnum opus, entitled *Ethica, ordine geometrico demonstrata* (*Ethics, Demonstrated in Geometrical Order*) was published posthumously in 1677, the product of a rigorous Euclidian geometric argument of propositions and corollaries painstakingly derived from definitions and axioms. In the course of his audaciously independent metaphysical system, Spinoza was able to methodologically reject the whole substrate of Descartes' system that had alienated mind from body as well as God from God's creation. Spinoza achieved this thorough-going critique, not only of Descartes but also of nothing short of the entire Judeo-Christian understanding of man's place in God's world, all via an intrinsically pantheistic notion of God's immanence in the world, one in which God is defined *as* the natural world and not some transcendent entity creating and manipulating it from outside.

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Using the term *Deus sive Natura* (God or Nature), Spinoza identifies God as the very process of nature itself, the aggregate of physical laws and matter that comprise the universe – an entity he bravely envisioned to be wholly devoid of anthropomorphized qualities. This was not a God as judge, or authority figure, or even friend. Man could not expect his love returned, or favors bought, from such a God any more than one might behave as servile supplicant before the laws of physics or chemistry.

So, in place of the inevitably problematic separation of mind from body, as well as God from world, that remains Descartes' most pernicious legacy, Spinoza offered a single metaphysical substance of materiality admitting in turn infinite "attributes" (or properties of ontological correlation) comprising the whole of nature, which he calls "God," a totality that is perceptible to man through only two of these attributes: namely, material things and thought. This, Spinoza's vision, is, essentially, the metaphysical view now known as dual-aspect monism. And it is through the majestically elegant consistency sustained in such a view that we today can approach the brain-mind problem with the perspective in which brain and mind are given equal respect and, as such, no longer *necessarily* a problem. But just as importantly, it is a view that ultimately aspires to reconcile atheist and believer through a world in which *both* are automatically and necessarily correct.

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As viewed by Spinoza, the brain has conceived, finally, of a God that is essentially itself, one with its world and the creative forces of that world and, perhaps most importantly, a futile target of our demeaning servile obsequies. For, Spinoza's God is an objective *process*, intrinsically neither good nor bad, and absolutely incapable of interfering in our lives or producing miracles—activities that would turn upon the inherent contradiction of its very own laws. Hence, there is no need any longer for man to prostrate himself in fearful, superstitious worship of that totality to which he intrinsically belongs. Worship is irrelevant now, though understanding is not. Furthermore, Spinoza found the notion of belief in an afterlife of an immortal soul to be absurd, suggesting that our proper focus is not on what happens *after* death, but rather *before* it.

Together with Karl Friston, Allan Hobson has applied the theory of dual-aspect monism to sleep, dreams, *and* waking consciousness. Indeed, this book may be seen as an experimental attempt to utilize subjective experience as a way of testing this hypothesis. The bold effort is to regard subjective experience as awareness of brain function. This attempt is mounted against the fact that we are unaware of our brains and can only become aware of them by regarding our subjective experience as a brain function. The invitation to you, reader, is to examine your own subjective experience in terms of the theory and data presented here.

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Now, regardless of the serenity to be found in the wisdom of such a metaphysical system, belief in an afterlife is a perfectly understandable outcome of our inherited instinct to cling on to life at any cost. But being understandable doesn't make it rational. Religious dogma (with only a few arguable exceptions worldwide) aspires to clothe the nakedly delusionary irrationality of this notion—that of a soul surviving a body—in the convenient disregard of all that has been gained through careful scientific inquiry about the actual workings of our world. In fact, religious sensibility has evolved in us in such a way as to protect itself against the inconvenient truths unveiled by science with enormously successful protective mechanisms. Principal among these is the apparatus of dogma, a contrivance of “black box” authority wherein the mystery of nature's complexity elicits from us the attribution of some special moral virtue to those minds willing to ignore facts and trust intuitions. And where this proves insufficient, the biggest gun of all is then wheeled out: that of blasphemy taboo, wherein it is not only virtuous to believe flapdoodle in the face of persuasive evidence to the contrary, but it is outright immoral and, worse yet, *eminently punishable*, to do otherwise!

Religion has attempted in recent centuries to set a place for itself at the banquet table of science and to enjoy, for free, the fruits of all the painstaking open-minded inquiry discussed there. But because religious thinking tests *its* truths not on the basis of observable evidence, as does science, but rather on that of the low-hanging fruit of “revealed”

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(meaning *self*-proclaimed) authority, religion has insisted on being placed *at the head of the table*, the only appropriate seat, really, from where an imagined supreme intelligence might best oversee the very laws by which it is said itself to be conveniently unconstrained. So, despite the relative rarity of the superstitious among true scientists, those few anomalous representatives typically find room for their justification of clinging to the comforts of unearned authority via the convenient notion of God as a necessary foreman of all that has yet to be explained through open-minded inquiry. This sleight-of-thought maneuver provides sufficient room for the delusion of having it both ways: thinking scientifically while in the lab and irrationally all the rest of the time.

But though a life-long man of science, Allan Hobson is nevertheless keenly aware of the importance of other perspectives necessary toward living life to the fullest, such as those provided by creativity through the arts. It is obvious to him after a long lifetime of scientific inquiry that the arts provide other important lenses through which to meaningfully explore the world around us and, most importantly perhaps, ourselves. For, although Allan doesn't take seriously Keats's suggestion that pursuing the science of Newton's color spectrum threatens to unweave for us the poetry of rainbows, he does agree that there's far more to experiencing a rainbow than can be measured by atmospheric optics.

And it is precisely this point that brings us to the other side of the main premise of this book: namely, that the evolved architecture of the

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human brain is quite naturally responsive to exploring our world through the disciplines of both scientific inquiry *and* poetic understanding (as made available to us through such expressions as literature, visual art, music and, yes, mythology) and that the insights into human behavior offered by our study of religion in particular is significant. The most salient difference provided by the perspective of Allan's approach in this book, as compared with that provided by most religious thinking, may be seen in the primacy of the human brain in his hierarchy.

Yes, Allan argues, perhaps not surprisingly, that among the great achievements of the human brain is its creation of God. Indeed, the hosts of gods it has created worldwide over the past several thousand years speaks eloquently to the sophistication of the brain's creative force, given the huge impact these magnificent creations have had on the ways we've learned to live with one another amid the frightening mysteries of our world. He agrees with Sam Harris that science *can* meaningfully explore the deepest questions of human values and that these fields of inquiry are *not*, therefore, the necessary domain of religion. But this is not to say that he has no respect for the creative achievements of religion or in the vast cultural heritage that remains its most lasting legacy. Indeed, he believes we are the richer for these most unscientific modes of interpreting our world – provided, that is, they are not assigned privilege over the truths learned by science. That there is room in our brain for both is clearly evidenced by the inescapable fact

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that our brain has conceived of and developed both. *Godbrain*, therefore, is an attempt to appreciate the creative powers of the human brain one important step further than even those recognized through the study of the arts and sciences – namely, the creation of God.

Essay #4

**[An Excerpt from] an Essay on James Joyce's
*Finnegans Wake***

Preliminary Note: The following is an excerpt of the first four-plus pages of my essay, “Group drinkards maaks grope thinkards or how reads rotary” an (FW 312.31): *Finnegans Wake* and the Group Reading Experience,’ an essay composed in 1990 and published in John Harty, III, Editor, *James Joyce’s Finnegans Wake: A Casebook* (New York & London: Garland Publishers, Inc., 1991 [vol. 1003 of the Garland Reference Library of the Humanities]), being a book of essays on Joyce’s last novel celebrating the 50th anniversary of its publication. The essay may be found in its entirety on pp. 151-64 of *A Casebook*, which includes essays from such eminent Joyce scholars (e.g., Hugh Kenner, David Hayman, Bernard Benstock, etc.) as to make one wonder why a contribution was requested from *me*. The title of this essay is lifted directly from Joyce’s text on line 31 of p. 312 of *Finnegans Wake* (New York: Viking Press, 1939).

“Group drinkards maaks grope thinkards or how reads rotary” an (FW 312.31): *Finnegans Wake* and the Group Reading Experience.’

I am reading [*Finnegans Wake*] now, and, though I meet many allusions, the book is very high over my head. A friend here (a painter) and I often read it (or try to) together; and I, it is fair to say, am better than he, and lead him into many a laugh and into the midst of wander and wonderland. It is an amazing book; and hardly to be understood in a year, much less a day.

So wrote Sean O’Casey [it has been said, *though possibly erroneously*, I later learned] to James Joyce in May of 1939, within only a month of the publication of *Finnegans Wake*. And here we see in its infancy a tradition of reading

Essays #4: [An Excerpt from] an Essay on James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*—continued

Joyce's great last book that was gradually to be embraced the world over: the custom of reading *Finnegans Wake* communally.

The idea of sitting around in a group—be it of two or twenty—to read a work of prose fiction is perhaps an uncommon one, but a book that so stubbornly resists being read from any one perspective is probably one best read from a multitude of perspectives. And a good way of sustaining a plurality of views in the reading of *Finnegans Wake* is to read the book in a group.

One precedent for reading the *Wake* communally is the practice sometimes accorded to the reading of religious texts, namely group monastic readings of scripture in the Middle Ages. It may be appropriate that the profane work which probably comes closest to continuing this tradition is *Finnegans Wake*, a work apparently conceived of, modeled on, and developed as a kind of surrogate for the sacred scripture. The *Wake* is permeated with references to the world's great religious texts, and even identifies itself with a religious manuscript: *The Book of Kells*. James Atherton, in *The Books at the Wake*, points to Joyce's romantic conception of himself as artist-God as the very basis of *Finnegans Wake*.

There was a medieval theory that God composed two scriptures: the first was the universe which he created after having conceived the idea of it complete and flawless in his mind; the second was the Holy Bible. What Joyce is attempting in *Finnegans Wake* is nothing less than to create a third scripture, the sacred book of the night, revealing the microcosm which he had already conceived in *his* mind. And as the phenomenal universe is built upon certain

Essays #4: [An Excerpt from] an Essay on James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*—continued

fundamental laws which it is the task of science and philosophy to discover, so the microcosm of *Finnegans Wake* is constructed according to certain fundamental axioms for which Joyce is careful to provide clues, but which it is the task of his readers to discover for themselves.

Finnegans Wake is bigger than all our attempts to reduce it. Just when we think we have the key to some secret storeroom of *Wake* explication, we arrive only to find that it had been open for us all along, and its shelves lined with fresh copies of the *Wake*. Yet, many long-term readers find that their eyes do eventually adjust (somewhat) to the dark, and that their ears, too, have been sensitized by the climb up Joyce's tower of babble. Today, half a century after the publication of *Finnegans Wake*, it is not uncommon to find groups of readers convening on a regular basis in cities throughout the world—groups of academics and amateurs alike with no more of an agenda than to read aloud, ponder, discuss, and enjoy Joyce's great enigma.

The Philadelphia *Wake* Circle is an example of a community of readers that has allowed the demands of reading Joyce to subject us to the ritual of regular meetings. This group was begun by Richard Beckman [a Professor of English at Temple University] in the early 1970s and—allowing for a couple of interruptions—has been reading the *Wake* communally ever since. [Indeed, the group *still* meets.] However, the group has changed gradually through the years. Participants come and go, bringing and taking with them an eclectic range of expertise in the fields of literature, language, philosophy,

Essays #4: [An Excerpt from] an Essay on James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*—continued

history, music, and the visual arts. If we were to choose as our agenda the goal of never finishing the book, we would not be selecting a difficult one. All we would have to do is read the *Wake* from morning till night for the rest of our lives and we would easily not finish it. Even if we were to read it rapidly enough to re-arrive on page 3 every year or two, we would still find a new book before us each time in light of all that we have lived and learned (and forgotten) in the meanwhile. But at such a fast clip the landscape goes by us in a blur; and there are countless stones there waiting to be turned over.

Our group approach, therefore, has been that of a “close” reading, a term now meaning different things to different people but used here in its more traditional sense to suggest a slow, careful reading that would permit us to stop for what we stumble on. At a maintained cruising speed of about a half a page per three-hour session, we have allowed ourselves the opportunity for a word-by-word scrutiny that can often reveal much about the book’s overall design. One often finds the biggest concepts mirrored in the smallest details. Of course, the trouble with the world-in-a-grain-of-sand approach is the relatively small stretch of beach one has time to examine in an afternoon. And since the intricate architecture of the book emerges only gradually through repetition—while informing the reading of the smallest details all along—it might be ventured that anyone not planning on living beyond, say, a century might miss a great deal of the book’s special beauty. The practical solution, therefore, appears to be the augmentation of our close-up

Essays #4: [An Excerpt from] an Essay on James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*—continued

reading with that of the wide-angle variety on our own (that is, concurrently reading the book at two different speeds) so that we may ultimately attempt to keep one eye focused on the road while the other surveys the vast landscape before us.

I. “the beast of boredom, common sense” [James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (New York: Viking Press, 1939, 1958 with the author's corrections incorporated into the text; rpt. New York: Viking, 1960, page 292, line 28.)]

Before we discuss the problems inherent in group readings of *Finnegans Wake* it may be helpful to prepare by taking a brief look at some of the problems faced by a single reader of this book. After spending a third of our lives unconsciously exploring the strange terrain of sleep, what do we do now when we wake to find it in our reading material as well? How do we recapture, consciously, the frame of mind that safely steered us, nightly, past the wandering rocks of rational thought? We spent our childhood learning to give up the remnants of this consciousness in favor of a practical taste for facts and have consequently allowed the banal encumbrances of time, space, movement, gravity, and the belief in progress to blunt our senses.

Enter James Augustine Joyce, Jesuit-trained apostate, worshipful iconoclast, wordman, wordlover, drawer of words, who devoted his life to the invigoration of the English language before finally putting it to sleep. For, if the dark, metaphoric world of man's unconscious is ever to be surveyed in language, it is evidently not to be done with words of concrete, but with words as fluid and changeable as their subject. Under Joyce's direction, word becomes “woid” (FW 378.29) in an exhilarating

Essays #4: [An Excerpt from] an Essay on James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*—continued

assault on our complacent trust in words as factual correlation. No longer can we expect to see words as the sharp-edged blocks of graven images they largely have been for us before. Joyce put them to sleep for their relative resistance to an essential ingredient of the imagination: ambiguity. Michael Patrick Gillespie addresses Joyce's use of ambiguity quite succinctly:

To counteract the impulses of Enlightenment empiricism which still influence our response to experience, Joyce urges the acknowledgement and even the pursuit of ambiguity as a means of opening one's consciousness to the mystery inherent in art. Ultimately in *Finnegans Wake* the problem does not turn upon a resolution of contraries but upon a reconciliation with them.

Ambiguity is an essential aspect of the dreaming mind, both in sleep, and in the conscious imagination. We turn to sleep for what is probably our most effective release from the relentless, hard-edged confines of factual certainty. The ambiguity inherent in the condensation and displacement phenomena of the dreamwork provides an escape from the rigid particularity of conscious perception. We have consciously sought daytime entrance to this refuge via myth, art, and imagination; though even here we often find ourselves trapped in the tyrannical clutches of certainty. Consider how we search through notebooks, drafts, sketches, and letters for insights into a work of art, often finding less about the finished work of art there than about the notebooks, drafts, sketches, and letters.

Essays #4: [An Excerpt from] an Essay on James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*—continued

Understandably, it is rather disconcerting, after years of trained submission to the despotic authority of fact to read in *Finnegans Wake* what we have all nightly understood: that $1 + 1$ is sometimes 3. To read the *Wake*, therefore, we probably should learn first to unread a few thousand years of literature. Hugh Kenner aptly described for us our sleep at Joyce's *Wake* when he declared: "Joyce worked seventeen years to push [*Finnegans Wake*] away from 'meaning' adrift into language; nothing is gained by trying to push it back."

We can't say we weren't warned. We are probably given everything we need to know about the *Wake* right in the text itself. If the universe of *Finnegans Wake* operates according to its own principles (as any good universe should), it also comes complete with the owner's manual of operating instructions dispensed throughout its pages: "Thus the unfacts, did we possess them, are too imprecisely few to warrent our certitude" (*FW* 57.16-17); "What can't be coded can be decorded if an ear aye sieze what no eye ere grieved for (*FW* 482.34-36). Such suggestions should be expected in a book predicated on the "gossiple" (*FW* 38.23) truth, where the fine line between the grapevine and the history book is usually blurred or absent. Conversely, however, we are warned against reading sheer nonsense out of this nonsense. Just when we think we're looking at a mere riot of blots and blurs and bars and balls and hoops and wriggles we read, "No, so holm me Petault, it is not a miseffectual whyacinthinous riot of blots and blurs and bars and balls

Essays #4: [An Excerpt from] an Essay on James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*—continued

and hoops and wriggles and juxtaposed jottings linked by spurts of speed: it only looks as like it as damn it" (FW 118.28-31).

Anyone who has followed Joyce through the *Ulysses* episodes of "Cyclops," "Nausicaa," and "Eumaeus" knows better than to trust implicitly the objectivity and accuracy of the narrational voice. But, in our attempts to see through their prejudices and incompetence, we run the risk of holding out for an ideally knowable ("real") story behind the language of its presentation, or, in other words, of looking for a different book beneath its pages

This dilemma is compounded ten-fold in *Finnegans Wake*, where we don't even usually know who's doing the talking, or to whom, or about whom (let alone what is being said!). In a book where a five-member suburban Dublin family permutates into endless social configurations encompassing all of mankind, and where the texture appears modeled on the sound (and consequence) of gossip, it might be safe to conclude that *Finnegans Wake* is the one book that cannot (must not) allow clear traditional distinctions between the roles of the characters, the reader, and the writer. Therefore, the question of how much authority we should invest in these supposed authorial reader-promptings will presumably remain debatable.

In light of the infamous reading dangers inherent in Joyce's "worldrenowned" (FW 341.19) "farced epistol to the hibruws" (FW 228.33-34), we may be tempted to ask the obvious question: just how much abuse is a reader expected to endure? The answer to this question

Essays #4: [An Excerpt from] an Essay on James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*—continued

is probably to be found in a closer examination of the question. Is there any reason to insist that Joyce would have really envisioned such a book being read by a single reader? Have you ever been the sole participant at a wake? Would not a sole participant at a wake be the corpse itself? In the looking glass world of Wakean identity we might just as well assume that the reader is the dreamer who dreams of the writer dreaming our wake.

A quick look at the history of *Finnegans Wake* from its evolution as *Work in Progress* through the publication and critical reception of the finished work might provide a clue as to just how many people constitute a reader of a text like this. Let us begin with the creator himself. Joyce masterminded a group effort to defend *Work in Progress* with the publication of *Our Exagmination round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress*. This book of essays was published in May 1929, long before any one reader on his or her own could have been expected to digest the serially-published segments of the then unfinished work. Evidently predicated on the belief in the power of numbers, this group of twelve “disciples” was directed by Joyce like a team of specialists attacking a newly discovered scientific phenomenon and might enjoy a distinction as the primal ancestor of our modern *Finnegans Wake* reading groups. That he paid them little tribute in the finished work—“Imagine the twelve deaferended dumbbawls of the howl abovebeugled to the continuation through regeneration of the urutteration of the word in pregress” (FW 284.18-22)—should not

Essays #4: [An Excerpt from] an Essay on James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*—continued

discourage us from divining Joyce's approval of the group effort method. That was perhaps just his way of saying thank you.

Just a couple of months after the publication of *Our Exagmination*, Joyce gave another hint of a company policy toward the *Wake* when he suggested that the book might need to be finished by someone else. His eyesight quickly diminishing along with the patience of his readers, a dispirited Joyce, still obsessed with the importance of his mission, formally proposed that his countryman James Stephens oversee completion of the book if and when it became necessary. As we know, it didn't, but Joyce even went so far as to contemplate the aesthetic value of their combined initials, JJ and S, under the title of the book. Such a remarkable gesture might suggest a belief in the author as medium rather than creator—where the writer's job is only to make visible a work that was here among us all along.

Already by 1940—only a year after the *Wake's* publication—there emerged an example of the *Finnegans Wake* reading group as we know it today when William York Tindall of Columbia University gathered together a small group of graduated students to pursue the *Wake*. Although Tindall eventually took up reading the book on his own as well as in the group, he believed that the pooled resources of varied learning and languages would go further than any one individual might. And nearly thirty years later, in the introduction to his 1969 *A Reader's Guide to Finnegans Wake*, Tindall acknowledged his

Essays #4: [An Excerpt from] an Essay on James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*—continued

indebtedness to this group effort for much of what he learned about the book, and eventually published....

[**Note:** See pp. 155-64 of the above-cited *Casebook* published by Garland, for the remainder of this essay.]

Essay #5

A Concise Plot Summary of James Joyce's *Ulysses*

Preliminary Note: The following plot summary was written in 1996 for Philadelphia's Rosenbach Museum & Library (which houses the only complete autograph/holograph manuscript of this novel) on the occasion of "Bloomsday 1996" and first published by the Rosenbach in their *Bloomsday, Schedule of Events* booklet made available during the day-long celebration of the 92nd anniversary of the day on which Leopold Bloom, protagonist of *Ulysses*, prevailed in his epic journey through Dublin on June 16, 1904. I was one of the founding coordinators* of this great Philadelphia tradition in which Delancey Street, Philadelphia is cordoned off from automobile traffic in order enable temporary seating in the street in front of the steps of the Rosenbach Museum, where readings from *Ulysses* are given by various local celebrities and enthusiasts throughout the day in concert with ongoing exhibitions, performances, and workshops. (*Philadelphia's "Bloomsday" was first publicly observed as such in 1992, and I became an active member of the museum's Bloomsday Committee the following year. "Bloomsday" has been celebrated since soon after *Ulysses* was first published [1922], first in Dublin [as early as "Bloom's Day" in 1924] and now all over the world. The Rosenbach manuscript,

Essays #5: *A Concise Plot Summary of James Joyce's Ulysses* – continued

one of the principal treasures of this fine museum, is entirely in Joyce's hand, though it is not *consistently* the immediate source of the typescript for the first published edition [Paris: Shakespeare & Co., 1922].

As mentioned above, I wrote the above plot summary specifically for use by the Rosenbach Museum for publication in their Bloomsday brochure of 1996. It was printed there under my name and was similarly used annually since then. However, a few years ago it came to my attention that my name was no longer published as the author of the piece and had been replaced, erroneously, with that of a certain Neil Smith (at least in so far as it appeared on BBC News Online). So, on May 18, 2021, I contacted the Rosenbach's current Director, Kelsey Bates, and brought this error to her attention and asked that this misattribution be corrected, restoring sole credit to its rightful author, me. I was assured by Ms. Bates that the mistake would be immediately emended and that it appeared to have been an innocent mistake on the part of a staff member who seems not to have known about the original booklet in their files and probably found the attribution they thought they were looking for via a quick google search. And indeed, a look at BBC News Online regarding this issue suggests such to be a likely scenario, as the plot summary found there bears no resemblance at all with mine anymore.

Citations in this summary refer to the 1986 Random House edition.

Part I: The Telemachiad (The Book of Telemachus)

[Episode 1.] Telemachus (pp. 3-19) 8:00 a.m., at the Martello tower at Sandycove (on the shore of Dublin Bay, seven miles southeast of the center of Dublin).

Stephen Dedalus, in part a self-portrait of the author, has just returned to Ireland from his studies in Paris (to which he was headed at the end

Essays #5: *A Concise Plot Summary of James Joyce's Ulysses*—continued

of Joyce's preceding work, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*). He shares lodgings with a medical student, Buck Mulligan, in the Martello tower at Sandycove, and the book opens with a rooftop exchange between Stephen and the irreverent Mulligan. Stephen has been kept awake by the nighttime ravings of Mulligan's friend Haines, an Englishman with bad dreams, and wants to know when the latter is leaving. He also complains to Mulligan about his (Mulligan's) distasteful comment on the recent death of Stephen's mother. The two then go downstairs for breakfast with Haines. They leave the tower together for the swimming hole, where Mulligan, like a good usurper, asks the work-bound Stephen for his key and some money and sets a date for them to meet at half-past noon (to spend more of the latter's earnings).

2. Nestor (pp. 20-30) 10:00 a.m., at Mr. Deasy's school for Protestant boys in the Dublin suburb of Dalkey.

We find Stephen at work attempting, with little optimism or success, to teach a history class. As the apathetic and unruly bunch quickly disperses for hockey, a lone lingerer named Sargent makes his cautious way to the teacher's desk for help with his arithmetic, and Stephen sees in the boy a pathetic portrait of his own youth. Then Stephen suffers his turn as pupil, receiving along with his salary, a tedious lecture from the

Essays #5: *A Concise Plot Summary of James Joyce's Ulysses*—continued

pompous Mr. Deasy who then enlists Stephen's help in getting a tedious letter of his published in the press.

3. Proteus (pp. 31-42) 11:00 a.m. at Sandymount Strand (the beach near the mouth of the river Liffey).

Stephen, alone and with time on his hands before his assignation with his roommates to squander his salary Deasy just instructed him to save, strolls the beach past his maternal uncle's house while meditating upon philosophic issues of perception, time, and change, as well as upon more earthly considerations touching family, peers, erotic fantasies, and the composition of a few lines of bad verse.

Part II: *The Odyssey* (The Wanderings of Ulysses)

4. Calypso (pp. 45-57) 8:00 a.m., at Leopold and Molly Bloom's house at 7 Eccles Street, Dublin.

We finally meet Odysseus himself in his modern manifestation as Leopold Bloom, an endearing unheroic 38-year-old Dublin-born Jew of Hungarian ancestry who canvasses newspaper advertisements for a living. We see him first at home and follow him on his domestic morning chores buying himself a kidney at the butcher's, delivering to his wife Molly a breakfast in bed with the morning mail (including, he notices, a note from her impresario Blazes Boylan, with whom she will

Essays #5: *A Concise Plot Summary of James Joyce's Ulysses*—continued

have a romantic rendezvous at the house later in the day). Back down in the kitchen he reads a letter from their daughter Milly, then visits the outhouse in great detail before finally embarking upon his long-day's wandering through the city on business, pleasure, respectful attendance of Dignam's funeral, and the pursuit of not being at home when his wife's lover calls.

5. Lotus-Eaters (pp. 58-71) 10:00 a.m., at various spots including Sir John Rogerson's Quay, Westland Row post office, and Leinster Street baths.

Bloom visits the post office under his pseudonym Henry Flower to pick up a letter from his sentimentally amorous pen pal "Martha Clifford." On his way to read the letter he bumps into the tiresome McCoy, whose conversation he suffers long enough to indulge himself in a pleasant voyeuristic distraction concerning an attractive woman boarding a carriage across from them. McCoy notices Bloom's mourning attire and learns of Paddy Dignam's funeral, asking Bloom to put his name down as having attended. McCoy out of the way, Bloom reads the letter, then allows himself a few minutes' repose in All Hallows church where, watching the service, he muses upon religion to humorous ironic effect. On his way out, Bloom decides to make use of the little time left before the funeral to get Molly's lotion from the chemist. He buys a bar of soap for himself and walks toward the baths. He is interrupted by Lyons, who asks to see Bloom's newspaper to look up a horse running that day.

Essays #5: *A Concise Plot Summary of James Joyce's Ulysses*—continued

Lyons mistakes Bloom's offer to give him the paper—"I was going to throw it away"—as a tip on the "dark horse" *Throwaway*.

6. Hades (pp. 72-95) 11:00 a.m., at Prospect Cemetery in Glasnevin, north of Dublin.

Bloom's odyssey through Dublin continues now by carriage (accompanied by Cunningham, Power, and Stephen's father Simon Dedalus) to the cemetery to attend Dignam's funeral. Hynes the reporter buttonholes Bloom about the identity of a mystery man wearing a Mackintosh coat. Death is everywhere in this episode, explored from various perspectives via Bloom's rambling, often fumbling, ruminations on the nuts and bolts of spiritual beliefs and rites, and of decomposition and renewal.

7. Aeolus (pp. 96-123) 12:00 noon, at the newspaper offices of the Freeman's Journal (and the Evening Telegraph), the vicinity of the General Post Office, and Nelson's Pillar.

In this humorous study of hot air, we discover Bloom pursuing a few minutes of actual work as he visits the newspaper to negotiate an ad for a client (the grocery Keyes). The editor's office is bustling with the confabulation among a changing consortium of hangers-on discussing the history of oration, rhetoric, and journalism. Simon Dedalus leaves and is replaced by Stephen (with Deasy's letter) who recites his "Parable

Essays #5: *A Concise Plot Summary of James Joyce's Ulysses*—continued

of the Plums.” Crawford, impatient for a drink, waves Bloom off, describing to him the precise location of his royal Irish anatomy the latter’s client Keyes may kiss.

8. Lestrygonians (pp. 124-150) 1:00 p.m., at Davy Byrne’s Pub and the National Library.

The subject of food and eating is explored here with the detailed attention afforded death and decomposition two episodes ago. We follow Bloom through a panoply of lunchtime noises and smells and their associations in search of an aesthetically satisfying bite. Along the way, he bumps into Josie Breen, who updates him on the unpleasant status of her own life with her lunatic husband. Bloom also learns from her about Mina Purefoy, who’s been in the maternity hospital three days already, and demonstrates his characteristic empathy. Feeling relaxed and satisfied from a cheese sandwich and glass of burgundy at Davy Byrne’s, he takes a walk, helps a blind man cross the street, and ducks into the National Gallery (to avoid bumping into his wife’s prospective lover).

9. Scylla and Charybdis (pp. 151-179) 2:00 p.m., at the National Library.

Meanwhile, not far from Bloom, we find Stephen at the National Library, hard at work selling his Hamlet theory to another hardworking group of literati. Shakespeare, it is suggested, was father not merely of

Essays #5: *A Concise Plot Summary of James Joyce's Ulysses*—continued

his own children but of his own grandfather, a ghostly father of all his race. Stephen sees Shakespeare's work, pervaded as it is by the themes of usurpation, adultery and exile, as an art born from the anguish of impotence. The quasi-Socratic dialogue, pitting Aristotle (Stephen) against his teacher Plato (the mystic A. E. Russell), is interrupted by the spirited arrival of the profane Mulligan, who has just come through the Museum where he noticed Bloom.

10. Wandering Rocks (pp. 180-209) 3:00 p.m., along the streets of Dublin.

This episode comprises nineteen separate passages, each a short poetic sketch of a scene or event happening somewhere in Dublin. Some of these episodes, though seemingly unrelated, appear to be happening simultaneously, affording the reader the sense of a wide-angle lens through which the whole city may be viewed. This unification of disparate elements is effected the more tellingly by the culminating scene, wherein a viceregal procession is depicted as observed by many of the characters individually portrayed.

11. Sirens (pp. 210-239) About 4:00 p.m., at The Concert Room (saloon at the Ormond Hotel).

Musical logic dictates the structure, sense, and exhilaration of this episode, which begins with an overture (composed, as in traditional

Essays #5: *A Concise Plot Summary of James Joyce's Ulysses*—continued

opera, from themes, motifs, and highlights of the action to come) and proceeds through a fugal handling of voices, ideas, taps of a blind man's cane, and nostalgic wisps of sentimental song. We follow Bloom into the Ormond Bar where he witnesses Boylan flirting with the Sirens (the seductive barmaids Miss Douce and Miss Kennedy) before departing for his conquest of our hero's wife. Bloom's impotence to intervene and prevent his cuckoldry, together with his fascination with his adversary, skillfully maintains a subtle but pervasive tension and a haunting poignance.

12. Cyclops (pp. 240-283) 5:00 p.m., at Barney Kiernan's pub.

One of the funniest chapters of a supremely funny book, "Cyclops" maintains its ironic humor with the help of a thoroughly unreliable narrator—a bitter, petty barfly equipped with a sardonic outlook and an exquisite sense for the cliché. The "I" narrator's account is interrupted by the voice of another narrator—one countering "I"'s vigorous deflations with equally preposterous inflations (in the form of amusing descriptions of Rabelaisian proportions). Among those so described is "the citizen," a worn-out patriotic bigot in an eye-patch who plays Polyphemus to Bloom's Odysseus. Jewish Bloom finds himself in unwelcome territory in this drunken den of nationalist bigotry. Distracted over the scene he imagines (correctly) to be transpiring at his home, Bloom allows himself to be drawn into an argument with the anti-Semitic "citizen." Even Bloom's very *presence* in

Essays #5: *A Concise Plot Summary of James Joyce's Ulysses*—continued

the pub is misunderstood. He has come to meet Cunningham so that the two of them can visit Dignam's widow with an offer of help; yet he is perceived as having come only to collect his winnings on *Throwaway*. Finally, when Bloom fails to pick up a round of drinks, the atmosphere of suspicion about him ignites into a confrontation over nationalism and intolerance given in comically cosmic dimensions, and our hero is whisked away from catastrophe by Cunningham "like a shot off a shovel."

13. Nausicaa (pp. 248-313) 8:00 a.m., at the rocks on Sandymount Strand.

We return to the beach that served as stage for Stephen's earlier musings and find Bloom there pondering *his* perception (markedly less theoretical) of young Gerty MacDowell and her underwear. Even less concerned with philosophy is Gerty, who gleans she is the object of a man's desire and happens to be quite busy living up to her objectification. When her group runs off in pursuit of the nearby fireworks display, she stays behind, soaking up the male gaze and feeding it with more and more view of leg until the exploding Roman candles overhead mimic Bloom's ejaculation. Meanwhile, anthem-like strains of organ and men's voices are heard emanating from a nearby church to remind us there is a temperance retreat in progress. When Gerty gets up from the rock and lamely limps away, we are left with Bloom alone on the dim-lit beach in a guilt-tainted postmasturbatory

Essays #5: *A Concise Plot Summary of James Joyce's Ulysses*—continued

reverie, reflecting on women and sexuality with his characteristic concreteness, providing a complementary foil to Gerty's ruminations on the subject.

14. Oxen of the Sun (pp. 314-349) 10:00 p.m., at the National Maternity Hospital, Holles Street.

Bloom continues his circuitous avoidance of home, hearth, and Blazes Boylan by paying a call on Mina Purefoy, whom he knows to be experiencing a difficult birth. At the hospital he runs into a group of young carousers including Stephen, who happens to be avoiding *his* homecoming as well on account of his own problem with usurpers. Bloom once again finds himself to be an outsider looking in on an unwelcoming society. His concern for the well-being of his surrogate (spiritual) son, Stephen, prompts him to linger on well past the delivery of the baby until the doctor is free to leave with the gang for the nearest pub. The language in which the episode lives creates a masterful portrait of the English language itself, evolving as it does from the highly convoluted and ponderous Latinate and Saxon stages through the various centuries of signature literary styles to the jargon-riddled commercial babble of modernity, perhaps the worse for wear with the help of an escalating rate of intoxication.

15. Circe (pp. 350-497) 12:00 midnight, at Bella Cohen's Brothel, Tyrone Street (in the red-light district Joyce called "nighttown").

Essays #5: *A Concise Plot Summary of James Joyce's Ulysses*—continued

In keeping with the late hour, high blood alcohol level, and magical powers of Homer's Circe, this episode is expressed largely in hallucinatory manner that invites comparison with the metaphoric power of dream logic. Bloom and Stephen move freely in and out of a sorceress' world, where personages and fears from their recent and distant pasts are made manifest to them in a seamless process of metamorphosis, and put down on the page in dramatic form, replete with stage directions. Stephen heads for the red-light district followed by Bloom, who is concerned in a fatherly way over Stephen's well-being. In the house of Bella Cohen, Bloom flirts with Zoe, falls under the spell of the whoremistress Bella, and keeps watch over Stephen who, after a traumatic hallucinatory visit from his deceased mother, attempts to break her hold on his psyche by smashing his walking stick against Bella's chandelier. Bloom pays Bella for the damage and follows Stephen into the street. Stephen is punched by a British soldier unimpressed by Stephen's rhetorical skills, and Bloom protects the unconscious recipient of that punch so that the latter might avoid falling into the custody of the police. The episode (and with it, Part II, the "Odyssey" proper) ends poignantly with Bloom's vision of his own son Rudy (who had died eleven years ago at the age of eleven days) as he might have been in life, now eleven. By associating Rudy with Stephen at this point, the image powerfully reinforces the book's undercurrent theme of father and son in search of each other.

Essays #5: *A Concise Plot Summary of James Joyce's Ulysses*—continued

Part III: Nostos (The Homecoming of Ulysses)

16. Eumaeus (pp. 501-543) 1:00 a.m., at the cabman's coffeehouse shelter beneath the Loop Line bridge.

Bloom escorts the revived Stephen to a nearby cabman's shelter in hopes of sobering the young man up and bringing him home to Eccles Street for a good night's sleep. The shelter is run by a reputed ex-Invincible known as "Skin-the-Goat," whose clientele are being entertained by the tattoos and tall tales of a sailor named Murphy, just back with a fresh batch of rare exploits on the ship Stephen watched that morning from the strand. Bloom's best efforts at communication with his newfound spiritual son are met with certain disappointments, beautifully emphasized by the episode's narrative technique, a prose style so hopelessly laden with insubordinate clauses, derelict predicates, tireless wandering constructions, and delicious clichés that the reader yearns for bedtime more keenly than do the protagonists. Nevertheless, our hero *is* triumphant in his mission, and eventually leads the young bard through the vicissitudes of city life and tired language to safe harbor at Eccles Street.

17. Ithaca (pp. 544-607) 2:00 a.m., at Bloom's house (same as 4).

Bloom remembers he had forgotten to remember to take his key. Through the bird's-eye vantage afforded by a loftily impersonal third-person narrative, we watch Bloom climb over the railing and into the

Essays #5: *A Concise Plot Summary of James Joyce's Ulysses*—continued

house to receive Stephen for a friendly cup of cocoa and conversation, a refused offer to stay the night, and a cordial parting urination together beneath the stars. After Stephen leaves, Bloom finds his way to bed past rearranged furniture, remembrances of his past life with his adulterous wife, and crumbs from the jar of potted meat brought that afternoon by the usurper of his conjugal bed. Brushing away his predecessor's crumbs, the returning hero climbs into bed, head to his wife's feet, boldly orders himself an unprecedented breakfast in bed (as we learn in the next chapter), metaphorically vanquishes an imagined host of her suitors, and then plants a kiss on her plump behind before his embarkation for the Kingdom of Hypnos down into a tiny blot of unconsciousness in the space of a dot on the page.

18. Penelope (pp. 608-644) Probably 3:00 or 4:00 a.m. (though unspecified).

The world is Molly's now; rather, Molly is the world now, and through the massive, ever-shifting sea of liquid prose that constitutes her monologue, we explore the yet-unseen sides of things limned throughout the book from other, largely male, perspectives. Washing up on shore from this freely-flowing tide of words (eight unpunctuated sentences totaling some nearly sixteen-hundred lines) are countless gems of insight into the psyche of Molly, Woman, and the world. Beginning with her surprise over Bloom's breakfast order and some random remembrances of life with her husband, she proceeds in reverie

Essays #5: *A Concise Plot Summary of James Joyce's Ulysses*—continued

over her recent tryst, before seeing it in the context of her past future life. Molly's review of her marriage and family, and before that her childhood on Gibraltar, gives way by turns to amusing ambivalent appraisals of men and women, as well as flights of romantic curiosity about younger men, like Stephen, before building to a great peroration of sustained lyrical sweep in affirmation of the pervasive power of love, of the reality of loss, and, yes, of her ultimate acceptance of the man she married (or at least the man he *was* when she married him). Yes.

Essay #6

Kidd vs. Gabler vs. Ulysses

An Article Covering the Scholarship Debate Incited by the Publication of the *Critical and Synoptic Edition* of James Joyce's *Ulysses* by the German textual scholar Hans Walter Gabler.

Preliminary Note: I wrote this article in 1989 on a flight back to Philadelphia after attending the Third Annual Miami James Joyce Birthday Conference at the University of Miami, Coral Gables, FL. That year's conference had been devoted entirely to the incendiary debate sparked among Joyce scholars around the world by the above 3-volume edition of *Ulysses* published in 1984. Dramatically speaking, the highlight of this conference was the much-anticipated debate between Professor Gabler and his chief critic Professor John Kidd. Upon arrival home, I immediately submitted my manuscript to Bernard Benstock, then Editor of the *James Joyce Literary*

Essays #6: *Kidd vs. Gabler vs. Ulysses*—continued

Supplement (an international scholarly journal in newspaper format dedicated to reviewing all books about or related to James Joyce and Joyce-related subjects and published by the University of Miami). It was published in its entirety on the penultimate page (p. 23) in Vol. 3 (Fall 1989). As will be immediately discernable, the style of my review of this debate is borrowed from the unnamed and oh-so-unreliable narrator of the “Cyclops” episode of *Ulysses* (the novel’s 12th episode, pages 240-283 in the Random House edition) — this for no better reason than what I saw to be the appropriateness of its sardonically ironic tone in describing an event that is best described, metaphorically at least, as a much-anticipated boxing match.

Kidd vs. Gabler vs. Ulysses

I was just passing the time of day with Mike O’Shea at the corner of 33rd & Chestnut there and be damned if he didn’t shove a flyer into my eye about some big bloody showdown in Miami. It said, “Gabler meets The Kidd, live!” What’s the lay? Says I. No lay about it, says Mike. They’re expecting The Kidd to show up this time...along with those bloody long-promised corrections. Yikes, Mike, says I. I’m in no dire need of a tan just now, but do ya know me to go and pass up a major train wreck? Hold me a seat whiles I just go kiss the wife goodbye, says I. So I’m off in a flash to the land of the world’s most understaffed Joyce department (where even the head has to supplement his income with fishing).

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A most interesting discussion took place in the ancient hall of Brockway, near Richter Library, U. of M., C.G., FL., under the auspices of the McBostocks, on the revival of the ancient Germanic science of

Essays #6: *Kidd vs. Gabler vs. Ulysses*—continued

Critico-Synoptico editing and the development of the race for editorship. After an instructive discourse by the chairman, a magnificent oration eloquently and forcibly expressed, a most interesting and instructive discussion of the usual high Miami standard of excellence ensued as to the desirability of the revivability of the ancient 1984 left-right games of our Panteutonic editors. The well-known and highly respected worker in the cause of our old new edition, Herr Doktor Hans Walter Gabler, sang to the fashionable international world of right witty scholars of the fifty-year tradition of Cherman editing, emphasizing process over product, of penetrating behind the text to obtain the archetypal text, of how no such manuscript for his edition exists, but that all of *Ulysses* does exist in Joyce's hand, of how the "inner steps" (typists, typesetters, etc.) impinge upon Joyce's subsequent additions and subtractions, leaving Joyce to work with a text that is partially not his, and how his goal was the text Joyce wanted rather than got, etc., etc., etc.

So, there we are with dry mouths and wet brows waiting for the foreigner to finish telling us what all he's gone and done to our beloved book when what does he go and do to add insult to injury but pass the mike down along enemy lines to Wolfhardt Steppe. Well, this guy takes to defending the cause (whose side did you think he'd be on with an accent like that?), and gives us an example from our own beloved "Lestrygonians" where Bloom thinks about the priests with no families to "keep" and tries to insinuate that Joyce was unclear about the word

Essays #6: *Kidd vs. Gabler vs. Ulysses*—continued

in his world-famous manuscript (imagine!) and superimposed an *f* on the *k* of keep and a *d* over the *p*, allowing readings of keed, feeb, feep...or even keep. (I could go on, but I think you get my drift.) Meanwhile, who else do you think is sitting there on this distinguished panel just staring out into space without a peep until now but Clive Hart, the one who wrote the book on S & M. [Clive Hart, *Structure and Motif in Finnegans Wake* (London: Faber & Faber, 1962), hence "S & M..."] So of course he was only waiting for the wink of the word and he starts gassing out about how the main issues here are the concepts, not the emendations, and how Joyce's notional text in his head was different from the one on the page, and how we could walk all over Dublin if we want, looking for the "Royal Canal," but that Joyce called it (the Grand Canal) "Royal" on account of the Vice Regal cavalcade riding over it, and how the James Joyce that was careless enough to leave so many loose ends was the man who wrote *Ulysses* and if he were different he woulda written a different book (Gob, he's not as green as he's cabbagelooking!).

Well, wouldn't you know it when old Garble Text gets his chance he starts all confused mucking it up with an example of when Boylan orders fruit to be sent to Molly he's described "eying" the peaches, but that Joyce got back "ying" on the typescript from which he later derived "young." Gob, he would've gone on till dinner had not that Hart fellow stated on his own behalf (and the behalf of the Joyce Estate, the quality, and the sensible people of this world) that the real problem with the '84 edition, don't ya see, is not the left page, but the right, and that he (they,

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we, etc.) has nothing against how he has shown the process, but the product itself. Well, that's debatable as far as I'm concerned, but the guy really did make some sense when he told the foreigner, point blank, that it's what Joyce DID and not what he INTENDED that interests him (us). Gob, there's many a true word spoken in jest.

Then Arnold Goldman has to go butting in about "the author's expectations of the editor and publisher" as in the case of Fitzgerald, and how Hart's equation of Joyce's haphazard working method with the book of 1922 itself is unacceptable to him, and so on and so forth. (Arrah, sit down on the parliamentary side of your arse for Christ's sake and don't be making a public exhibition of yourself!)

Well, thank the Lord when we were delivered from the views of Mr. count-it-on-your-fingers by Ms. "Louisa Taylor of California" who justly inquired didn't anybody ever hear of the Rosetta Stone and the Rose of Cast Steel and hieroglyphics, etc., until our Swiss Guard of the Z.I.P. (Zurich Irrelevance Patrol) [referring to the much-admired Professor Fritz Senn, Founder and Director of the James Joyce Foundation, Zurich]) intervened in the nick of time and ordered her put on ice till Saturday's open discussion panel. Jesus, I had to laugh at the man's sense of proportion!

We all got 15 minutes of hard response till the next round (Gabler vs. The Kidd), so I just went round the back of the hall to pumpship and...well, when I got back they were at it dingdong: There was old lardy-face John Kidd (be a corporal work of mercy if someone'd lop the

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second d off his name so you wouldn't have to hunt around for an appropriate nickname!) up there havin' a great confab with himself, waiting for what the chair would drop in the way of an opportunity to dust the floor with old Garble Text. And you'd think he was up there all by his lonesome for all anybody else got a chance to say "uhh" edgewise, the bloody allegator, making allegations about how foreigners is the cause of all our editorial problems, and how old Garbler pretends we don't understand Cherman editing when he himself doesn't even edit like a real Mensch, and that if he did he'd a shown us the complete record of variants rather than a select few, and how Garble neglects seven different typesettings of *Ulysses* and how old Garble Text's errors are a new kind of error: one indigenous to the computer (Jesus, I had to laugh about how he came out with that one!), and how in 2,000 places the foreigner follows editions with no authorial intent visible, and goes inserting 60 dots Joyce didn't write while removing 60 more Joyce saw added and never removed, and how old Garbled Text has yet to answer any of these challenges (Gob, there's bloody sight more pox than pax about that boyo, and make no mistake!) and on and on about the other 19,999 bloody errors he has counted in that lardy-faced "study" of his he's been promising us for how many years now "if only anybody'd read it." Hoho begob, says I to myself says I: Why don't you go and publish the damn thing first and maybe we'll take a peek at it, for crying out loud!

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The figure seated on a smallish bridge chair at the end of the stage was that of a frankeyed redhaired shaggybearded extremely wide-mouthed hero. His mouth was so wide that when he smiled, the corners of it grazed the cheeks of the panelists flanking him. And on the table before him sat a great tome hitherto unseen by mortal eyes. Between its great jewelled bronzed covers were bound several tons of paper of tissue thinness, each printed microscopically with a continuous list of corrections the hero had made to the visiting dignitary's work. During the course of the great struggle that ensued upon that stage he would wield this might book (locked shut to protect the mortal public's eyes) high overhead while a sea of former unbelievers swooned beneath its jewelled glare.

So, meanwhile, I'm there looking over at Garbled across the table there from the Kid, and he's got a face on him as long as a late breakfast, looking like he's waiting for divine intervention or something to come down and edit the Kid from the face of the earth or something. Gob, you should of seen him! And then we hear that the true count of the Kid's corrections to the '84 edition is 20,000, and I'm thinking to myself: "sure, if you're counting each dialogue dash to be moved back to the margin and every line and chapter number to be removed too! (There's no one as blind as the fellow that won't see, if you know what I mean.) Well, when they go and get the Kid shut up long enough to pass the mike back to the German front, chief aid Steppe's noble defense was rudely interrupted in about 20 seconds or under by an impatient little Kid with

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his famous lardy “study” tucked under his arm, loudly claiming foul to the chairman for letting the defendant’s “computer man” answer the poisoned arrows aimed solely at the doomed master himself. (It’d be an act of God to take hold of a fellow like that and throw him in the bloody hotel pool, so it would.) So, while he has our attention, he tells us all the dirt about the 12 erasures in the Rosenbach pages of Nestor that don’t show up in facsimile and which therefore escape Garbler’s notice, showing he didn’t check all the originals he claims he did, and about how Garbler’s “level A” is nothing but some cards and notes from Joyce to the typists and typesetters, not the holographs he calls it, and how Garble Text’s left page doesn’t show the italics of the *Little Review*, and about the other “love” passage in which Steve’s mom broaches the subject goes unnoticed but shows how unhappy Joyce was with the use of the first occurrence in “Scylla and Charibdis,” and the 100 corrections Garbled took mysteriously from the 1932 Hamburg edition without any explanation, and more about “my study, my study, my study” till you just wanted to puke or at least see this bloody study for yourself. (Gob, want a small fortune to keep him with a working microphone!)

Well, seeing Herr Up-the-creeek was looking a bit tired, good old Zen master Seen brightens up the tone of things a bit by telling him he’s the victim of his own rigid system (not the kind of thing you go around telling Germans) and rousing a nod of consent from the victim, and how he’s gone and attempted to clean up a consciously flawed universe where world and word are eternally confused. And then, as if things

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weren't getting bleak enough, out he comes warning that passive authorization becomes active confirmation, and so forth and so on. Thinking he needs a little help, old have-a-heart Hart adds a few more of his farthings about the famous "love" passage known to all men, and about how he wants it taken out again where it belongs. And of course, Philip Gaskell sees no reason for its inclusion either, him being buddy-buddy with Hart and the Joyce Estate and all. And everyone else, including master Zen, concurring on the point now that good old Ellmann is in critical heaven. (Gob, did ya ever see such a bunch of fickle wishy-washies: "leave it in...na, take it out!") And leave it to Garbler to hold out for his famous "eyeskip" explanation for Joyce's passive authorization of the deletion, pointing out the underlinings framing the passage in holograph as a possible reason. But God save us if the Zurich Foundation himself didn't set things straight on that account as an experienced proofreader and all by reminding us about the particular care any proofreader takes with passages containing foreign languages (if you're going to call Latin foreign), and how unlikely it would have been for Joyce to really miss the passage. (Gob, I was blue mouldy for the want of that kinda testimony!) Then out comes another pip out of Gaskell about how Garble Text changed the Roman numerals of Ithaca to read correctly but not Joyce-like, and that he wonders whose job it really is to correct Joyce's own errors, etc., etc., etc. So do you know, that bloody Kid lets a grouse out of him would give you the creeps with his lardy-faced grin on him ear to ear, lookin' content as a pig in shite.

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By Joyce, says he, I'll show that bloody Cherman what he's done to our beloved book! And he grabs that dog-eared little "study" of his and waves it over his head like he's going to catch a cab. "Show us, show us!" shouts the crowd. It's all printed here, says he, pointing to the bloody study. (Somebody should tell this guy we're all sitting here because of him, and we'd much rather be outside getting a tan, so shut the hell up and just print the damned thing like a man!)

Meanwhile, Munich is dealt the death blow to three volumes of left-hand pages when Zurich finally drops the big one: the left-hand pages don't even convey what really happened to the text along the way, since Joyce's continuous process of accretion was made upon mistake-ridden typescripts and galleys rather than upon the documents old Garble Text so carefully charted for us in his unreadable key. Therefore, his left page, the only half-a-spread worth a farthing, is a serious misrepresentation of the very process it purports to show. (Jesus, I had to laugh at the way this guy kisses goodbye to seven long years of German ingenuity just like that!)

So, then Zack Bowen pushes the panic button and calls in the entire legal department to ask just who's allowed to publish what and when, and what if someone were to do a new edition using unpublished drafts or notes or somesuch thing. Well, the lawyer fellows, being weaned on this kinda stuff and all, think they can simplify things by asking: Are these hypothetical drafts or notes or somesuch thing you speak of *Joyce's*

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intentions? Jesus, they must have thought we were playing Ping-Pong for the last two days!

The last farewell was affecting in the extreme. Quietly, unassumingly, Herr Professor Hans Walter Gabler stepped onto the scaffold in faultless leisure dress and was greeted by a roar of acclamation from the huge sun-drenched crowd. Big strong men, officers of the department, were making frank use of their handkerchiefs, and it is safe to say there was not a dry brow in that record assemblage.

Well, back at 33rd & Chestnut [i.e., Philadelphia's Drexel University] after all was said and done, I says to Mike, Gob, what do we know now that we didn't know before going all the way down there to allegator land? Only that if you can't trust James Joyce himself to do *Ulysses* right in the first place, how are you supposed to get any two people that aren't half as good writers to agree on how to rewrite the book properly? Gob!

Essay #7

February 13, 2021: A Darker Day Even than the Sixth of January

A J'Accuse! Sent to My Senators on the Day of their Unforgiveable Deceit

January 6, 2021 will be remembered by anyone with the slightest regard for democracy as a dark day for our country. February 13th, however, will go down in history as one with even darker ramifications – a day on which respect for our country's *future* as a democracy was sold out for the short-term gain of keeping the tenuous unity of a rightfully disgraced political party.

On the January date, we watched in horror as a fallen tyrant's prophecy came true, illustrating in nauseating blood-soaked detail what happens when a mob of ignorant goons takes seriously the deceitful self-serving rantings of a dangerous sociopath and then actualizes his incendiary rhetoric.

What we witnessed on February 13th, on the other hand, was a premeditated act of sedition perpetrated not by common hoodlums but by well-heeled members of the nation's most elite governmental body, the upper chamber of the legislative branch of our federal government. Yes, what transpired when the Senate roll call vote was taken was nothing short of the public unmasking of that special blend of greed-driven dishonesty that *remains* the life force of Trumpism.

We watched forty-three Republican senators – representing all but a mere seven, that is – cast a vote declaring former President Trump “not guilty” of the treasonous high crime of inciting insurrection against his

Essays #7: February 13, 2021: A Darker Day Even than the Sixth of January—continued

country's government (and, as dangerously, of being derelict in his duty to protect the country and constitution under his care). This is to say that after listening to and watching an overwhelming accretion of evidence assiduously collected, verified, and collated by the impeachment managers as to Trump's *indisputable* culpability in this most heinous crime against our nation, when their names were called, *all but seven* of these senators chose loyalty to party over country and thereby feigned belief that they were (*somehow*) voting on a completely different issue than what had actually brought them there on February 13th.

These 43 Republican senators voted as if the question asked of them was not whether the former president of this country was guilty of inciting an insurrection against the very nation his oath of office had mandated that he *protect* but instead whether this trial was in itself constitutional. Under this transparent guise, they voted to acquit trump.

In other words, they voted *disingenuously*, for *this* question was no longer on the table; it had already been argued, voted on, and answered—in *the affirmative*—by a sufficient consensus of these same senators back on January 26th. That was the very reason they were gathered together in this room on February 13th again: to vote on Trump's guilt on inciting insurrection, not on the issue of constitutionality.

For anyone at this point unconvinced that these senators did indeed know what they were there to vote on this day, we have only to consider

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what their own leader, Mitch McConnell, said only minutes after this collaborative dark deed had been accomplished.

I refer specifically to McConnell's closing speech, artfully articulated with diabolical precision. Yes, after these conspirators had, one by one, sold their soul (and their country's) for their own political comfort or advancement, McConnell took to the podium for a closing speech that pretended to explain why he had voted as he did (and had announced that he would earlier in the day for the benefit of those who were expected to follow him). It was a piece of crafty oratory that offered us up a textbook example of how to most effectively practice disingenuousness in one's capacity as a public servant.

In short, McConnell said that Trump *was* unequivocally guilty on the article of impeachment approved by the House. I repeat, despite the insulting fireworks display of obfuscatory Trumpian fake truths put on by Trump's ambulance-chasing expert on dog bite liability, Trump *was* guilty. In fact, McConnell's very words were, "there's no question that President Trump is practically and morally responsible for provoking the events of the day" and that "the people who stormed this building believed they were acting on the wishes and instructions of their president." Indeed, McConnell went even further, condemning what was in his opinion a "disgraceful dereliction of duty" and observing even that this belief on the part of the mob that they were acting on Trump's wishes was "a foreseeable consequence of the growing crescendo of false statements, conspiracy theories, and reckless

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hyperbole which the defeated president kept shouting into the largest megaphone on planet Earth.”

Now, this address by the minority leader was made *not* to his family back home in the privacy of their dinner table but rather to his colleagues, as well as the entire country he had just betrayed. Moreover, the immediate target audience of this speech was made up of those with whom *he had just conspired to acquit* the author of this insurrection of this precise charge.

You might ask, is Mitch McConnell suffering from dissociative identity disorder? Are there in effect *two* Mitch McConnells vying for control of the same skull: one who professes to believe Trump to be guilty as charged while the other merely taps his foot with folded arms in obstinate dissent?

No, it is plain that this man is suffering rather from an acute case of **Bad Faith**: of saying one thing and voting another in order to get what one wants. Bad Faith is a social behavior typically defined as the malicious intent to deceive or mislead others in order to gain some advantage. A pretty low bar in this case—one that McConnell and his equally unprincipled cronies cleared with embarrassing ease.

Perhaps McConnell thought he could dupe us. Perhaps he figured this pretense of theatrically unequivocal condemnation of Trump’s treason might provide the necessary smokescreen to obscure his fumbling at the levers of whatever might keep his desperate, soul-forsaken party from collapsing under the gathering weight of its own

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delusions and deceptions. For, he went on to say that regardless of Trump's culpability, the question of his conduct was "moot" because former presidents are "constitutionally not eligible for conviction."

Again, the impeachment trial vote was not supposed to have anything at all to do with deciding whether the trial itself should happen—*that question had already been voted on and decided*—but only whether the man was guilty or not of this crime. Countering the irrelevant protestations of Trump's accident lawyers, who only demonstrated their ignorance of the crucial legal concepts at play in such a trial, the impeachment managers made abundantly clear *why* this conviction was so vitally important to *all* citizens of our country. This trial, they emphasized, was intended not to punish the guilty perpetrator (which is the purpose of *criminal* litigation) but rather to set procedural precedent that would help protect our nation from having ever again to suffer the self-aggrandizing whims of a dangerous, reckless abuser of presidential power.

On January 23, 2016, while still a presidential candidate, Donald Trump made the following unbelievably brazen, tasteless boast at a campaign rally in Iowa: "I could stand in the middle of 5th Avenue and shoot somebody and I wouldn't lose voters." Forget for the moment—*if you possibly can*—that a presidential candidate, at the very least, might be defined as someone whose choice of words is intended to persuade voters he or she is made of presidential material. What is most sad and frightening here is that Trump's obscenely improper prophecy has

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actually come true—that is, with the help of only a minor adjustment here and there to such particulars as location and logistics. For, rather than Fifth, he stood on *Pennsylvania Avenue*, and sooner than get his own hands dirty, he incited a mob of brainwashed devotees armed for combat to storm the United States Capitol and interrupt democracy in an attempt to steal for him an unearned second term. We must remember, this brutal armed attack was no mere “protest,” as it has been described by the duplicitous, but rather a violent grab at an unlawful seizure of power—indeed, nothing short of an attempted bloody coup directed by a sitting president to undermine the very constitution it was his job to protect.

But as if this crime of Trump’s were not heinous enough, *it was one that cost the lives of our fellow citizens*. Yes, the senators who voted to protect this traitor to our country have, in effect, chosen to find this tragic loss of life and limb to innocent citizens and their grieving families to be less important than the comfort of their own political careers.

Any senator who was persuaded by the sleight-of-word deflections of Trump’s legal henchmen rather than the clear-as-day evidence put forward by the impeachment managers clearly lacks the intellectual, emotional, moral, and ethical wherewithal with which to properly perform the duties of their office. Their only possible excuse could be that they *did* understand him to be guilty but did *not* wish, for whatever nefarious reason, to admit this. This is what is known as Bad Faith; no

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public servant should *ever* act upon it, and yet forty-three U.S. senators did *just that* on February 13th. I firmly believe the threat to our nation posed by this act of deceit ultimately exceeds even that already inflicted by the treacherous breach of our Capitol by Trump's horde on January 6th. These senators who conspired to protect their party rather than their country, and do so even more shamelessly under false pretenses, should all be removed from office before they do *more* harm to the workings of our democracy.

May they never get another night's sleep!

Some Thoughts for Alejandro Gillot Vassaux
After My Reading (on his Recommendation) of
Pope John Paul II's Encyclical Letter, *Fides et Ratio*

(Written in Conjunction with Cardinal Georges Cottier of the
International Theological Commission, 1998)

Alejandro, I read this encyclical as yet another in a long history of attempts to persuade the faithful that faith and reason are not only completely compatible but equally necessary to the intellectual and emotional fulfilment of the human journey. Although I remain unconvinced by this claim, either in previous handlings or the subject one, I find in this letter a rich trove of material inviting meaningful discussion of this philosophically salient debate. And I thank you for this.

I. Defining Terms

The title of this letter, *Fides et Ratio*, or “faith and reason,” employs Latin words with long histories of varying meanings, both general and theological. So, in order to prevent making a complex argument unnecessarily more so, I’d like to offer my understanding of how these multifaceted terms are being used by its author(s) and then by me.

1. *Fides*, or “faith,” is often used as a mere synonym for *belief*, though I think erroneously, at least in its most characteristic and fundamental context. For, despite dictionary denotations, which might superficially suggest a difference merely in source derivation – Latinate versus

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Germanic – more articulate usage tends to reveal the disparity between these terms at a key level – that *level of trust* each allows us to gather in its employment towards accepting something as true or valid.

For example, in the Christian tradition, such as observed in the New Testament text Epistle to the Hebrews, *faith* is defined as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11.1) and is followed by some forty snippets of Old-Testament narratives in which this attitude is portrayed as commendable in the face of its impotence to effect the outcome of what had been wished for, since “God had planned something better for us....”

Now, this notion of faith, which is most common to Christian teaching, is *explicitly* different from the more general concept of *belief*, which is typically based on neither hope *nor* a conviction of things unseen. Instead, belief, as understood in a specifically secular usage, and especially one informed by cognitive science, is appropriately understood to convey the idea of a basic learning mechanism among the complex workings of human thought. For, the process of belief allows us to efficiently favor what works and discard what doesn't while avoiding the fatally expensive waste of an exponentially expanding redundancy of data testing. In other words, it is that process through which we avoid getting caught in a recursive learning curve that continually lands us at the proverbial reinvention of the wheel. It is an efficient process of suspended comparison achieved amid the buoyant solution of memory. And as such, belief, when understood in

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this way, is as fundamental to human consciousness as is memory—even among those who do not possess “faith” in the unseen or otherwise unknown.

For example, we board an airplane with the reasonable trust that the vessel's design, manufacture, maintenance, and operation is all consistent with the mutually interactive relationship it will need to maintain with the unchangeable laws of physics, all of which conspiring to keep the plane in the air until it safely lands. This trust, which gradually becomes relegated to a less conscious awareness the more we fly (unless we are phobic about flying), may be seen as an excellent example of healthy, constructive *belief*. Our *reasonable* reliance on it helps us circumvent the inconvenience of pulling out our computer to figure out our survival chances before boarding each plane, leaving us freer to concern ourselves with less redundant, more interesting, endeavors.

But what if we have more than sufficient evidence in hand to the effect that the plane we are about to board *cannot* stay up in the air as long as it needs to in order to accomplish a successful flight. Let's suppose we can discern by eye alone and without dependence on a requisite knowledge of physics and engineering that the plane is obviously *unsound* for safe flight—say, perhaps because one of its wings is missing—yet are urged to board it anyways because a certain authority on astrology, palm reading, tea leaves, or the New Testament assures us of its guaranteed safety. (And let's assume for the sake of this argument that these same authorities have *no* authority concerning the

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subjects of aviation and physics.) Our only evidence of the appropriate safety of this vessel in this case would be the authority of, well, *authority* itself, a status-based commodity of power that is impossible to test in such a case without taking one's life in danger. The only type of non-suicidal passenger who might willingly board such a plane could only be one deeply deluded as to the true relationship of successful aviation and the laws of physics. Religious *faith* is sufficient for the accomplishment of this.

Faith, unlike belief, is most characteristically relied on *in the face of otherwise-convincing evidence to the contrary*. In our aviation case, it is an *unreasonable* trust extorted by untestable authority from out our tested belief in the predictable consistency of the laws of physics. Therefore, unlike the more constructive mechanism of belief described above, this recklessly idealistic and unrealistic country cousin we know as *religious faith* represents its mutation into an *unwarranted* belief in something, or, better yet, *a belief in the face of the flagrantly ample evidence of its untruth*.

This is where the *hope* component, defined above in Epistle to the Hebrews, comes in. *Faith* finds *hope* where *belief* has not yet gathered the sufficient evidence for it. And as if this were not enough, Christian tradition typically grants this loss of reason the status of nothing short of a *virtue*, a state of righteousness and moral purity that remains unattainable by its user's more *reasonable* fellow creatures. This special virtue in the practice of *unreason* demonstrates a subservient submissiveness apparently attractive to the scribes of scripture (who,

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more typically than not had scribbled their gods' wishes during an iron-age slave culture that, not surprisingly, prized such submissiveness in their slaves). And this mindset necessary to religious faith comes so close to that necessary for the smooth operation of delusion, that it seems necessary here to ask whether it is any longer reasonable to continue to pretend that the former is anything more than a euphemism for the latter.

2. *Ratio*, or “**reason**,” in its primary meaning of “a reckoning, accounting, numbering,” is traditionally used in its sense transferred to the arena of mental action, where it is understood as “reason, reasoning, judgment, and/or understanding.” Not surprisingly, it was often the Latin word chosen to represent the Greek word *logos* (for the above primary meanings) and was therefore through this that we get our related term of “logic.”

However, over the past two centuries we have acquired separable subsets of this meaning relevant to the maturing of what we now call “science” into its own distinct discipline driven by its own distinct methodology, all from out of its earlier tradition shared with that of philosophy. We have come to think of science and philosophy as fundamentally different, though equally useful and respectable, methods of understanding our world.

Yet, up until about the middle of the 19th century, these terms would have been understood to represent more of a *shared endeavor*, one whose practitioners were typically referred to as “natural philosophers,” as the

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focus of their investigations was nothing less than the workings of nature itself. It was not until 1840 that a British scientist of this “natural philosophy” saw it necessary to coin the more specific term of “scientist” for a practitioner of *empirical*-based hypothesis testing in order to distinguish such a person from one employing predominantly *reason*-based logical analysis (i.e., *without* the systematized hypothesis testing).

The root of this word *science* had long been in use by that point and was derived from the Latin *scientia* for “knowledge” — this as opposed to the word *sapientia*, meaning “wisdom,” a notion more often associated with what we now call “philosophy.” The original meaning of *scientia* had to do more specifically with “distinguishing things,” i.e., separating one thing from another in order to better understand it. Anyway, it took a while for this new term “scientist” to gain universal acceptance, and even as late as Charles Darwin’s day it was common to find practitioners (such as Darwin himself) referring to themselves as “natural philosophers” rather than “scientists.”

3. **Bottom line.** Understandably, I think, the pontiff has not defined his terms before using them in this letter, as he is writing in the comfort of a long tradition of theological context that privileges concepts of a devotional nature over those of strictly empirical *or* rational type. But, for the sake of clarity in comparing our different understandings of our world, I feel it necessary to point out that I am proceeding in my argument in the understanding that his use of the term *fides* is meant to

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designate specifically *religious faith* rather than the fundamental cognitive mechanism of *belief*. Likewise, I believe he uses the term *ratio* to mean *all types* of thinking that do *not* derive from religious faith, whether that be our modern sense of the term “science” or that of “philosophy,” or even the older traditional blending of the two found in “natural philosophy.”

II. The Pontiff's Position in General

I believe that such a position our author takes here should not be surprising from the perspective of a theologian, at any rung of the ladder, as it seems just common sense that faith would be recognized as *the* one indispensable practice, ultimately of greater value than that of reason, for *anyone* who puts store in the supernatural and its supporting narratives (i.e., superstitions).

Now, I do see in this encyclical letter a more palpable gesture of recognition of the importance of reason (in both its *scientific* and *philosophic* readings) than that conceded by so much of the history of church teaching, but I believe this to remain, ultimately, of an *ostensible* nature only. For, so long as the dogma insists, as it indeed continues to do, upon the *supernatural* source of an *indestructible* and *transcendent* human soul appointed with a *special sacred status above all other life forms*, any concessions it will deign to proffer to science will be done in an implicitly hypocritical way—that in which a science-bound body becomes little more than the vessel for, and then husk of, a God-created-

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and-bound personhood that can then live on into eternity just fine without its brain. And this bit of ontological incoherence that philosophers today almost unanimously disparage in the name of “substance dualism” keeps the church’s discussion of science something of a shell game, one played via some impressively sophisticated mincing of words that lends to our argument a genial ambiance of relevance it does not deserve.

For example, let’s start at the beginning and examine this letter’s initial epigraphic blessing:

Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth—in a word, to know himself—so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves.”

Nakedly obvious in this pronouncement is the prediction that anyone attempting to contemplate truth using reason alone, *without* faith, is destined to a success rate equivalent to a bird’s chances of maintaining flight with only one wing. Yet, *lots* of respected thinkers have insightfully contemplated and persuasively debated, in appropriate nuance, all sorts of truths without the help of a dogma through which to predictably interpret them all. Since dogma is defined as a set of principles laid down by an authority as incontrovertibly true (i.e., without the help of reason), it is clear that any employment of it in a *reasoned* endeavor should be seen as little more than that

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“philosopher’s stone” which had been formerly used to magically transmute any real discussion of chemistry into a more hopeful one of alchemy. For, it is only in the latter that truths are recognized as divisible between those of a body-bound base-metal nature and those of pure spirit-bound *sacred* gold.

In my attempt to find a convenient analogy for the necessary position of the faithful in this argument, I will indulge here in a thought experiment—and this from the opposite direction. A distinguished scientist named Mary determines to abandon the rigors of scientific method in her ongoing research and believes she can do so without compromising her status among her colleagues. But regardless of the level of mastery she wields over her subject, the disconnect growing between her observations on her field and her altered academic standing among her peers creates a cognitive dissonance that is difficult to avoid. She finds, effectively, that she cannot wear two hats at once. She can continue to bring her great store of knowledge about her particular subject to bear on her private speculations but will not be permitted anymore the same conduit of communication and interchange with her peers for these insights.

However, Mary finds it is possible to ameliorate her situation by gravitating to a *philosophical* rather than *scientific* perspective, thereby harking back to the long tradition of “natural philosophy” in which to still satisfy her sense of wonder in the world and its workings despite

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this more recent branching of such inquiry into two disciplines. Ah, a fortuitous ending....

But, as the computer scientist Jan van de Snepscheut is now believed to have originally observed (in place of Yogi Berra and all the other usual suspects), “In theory, there is no difference between theory and practice; in practice, there is.” Yes, the best outcome for her predicament can only be achieved through sacrifice and compromise, leaving her in a very different place in the *actual practice* of her ponderings. This might be in some ways a more valuable place, in terms of affording her a fresh perspective and a refreshing freedom from peer-review politics, but she is still not quite reconciling both worlds, since philosophy and science are now distinct, though equally important and respectable, methods of investigation.

O.K., a bit far-fetched but only intended toward what I believe to be an important *general* distinction regarding our text and its author. There is a basic difference, it seems to me, between Mary's situation and that of the head of the church who endeavors here to recognize a legitimate symbiosis between faith and reason. This is that the latter is not free to remove his mitre in the process. For, Mary remains unencumbered in the embrace and abandonment of any and all approaches to her contemplations in her ultimate aim of remaining true to *herself*. (After all, it is not at all uncommon today for philosophers to rely heavily on scientific findings in the exercise of their discipline without suffering the accusations of treason.)

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I believe it true to say that the same cannot be said for the pontiff, who still must abide by his received tradition of a “God-given” human soul, which happens to be his ultimate role to protect from the sacrilegious illuminations of profane reason. Yes, even were he to abdicate his office (due, say, to his own cognitive dissonance in attempting to see a problem solved that really isn't), his membership in the Christian community, *at any level*, still prohibits this total freedom in interpreting the world around him *thoroughly and consistently* through the eyes of reason rather than dogma.

Now, you might point to the numerous occasions when the church *has* made public concessions to science, acknowledging the legitimacy, say, of the theory of evolution by natural selection, or else the fact that the sun does *not* in fact revolve around the earth. But a closer look at the mechanisms typically underlying such official doctrine pronouncements may prove revealing. Yes, the pontiff *did* indeed publicly forgive Galileo (only 32 years ago and about 350 years too late) for the latter's heretical heliocentrism hubris, but only by indulging in equivocation—namely, by conceding that (in his words) “the theologians who condemned Galileo did not recognize the formal distinction between the Bible and its interpretation,” leading them to “unduly transpose into the realm of the doctrine of faith a question which in fact pertained to scientific investigation.” He further clarified that the theologians who condemned Galileo in 1633 to house arrest on

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pain of torture for his wrong ideas were, well, “working with the knowledge available to them at the time.”

But let's take a look under the hood at what all this might mean at the level of church officialdom. The pope *may not* say what is actually crystal clear to just about anyone not committed to church teaching—specifically that the Bible is a *pitifully poor* source for information about how our world actually works and is more reasonably and usefully read only as a thought-provoking collection of memorable mythologies that can stimulate the imagination of the faithful quite in the way a thoughtful work of creative literature typically does for those in a secular setting. And this same book that then contained merely “the knowledge available to them at the time” remains that same one that continues to serve as the effective lexicon with which the church's key teachings are formulated and promulgated, whether pertaining to the role of science in its unscientific worldview or, alas, the rights of women.

Thanks to science alone (i.e., rather than to faith), we know a considerable amount about the natural phenomenon of “spontaneous abortion.” Of course, this is just a more formal name for *natural abortion*, or miscarriage, a natural phenomenon effecting women of all egg-producing ages all over the world, with little regard for culture, ideology, or women's rights, *and most often without even the mother's knowledge*. This unfortunate but entirely natural phenomenon is estimated to occur at a staggering rate of anywhere from one in four, to

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as high as *one in two*, fertilized eggs *across our species*. We also know, unequivocally, that conscious suffering, such as happens during the process of dying, can only happen within the bounds of a working nervous system, which is not yet a realized feature of the physiology of the early stages of embryonic development. (For example, according to many major medical organizations, including the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, the Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine, and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, a fetus is not capable of feeling pain until at least 3 months of development.)

Yet, because of the church's fundamental doctrine of the species-specific sanctity and divine origin of human life, its followers are mandated to adopt an all-or-nothing idealism equating the death of a fertilized human egg with nothing short of *murder*. This breathtaking bit of illogic is revealed to be all-the-more specious by the flagrant irony surrounding this same god's own contribution to the ongoing history of abortion, wherein so-called *potential personhoods* are killed in a continuous stream of natural abortions all around us every day by the millions. Furthermore, you might think that such a god that would allow this to happen under its watch over millions of years of human evolution might eventually come to attach a somewhat less draconian moral onus to it and might settle on a more contextually supple approach.

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Nonetheless, the church continues to maintain, vigorously and pitilessly, its prohibition against women's rights over their own bodies, and does so with the help of a particularly effective rhetorical formula sometimes referred to as the *argument from potentiality*. This is that easily bewitching, though fundamentally illogical, line of argument that runs as follows: Anything that *could possibly* become a personhood necessarily *is* that personhood already, complete with every societal right it *might have enjoyed had* it indeed become, *against life's great odds*, that sacred idealization of *possible* outcomes. And like all erroneous ideas, the easiest method of making this one sound anywhere plausible is to trim away its contextuality till it can fit on a bumper sticker, such as found in the anti-abortion mantra, *Human life begins at conception*.

But what such a slogan really means has nothing to do with any biological *fact* about eggs and sperm and the outcome of their meeting. To the contrary, from a purely scientific perspective, life, whether human or otherwise, *cannot* be said truthfully to begin at the moment of fertilization, as its constituent parts are *already* living before their theologically fateful embrace. Both eggs *and* sperm meet the requirements of the definition of life and are therefore commonly described by scientists in terms of their *life span*. And this, therefore, leaves fertilization as only *one of several* key steps that together constitute a *continuity of life* rather than some arbitrary line in life's sands. **Life is a process, not a substance.** And although reason, through sober scientific observation, has brought us a long way from the essentialist tradition

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of some mysterious and elusive yet all-important “life force” distinguishing the living from the dead (as if some coveted secret ingredient smuggled into the kitchen during the night), this notion is no longer discussed seriously outside of religious circles.

No, this jingoistic battle-cry may be found to communicate only one message: The fertilized human egg, unlike those of all other creatures on earth, is less a stage in a physical process of nature than it is a sacred relic, symbolic of divinity—sort of like the Eucharist *would be* of Christ's body and blood had not the doctrine of Transubstantiation come along to assure the unscientific that it's *more* than symbolic and, believe it or not, *one and the same thing*. Furthermore, it means that this luck-dependent realization of personhood that has yet to happen but that is already considered a “soul” somehow remains God-*given*, though only human-*protected*. After all, if it were God-protected, our courts would not be choked with cases arguing it in place of so many more important boundary disputes inherent in human society.

This *argument from potentiality* should be seen as an indispensable ingredient in faith's recipe for devaluing women to the status of mere egg cartons, effectively rerouting most arenas of political debate from real-life problems to that tiresomely predictable simplistic litmus test of who's worth more, a woman or her egg. In the United States, for example, one can watch entire political parties line up with their strange bedfellows amid the fallout of this divisive and pitifully unnecessary controversy. Therefore, it becomes crucial that we take a closer look at

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this fundamentally incoherent concept which has nevertheless gained such traction behind the wheel of the faithful. Let's start by repeating its formula, so we can make sure we heard it right the first time around.

Here goes. Something that *could possibly* become a personhood necessarily therefore *is* that personhood already, complete with every societal right it *might have* enjoyed *had* it indeed become, *against life's great odds*, that sacred idealization of possible outcomes. In other words, because a fertilized egg *bears the possibility* of gestating and surviving into a functioning adult that is capable of suffering and revering its supposed maker, it *automatically becomes one* simply by virtue of *the existence of this possibility*, which has low odds of realization to begin with. And by considering it as such, we are obligated to protect this veritable crapshoot-chance of fruition against all other likely possibilities and do so with a commitment that supersedes that shown to the female human being in whom it resides, *though she has already passed the test and become a functioning living adult*.

Wow! Were *reason* and not *superstition* our only standard, we would never have needed to go any further. But because of the mental acrobatics lent this discussion by hard-working theologians, we'll need to concede once more that what may seem satisfyingly conclusive to reason may be anything but that to faith, and vice versa.

So, let's use an analogy. Science has long ago revealed a fact of nature concerning human embryology that is contested by no legitimate scientist. It is that the human embryo, like those of so many other of

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earth's species, has evolved to contain the building blocks of both sexes within its basic physiological blueprint and that until at least six weeks old, when genetically-driven hormonal responses begin to tellingly exert themselves on this little ball of dividing cells, it cannot be predicted with any certainty which sex will be its eventual outcome.

According to the evolutionary economy of developing forms, it is most efficient to begin not with two separate templates but with one of unisex capability that can be then chemically inspired at the appropriate developmental time as to which of the *potential* systems, male or female, should be encouraged to develop and which to be ignored. This is why men have nipples despite not needing them. Rather than evolve two separate blueprints for an organism, one for each sex, nature's own rule of parsimony saves costly steps by creating one that accommodates the future needs of both. (And although the males of some mammals lose these vestigial ornaments, many, such as humans, don't.)

But the important point here is that what we might call, in the spirit of this conversation, the *potential* adult represented by the embryo at this point, is either male, female, or some orientation in between. (And the constellation of sex/gender assignment problems that we have become increasingly aware of in recent decades is explained by this last menu option of development.) This being as it is, should we *therefore* consider that *every* fertilized egg up to six or so weeks old is *potentially*, say, a female, *and therefore definitely a female* despite the chance it may become, according to developmental conditions, squarely male or

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maybe somewhere in between? Of course not. Why would we? It would be pointless. Rather, we wait the six weeks and find out the truth of how nature actually works, an approach of reason that bows to nature's complexity while not endeavoring to complicate it any further.

No, the anti-abortion chant, "life begins at conception" is *not* a scientific concept but a religious one, based as it is on an inculcated appetite for toothsome justice against the sacrilege of disobeying the imagined mandates of an imagined and unappeasable sky parent. It is also based on a misunderstanding of the natural workings of the human body and of embryology in general.

This incantation closely echoes the more elaborate but no less simplistic misunderstanding of reproductive and embryonic physiology maintained and enforced among its followers by the official teachings of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (promulgated by this same pope in 1992), which states that "human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception" and that "from the first moment of his existence, a human being must be recognized as having the rights of a person—among which is the inviolable right of every innocent being to life." And though the church has spilled reservoirs of ink over many centuries to read the tea leaves thought to be seen in countless passages of scripture in defense of this or that precise tweaking of this nonsense, none of it was, is, or ever can be based on reason, only on faith.

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Were the body, which is misunderstood by the church to be the mere physical *vehicle* for this indescribable eternal substance called “soul,” to be born suffering devastating developmental deformities, the church still holds out for a God-given obligation to sacrifice the quality of life it experiences (along with that of its loved ones) toward its *sustained* suffering, all in deference to the worship of one credited in having created it like that in the first place. Never mind that any such deformity can never be causally separate from those characteristics of behavior we associate with the “soul.” After all, a neurosurgeon’s knife, or even a lesion or tumor, can come into contact with just the right place in a brain to *predictably and inescapably* alter the “personality” of this personhood.

And this raises the further question as to exactly which specific congregation of behavioral characteristics that we recognize as a “soul” would show up in “the next world” once it has somehow “shed the body” that most obviously formed it? Would it be the one observable at the top of one’s game (i.e., while one still had an untarnished reputation and had not yet been determined to owe back taxes or suspected of child molestation) or, rather, at the less fortunate moment of death. I wince in anticipation of the possible answers, as *any* would be laughable.

Ready for another rather awkward irony? Such an irrational idealism as exhibited here tends *not* to corrupt this same moral discussion concerning a seriously deformed creature of *any other species than our own* under our God-invested authority to do his bidding. This means that our innate sense of morality, in all its necessarily contextual

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subtleties, may be practiced in good conscience on any living thing *excepting only us*. Curious, but perfectly explainable. This is the product of an iron-age thinking that derives its authority from a catch-all of texts conceived and arbitrated by fear-driven superstitious ancestors who were, as the pontiff himself concedes “working with the knowledge available to them at the time.”

And because such a text as the Bible retains its moral authority purely via the conspiratorial cooperation of believers agreeing not to question said authority (under punitive penalty, of course), it becomes the textbook example of what scientists and philosophers refer to as a “black box.” This is the term given for any system that can be viewed in terms of its inputs and outputs without any knowledge on the part of the observer as to the box's actual internal workings. And although much of the history of this concept was developed regarding computational theory, its extended use among philosophers to refer to epistemological and sociological questions has borne much fruit among cognitive scientists in contemplating societal customs, especially such as religious practices.

This perverse fetish with the incoherent *argument from potentiality* allows for the canonization of obvious *immorality* into a sacred “ultimate truth,” wherein it becomes mandatory for the church's followers to believe that even a zygote, blastocyst, or some other *insentient* nascent stage of embryonic development should be *worth more than a woman*. In other words, the obligatory position of the faith is to maintain a deeper

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moral obligation and stronger effective commitment to the mere *ideal potentiality* of human life, such as represented by an insentient embryo (which *naturally* bears a low rate of survival to begin with), than to the complete, fully realized and conscious life suffering unmistakably before one's eyes in the form of a woman caught in the snares of this thinking.

This is nothing less than the wholesale trade-in of compassion and empathy for the snug contentment of unblemished idealism. We are now deep within the dark and dangerous lair of sentimentality, where our humanity may be comfortably hidden behind our fear of the unknown. And more specifically, it is an expression of blatant misogyny. Yes, this sacrifice would never have been expected of males had *they* happened to constitute the birth-giving sex of our species yet still retained their God-given authority over “the weaker sex.”

Nor is this official culture of misogyny limited to idealisms regarding fertilized eggs; rather, it is fundamental to, and pervasive through, the system. For example, this same pontiff, in his apostolic letter of 1994 entitled, *Oridinatio Sacerdotalis*, explains the fate of the role of women in the church and its society as follows:

Wherefore, in order that all doubt may be removed regarding a matter of great importance, a matter which pertains to the Church's divine constitution itself, in virtue of my ministry of confirming the brethren, **I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women** and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful [emphasis mine].

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Now, if the *church* has no authority over churchly matters, then who does? Of course, it must be God, the one authority that no one except the church hierarchy has access to for fact checking, being that He may only be questioned by those who dare not. Convenient. What if this God had decided, perversely, that only *women* and *not* men, would be suitable for ordination in such a club? Who would be the messenger to report that bit of inconvenient business? Don't waste any precious time worrying about it.

The reasons the pontiff gave for his position may be found in an earlier Vatican declaration, *Inter Insigniores*, entitled "On the Question of the Admission of Women to the Ministerial Priesthood," an authority-dipped decree of a generation earlier that, luckily, may still be wheeled in whenever the really big guns are called for. This document tells us that regardless of what officials of the church might want, relevant to the ordination of women, *God doesn't want it*. And the proofs for this "truth" include the "facts" that a.) Jesus chose the Twelve Apostles, none of whom were women; b.) Mary, though not a priest, is still considered the holiest human being, which "clearly shows that the non-admission of women to priestly ordination cannot mean that women are of lesser dignity, nor can it be construed as discrimination against them" (yes, this really is a quote, I kid you not); and c.) although part of the church's hierarchy, the ordained priesthood is not really about power so much as about *servicing* and *helping bring holiness in the church*, which, of course, would be damned difficult with women in it.

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A related reason often cited, though not emphasized in this authoritative parchment, is that when a priest says “this is my body” or “I absolve you,” it is *not* the priest speaking, really, but rather *Jesus through him*, the “logic” of which apparently being, of course, that such an office holder *must be a man*, as such an utterance from a woman would be, by definition, well, wrong.

And not even the comparatively liberal gestures of Pope Francis have been successful in promoting the role of women in the church to a status above the marginalized, let alone one *equal* with men (God forbid!). In answer to this question of the church's sexist attitude to ordination in 2022, he explained that, alas, “the Petrine principle has no place for that.” Now, this “principle” refers to the narrative in which Jesus Christ bestowed the keys of his self-claimed father's self-evident kingdom on Simon Peter the Apostle, who would go on to be the first bishop of Rome.

Keep in mind that nowhere in any original texts for such a narrative is so much of a *mention* made of either the rules of ordination or the role gender might play in them. This should not be surprising though, especially given that the Catholic Church itself, as such, had not yet existed. For, even the original Greek name *katholike ekklesia*, or “universal church,” used to designate what we now call the “Catholic Church,” did not make its first appearance until about 110 AD., at least 75 years after this transfer of Christ's mission to his followers.

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Though this handy “Petrine principle” makes no *direct* reference to the ordination of women, its value lies in its *potentiality* to do so via *inferred* intention, whereby it becomes clear that it couldn't have been mere coincidence that Christ's apostles were men rather than women, which obviously means he wanted it this way, which of course bestows an obligation to *keep it this way* upon any successor to his authority. Done.

Of course, this is not a very persuasive proof, so the pontiff had another “principle” waiting up his sleeve—one known as the “Marian principle,” in honor of the virgin who, naturally, gave birth to Jesus. What this principle acknowledges is the obvious “*spousal* nature of the church” in relation to God, a fact which is immediately recognized by anyone who has been told this often enough. And with this helpful metaphor, the dignity of womanhood is *automatically* secured, at least once they've understood that what they had ignorantly objected to as “marginalization” was, to the contrary, nothing short of an *adulating reverence* appropriate to the worship of no less a real woman than the miraculous virgin-mother of Christ. After all, consequent to centuries of theological card shuffling, *she* had been raised from relative obscurity to nothing less than the *center* of Christianity's Economy of Salvation, all despite the admitted shortcomings of her sex. So, yes, it is this *adoration* of the most holy of women that now keeps women, universally, *at the very center of things*—safely protected from all the

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subordinating male authority gathering around them like smoke here in the world's oldest, most elite, and best-guarded Good Ole Boys Club.

But back to women's rights. Granted, there are those who argue that the most salient factor in this discriminatory preference for the zygote over the woman has to do with the complete reliance the former necessarily has on the latter due to its inability to care for itself. But this argument is merely another impressive product of the fine art of obfuscation. For, at the level of development at which we are talking *here* (unlike that used in the case of, say, an infant), this blurring of the line of responsibility remains an impressive-sounding non sequitur for what should be obvious reasons. The fact that a fertilized egg is dependent for its life on the health, well-being, and even eventual concern of its mother is not the same as calling it a fact too that the mother's moral responsibility must be widened to begin at the mere biological level of a sperm's success with her egg, even were it not for the all-too-common fact that that sperm may have been put there against her will in the first place. Like everything else in our world, responsibility unfolds upon a contextualized spectrum, in this case according to a host of considerations, such as competence, intention, and specific circumstances.

But on to equally fundamental examples of the dangers of faith-based thinking, wherein we willingly surrender the dignity of our reasoning abilities to the supposed desires of an unseen, unprovable,

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and unlikely sky despot. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, as promulgated by Pope John Paull II in 1992, asserts:

Methodical research in all branches of knowledge, provided it is carried out in a truly scientific manner and does not override moral laws, can never conflict with the faith *because the things of the world and the things of faith derive from the same God*. The humble and persevering investigator of the secrets of nature is being led, as it were, by the hand of God despite himself, for it is God, the conserver of all things, who made them what they are." [emphasis mine]

In other words, there can be no *real* concession to reason by faith, as the former is merely an appendage of the latter to the extent that it shares a body that was ultimately made by the object of this faith in the first place. Reasoned argument seems futile in the face of such a highly cultivated tradition of equivocation.

Likewise, in October of 1996, this same pontiff outlined the Catholic view of evolution by natural selection to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, saying that the church holds that evolution is "more than a hypothesis" and is, rather, a well-accepted theory of science...*but* that the human body evolved according to natural processes, *while the human soul is the creation of God*.

Nice try, but foul ball. If the church truly *does* view evolution by natural selection to be a veridical explanation of life on earth, with all the physicalist implications that necessarily follow, then it *may not* pretend there are loopholes in this same science that allow for

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exemptions to physicalism in the case of God's especially beloved humans. The science that supports this type of evolution that he recognizes as true is nothing if not physicalist in nature, leaving no room for the supernatural. If physical bodies indeed "evolved according to natural processes," this means through an algorithm dependent on physical *mistakes* (mutations) and culminating in physical nervous systems whose physical processes create certain characteristics. And those same characteristics *cannot*, suddenly and conveniently, become *non-physical*. This is called having your cake and eating it too. Reason holds this trick suspect, *reasonably*.

Back to poor exonerated Galileo. The pontiff in his pardon of Galileo's offensive ideas, recognizes that the realms of faith doctrine and scientific investigation *are* independent *and* incompatible after all, blaming as he does the difference between the Bible and its interpretation. This is to say that the Bible cannot be wrong but that men reading it *can* be, and that any passages in this supposedly infallible word of God that espouse untrue statements about the way the world works are in fact necessarily true but *merely misunderstood*.

This allows for making the most incoherent of the church's mandatory bad ideas figuratively bulletproof, especially once they have been applied with that most impervious of finishing coats, *taboo against sacrilege*, wherein it is deemed bad moral character to shed one's faith enough to question something given as true on the sake of mere authority.

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And yet, less than a decade later than Galileo's pardon, our author writes in the very letter we read here, conversely, that reason and faith *are* compatible. Were he not wearing his mitre (or zucchetto or camauro, etc.) while penning this, he might have been free to formally recognize the painfully obvious—that the Bible is no source for reliable answers to real questions about the world's workings and should be read as imaginative literature, written and cobbled together by lots of different human beings with differing political agendas but remaining a narrative useful toward the unified goal of the sustained dogma of faith. For, unlike our "natural philosopher" Mary, who is still free to enjoy the mysteries of the universe without the requirement of an official dogma through which to symbolically interpret them, any believer in the supernatural who chooses to acknowledge the power of reason is *not* really free to do so in the eyes of her church, at least not without continued respect for, and ultimately *preference* for, the *irrational* and *unscientific*. That is to say that she is officially obligated to privilege faith over reason even while pretending they are equal and compatible, *which they obviously cannot ever be*.

Despite the seductive comfort afforded by the distinguished paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould's unhelpful notion of "Non-Overlapping Magisteria," in which science and religion may be seen to inhabit areas of inquiry so cleanly removed from each other as to prevent any contradiction between them, this concept is seen by many respected thinkers as yet another attempt to placate religious

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sensibilities while holding a place for superstition at reason's table. Though it represents an echo of David Hume's "is-ought problem," wherein an ethical or judgmental conclusion cannot be inferred from purely descriptive factual statements (i.e., thereby making it impossible for an "ought" to follow from an "is"), such distinguished provenance is not enough to win the theory widespread support.

Basically, to pretend that science should defer to religion on questions of morality, meaning, and value is just as nonsensical as demanding such deference on questions of aeronautics. After all, whom do we *reasonably* consult with questions about the aeronautic viability of an aircraft, a priest or an aeronautical engineer? This is no different from suggesting that religion should, conversely, defer to science regarding the enjoyment of the religious experience. (Sure, you can read William James' illuminating survey, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, in order to better understand *about* these experiences, but the book cannot *give you* these experiences.)

III. Specifics

Early in the Introduction to this encyclical, we read that the church "received the gift of the ultimate truth about human life" and that we are driven by a desire to discover this "ultimate truth of existence." This sounds deep. Indeed, what could *sound* deeper? But wait; what *could* such a thing as the "ultimate truth of existence" possibly be? If it is something central to the human condition and applicable to all humans,

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regardless of adherence to a particular dogma, then why would faith still be a necessary requisite toward our recognition and comprehension of it?

The problems with such deep-sounding formulations may be traced back to some rather basic misconceptions clarified by the discipline of epistemology. The very concept of “truth,” whether “ultimate” or else compromised in some form, is a construct of the human brain and *not* an objective fact, force, or any other type of entity or essence found out there in the universe. Like the concepts of love or hatred, it describes the experience of a *physiological process* evolved by advanced nervous systems to utilize toward better predicting, visualizing, navigating, and even manipulating their world. It is inseparable from the evolved architecture of the embodied human nervous system, and so it cannot live on its own, as if *disembodied* yet sustained fully functioning in pure ether. To treat it as such is irreconcilable with what we know about the nature of thought itself. For, the more we survey the evolution of nervous systems on earth and study the remarkably similar ways in which they all operate across the millions of species that employ them, it becomes difficult to avoid questioning a few basic assumptions we make about the world of ideas.

Truths, untruths, concepts, beliefs, metaphors, analogies, paradoxes, narratives, moral codes, and systems of thought in general are all mental constructs, the emergent products of embodied nervous systems at work in their environments. Like colors or sounds, they don't exist *as*

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such outside of the brains that construct them. They are merely convenient user-interfaces that help biological entities to successfully maneuver between sustenance and danger in an uncertain world. Sure, wavelengths of electromagnetic radiation, audio vibrations, and all sorts of other physical phenomena that *serve as stimuli to various living nervous systems* do indeed exist out there in the world, independent of brains, but it takes an embodied brain to construct these into the recognizable languages of color, sight, sound, etc. The same for meaning, value, morality, etc. There's nothing valuable or moral out there in the world until an embodied brain generates the right process to recognize (or *misrecognize*) it as such.

Even mathematics, which may instinctively seem to us to represent the system of laws revealing the fundamental operations of the universe, is on closer inspection yet another language humans create and use toward exploring, charting, pondering, discussing, and even exerting control over those characteristics of physical reality we call "the laws" of nature. The universe operates on the basis of certain characteristics, like gravity and magnetic fields, etc., and we construct the languages of physics and mathematics to better map them. But neither of these languages exist outside the brains that think them. As Hamlet brilliantly recognizes, "there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." (This, of course, is not the *whole* or *only* meaning of his retort to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in Act II, Scene 2, but it is clearly at least *one* of them.)

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A thought of any sort is nothing more than a unit of mind, and a mind is nothing less than the reciprocally interactive process of a working brain within its body in an environment. In other words, a mind is the emergent process that supervenes upon the elaborate systems-organization of a working embodied brain in its environment. Starve a nervous system of its necessary sustenance and it will close down, *taking with it* all those units of mind that had been sustained by it through the physiological mechanism of memory, including concepts or notions of truth, beauty, goodness, moral justice, etc. And “truth,” like *any* concept, is merely a *metaphorical* construct of biology rather than an attribute of objective reality. Even the mental process of *reason* itself may be said to only *make use of*, rather than *transcend* our animal nature, as its very structure may be observed as the outcome of our experience of embodiment.

Now, all of these concepts may be said to survive the death of the brain in which they were realized, *but only through the intervention of replication in other brains*, such as may be memorialized via oral and written language, the arts, and other cultural media. Another way of putting it might be that an idea has nowhere else to live except realized in living neuronal circuits—*excepting only some sort of recipe for its replication*. And like in baking a cake, the recipe might get you through the process of re-creating a particular confection, but it isn't *in itself* tasty and nutritious.

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No nervous system that has evolved on earth can possibly know “reality,” no matter how large and subtle its vocabulary or impressive its academic credentials. All any of us can *know* of reality is our *experience* of it, and this being allowable only through what manages to filter down through our imperfect flesh by means of those perceptions that help us tweak our inherited predictive modeling powers.

These percepts, being the product of the economics of evolutionary pressures, are necessarily incomplete *and often woefully so*. A close look at our millions of cousin species out there makes this clear. For, despite the impressive ability our species demonstrates in its ability to create new narratives with which to predict and manipulate our environment and compare it to past attempts, our base sense perceptions are often inferior, sometimes egregiously so, to those of many of our less overtly brainy fellow creatures. We see fewer colors than many, or else fewer things altogether and/or over shorter distances; and in comparison with that of so many species, our sense of smell, well, *stinks*. And then, we lack certain senses *altogether*, such as the language of electromagnetism, for example, which is so useful to many inhabitants of the sea.

Yes, we create our *own* reality, and that reality is necessarily different from that experienced by other creatures by virtue of the precise machinery employed in constructing that particular ongoing simulacrum that each species uses to navigate its world. The reality created by the nervous system of a bird will necessarily revolve around

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the specific evolutionary niche pressures that helped design that particular refinement of a nervous system and not one that applies specifically to us.

So, ultimately, “truth” is a *value* ascribed to *propositions* rather than a *thing* that exists in and of itself out there in the world. The same is true for goodness, beauty, virtue, moral justice, and all those other mental constructs our species creates for itself. Each has value in specific application to a realm of human discourse and endeavor, but it can only retain its usefulness if it remains understood as contextual and specific to a particular proposition. Therefore, the very notion of a one-size-fits-all absolute-and-final truth, and especially one that is prior to human existence should be entirely nonsensical to anyone not bowing to dogma.

It is understandable that the author of this letter, being the authority equivalent of the “alpha male” among his particular tribe of believers, writes in this letter (and elsewhere) with convictions that are based on common presumptions of the superstitious. Any concept that needs to be taken “on faith” instead of via empirical-based *belief* qualifies for the magical thinking of *superstition*. For, unlike our usual empirical-based notion of *belief*, which is a mechanism allowing us to privilege selected data long enough to refine our predictive model of the outside world and reduce its prediction error, *faith* is that more recalcitrant version that one is proud to brandish *in the face of sufficient evidence to the contrary*. And it is a predictable characteristic of the nature of religious

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faith that practitioners worldwide endeavor not merely to condone or accept this type of delusionary thinking but, ironically to see in it no less than a moral *virtue*. To them it shows bravery and commitment on the part of the adherent who holds onto an idealistic notion that the more pragmatic of our fellow creatures reasonably abandon to the persuasiveness of evidence.

Our author's assumptions, typical to the religious mindset in general, though exaggerated here by the ultimate authority status he enjoys among his flock, include a belief in the indestructability of thoughts, personalities, and other such temporary products of a *living* nervous system, all as if each were a *thing* and not a *process*.

In his introduction to this letter ("Know Yourself"), the pontiff warns us, for example, that "reason, in its one-sided concern to investigate human subjectivity, seems to have forgotten that men and women are *always called to direct their steps towards a truth which transcends them*" [emphasis mine]. In other words, reason, despite the relatively high status he deigns to grant it in the general order of things, can be a dangerously inconvenient truth—one that gets in the way of certain supernatural priorities, such as following the dictates of an unseen, unprovable, and unlikely supreme intelligence operating (somehow) without the otherwise-requisite machinery of a nervous system, a supernatural entity for whom he acts as spokesman. And therefore, those who rely on reason and who will therefore find no credible grounds for accepting this "calling" of a supernatural authority figure,

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are commanded to abandon reason and adopt in its sorry absence an authority-based enticement to believe in the unlikely.

Also worthy of mention in this line of his is the curious reference to reason's "one-sided concern to investigate human subjectivity." Again, it could just be that our author has in mind a less mainstream interpretation of reason than is traditionally understood. It is difficult to imagine blaming a cosmologist, say, for turning a blind eye toward objective facts about nature, though he may also strive to better understand the subjective.

Referring to the Second Vatican Council's Constitution *Dei Verbum*, John Paul II quotes the Council as asserting that "there exists a knowledge which is peculiar to faith, *surpassing the knowledge proper to human reason*, which nevertheless by its nature can discover the Creator" [emphasis mine]. Now, relevant to the takeaway in the italicized clause, try to imagine the likelihood of a theologian restating the whole sentence something closer to this: "There exists a knowledge which is peculiar to faith, *antithetical to human reason*, which nevertheless by its nature can discover the Creator." Refreshing, but difficult to imagine, right? Why should that be?

There is no such thing as a miracle in scientific thinking, or even in the broader community of rational thinkers outside the scientific community. This is because reason urges us to avoid mistaking that for which we don't yet have a reasonable explanation for that which must therefore have a *supernatural* explanation. Correlation does not imply

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causation, and science does not shun the challenge of mystery, only the magical thinking in which yet-unsolved problems prove the need for irrational answers. However, examples of literal belief in miracles, as well as a host of other manifestations of magical thinking abound in the narratives of religious practice worldwide, and perhaps especially in Christianity.

For example, an estimated couple million Christians have made their difficult and costly pilgrimage to the market town of Lourdes in southwestern France during the past century and a half, all because some otherwise-forgettable peasant girl happened to have a hallucination. Now, the history of humankind is riddled with hallucinations, which turn out to be scientifically-explainable phenomena that remain rather congenial to the architecture of the human brain, especially in the presence of stress, excitement, or other extreme physiological states, such as epilepsy. But Christianity has offered a bounty on these...*when in the service of its faith*. Were this same Bernadette to have envisaged, instead of a young woman asking for a chapel in her name, one asking for an improved public transit system, she would have been treated as a kook. But because she fit so neatly into the revered tradition for Marian apparitions, she was canonized.

The rigor with which miracles are questioned and investigated by scientific method inevitably reveals the sleight-of-mind necessary toward their recognition among the faithful. Only in the accommodating environment of a superstitious culture (one based on

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a privileging of the supernatural) can miracles survive our examination at even the most coarse-grained level of inquiry. Among the millions of visitors to Lourdes who have prayed and taken the waters toward needed repairs to their corporal health, it is safe to say that not a one of them has returned with a re-grown lost limb. That's because *this would be a miracle*, unlike the many reports of, say, cured cancer, which, more often than not, can be explained *rationally* (i.e., without the help of the supernatural and superstition), such as by pointing to the fact that even stage-four cancers can and sometimes *do*, go into remission.

Upon boarding that airplane mentioned above, which stays safely aloft due *entirely* to reason and *not* to faith, even a most pious believer in the superior nature of faith over reason is unlikely to want to emphasize at this particular point the reasonableness of their claim. If they encounter dangerous turbulence, they will thank God for their safe landing, as opposed to the pilot or aircraft designer, though it would be one of the latter to have been blamed in the case of a crash.

In the first paragraph of his first chapter (“The Revelation of God’s Wisdom”), our author claims that “as the source of love, God desires to make himself known.” This makes no sense. Science has shown us quite clearly what the source of love is: a highly evolved nervous system. Love is an emotion. It is made with neurotransmitters and electrical current over complex circuitries of neurons that have evolved in the mammalian world as a mechanism for bonding, which enhances likelihoods of survival. Love is not a disembodied force out there in the

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world, like a radio signal our brains either receive or don't. Love does not exist outside of nervous systems, unlike love *poems* or love *letters* or films about love *affairs*, which are all merely relics of the experiencing of this emotion, cultural memorializations of the effects of this particular physiological phenomenon.

In fact, a supernatural entity, such as any god is supposed to be, would be the *one* entity that, by definition, could *not* be the source of love, or even the lowest ranking *participant* in its pleasures and pains. Out of the more than 14 billion years our universe has existed, it wasn't until the last half a billion on our specific planet that nervous systems are known to have come into being in their most rudimentary form. *Creative intelligence is a late feature of our universe, not an early one.* You can clearly and unequivocally map the development of intelligence in one form or another from simple life forms through less simple ones all the way up through dolphins, octopi, ravens, border collies, and on to the most astute of our own species. And that special type of intelligence we associate with top-down creative design, such as might be used to create a useful tool, let alone the UNIVERSE—is *ridiculously recent*; a few million years at best in order to accommodate even the most rudimentary tool usage. So, thanks to religious thinking, it is easier to attribute the top-down creation of a 14-billion-year-old universe to an entity that existed before intelligence could have possibly come into being than to contemplate the less seductive possibility that stuff happens and then there are consequences.

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And this same preference for the more romantic version of a narrative may be seen at work regarding love. The chief executive officer of one of the largest of the world's religious cults has no philosophical problem with granting the foundational cause of an emergent property of nervous systems to a supernatural being who, by definition, *cannot possibly have one*. It takes a considerable amount of willingness to ignore reason to such an egregious extent. Reason is the mechanism by which our species has put a man on the moon, yet this same discipline is to be distrusted the minute it proves inconvenient to the authority status of an unlikely, let alone unproven, being.

It is not surprising, therefore, to see the extent to which mystery is marshalled to the aid of reason's absence in the pursuit of superstitious belief in the supernatural. Mystery serves as the perfect "black box," that concept discussed above in which, in religion's case, the actual workings *must* remain unknown in order to be better revered. And this is particularly convenient in the case where it is clear there is nothing in the box that could actually supply even a semblance of veridical explanatory power.

A Thumbnail Autobiographical Sketch
For the Back Cover of My Next Bestseller

(An Attempt to Define *a* Self
Toward Further Identifying, Specifically, *My* Self)

Who am I?

Immediately upon asking myself this question, I am aware of a sensation of standing too close for the perspective necessary toward seeing it fully as well as the need, therefore, to take a substantial step back. For, here I can ask a broader, more fundamental, question that must inevitably serve as its foundation. This question is, of course, *What* am I? And to *this* I offer the following attempt at a definition.

I am a living narrative: the pattern-seeking, meaning-making, narrative *process* of an embodied brain operating in an environment. This narrative “I” answer to is *constructed*, not found *as is* in either my genome or the world. Though based on a unique genetic inheritance that develops into neural networks that grow to create this narrative, it is only upon an ongoing *reciprocal interaction* of this system with its environment, both outside and inside the embodied brain, that such a narrative can come to fruition. Therefore, it becomes clear that this narrative is not a *thing* but a continuous and evolving *process* of systems organization supervening upon a biological one. Furthermore, this mental process that supervenes upon the physiological one, is itself entirely predicted by the structure and nature of my bodily experience,

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even to the level of the largely metaphorical language of its narrative structure.

Although created by my embodied brain functioning in an environment, this process is further shaped at a higher level by its interaction with other sentient agents who, in the course of my interaction with them, validate and critique my specific identity profile of behavior characteristics, all according to the rules of a culture. And it is through this interaction between my received and developed biology and the culture in which it thrives that my reality is most fully constructed, helping me navigate between sustenance and danger in the reality my wetware is able to predictively construct from inside the dark confines of my skull.

For, it is here, in the quiet of this sheltered control center, that my entire nervous system, along with the body in which it is embedded and reciprocally integrated, is regulated and organized among its variously-focused workings, a very small proportion of which left sensible to me after percolating up into the scope of my consciousness while the vast bulk of it is left to operate beneath this level, thereby avoiding the information overload, or bottleneck, that would result from any attempt at monitoring so many independent robotic processes (fixed action patterns) in a unified way. Therefore, this constructed sense of selfhood seems to have evolved as a convenient user interface, wherein a severely limited amount of networking is made to *seem* as if it is actually the entirety, efficiently simplifying the dazzling blur of information

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both out there *and* in according to an inherited hierarchy of prioritization that allows more strictly-regulated processes to operate without exaggerated interference from those less-regulated ones. And this user interface, which has evolved to wield an easily recognizable *feel* of cohesion it does not actually deserve, becomes my sense of identifying selfhood. In other words, it is an ongoing process that necessarily pretends to a level of control over its world it cannot possibly wield.

Despite the powerful reliance this *sense* of selfhood has on its underlying physical mechanisms, which are determined by genes and development in an environment and not by the will of agency, it nonetheless maintains a certain level of control over itself and environment and hence may be said to retain some level of what is called “free will.” This is not the type and level of undetermined agency that philosophers call “libertarian” free will, which is little more than a strain of Cartesian Dualism in that it treats thought and embodied brain as two independent substances by insisting upon that former’s ultimate lack of reliance on the latter. Rather, it is a realization that the freedom to choose comes in degrees upon a spectrum, in this case according to a synthesis of physicalist notions of bottom-up causation and top-down concepts of emergent properties of mind that cannot be reduced effectively to their smallest underlying parts.

Ultimately, therefore, it seems safe to consolidate our definition somewhat as follows. *I am a meaning-making organizing pattern that*

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discriminates the most salient information from out reality's chaotic jumble of stimulae in order to safely navigate a confusing, dangerous world by constructing a simplified simulacrum of it, tweaked by input from the environment, as part of a reciprocally-interactive narrative we think of as a "self," which in turn is merely a conveniently simplified feel of authorial control serving as our equivalent of a user interface.

What we refer to here as "I" here cannot be known by means of examining my embodied brain alone, as it is not *the same* as, nor limited to, this physical system but is rather the emergent *process* supervening upon it in all its top-down *and* bottom-up *reciprocal* workings. And, therefore, when this functioning organism I call "mine" ceases to function, this organizing, meaning-making process I call "me" ceases to exist *in any form*, excepting only *what is represented of it* in the minds of others and, ultimately, in their own similarly constructed narratives.

Of course, we commonly speak of another way in which this narrative—or *any* narrative a nervous system creates, for that matter—survives death in the minds of others, namely through some recipe for its replication in other minds. These are culturally-mediated representations afforded by language and other means of cultural communication between minds. For example, this essay I am writing may be seen as such a recipe to be followed by another human nervous system toward replicating this thought of mine that would otherwise perish upon the death of my memory system. But like the recipe for baking a bread, this one has none of the physical features associated

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with the end product, remaining therefore merely a set of instructions for replicating its experience in another mind.

This is because consciousness, through all its various bodily and computational levels of operation, is *a product of a working nervous system* rather than a mere transmitter of some separable universal substance. And regardless of how plausibly separate its user-interface sense of unified self makes it *seem* to its operator, this product remains vulnerable for all its emergent characteristics to the proper workings of that biological system upon which it supervenes. Destroy a certain neural circuit or network and you eliminate its emergent characteristics. There is now no environment left in which to support it. It is the same with any thought a mind can conceive. Unless it has been formed into a replicating recipe for re-experiencing in another nervous system, whether through language or art, it ceases to exist once the lights go out.

O.K. Now that I have offered something of a definition of *what* I am, our more specific initial question of *who* I am may be better framed and more subtly explored. This “who” merely asks if there is a discernable and memorable profile of behavioral characteristics that identifies my own specific pattern-seeking, meaning-constructing, narrative-weaving process. In other words, it asks what kind of “portrait” can be assembled from out of all the features distinguishing this unique reciprocal interaction of a connectome *with the experiences* of its relationship to its environment. Therefore, this “I” *happens* upon a broad spectrum of contrasting, and often contradictory, expectations of a

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navigated reality. It is built upon a substrate of evolutionarily programmed neural connections that have been developmentally and experientially tweaked with the help of sensory input from the outside as well as the inside, all discriminated within a dialogue admitting a constellation of contextually-varied perspectives, desires, proclivities, sensitivities, association trains, and identifying narratives, much of which contingent on feedback from other minds with whom mine comes into contact.

This portrait is, necessarily, a broad simplification of measurable *tendencies* rather than a precise map. Therefore, my “who” is impossible to pigeon-hole with any useful accuracy, though it *can be* relatively easy to understand, eventually – this through open, caring, non-judgmental dialogue. In this way, and in many others, I am not a whole lot different, in the long run, from most everyone else.

And, finally, getting closer to an answer to of our initial question, that specific identity vignette I associate with “me” might include such behavioral tendencies as suggested in this following description my embodied brain has computed from its own subjectively biased survey: a quiet, introspective, ever-curious, skeptical (though trusting and uncynical), pragmatic, compassionate, sensitive (as opposed to sentimental), acceptance-seeking lover of living who much prefers negotiated cooperation to “winning” and is more satisfied by creative probing, artistic expression, and closely examined living than to competition for status, fame, or material gain.

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However, the above list of characteristics reflects, hazily at best, merely how “I” (this particular collection of experience-tweaked aptitudes and behaviors posing as a user interface) see myself and not necessarily how others out there see me. I could be wrong. In fact, in some aspects perhaps *way* wrong.

II. Professional Lectures

(Two Lectures on the Methodology of Art Appraising)

Lecture #1:

Towards an Anatomy of Authentication:

What’s it All Mean for the Appraiser?

Preliminary Note: I delivered the following lecture to Members of the American Society of Appraisers on Friday, March 27, 2015 at The Yale Club, 50 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, as part of the 2015 ASA Personal Property Conference: “Current Issues in Determining the Authenticity in Visual Art and Objects, The Catalogue Raisonné in Art Scholarship, and Value in the Marketplace.”

Good morning. So far in these talks, we’ve heard ample testimony to the complex challenges confronting those who would perform explicit authentications. We’ve also heard persuasive evidence of why these

Professional Lecture #1: *Toward an Anatomy of Authentication* – continued

challenges are so often worth the effort. But for those of us who are appraisers and not specialist scholars of art history, we need to understand this process and its role in the art market from a wider perspective – meaning, of course, one that includes *us*, most specifically in our capacity of *reporters* of authenticity rather than *judges* of it. And toward this end I ask you to indulge me this morning in employing an analogy from an altogether different field – that of physiology – in maintaining a wider perspective that keeps *us* in the overall picture. I think the physiology analogy is particularly useful toward our goal due to the visceral obviousness of the physiologist's concern for systems analysis thinking, wherein a component part of an organism is understood not merely in isolation but *systemically* – that is, concert with its other parts.

I see this as an approach that can help us view the complex organism that is the art world, and in particular *our* role in it, *holistically*. Students of physiology often study the *pathology* of an anatomical structure in order to gain a better understanding of the *healthy* specimen at work in its natural environment. I believe the same approach can prove educational in our field of endeavor. Yes, when *we* allow ourselves to observe how the various component parts of authentication can sometimes *fail* to provide useful predictors of the object's truthful identification and reasonably expected marketability, we are then in a better position to understand how these elements should, and often do, ideally work together.

Professional Lecture #1: *Toward an Anatomy of Authentication* – continued

These component parts may be identified as: 1.) connoisseurship; 2.) provenance; 3.) scholarship; and 4.) scientific testing. (I believe this order to be significant, both in as a hierarchy of sequence *and* importance, for reasons I'll get to later.) And I observe that they tend to fail us as predictors mostly when we lose sight of their systemic interrelation and succumb to focusing, conveniently, on one of them – usually the lowest hanging fruit – to the relative ignorance of another. I intend to conclude my survey of some of these pathologies with a taxonomy of sorts, one I hope will invite more skillful practitioners than me to come and enlarge it toward a useful anatomy of this whole structure of thought we call “authentication.”

Now, what *precisely*, do explicit authenticators do when they're at work? I think it safe to say that, *ultimately*, they extract uncertainty from an object's apparent identification – *particularly* as pertains to *authorship attribution*. This complex operation may be seen to alter the object's attributed characteristics, conferring status on the object that can change even its perceived *role in society*.

For example, a chair from whose apparent identification the uncertainty has been officially removed regarding its authorship attribution to Thomas Chippendale – in other words, one that has been officially recognized to bear Thomas Chippendale authorship – may be seen to have suddenly *lost* its functional value, as it will tend to be perceived as something to study, relish, and lend to exhibitions rather than to sit on. Furthermore, this operation is intended to save the health

Professional Lecture #1: *Toward an Anatomy of Authentication* – continued

of the surrounding tissue of validity that is the reputation of the object's creator or genre.

As we have heard over the last few days, these complicated, nuanced operations tend to be the province of a select few recognized authorities of extremely concentrated focus of expertise (the "expert")—some spending a lifetime studying the work of one artist or sometimes even a particular decade of that artist's life and work. (In other words, don't try this at home!) And the theaters that serve as operating rooms for these reputation-threatening procedures tend to be, *at least in theory*, environments sterilized of the pathogens of bias, such that would infect connoisseurship perspective and threaten the proliferation of new uncertainties. This is to say they tend to happen in the academe rather than the marketplace—even though, ironically, it is in this latter environment in particular that our patient will be most noticeably observed to have died.

Now, all of us working professionally in the art world, whether as scholar, curator, registrar, lawyer, underwriter, journalist, auction cataloguer, or appraiser, *initially* approach the art object from the *same basic perspective* of an apparent identification. This most rudimentary understanding of the physical and attributed characteristics of an object is not yet an authentication, as it still lacks *explicit* validation or warranty as such. In other words, it has not yet had its uncertainties removed.

An example of an "apparent identification" might be found in the title line of an appraisal or auction catalogue entry, such as "**An**

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American Chippendale Mahogany Side Chair,” a general descriptive tag that observes the property in question to possess certain attributes, such as: **a.)** *functionally*, something one can sit on; **b.)** *compositionally*, something crafted at least primarily of the wood of the mahogany tree; and **c.)** *culturally*, something made in America during the period when Thomas Chippendale’s *Directory* still wielded a significant relatively contemporary influence. Only the uninitiated would read such an *implicit* attribution as an *explicit* authentication of a chair made in America by the British designer-craftsman Thomas Chippendale.

Such a misunderstanding would stem directly from the question of what would be a reasonable expectation of a *non-specialist* reader of a descriptive identification found in an appraisal report or sales catalogue. The writer of that line merely identifying the property *as it would be properly recognized in the market*, while the uninitiated (or hopelessly pedantic) reader, knowing little of the actual role of such a writer in society, has misinterpreted this authority as something bigger than intended.

Now, an estate or probate lawyer might have to cut a similarly wide berth around the precise denotations asleep in an Apparent Identification whenever citing a bequest in the legal instrument known as a Will. For, when the testator directs, “I leave my collection of etchings to my nephew Alphonse,” the lawyer is unlikely to hire a print scholar to ferret out from the collection those apparent etchings that are *actually* drypoint engravings and therefore, *technically at least*,

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extraneous to that bequest. And when Alphonse dies and leaves his uncle's collection to the local museum, we can be fairly certain the museum's curator is not going to rely on the verbiage of the will to lay to rest questions of explicit authentication of these items as bona fide "etchings."

So, the appraiser, cataloguer, registrar, or lawyer, each working in the capacity of implicit identifier in the course of their work describing physical objects, labors under the reasonable expectation that the intended reader of their work will not confuse such an innocent identification for an explicit *guarantee of authenticity*.

Therefore, for those of us waiting *outside* the operating room in which the diligent doctors of art history are at work extracting uncertainties from identifications, we need to respect the agreed boundaries of our professional role in the complex organism that is the art market. As appraisers, our professional role in society has long been recognized to constitute an authority *not* on authorship authenticity, *per se*, but rather *on the market*. Of course, we mustn't mistake this distinction as a convenient doctor's note excusing us from our responsibilities as *reporters* on authenticity, a role that should be seen as *integral* to our professional standard of care exercised toward properly identifying relevant market, among other things. But while the expert scholar's explicit authentication is a judgment of authorship, our appraisal report remains at bottom *a judgment of value* and *not* of authorship—this despite the fact that it can be read as an *implicit* attribution of same.

Professional Lecture #1: *Toward an Anatomy of Authentication* – continued

Now, before we don our scrubs and reach for our scalpels to dissect the first of our market specimens today, we would profit by revisiting our understandings of the terms “authentic,” “inauthentic,” “fake,” and “fraud.” There is good reason to suspect that every one of us in this room who performs valuation services and has been doing so for more than just the last couple of months, has at least once in our career unwittingly appraised an item of personal property that was inauthentic when we presumed it to be authentic.

By *inauthentic* I mean something that should be correctly identified as something *other than* what its physical and attributed characteristics would normally suggest in the requisite arena of our appraisal challenge (the appropriate marketplace). This seems to me a safe supposition, given the alarming published statistics. In a popular book on art forgery I’ll mention a bit later [Laney Salisbury & Aly Sujo, *Provenance: How a Con Man and a Forger Rewrote the History of Modern Art* (New York: Penguin, 2009)], mention is made of an astonishing estimate that anywhere from 20 to 40 percent of the artworks on the mainstream art market are either outright fakes or genuinely old works that have been doctored to fit a more valuable style or artist. (See p. 236.) In the 1990s in Italy alone, the authors report the Italian Art Police Unit to have seized more than 60,000 fakes.

And these statistics only refer to those items for which there exists a *consensus* as to their status as fakes. Were we to take into consideration the enormous number of artworks, both in and out of the market, that

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have their authenticity given and taken away again by successive waves of experts, these numbers would become even more frightening.

Now, when we say “fake” or “forgery” in the world of collectible art and antiques we are *not* necessarily discarding the item from the realm of collectability or from the traditional conduits of sale. We are merely making a statement as to how this particular object would be understood as to its valid identification as a cultural relic and, eventually therefore, as a market commodity.

The slide on the screen shows a *forged* fake – not just a fake of Claude Monet’s *In the Woods at Giverny*, but a *forgery of that fake* – a painting executed either by, or at least under the auspices of, a London bookmaker named Ken Talbot, a painting intended to be taken for a fake by the celebrated Hungarian art forger Elmyr de Hory (b. 1906 in Budapest, the subject of Clifford Irving’s 1969 book *Fake!* and featured with Irving in Orson Welles’ 1976 documentary “F for Fake”). The painting was one of two forged fakes after Monet put up for auction at Cordy’s an auction house in Auckland, New Zealand. According to the *New Zealand Herald*, Cordy’s had to withdraw the two paintings that had been consigned and promoted as forgeries of Monet by de Hory, “after they were discovered to be, well, fake de Horys.” They were identified as fraudulent de Hory paintings by someone holding himself out to be the reigning expert in de Hory forgeries (not the same as forged de Horys), a man named Mark Forgy, who was the late forger’s live-in bodyguard and companion. Talbot claimed he bought 400 paintings from de Hory, but according to Forgy,

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he painted most of them himself. It later came out that Forgy qualified his statement to indicate that Talbot had not necessarily painted these fakes himself but had others create the fake de Horys and that the source may have been Asian. The auctioneer at Cordy's said the house was "astonished to find that there was a market in faking faker's art works" and hopes "this does not start a market trend." It seems that this fear would be well founded, as big prices are knowingly being paid for so-called Legitimate Fakes, such as those being painted by John Myatt in England and sold for prices in the range of \$15,000-20,000.

But the fear of such a market trend is unnecessary, as this market is *already* here. What we need to anticipate with open eyes is the next level: *those who fake the fakers of fakes*. Perhaps there's comfort to be taken yet in the relative youth of this market; when this fake de Hory forgery of a Monet, along with another, were eventually put back up for sale, this time properly identified, they fetched the equivalent of only about \$770 and \$1,386 respectively.

We find the term "Authentication" used widely in our culture (including non-art related uses, such as computer technology and political science), and through hearing it used popularly, it becomes inviting to think of it as just one ingredient that you add to a commodity to give it value. For example, that thing that was missing the first time around when this 18" x 24" oil sketch by John Constable for his *Salisbury Cathedral on the Meadows* (one of five sketches for this 1831 masterpiece recently purchased by the Tate) was offered at Christie's, London on

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June 10th of 2013 and sold for a tad over \$5,000 as compared with its reoffering at Sotheby's, New York, only about 18 months later (on January 29, 2015), when it sold for just a tad over \$5 million. Yes, this represented an increase of some 500 times on *pretty much the same painting*. I say "pretty much" because a professional cleaning had been performed on the painting in between—one correcting heavy "retouching" with a dark and opaque pigment back at the turn of the last century—and because it was now accompanied by a statement by a respected authority on the artist (former Tate curator Anne Lyles) accepting it as a missing study for a very important work of the artist.

So let us take a look at this concept of Authenticity close enough to see what makes it tick:

Authenticate (from the medieval Latin *authenticare*: to make authentic) is a transitive and reflexive verb meaning "**to invest a thing with authority; to establish the validity of; to establish the claims of something to a particular character or authorship.**" Therefore, a typical definition of an authenticator is "one *who guarantees* a thing as valid, authoritative, etc." Or at least this is the basic *denotation* of the word authentication.

When we introduce the enzyme of *usage* to this denotation, however, we'll see emerging from its outline a *connotation* that has significant resonance for us—that of *implicit* authentication, otherwise known as "**Apparent Identification**" (or a "*readily* apparent identification"). While there are those whose job as highly focused experts includes

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publishing statements of fact that attempt to lay to rest (at least temporarily) questions of the reasonableness of attributing a certain work to creation by a certain hand or collective of hands—a responsibility known as **Explicit Authentication**—there are others of us, such as the majority of us in this room today, whose job is to correctly recognize and identify such properties as particular types of sales commodities. Of course, in our attempt to do this, we may need to *report on* the existence or lack of existence of these explicit statements of guarantee that would be accepted by a consensus of the players in the market, but as reporters on the market we are rarely involved in pronouncing explicit authentications *ourselves*.

Jessica L. Darraby, in her impressive *Art, Artifact & Architecture Law* (Thompson/West, 2005 [10th Anniversary Edition]; brought out again in 2008 in a very expensive 2-vol. set retitled *Art, Artifact, Architecture & Museum Law*), puts it quite succinctly [on p. 57 of the 10th [2005] edition under 2:30: Appraisals, certifications and authentications]: “Appraisals are judgments about *value*, authentications are judgments about *authorship*. While one can impact the other, they are not co-terminous.”

On p. 39, under her summary of the CROSSAQ [Condition, Rarity, Ownership, Size, Subject Matter, Authorship, and Quality] factor, she writes: “Authorship is the core of authenticity, the identification of the relationship of the artist to a particular work. Authorship is the most complicated legal and arts issue, and the terms “authentication,” “attribution,” and even “appraisal” are often erroneously interchanged.

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One of the striking features of this complete organism of authentication as it may be observed to operate in the context of the market is that, like a physiological system, the relative strengths of one component over another can have *significant* compensatory effects. For example, if we place disproportionate reliance on provenance in our attempt to lay questions of authenticity to rest, we risk letting the connoisseurship component of authentication atrophy. Or if we put our feet up once a scientific test has been performed, we might miss an otherwise noticeable red flag in the provenance.

So, let's begin by looking at some of the unsung *dangers* of provenance. First, a look at how great provenance can help atrophy connoisseurship and actually facilitate the proliferation of the inauthentic.

One of the most astonishing of all cases of art forgery ever dissected was perpetrated not so much by a great *art forger*, per se, as by a great *provenance forger*. He was an expert con man who succeeded in passing off forgeries of 20th-century masters he commissioned from an unfortunate, desperate painter who had fallen into his confidence and with whose help he had turned the London art market on its head. In the book *Provenance: How a Con Man and a Forger Rewrote the History of Modern Art* (by Laney Salisbury & Aly Sujo) (New York: Penguin, 2009) we see how this con man, John Drewe, and his lackey, John Myatt, were able to pawn off to the art world fakes of varying qualities because of Drewe's sly ability to produce and manipulate provenance. For me, the

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most salient moment in this engaging page-turner happens already on p. 85, after we watch Drewe infiltrate the Tate Gallery's archives and contaminate these files with information he stole from the Institute of Contemporary Arts (who had them in storage) so that the forgeries he's having Myatt paint are easily accepted as authentic. Myatt had been used to nervous secrecy in perpetrating his forgeries for Drewe until the latter had succeeded in preparing the forged provenances well enough. The authors write:

Finally Myatt could paint in broad daylight... Because Drewe was manufacturing solid provenances for his paintings, he could relax. He no longer worried about producing the "perfect" forgery, because he realized that when the documentation was good enough, dealers were willing to overlook aesthetic flaws. If the provenance could be verified at the Tate, the V&A, or the British Council archives, all the better.

In other words, because all eyes were on the provenance, less attention was being paid to other components of authenticity, particularly what should be the most important one—the visual persuasiveness of the painting style and technique—suggesting that the market is willing to see something as looking right when it wants it to be right. This tendency, it seems to me, remains the Achilles heel of the art world, both in the market and in the academe. The human brain has evolved to be hardwired to fill in dots and complete blanks in order to match our expectations with the contours of the outside world. And it can and does work against us in many ways, this being one of them.

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The next slide shows a portrait miniature depicting the likeness of the Kurfürsten Friedrich Christian von Sachsen, Prince Elector of Saxony, circa 1751, done after a pastel by Anton Raphael Mengs (German, 1728-79). Many years ago, I was asked to appraise the Fair Market Value of this portrait miniature in order that a tax deduction could be enjoyed for the charitable contribution of this piece to a distinguished museum in Philadelphia. The donor who *would have* (alas) enjoyed this deduction had inherited the piece and believed it to be, according to family tradition, a portrait of a much more distinguished personage: that none other than of King Louis XVI of France.

Now, the donor was a direct descendent of the distinguished Francis Hopkinson, the famous American author, musician, Delegate from New Jersey to the 2nd Continental Congress and signer of the Declaration of Independence. And as Hopkinson had traveled in very high circles, it seemed reasonable, or at the very least, not *unreasonable*, that a likeness of the French King might have been given to an ancestor of this sort. At any rate, no one had questioned the attribution of the picture's sitter for a couple of hundred years. *Until, that is, an appraiser exercising due diligence came along.*

Now, of course, as I maintained earlier, it is not the role of the appraiser, generally or necessarily, to lay to rest questions of authenticity, whether relating to authorship or, well, "sittership" but only to discover, identify, and employ such attributions, when viable (i.e., recognized in the market), in the development of the appraisal.

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And being no historian, either of French royalty or American signers, it would have been inappropriate for humble old me to reject this attribution out of hand.

However, my job description necessarily involved satisfying such an identification *somehow*. It is not unusual for the appraiser to investigate basics in order to learn whether in fact an authority would have to be consulted and, if so, whom. And this is what I did, beginning with attempting to answer the burning question of just why this sitter *didn't look anything like* King Louis XVI. I began where anyone in my state of ignorance and concern might have started: culling images of every portrait of the King I could find.

Alas, none looked a thing like the man. But possibly as important, *neither did his attire*. For, I noticed that my sitter was wearing a medal on his coat that I had never seen on any portrait of Louis (XVI or otherwise) and thought I might start with that. So, I was able to discover that this medal was “The Star of the Polish White Eagle Order” (*Stern des Polnischen Weissen-Adler-Ordens*), which turns out to have been Poland’s highest decoration awarded to both civilians and military for their merits. It was officially instituted in 1705 by Augustus II the Strong and awarded to the most distinguished Poles and the highest-ranking representatives of foreign countries.

This led me to shift my focus away from French portraiture to German and Polish and, “bingo,” I found an illustration of an anonymous German portrait miniature of our sitter *in the identical*

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depiction...though...it was identified as a portrait of Kurfürsten Friedrich Christian von Sachsen after an original pastel by the important German artist Anton Raphael Mengs. This original portrait miniature, otherwise identical to my client's, is currently in the collection of the Gemäldegalerie, Dresden.

It turns out Mengs was court painter to the Elector of Saxony, and as our sitter was heir to this title (Kurprinz), and indeed eventually himself Elector of Saxony (5 October 1763) for a couple of months before his death, it should not be surprising to find that numerous versions of this portrait were made. This is the same Friedrich Christian, Prince Elector of Saxony, by the way, for whose eleventh birthday (on 5 September 1733) the great Johann Sebastian Bach composed his cantata BWV 213 (*dramma per musica: Lasst uns Sorgen, Lasst uns Wachen – Herkules auf dem Schweidewege*). And indeed, music appears to have been an important component of this man's life, having married (in Dresden on 20 June 1747) a renowned musician, Maria Antonia Walpurgis (Wittelsbach) (1724-1780, daughter of Karl VII, Elector of Bavaria [House of Wittelsbach], Holy Roman Emperor, 1742-1745). Perhaps it is music, therefore, that holds the mystery as to how this particular portrait came into the possession of Hopkinson (if indeed he *ever* owned it, as opposed to its having been acquired by a descendent of his).

Now so far, we are dealing with provenance in its above-mentioned capacity to help substantiate pedigree more than in its other capacities

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to measure various types of value, such as connoisseurship does. But let's turn to provenance in this use as a vetting tool.

To come across the stated provenance of J. Pierpont Morgan in the market may be highly meaningful or not meaningful whatsoever. If the item happens to be a painting by Fragonard or Vermeer or an important object of medieval or renaissance decoration, the comfort derived by his name in association with that piece can be enormously seductive inspiration to dig deep in the pocket in the minds of the right buying public. But this public would necessarily insist upon the specific details of that provenance that would help legitimize that object as something the famous financier/collector chose to be a part of his world. For such collectors would surely know enough of the purchasing habits of Morgan as to be wary of presuming that ownership equals appreciation.

Morgan historians, on the other hand, are quick to point out the fact that the man was known to acquire, if needed, significantly more than he really wanted just to get a specific piece. For example, Louis Auchincloss, in *J. P. Morgan: The Financier as Collector* (N.Y.: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1990) [p. 15], asks "How good was his taste? It is hard to tell in a man who bought whole collections, who was willing to purchase a vitrine of objets de vertu to obtain a single piece." [And on p. 59:] "One of the difficulties in assessing Morgan as a collector is that he bought almost everything. A man who buys another man's collection may be seeking a few jewels in a gallery of the second rate; it is hard to tell." Indeed, we often cannot know whether Morgan himself

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ever even saw the piece, let alone admired it for its aesthetic and/or historic attributes. Or it may have been something purchased by his librarian Belle da Coste Green, with or without his focused direction.

This portrait miniature [shown in the slide] of Louis II de Bourbon, Prince de Condé (1621-86), on porcelain, 1 ¼" oval, with provenance of J. Pierpont Morgan Collection, was offered by Christie's, London on June 24, 1935, lot 3, identified in the catalogue as having been painted by Pierre Bain and having been listed in Dr. G. C. Williamson, *Catalogue of the Collection of Miniatures, The Property of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1906-08*, vol. III, no. 433; *The Connoisseur*, August 1907. But this piece brought only £660 with a £700-900 estimate at Bonhams, London, on May 23, 2007 (lot 15), this *despite such stellar provenance*.

Likewise, there are many objects that have documentable provenance of Thomas Jefferson. The effect of such provenance on the item's marketability can be enormous, if only due to the "celebrity value" of this ownership as opposed to proof of high qualitative ranking or clear title. But two different well-documented objects found in Monticello can invite vastly different types of market response due less to the other attributes of the object than to the relative *centrality* of that object to Jefferson's life. For example, a clock that the famous man would thoughtfully and lovingly wind every day of his mature life would bear *significantly* more celebrity-value enhancement to market value than might a work stand sitting in the back hall that he might absent-mindedly walk past once a month. So, in both cases we must be

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careful to properly weigh the *centrality* of the subject item to the life, career, or collecting habits of its source of provenance in order to glean from that relationship the enhancement effect, if any, it might have on collector motivation.

Big prices *without* provenance.

So, just as an object with very impressive provenance of one of the great collectors of all times can have marginal if any enhancement on a mundane piece, a superlative piece can still inspire record-breaking market competition without any substantive provenance. For example, a very rare specimen of the above-mentioned top niche of the market would be the pair of large six-panel screens (each measuring 59 7/8" tall x 140 1/2" long) attributed broadly to 17th-century Japanese manufacture [the slide shows a pair of Japanese Edo-period painted gold-ground six-panel folding screens (*byobu*) of *Rakuchu-Rakugai-zu* genre ("Scenes in and Around the Capital")] that fetched \$962,500 (with an \$800,000-1,200,000 catalogue estimate) at Christie's (New York) on September 18, 2008 (lot 244 of their sale of Japanese & Korean Art), despite the *conspicuous* lack of literature, exhibition, or specific provenance citations. (Indeed, the provenance was so vague as to invite discomfort: "acquired by an American private collector in Kyoto, 1940s; acquired by the current owner from an American dealer, 1980s; from a Japanese institution." Compensating this lack of the usual citations was a seven-paragraph explanatory note about the history of the genre.) Just prior to the bursting of the Japanese art market bubble of the 1980s in

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1990, a price of \$1.76 million (nearly three times the catalogue estimate of \$400,000-600,000) was paid at Christie's, New York, for an example of this genre (a pair of these screens) attributed broadly to the first half of the 17th century (though in the catalogue note refined somewhat to the second quarter of the 17th century) (lot 168 of their sale 7048 of Fine Japanese & Korean Works of Art, March 29-30, 1990, New York sales rooms), setting then the record for a Japanese screen at auction. And *its* provenance was reported with an even more wantonly meaningless generality: "from the property of a gentleman."

So, we see that *provenance can be extremely misleading*. A piece correctly advertised as having come from the collection of J. Pierpont Morgan might indeed have *no* connoisseurship component to provenance, as the man may have never even seen the piece (or maybe did and was glad to get rid of it, etc.). But correct provenance can even be a *liability* rather than an asset, especially if it contradicts the market's expectation of what it wants a certain commodity to be. I will illustrate this with an example from my own direct experience after reminding you of that analogy I made at the beginning between a physiologist learning about a structure from its pathology and an appraiser learning about appropriate market from a provenance that's misreported or misunderstood.

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Heraldic Arms. Whose Arms? (Who Cares!)

Back in 1989 a dealer friend of mine asked for my help in trying to identify the particular British aristocrat whose coat of arms was depicted on a large relief-carved wood sign, such as might have been displayed outside the shop of a clothier in service to a Duke. I recognized the basic format of this heraldic achievement as that, generically, of the House of Windsor. But having no specific expertise in heraldry, I was at a loss as to identifying anything more detailed. No problem, however, I told him, as I was preparing to go to London the following week and would be glad to ask no less than the world authority on British heraldry. And so, armed with a large photograph of this impressively large carving (53" x 53"), I met the following week with the Chief Herald at London's College of Arms.

After pouring over a few different tomes at his elbow, our Chief Herald hemmed and hawed considerably over this photograph and then collected himself and apologetically inquired as to the possibility of his keeping the photograph to work on the puzzle over the next couple of days. He pointed out a couple very slight details that didn't quite dovetail with his expectation of whose this particular heraldic "achievement" might have been. And, as promised, he called me a couple days later, pleased to announce that he conclusively identified the achievement as having belonged to a Prince George William Frederick Charles, i.e., Prince George, The 2nd Duke of Cambridge (1819-1904), the oldest grandson of G.III and a cousin of Queen Victoria.

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Now, this George succeeded his father as 2nd Duke of Cambridge in 1850 and would not have earned these specific arms, blazoned as depicted here, until at least that year and, for some obscure reason, not actually until 1860, as made evident by the number of mullets seen across its mid-section. I returned to pick up the photograph and the printout he provided, describing in *excruciating* detail, supported by numerous bibliographic citations, the precise provenance of these arms (though, of course, not of the physical depiction of that armorial achievement). He emphasized to me that the carving itself could be safely dated on the basis of the particular “blazon” (description of armorial bearings as expressed correctly in the language of heraldry) seen represented in this achievement and, most importantly, *that it wouldn't have been before the year 1860.*

My friend eventually decided to consign this item to sale at a major New York auction house and entrusted to them this impressive piece of scholarship to help beef up the catalogue entry and win the confidence of bidders who might otherwise feel unsure as to how precisely to date it. The auction (Sotheby's, New York, sale 5995 of Important English Furniture, Decorations and Carpets in New York on April 7, 1990, lot 32) catalogued the piece as follows:

A Georgian oak and pine coat of arms, late 18th century...the arms are those of George William Frederick Charles, Duke of Cambridge.

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Now, the correct provenance proved that the man whose arms these were *wasn't even born in the late 18th century*, let alone appointed a craftsman or merchant to procure for him using this sign. The piece, given the fudged provenance, was successfully sold at a price commensurate with examples of the 18th century rather than the mid-19th, fetching about \$10,000 (with a \$5,000-7,000 catalogue estimate). The auction house may be seen by many to be merely doing their best job as advocate for their client by disregarding information that could be damaging to the sale. However, one could (*should*, really) argue that this does *not* absolve the house of criticism of an ethics breach, as such a practice endangers the public trust. Ultimately, it seems, the auction house had focused on what kind of market commodity this item truly represented. Its most likely buyer was not a historian of British heraldry or history or wood carving but a wealthy Brit or Anglophile intent on conjuring up the aristocratic ambience of the good old days. Such buyers would want such a piece to be at least 18th century and certainly not Victorian. And that's what this commodity had become in this case. Everyone was happy. Any potential buyer interested in learning more about the recipient of these arms could have easily learned the inconvenient truth about his dates. Given the healthy market response, it seems apparent that either no one did this or that some or many did and didn't care about the truth.

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The Emperor's New Clothes.

In 1837 Hans Christian Andersen captured an important sociological phenomenon in an unforgettable way with his story, "The Emperor's New Clothes," in which a couple of swindlers promise to make the vain Emperor a suit of clothing so fine as to be invisible to anyone unfit to see it and how layer upon layer of society signs on to pretend to actually see these garments for fear of appearing unfit for their position until a child, who is naturally ignorant of the politics, cries out at a procession that the Emperor is, well, **naked**.

Now, Andersen might as well have been reporting on the art market when he wrote this wonderfully potent parable. Those who sell or appraise collectible specimens of personal property, be they fine or decorative arts objects, are likely to have conspired, unwittingly or otherwise, in admiring the naked Emperor's raiment. This is because some conspiracies are just so vast and all-comprehending that the majority of honest observers can take part in them with impunity if only because to argue otherwise would be highly impractical to the point of absurd. This has been recognized by various students of markets over the years, but few so succinctly as the English furniture expert Herbert Cescinsky who, on the first page of his insightful 1931 book entitled *The Gentle Art of Faking Furniture* (London: Chapman & Hall, Ltd., 1931), stated the following:

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One does not require an expert, but an actuary, to tell the collector of English Furniture that, **in one year, more is shipped to America than could have been made in the whole of the eighteenth century.** [emphasis added]

Cescinsky endeavors to demonstrate how this must be so by estimating from national records how many families in 18th century Britain could have actually afforded to buy new furniture of any note, and he estimates that the amount of goods produced for as few as just a couple thousand families between 1730 to 1790:

...has equipped most of the millionaires' houses and apartments from New York to the Pacific Coast, to say nothing of the huge stocks in the hands of American dealers and department stores. What has been left has to be divided into what remains *in situ* and the residue left to reinforce English dealers' stocks. Little wonder, therefore, that the term "scarce" hardly describes the state of the market so far as genuine English furniture is concerned.

Remember please that our author is discussing the state of the market back in 1931—*nearly 85 years ago!* The number of supposed articles of 18th-century British furniture shipped from Britain to the U.S., not to mention scores of other countries in the world, *since* Cescinsky's book, would surely have staggered the imagination even of this most openly skeptical author. And, of course, as Mr. Cescinsky points out, this embarrassment of riches doesn't even reflect the tremendous quantities of "18th-century British furniture" seen everywhere in Britain itself. Anyone who has toured the National Trust houses and visited

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some of the London and regional auction houses and the endless array of furniture dealers throughout Britain has probably come away with the uneasy feeling that *they themselves* have seen more than could have been made in the period, let alone leave the country.

Yet, when we move about in the market for this furniture today, it seems as if Cescinsky's very persuasive and reasonable deduction has been conveniently ignored. On any day of the year, you can find an auction somewhere offering dozens if not hundreds of pieces of the stuff, let alone the hundreds of dealers with store rooms of it— and all of this forgetting the vast permanent collections maintained around the world—and nearly all using the seemingly innocent apparent identification including the names of one of the first three Georges. Clearly, an appraiser contemplating date-authentication of a piece from the perspective of a curator or historian rather than as a reporter on the market can fall short of the proper forecasting of market performance. (Likewise, it is important for the appraiser to express qualitative rankings in such a way as avoid appearing to *promote* the item as a dealer might.)

Indeed, some experts recommend disregarding provenance altogether in the process of authentication, *at least during the connoisseurship stage*, as it can allow us to talk ourselves into finding the physical attributes of a piece persuasive even where they may not otherwise be. For example, Myrna Kaye, in her wonderfully astute and witty *Fake, Fraud, or Genuine?: Identifying Authentic American Antique*

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Furniture (Boston: Little, Brown and Company [a New York Graphic Society Book], 1987), p. 181:

Try to do the impossible—disregard even splendid provenances. An impressive provenance can grow without a critical inspection ever having been made. A card table featured in the 1929 sale of the famous Howard Reifsnnyder collection, illustrated in *House and Garden* two years earlier, and known to collectors as number 1030 in Nutting's *Furniture Treasury*, as number 1516 in Edgar Miller's *American Antique Furniture*, and as a star of the 1947 Baltimore furniture exhibition and catalogue—was not skeptically examined until the 1960s. Then John Kirk, in his book *Early American Furniture*, and Yale's Gavan Collection staff, in the "Eye of the Beholder" exhibition, revealed that the table that had seemed a masterpiece was a fraud with a few old parts. The old, probably eighteenth-century English frame was largely of oak with some new veneer and inlay. The top was a reused one whose shadow is inconsistent with the frame. The fine inlay of the griffin contrasts with the coarse bellflowers on the legs. The defrauder, possibly from Baltimore, used enough Baltimore motifs to suggest the table's origin in that city in the Federal era. The table was made in the 1920s, when the Federal style and inlay furniture were much in vogue in both revival pieces and fakes.

What I believe is important here is *not* the fact of fraud, which is omnipresent in the art and antiques world, but that the *provenance helped obfuscate the realistic status of authenticity* rather than secure it.

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A less-than-obvious problem with disproportionate reliance on scientific testing.

Back in 1997, a holograph manuscript of a poem by Emily Dickinson, was put up for sale at auction in the New York sales rooms of Sotheby's. It turned out to have been a forgery, as both literary creation *and* as physical object, one made by a master forger who had until then made his fortune in creating documents embarrassing enough to the Mormon church as to make them want to buy them up at great expense whenever they appeared. Having been brought up as a practitioner of the faith, the forger, Mark William Hoffmann, had a keen awareness of our very human tendency of cutting a wide berth around reason when and where we are culturally prompted to do so (while remaining scandalized to do so when not).

For more information, see Simon Worrall, *The Poet and the Murderer: A True Story of Literary Crime and the Art of Forgery* (NY: Penguin, 2002), a book covering the forgery career and downfall (including imprisonment for murder) of Mark William Hofmann (b. 1954). It serves as an excellent inquiry into the phenomenon of how we endeavor to see things as we want to see them rather than what they are.

Hoffmann's fake Dickenson poem, composed by him as well as inscribed, was signed and dated *Emily 1871* and inscribed (in red pencil) *Aunt Emily* on the verso and written in black lead on blue-lined Congress paper manufactured in Boston similar to that she'd used in 1871 and 1874. Even Ralph Franklin at Yale University's Beinecke

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Library, the leading expert on Dickinson's "fascicles" (i.e., her improvised sewn booklets of poems), told Daniel Lombardo, Curator of Special Collections at the Jones Library in Amherst, that he was aware of the poem for a few years and was planning on including it in the new edition of his book of *Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*, due to come out in 1997. The catalogue estimate was \$10,000-15,000. It was brought for \$21,000 by Mr. Lombardo.

The Problem with Scholarship

Another component of Authenticity that is typically considered of huge import to the market is the above-mentioned component of Scholarship. As expert auction catalogue readers, we all know the warm feeling of validation that comes over us before a two-page spread of provenance and literature citations for a given offering, particularly when one of them happens to be a catalogue raisonné citation. A catalogue raisonné might be seen as the closest thing the art market has to what the real estate market has long enjoyed as a given: the "abstract of title." Yet, on closer inspection the two are not really all that similar. Due to the more opaque nature of the art market, wherein collectors enjoy the freedom of anonymity that a home buyer could never know, and due also to the more provisional nature of correctly identifying the creator of an artwork as opposed to a building, the art market will never quite enjoy the matter-of-factness of a real estate appraisal, which starts with a title search and abstract.

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However, something that *doesn't* make it into the Catalogue Raisonné isn't necessarily *inauthentic*. A glaring instance would be the lack of consensus among scholars of 17th century Dutch painting as to the list of authentic Rembrandts. The fate of this list has been in the hands of the Rembrandt Research Project, which recently disbanded after 42 years of purging his canon of hundreds of beloved works, then, towards the end, re-installing many of them. More light shed on this fascinating excursion by Alexander Forbes in the October 10, 2014 edition of *ArtNet News*, deliciously entitled "70 New Rembrandt Paintings Discovered," in which he quotes the *Wall Street Journal*, saying Ernst van de Wetering has published his findings in the sixth edition of the Rembrandt Research Project, what will be the organization's final volume. It was founded in 1968 by a group of Rembrandt experts. Van de Wetering is the only remaining member, and he says he's out to correct some decisions his peers got wrong. Forty-four pieces they stripped of attribution to him have been reinstated in this latest volume. "There was a tendency to say no to paintings," he said about the early years, "and that tendency was too strong." Adding these back brings the count of paintings believed to be genuine up to 340, up from the less than 300 since the 1980s – a number far short of the 714 thought to be by him back in the 1920s. The late Seymour Slive (1920-2014), celebrated art historian and expert on 17th-century Dutch painting, quipped "one more meeting of the Rembrandt Research Project and the artist will cease to exist!"

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But it Was Included in the Catalogue Raisonné?

Yet, regardless of how effective this citation may be in selling the piece, it may in its own right be meaningless in terms of literal proof of authenticity. And now another example from my own career.

Back in the 1980s, I received a call from an FBI agent who had hired my services over the years and asked if he could visit me with a guest from France for whom he was serving as a sort of facilitator. I was introduced to a police inspector from the city of Lyon who showed me a picture of a watercolor/gouache by Maurice Utrillo (1883-1955) and asked me if it looked familiar. It was, in fact, one I had appraised a year or two prior as part of an estate. He asked if I knew that it was a fake. I made some comment to the effect that I'd always harbored the rather prejudiced opinion that even the best of Utrillos looked like fakes to me...but that no, I did *not* know that and that I would not pretend to authority in such matters, knowing how riddled with fakes was this particular corpus of work. I added, somewhat defensively, that I appraised this piece with confidence in its authenticity *solely* on account of my having found it illustrated in the recently released 7th volume of the Catalogue Raisonné prepared by the artist's long-time dealer Paul Pétridès (1901-93), the Greek-Cypriot Parisian art dealer who was sole dealer for Utrillo since 1937. I figured I need say no more. My guest then smiled politely and asked if I knew that Mr. Pétridès was currently in prison, doing time for nefarious activities involving stolen art and

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writing fictitious certificates of authenticity on Utrillo paintings that he himself commissioned to be painted by a faker. “No,” I gulped.

It turned out that a major New York auction house a year or so after I’d appraised this item also found comfort in the appearance of it in this same catalogue raisonné – confidence sufficient toward offering it for sale catalogued *as* an Utrillo – and was able to successfully sell it within its estimate and, coincidentally, for almost exactly the Fair Market Value at which I’d appraised it for the estate. Our police inspector was here in the U.S. trying to gather up leads that would give him the smoking gun he needed to bring down this forgery ring. All this attention to fake Utrillos had been spurred no doubt by the noise made by Jean Fabris, the gentleman who had just recently acquired the *droit moral* (translating as “moral rights,” the right to control the fate of an artistic creation) for Utrillo and who became infamous for yelling “Fake!” at major auctions in which these pieces with Pétridès authenticity certificates came up. In the meanwhile, despite my police inspector’s conviction that the catalogue raisonné itself includes fakes from which Pétridès handsomely profited, the book is *still* widely cited at the major auction houses. This is not a mistake, however, as far as the market is concerned. Auction houses represent the seller, not the buyer, and *are*, unlike appraisers, advocates for their clients. Not citing the catalogue raisonné runs the risk of communicating to potential buyers that the piece is not in there, which, despite the dubiousness of many catalogues raisonné, does not sit well in the imaginations of these buyers.

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So, unless every piece in a catalogue raisonné has been proven to be fake, the default setting for purveyors of art appears to be over-inclusive rather than understated. Thus, the catalogue raisonné, sometimes described as the closest entity art appraisers have to the real estate appraiser's "abstract of title," is much more vulnerable to human error of every type, *including that of conflict of interest*. And this problem seems unlikely to go away. With the ever-increasing costs of producing a proper catalogue raisonné, this type of project is increasingly being developed under the aegis of a major gallery known for the offering of that artist or school. And this has the effect of making the host gallery the unavoidable funnel through which all candidates for inclusion must pass toward the much-coveted status of inclusion.

Dissecting Perplexities: The Authentication of Chinese Paintings (a.k.a., "Chinagate: The Perfect Storm").

So far, we've seen some unsightly examples of what can happen when we put disproportionately more store in the provenance of an item than in the other components of Authentication. But I'd rank most of this as bordering on *child's play* compared with the problems faced by the authenticator of traditional Chinese paintings. Consider, for example, the following painting:

Along the Riverbank, a famous Chinese hanging scroll painting (ink on silk, 87" x 43") long attributed to the 10th century master Dong Yuan (circa 934-62), described by the celebrated Chinese

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scholar/collector/dealer/artist C. C. Wang as “The Mona Lisa of Chinese paintings,” was promised as a gift to the Metropolitan Museum of Art by Chinese-American New York financier Oscar L. Tang – this to *enormous* fanfare, as it was used to memorialize the reopening of the Met’s Chinese Galleries in 1997 after significant expansion renovations. Wen C. Fong, Professor Emeritus at Princeton, and the consultative chairman of the museum’s Asian department (as well as brother-in-law of the prospective donor, Mr. Tang), said about “Along the Riverbank”: “art history would not have happened that way without this painting.”

Then in 1991, the late Professor James Cahill (1926-2014, former curator of Chinese art at the Freer Gallery of Art in Washington between 1958 and 1965 and professor at Berkeley from 1965-95), announced that this long-revered painting of the 10th century was actually *a forgery of 20th century creation* – one specifically contrived by the great late master painter/forgery Zhang Daqian (1899-1983). Professor Cahill happened to make this particular announcement at a scholarly symposium at the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery in Washington in 1991. He was effectively booed off the stage. Please note, this is not your average scholarly argument over whether a certain painting should be assigned to one master of the 10th century or another of, say, the 11th or 12th, but one in which the foremost authorities on the history of this genre cannot agree if something was executed over a thousand years ago or *merely within recent memory*. And note also that Cahill’s claim was not a tentative one to the nature of doubting the painting’s traditional attribution and even

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possibly the age and suggesting a likely candidate for reattribution, but a blatant one. No, he maintained it was a recent fabrication, and one by *none other than* Zhang Daqian. [In fact, well before this, in his *Index of Early Chinese Painters and Paintings* (1980, p. 48), Cahill wrote of *The Riverbank*: “Important early work? Or modern fabrication?”]

Carter B. Horsely comments on this as follows (in “Debate over Attributions...” in his “Chinagate” series in *The City Review*):

When an art historian thus reveals that his dating of old pictures has a built-in plus-or-minus variable of a thousand years he also uncovers for all to see the shifting bed of mud upon which understanding of early Chinese painting rests.

So incendiary was this declaration of Cahill’s that the Met found it necessary to convene an all-day seminar on December 11, 1999, at which a handful of the world authorities debated the question. Professor Cahill, along with Sherman Lee (former director of the Cleveland Museum), argued against the traditional attribution while Princeton Professor Wen C. Fong and the distinguished collector C. C. Wang [Wang Jiqian; 1907-2003, Chinese-born scholar/collector/dealer/artist based in New York City] argued for its 10th-century attribution.

Now, what makes this argument particularly tantalizing for our purposes here is the specific provenance of the piece: It was acquired by C. C. Wang from the last person in the world at this point you could want to have associated with it: namely, the great painter/forgery to whom Cahill had reattributed it: none less than Zhang Daqian himself

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(who just happened to be a good friend of Wang's). It should also be pointed out that Professor Fong had been the very one to have orchestrated the original acquisition by the Met of 25 celebrated early (Song/Yuan dynasty; roughly late 10th through mid-14th century) Chinese paintings from C. C. Wang's collection back in 1973 (for a then unheard-of price tag of \$2.5 million [which in those days was *a lot of money*; only three years earlier, for example, a mere \$5.6 million was paid for Diego Velázquez's *Portrait of Juan Pareja* [c. 1650; Met Museum], a sum that remained for *many* years the record price for *any* work of art]).

Some, if not *most*, of these 25 paintings have had *their* attributions seriously challenged too, and not only by our roving culprit, the indefatigable James Cahill. Nor only recently, either. Talk of Zhang Daqian's hand in the painting of some of these was heard even back close to the time of the purchase—this despite the fact that Wen Fenghad described the collection to Thomas Hoving as possibly “the greatest acquisition in the history of the museum.”

Detailed coverage of the December 11, 1999 seminar at the Met was published by Carter B. Horsely as “Metropolitan Museum Holds Chinese Art Symposium” in a series of reviews of the Met's ongoing Chinese painting authentication controversy called “Chinagate” in *The City Review*. A book co-edited by Fong appeared on the occasion of this symposium. Its full citation is Judith G. Smith and Wen C. Fong, Editors, *Issues of Authenticity in Chinese Painting* (New York: The Metropolitan

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Museum of Art, Department of Asian Art, 1999), published specifically for the international symposium “Issues of Authentication in Chinese Painting held on December 11, 1999 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Valerie Doran, a contributing editor to *Orientalism* magazine, had written an article in which the expert Maxwell Hearn had described *The Riverbank* as “the defining point between Tang and Song [dynasty] art,” comparing it in terms of relative importance to works by Giotto or Leonardo. She also quotes Wen Fong as stating that “Connoisseurship can narrowly be defined as the art of authentication, but more broadly can be said to mean taste, preference or even a reading of history.”

Now, although this definition of connoisseurship flies in the face of much I have been insisting on so far – I believe it to be dead wrong – I do see it as essential in understanding the paradigm shift in the scholarship and authentication of old Chinese paintings after Cahill’s exposure of the Myth of the “Amateur Painter,” as discussed in the next section. (For the sake of fairness, Cahill is thought to have softened a tad on his attribution on this painting in the last few years of his life, referring to *The Riverbank* merely as a “modern pastiche” rather than specifically as a fake created by a known modern artist. But this makes little difference, really, to the problems illuminated by his argument.)

Questionable Provenance as an Inescapable Component of the Scholar-Painter Convention of China.

The connoisseurship, scholarship, and collector market for traditional Chinese painting has long revealed at its bedrock an

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idealistic dichotomy that has little to do with technique quality – the dichotomy between the *lofty* “amateur artist” and the *lowly* “professional artist.” The first represents the pursuit of the *wenrenhua*, which translates to “literati painting,” the creation of the scholar-official (“mandarin”), whose high esteem in society is associated with the literary-artistic-philosophic sensibilities cultivated through book learning and “gentlemanly pursuits” untainted by any crass commercial concerns of the art market. The second type represents the technically proficient craftsman of painting who is seen to stoop to supplying the ready demand for “pretty pictures” that merely attempt to copy nature rather than truly *understand it* and who, in doing so, ignores, alas, the more “spiritual” qualities of great art, which cannot be explored in an environment tainted by market considerations. This tradition has existed for at least three quarters of a millennium, reaching all the way back to the time of Kubla Khan’s Yuan dynasty in the 13th century, when certain officials of the fallen Song dynasty refused to serve the government of the Mongol invaders and heroically retired into contemplative isolation and the private creation of art that symbolized the national tragedy of “barbarian” rule.

The late Professor James Cahill, whom I mentioned in regard to the famous/infamous painting, *Along the Riverbank*, published what I believe to be a book of paradigm-shifting power some two decades ago – one I believe should be mandatory reading for all scholars of traditional Chinese culture (and not just painting and calligraphy). It is

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entitled, *The Painter's Practice: How Artists Lived and Worked in Traditional China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). What I find so compelling and important about this book is the author's cogent argument for seeing the tradition of the amateur/professional dichotomy as a *mere social convention* of use to upper class in order to keep the lower rungs beneath them as slippery as possible—a convention *not at all* indicative of the way paintings were actually painted in China over these centuries. In other words, Cahill actually reveals to us in this book that it was indeed, *despite all the idealism*, the *market* that most consistently drove the painting of great paintings in China—at least from the 16th century on—even resulting in the stylistic developments of rapid brushwork as a means of obscuring traditional tests of authorship authenticity and allowing a wider practice of forgery. He sees the cult of the amateur painter in imperial China as a mythology of use to the literati to insure their respect by idealizing them as being above financial concerns. The amateur artist was seen as untainted by commercial practicalities; the professional as lacking the pure intentions of the real artist, who needed to remain above such earthly concerns. In reality, however, not only did many so-called amateur painters sell their work (albeit surreptitiously), but they even employed “ghostpainters” (our term for Tai-pi [Daibi], or “substitute brush”), signing them, though often with sobriquets that revealed to the artist himself the special status of these forgeries, to pawn them off as theirs in order to keep up with the market. All in all, the

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amateur/professional dichotomy was a long-established convention, like that of the “starving artist” in the West, of use to ennobling the product beyond what is evident to the naked eye in the work itself. It helps protect the status of the practitioner, keeping the art produced as a special commodity of higher value than placed on works of comparable technical quality produced under less “noble” conditions. And in this under less “noble” conditions. And in this book (and elsewhere in Cahill’s writings and lectures) he shows the cognitive dissonance at work between this myth and the real-life making of art.

For example, the Chinese painter Zheng Min (Anhui School, 1633-83) was described by his contemporaries (in the idealized language of the “amateur painter” mythology of the mandarin class) as a person of deep cultural refinement living quietly without concern for worldly matters, executing paintings, calligraphy, and poems without regard for the market but only for the satisfaction of himself and his close friends (this in direct contrast to the “professional painters” who tradition has lacking the essential untrammelled spirit necessary to the creation of great art due to their willingness to prostitute their skills for mere worldly comforts).

However, *this same Zheng Min happened to leave a diary*, which was discovered only in the early 1980s. This juicy chronicle reveals what were quite obviously the artist’s *unofficial* (i.e., real) concerns, including his refreshingly *deep* concern for worldly matters, like putting food on

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the table. I quote here from Cahill in *The Painter's Practice* [all emphasis added]:

- [1672, 17th day] Cloudy. Yen-ch'ing and K'uan-chung “moistened my brush” [**i.e., gave me money for painting**] and I added bamboo and rock for them [presumably for some previously done painting];

- [1673, 6th month, 3rd day]. Mu-ch'ien ordered a painting for Hsü Erh-ming, **and I used the money for food**;

- [1674, 2nd month, 6th day]. Cloudy. After supper I visited Tzu-yen, and entrusted him with three paintings **to sell for me**;

- [1676, 12th month, 4th day]. This line of poetry came to me: **“To get through the year, I need the money from selling paintings.”**

I can guarantee you one thing: Poems like this do *not* end up inscribed on the paintings we find in the museums and major market venues. They get translated more typically into something like this: “I painted this for Mu-ch'ien, whose heart is pure as driven snow,” etc. And the problem with the inconvenient truth found in this diary is the huge implication it has for the weight historically given to inscriptions on paintings and colophons in constructing provenance toward authentication. One need not be an alarmist to read this as the slippery slope of a paradigm shift in understanding authenticity and the hugely obfuscatory role that provenance can play toward its determination.

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Because of the perpetuation by the mandarin class of this mythology of the lofty amateur artist, there exist few records of the reality of day-to-day living by these men. Just as we don't expect to find sex depicted in Victorian novels, we shouldn't expect candor in the tradition of the mandarin. There was a conspiracy of silence about the practical realities in the lives of scholar-painters. "The exaltation of amateur art-making was also a late move in the centuries-long campaign to legitimize painting as an upper-class cultural pursuit, not just an artisan's craft—an effort that is paralleled, of course, in the history of Western art and art theorizing, although nothing that quite corresponds to the Chinese preference for amateurism is to be found there.

Cahill points out that the cultural prejudice toward amateur painters over professional ones was complicated, ironically, by the fact that from the mid-Ming (15th/16th centuries) on, there was an increase in the practice of painting on an income-earning basis by learned and cultured people, this due to rising levels of affluence that lead to a surfeit of men qualified for bureaucratic service (the occupation of the amateur scholar-painter), many of whom having to turn to other talents, including painting, to make ends meet. Those in this situation "required and received absolution, so to speak, from the sins of professionalism, just as their audiences needed constant reassurance that the painters they admired and supported were free of those sins." The tradition has it that the amateur painters never painted for money but only exchanged their paintings as gifts. In reality, though they were often

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given as gifts, these “gifts” tended to be commodities of barter, in which “gifts” of things the mandarin needed (like more painting supplies, or wine, or things that he could sell for cash through a dealer) were bartered for the paintings. The irony here, of course, is that the conventional taboo about painting for financial remuneration and its attendant categorical respect for work created outside of monetary remuneration created a market still in effect today that valued this work head and shoulders over the more honest production by professional painters.

Summing Up: *Toward an Anatomy*

We have seen that different sectors of the art world, such as occupied by curators, dealers, collectors, auctioneers, appraisers, journalists, lawyers, and judges, often use terms like *provenance* and *authenticity* in varying connotative senses that do not necessarily line up to share the same boundaries. We have also seen that varying amounts of weight are often placed on provenance in the pursuit of proven authenticity, sometimes in the place of other components of the authentication process and sometimes, therefore, resulting in the erroneous authentication of an outright fake.

The appraiser’s role in society is to develop judgments about *value* as opposed to judgments about *authorship*. As *reporters on the market*, we are best able to do our job when we understand the mechanisms of authentication – even though we ourselves are rarely direct players in

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the process of explicit authentication and are usually only *reporters of its outcome*—this because we gain insights into the complexities of the valuation challenge that more correctly mirror the complexities at play in the art market. And it is the art market that provides our most meaningful litmus test as to the relevant lengths we must go in reporting the authentication status of a property that is our subject appraisal challenge. This complex we call “Authentication” has a central role in the art market, and our brief exploration of its working parts can help us better understand and take command of our real responsibilities as appraisers.

The Promised Taxonomy:

Authentication, the conceptual corpus, expressed/recognized as either:

a.) *explicit* (a definitive *guarantee* of attribution by an acknowledged expert);

b.) *implicit* (a qualified “apparent identification” *reported* by a non-expert); and

admitting a taxonomy into four interdependent gross anatomical structures:

1.) **Connoisseurship**: “the eye of the expert,” comprising visual perception as tutored by experience gained through historical and technical awareness, historically considered the first test of authenticity;

2.) **Provenance**: a record of ownership and its transmission, itself admitting further classification into its various perceived functions (the last two of which being relevant to market outcome rather than authentication):

(2.[a]) proving the property to be the same that left its creator’s hands;

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(2.[b]) proving it to have been vetted by a respected connoisseur;

(2.[c]) proving it to bear clear title (of particular importance to public collections, who cannot afford the erosion of public trust associated with acquisitions that become the subject of contested ownership);

(2.[d]) predicting an enhancement in marketability by association with a celebrity owner (an enhancement dependent *not* on the perceived connoisseur status of said owner but on the *centrality of the object in his or her life or concerns*);

3.) **Scholarship**, either published or unpublished, including:

(3.[a]) that of *explicit* authentication intent, such as catalogues raisonné and letters/certificates of authenticity from acknowledged experts;

(3.[b]) that of *implicit* type, such as biographies and historical records, wherein mention/image of a property is peripheral to authentication concerns;

4.) **Scientific Analysis**, employed only when necessary or meaningful.

(4.[a]) of more qualified, conditional, and therefore limited use than the above three – this due to its proficiency in proving *not* that the property *is* authentic but rather that it is *consistent with one that could be* (judging from the age and appropriateness of its materials, etc.); therefore historically reserved to determine what the property *could or could not be* rather than what it actually *is*.

II. Professional Lecture#2:

A Profane Look at the Chinese Art and Antiques Market

Preliminary Note: I delivered the following lecture to many of the same professional appraisers to whom I had addressed the last one—members of the American Society of Appraisers—but at the following year’s Personal Property Connoisseurship Conference, this time held in Vancouver, B.C. (at The Fairmont Hotel, 900 West Georgia Street) in March of 2016 (my lecture falling specifically on March 11th).

Good Morning. We have been, and will be, considering in this conference, among other things, the market ramifications inherent when certain artifacts of human material culture come to be regarded as “sacred.” Now, this word “sacred” has meant different things to different people over the centuries across a spectrum of connotations ranging from the decisively religious sense of “relating to the gods” (as in *sacrum*, the Latin root of our word) to more generalized, secular readings like “special” or “worthy of respect, reverence, or awe,” understood *without* necessary reference to a supernatural subject, source, or recipient. An example of this more secular connotation would be when we use sentiments like reverence or justice to secure something against some violation, infringement, or encroachment, such as when we tell a friend, “don't worry, I consider my obligation to you in that regard to be *sacred*.” But beginning with the later writings of the French sociologist Émile Durkheim, the term “sacred” has been understood

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even more broadly in relation to *what it is not*—in other words, *the profane*. Durkeim saw this specific function of the sacred as central to a proper understanding of human social behavior—this because to him such an act of separating out the special from the mundane (and more importantly, from the *taboo*) represented the interest of the group, unifying them against those things that threatened to *break up* the group.

This view was further expanded by the Romanian scholar of mythology Mircea Eliade, who claimed that whether deriving from some form of divinity or just from mythical ancestors, the *sacred* contains that "reality" that may be acquired by things only to the extent that they participate in it. Both these men viewed the *sacralizing* process as basically that of *separating out the important stuff from that other stuff* the group has determined to be less vital to its own cohesiveness.

Now, this type of dynamic may be seen to operate as well in our own world of personal property appraising. Consider, for example, the importance we attach to the value-adding consequence of *provenance* in its various manifestations. A certain documented ownership can transform the owned object into a higher market commodity in various ways—and all without the slightest physical change to the object—as follows: **one**, by conveying a warranty of authenticity or qualitative ranking when that past owner in question happened to have been a respected connoisseur and/or scholar; **two**, by conveying a *similar* warranty of authenticity through mere evidence of an unbroken line of ownership descent that persuades against the likelihood of forgery;

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three, that through that same ownership trail the object can be proved legally *salable* at all (such as when it shows the object to have been in the country long enough to meet a legal importation requirement), or **four**, that by association with some celebrity the new owner seems invisibly drawn into that celebrity's perceived halo of specialness.

This status conferred to an owner of personal property by virtue of value-added branding was explored in great detail by Don Thompson in his two books, *The \$12 Million Stuffed Shark* and *The Supermodel and the Brillo Box*), books that lead us through the mechanisms used in the contemporary art world of *sacralizing* the profane. But as Dr. Thompson succinctly observes, value-added branding works best where buyers *don't know what's good*. Among his many illustrations of this phenomenon is the market-enhancement effect of previous ownership by the British Advertising mogul-turned-art-dealer Charles Saatchi, whose venerable name used in the same sentence as that of a hitherto unknown artist can veritably launch the latter's career into stardom – this because buyers don't feel confident they know what good is merely by looking at it. And as we will explore quite soon – *I promise* – this particular collector dilemma may be found to be alive and well and operating at the heart of the art and antiques market in China.

But provenance should be seen as merely one limb of four that make up the corpus we know as authentication. And in the contemplation of the effect of this *whole* organism (including, as it does in descending order of importance: a.) connoisseurship; b.) provenance; c.) scholarship;

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and d.) scientific testing) we come to experience this *sacred-profane* dichotomy rather close to the way it had been understood by both Durkheim and Eliade. For, authentication can transform the public perception of an artifact, *and this, again, without any visible change in the appearance of that artifact*, to the equivalent of a higher life cycle stage, such as one might observe in a butterfly when it is metamorphosed from pupa to adult. However, in the case of authentication, this metamorphoses happens solely by virtue of the *status attributed to it* at a certain point in time via its acceptance by a well-branded authority, such as a major collector, dealer, museum, or even just some plain old celebrity.

At the New York conference on authentication last March, I argued that when the appraiser and dealer Robert B. Simon originally laid eyes on the painting he discovered to be Leonardo da Vinci's long-lost *Salvator Mundi*, a painting that had been hanging in a back hallway of an unsuspecting home in the Midwest, it was not yet a Leonardo, really – *at least not as a market commodity*, the determination of which being the *central* job of the appraiser. This is because at that point, *well* before the appropriate doctors of authentication had a chance to bend their wizened heads over this anonymous patient in the costly, many-year-long operation to remove all the uncertainty in which it had been found shrouded, the apposite effective-date value of this painting was *not yet* commensurate with the likely price paid for a bona fide renaissance masterpiece but rather only for that of a painting that *may*

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or may not prove to be such. And this particular pathology I call “uncertainty” (which, too, exists in a broad spectrum of degree and consequence), nearly always bears a *dramatic* impact on market value. This is why we appraisers would be wise to avoid taking on more responsibility than we're actually required to by recognizing that our appraisal reports do *not* express authentications but only the “apparent identifications” of objects *as market commodities*—and this, more importantly, *only as of a specific effective date.*

Yes, like the above-mentioned butterfly pupa that has yet to undergo its metamorphoses into an adult, these different life stages of identification of cultural objects have *very* different realities in the marketplace. Indeed, a certain portion of nascent masterpiece-status artworks *never* make it to this equivalent adulthood stage, succumbing as they often due to the ravages of authentication politics or constraints of a legal and/or financial nature. And if one of these artifacts happens to be dumped on the market before it becomes the adult butterfly we recognize and want for our collection, *we will likely not pay much for it.*

Now, I will argue today that this *specialness* we're talking about is historically understood to imbue certain artifacts of material culture in such a way as to create an economy closely analogous to our own familiar world of the art market, with its own primary and secondary levels. This specialness may have been attributed by collective consensus to a particular artifact originally by its primary-market users, which would have included the religious celebrants for whom it was

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created, as well as such celebrants' organizers in the form of their clergy. Or it might instead have been attributed later on by its *secondary*-market users, which included collectors and *their* organizers in the form of critics, scholars, and vendors. But *secular* observers – those of us who can afford to sustain an anthropological view over a devotional one – tend to regard the sacred characteristics of such objects, whether on the primary or secondary levels of access, as those of an *attributed* rather than an *intrinsic* nature. In other words, in this view, a certain object fashioned to perform a certain religious rite only attains that state of sacredness through *convention* – specifically a consensus of community holding that certain meanings associated with them are valid and are to remain relatively constant.

For example, the gold or silver extracted from the earth to be fashioned into a monstrance in order to display the consecrated Host in the Catholic or Anglican faith is usually not yet considered sacred while metal ore, or later as refined metal, *nor even once crafted*, but is *sacralized* only later in the ceremony of its use when, *by consensus*, it qualifies to carry the requisite symbolic meaning through a type of social branding. Usually this happens quite late in the game, such as once the object has been used in a particular ritual or blessed by a particular religious authority. The same holds for *relics*, objects originally created toward, or surviving from, some secular use but then had sacredness *thrust upon them* through connection with the life of an important religious participant. In each case there is a certain point at which the secular

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becomes sacred—becomes drawn into that circle/halo from out the profane.

Now, my talk is entitled “A Profane Look at the Chinese Art & Antiques Market.” So why am I indulging in this *lengthy* theoretical preamble to all the titillating profanity awaiting us? Because the dichotomy of *sacred v. profane* is not, historically, limited to discussions distinguishing the divine from the mundane or the religious from the secular. And so, I will argue today that it is reasonable therefore to speak of certain types of artifacts becoming temporarily *sacred* to today's Chinese buyers, though they pursue their ownership of them in a manner that can only be deemed *profane*. Even those of us who do not give a damn about Chinese art cannot escape the press coverage of the obscene amounts being spent on cultural artifacts the Chinese have come to embrace as currently *sacred* to their pride of national identity. Whence spring the specific motivations toward this type of *sacralization*?

Well, I'm glad you ask. First, we need to remember that regardless of the wide spectrum of religious faiths practiced across her vast empire, China's people were, *socially speaking*, Confucian for most of the last twenty-five hundred years. Yes, from about the 5th century B.C. right up until the fall of the empire in the early 20th century, the majority of Chinese, regardless of where they lived, shared a cultural predisposition toward honoring and revering their ancestors, and with them their cultural past, including most notably, *material* culture. Enter Mao Zedong, who saw Confucianism and this reverence for the past as

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the very kernel of the problem he sought to immediately remedy and who, therefore, condemned the acquisition, ownership, and trade of art objects, *ipso facto*, as – you guessed it – *sacrilegious* to the nation's *new* religion.

Unfortunately, this taboo on material culture led to the extermination of significant quantities of cultural artifacts and books as well as of scholarship and, as we know too well, *of scholars too*. (And this same loss of scholarship would come to prove the Achilles' heel in the market mayhem we now contemplate.) Then, rather suddenly, in 1978, Deng Xiaoping (paramount leader of the People's Republic of China, 1978-1992) saw to the abolition of most Maoist practices with his ideology of "Socialism with Chinese characteristics." The market reforms that evolved from this abolition prepared for a return to reverencing the past once again – though, as in most such pendulum returns, *with a vengeance*. Just add the wagonloads of disposable income generated out of China's burgeoning stock market and industry of the late 20th century to this return to the native worship of the past and you have a dizzying discord of market motivators that have combined to create something that appears less a sumptuous banquet than a blind feeding frenzy.

The Communist Party's embrace of traditional culture is seen as integral to laying a foundation for China to compete in the world. Having for decades viewed antiquities as relics of feudal oppression and bourgeois decadence, the party now says art can 'lead people to live

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a life abiding by the code of morality,' thereby contributing to social stability. And shortly we'll see how, through a corporate offshoot of the People's Liberation Army, China's government has managed to turn the auction block into a patriotic battlefield.

But I believe a closer look at the current Chinese art market will reveal to us just what closer looks at *anything* reveal: namely, that things are rarely quite what they seem. I will attempt to draw the curtain back to reveal the wizards conspiring to keep this illusion running. We'll see that despite the posed casualness of the image up on the screen, this is no ordinary refreshment break but rather a bit of carefully staged theatrical display of telling significance and consequence. I chose this shot as my title slide because it seems to sum up quite succinctly the phenomenon underlying the current Chinese art and antiques market: that of a culture attempting to return to its indigenous tradition of worshipping the past after being brainwashed into seeing such worship *sacrilegious*. We can observe in this one image an overlay of contradictory responses to the sacred/profane dichotomy as being experienced by the Chinese people as they come to terms with their past.

Now, we've all read our share of quotes about how gargantuan China's art market is (or at least *was*) – about how it even overtook the U.S. as the world's largest, back at its peak some five years ago (2011). The annual market report prepared by art economist Dr. Clare McAndrew for the European Fine Art Fair, or Tefaf, is to be released

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today. Last year's report (released in March of 2015 but speaking to the state of affairs in 2014) sites China as having a 22% stake in the distribution of sales by value in the global art market (with the same amount by the UK and 39% by the US). Now, these are impressive numbers, as numbers. But what do they *actually* mean? I think a glance at some of the newspaper headlines about the Chinese market over the past few years will help us see how difficult it is to locate the operative mechanism behind such a market.

A few years ago – indeed, just after China's temporary dominance in the global art market was being trumpeted through the press, Abigail R. Esman, in an article entitled "China's \$13 Billion Art Fraud--And What it Means for You," in the August 13, 2012 edition of *Forbes Magazine* observed that many of the major purchases at Chinese auctions – *which represent the vast bulk of China's art market activity, by the way* – were going *unpaid*. She distinguished such defaults from those recorded at auction houses in other countries and concluded that part of the difference pertains to the identity of China's largest auction house, Poly Auctions in Beijing, which in 2014 represented 14% of the overall auction market in China, almost as much as Sotheby's and Christie's combined [9 + 8% = 17%], a company which is part of a larger organization, Poly Culture Group, in turn part of Poly Technologies, Inc., a large-scale defense company authorized by the Chinese Central Government for the import and export of all ranges of defense equipment. (Basically, it is the auction arm of the People's Liberation

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Army.) The Poly Auctions website had rather recently included this specific identification: “We are the fine art auction home of the People’s Liberation Army. Our goal is to bring the people's art back to China.” She then goes on to observe:

That your purchases at Poly are helping to feed China’s military and oppression machine is bad enough; but worse, according to many familiar with China’s auction racket, you may be getting taken in the process – even if you’ve never bought anything from Poly. Artificially-inflated prices and manipulated sales have so disrupted the values for Chinese art and antiques that the true value of many of them remains unclear – meaning that buyers of Chinese art, antiques and antiquities worldwide are likely to pay far more for things than they’re worth. (And that’s before we calculate the explosive growth of fakes, which comprise, as much as eighty percent of the material offered at Poly and a fair share of what one finds even at more respectable houses, like China’s number two auctioneer, China Guardian.)

Esman identifies a couple of common schemes used by Poly (as well as at least one or two other houses) to build this type of seemingly burgeoning market. One is guaranteeing the seller a certain price and then inviting said seller to bid and, at that, bid up to the guaranteed amount if it didn't make it there on its own, thereby establishing a false, *but recorded*, value for the work. The owner can then choose to offer the piece again, this time at a higher reserve, or give it as a gift (i.e., “bribe”) to a government official. The problem is that the recorded price paid does not represent a reliable *sales comparable* of any use to anyone tracking a real market for a particular artist or genre, as it is entirely

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trumped up. She then quotes Hugh Bulmer, Asian art specialist at Maynards here in Vancouver, who noted a “marked increase in people trying to pass off copies of Chinese artwork as originals in Vancouver.” “The market is full of it...and you can guarantee that if something sold for a million dollars in Hong Kong last week, it will be copied and will be on the streets of Vancouver this week.” This does not even address the issue of copies of things sold for such sums in Beijing, which were probably inauthentic to begin with. It's enough to make your head spin.

Esman sees the takeaway here in its worldwide effect: basically, that corrupt local traditions *do* infect the market worldwide. Now, beyond the mare's nest of ethical, professional, legal transgressions involved in this muddle, what is going wrong here at the level of our interpretation of all this market data? I believe it can be boiled down to the age-old danger of confusing *price* with *value*. I do my best to avoid rolling my eyes when my clients innocently confuse these two very different concepts, yet it is even tempting for valuation professionals to lose sight of this significant distinction. Even in cases where the Poly Auction sales result proved to be a bona fide transaction, where the buyer *actually paid for the item*, how should this paid *price* be interpreted toward the market *value* of that item?

Those of us who attended Fran and Analee's superb Authentication conference in New York last March will remember the fascinating presentation given by Dr. Wei Yang, in which she referred to a Chinese

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auction in 2011 at which \$34.9 million was paid for a jade dressing table and matching stool, supposedly of the Han dynasty (206BC-AD220). This table and stool, made entirely of carved jade plaques, was put up for sale at Beijing Zhongjia International Auctions Company on January 9, 2011, where it was knocked down for 220 million yuan (\$34.9 million). The auction house had invited Zhou Nanquan, a former senior jade researcher at the Palace Museum, Beijing, to identify it, and he did, issuing a certificate dating it to the Han dynasty. Everyone was happy – that is, until immediately after the sale, when the purchaser began asking questions. An archeologist, former director of the Institute of Archaeology at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, offered a refreshingly simple yet simply devastating observation: “Chinese in the Han dynasty sat on the floor, not on stools.”

[Now, true, a type of folding stool, called the *huchuang* ("barbarian seat"), opening to an X-form structure of interlaced slats, *was* introduced to China from countries in the West during this same dynasty. It was used by nomadic tribes in the remote northern and western regions of the empire, where it served for mounting horses and for carrying over the shoulder for hunting. But this item looked NOTHING like our jade stool here. Nor did the low platforms, called *ta* and *chuang* (the longer ones), used by high officials and religious dignitaries that appeared during the Han dynasty. During the Northern and Southern Dynasties (386-586AD), hourglass-shaped straw basketwork stools appeared from India. But it was not until the Tang Dynasty (618-907AD) that chairs and stools, *as such*, appeared.]

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Now, maybe, had the participants at this auction taken out their smart phones and googled the word “chair” or “stool,” they might have saved themselves the trouble of bidding on this lot. It turned out, once the questions were asked (after the sale), that a jade dealer who presided as leader of the jade trade in Pizhou, a village in Jiangsu province, admitted to having this set made in 2010 using \$170,000 worth of jade from the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). The set was then purchased that same year by a private collector for \$430,000 with an attribution to the Han dynasty.

But the reason this kind of oversight can happen is also a legal one: loopholes exempting auction companies from responsibility when faked pieces are sold. A study by Artron, an art data company based in China, in 2012 estimated that there may be as many as a quarter of a million people across as many as 20 cities in China involved in producing and selling fakes. Apparently, this figure has not taken into account the auction authorities at over 700 auction houses across the country, many of which promote and sell the stuff. One of the best-known ceramic reproduction makers in Jingdezhen is Xiong Jianjun, who spent eight years making a copy of a Qianlong vase at the request of the National Museum in Beijing. The China Association of Auctioneers (CAA) reported that in that same year (as well as the preceding) only *half* of the works offered at auction actually sold. Jiang Yinfeng, a painter/art critic, told the Worker's Daily “Art has become the best tool for money laundering and corruption.” According to Anna

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Healy Fenton, “China Art Auctions – A Great Money Laundry,” in the January 20, 2014 edition of *South China Morning Post*, the roots of this may be found in China’s Gift-Giving Culture:

Demand is driven by businessmen buying artifacts as presents for officials. Fake or genuine, an artwork presents an opportunity to ‘wash’ a bribe, WIC explains. It’s not rocket science. A businessman gives a painting to an official, whose relative auctions it off. The businessman buys it back at an inflated price and the official pockets the cash. This leaves less evidence linking favour to bribe than handing over suitcases of cash. More sophisticated schemes exist but this is the general idea. It goes without saying that a clampdown on dodgy art deals will hit all players in the business, but no one really knows how much is real. Questions of authenticity crop up time and again and are beginning to cast a shadow, but the market continues to expand. Not only do art sales attract much lower rates of tax than other business deals in China, but with no retail reference, their book value can be ratcheted up or down, depending who’s asking. Buying favours from officials with gifts of art has become so popular it’s spawned a new phrase: “yahui”, or “elegant bribery”.

What is particularly hot in the Chinese market for Chinese porcelain currently is the overdecorated, fussy, colorful, candy-like Qianlong palace wares that had for centuries been admired only from a distance for technical virtuosity and considered by the scholar-connoisseurs then shaping the market to represent the kind of decadence that brought down the empire. For example, the vase that fetched the equivalent of \$83.2M (50 times its high estimate of \$1.9) at Bainbridge's (provincial England; previous record: \$161,000) by a Beijing-based bidder for an

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undisclosed Beijing collector in November 2010, the result being described as a "perfect storm" of a.) new money; b.) national pride; and c.) historical cachet (to which might add skewed ranking priorities based on a lack of education in the traditional appreciation of China's ceramic history). [NOTE: The actual buyer is rumored to be Wang Jianlin, Chairman of the Dalian Wanda Group, *but payment has yet to be made for it*. This is one of the many items rumored to have been bid up by the Chinese government and then left languishing in storage, unpaid.]

The wares made under the reign of the Qianlong emperor (1736-95) represents the pinnacle of fascination for the new generation of mainland Chinese wealth. This piece is a superlative example of the porcelain-maker's cadenza, a piece of "bells and whistles" pyrotechnics that traditional collectors saw metaphorically as indicative of the debauched mindset that brought on the downfall of the dynasty. The additional fact that this piece is believed to have been booty from the Old Summer Palace of the emperor, which was looted and destroyed by French and British troops during that infamous act of Western aggression toward China known as "the second Opium War" (1860) provides us a patriotic element here that is thought to have served as a powerful value-enhancement factor.

However, patriotic bidding is thought by many analysts to be an insufficient explanation for the particular success of this lot, and in the words of Gao Chao, a ceramics expert at the Jin Yi Bai Collection in Shenzhen, "fifty times the high estimate smells more like they were cooking the price than fighting for a piece of artwork they like; you can

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never estimate its price solely on aesthetic value.” So, “market juicing” may explain more than even patriotism the price paid for this piece, supported by the fact that this sale happened just prior to the main autumn auction sales season in Beijing, and priming the market with this kind of excitement would have reaped huge benefits beyond the money spent on it. Now, I would argue that this vase became of use in such “market juicing” because it met the criteria establishing its icon value for the current wave of patriotic zeal expressed monetarily by the new elite, thereby qualifying it as an exemplar of the sacred in the marketplace.

Souren Melikian, in “Chinese Nationalist Fervor Trumps Basic Facts,” in the May 26, 2011 edition of *The New York Times* (Special Report: Asian Art), observes that “The Chinese, who have always loved palace wares, now see them as supreme emblems of national identity.”

What is most telling here is that those pieces of Chinese porcelain that had always been most dear to centuries of connoisseurs, both Chinese and foreign, have actually taken a back seat in the crowded current market behind examples like this Qianlong vase, which, ironically, connoisseurs found impressive but vulgar. For example, the amount bid (albeit not yet paid) for this vase was nearly *two-and-a-half* times the amount spent for a piece of porcelain called by some “the holy grail of Chinese porcelain,” the Meiyintang “Chicken Cup,” a Ming dynasty *doucai*-enameled porcelain cup of the coveted Chenghua period (1465-87) thought to be one of only 17 worldwide of a group coveted by

emperors for over half a millennium. This is the cup sipped in our title slide. We'll come back to it shortly. In the meanwhile, what is salient here is the underlying truth that various types of events can conspire to sacralize an artifact.

An excellent account of the current Chinese obsession with booty from the Yuanmingyuan Summer Palace is offered by Audrey Wang in *Chinese Antiquities: An Introduction to the Art Market* (London: Lund Humphries in Association with Sotheby's Institute of Art, 2012). She sees the looting and destruction of this vast complex of imperial buildings (in the northwest outskirts of Beijing, where six generations of emperors spent increasing amounts of time) in 1860 by French and English troops (as revenge for the execution of foreign officials) as pivotal to the later Chinese sense of national identity. And she follows the current fervor to regain possession of the items looted from these rooms (many of which ending up in the Musée Chinois at the Fontainebleau Chateau after being given to Empress Eugénie in 1861 by General Montaubon) with an ironic eye on the fact that many of these same items were *anything* but quintessential examples of the Chinese aesthetic.

For example, some of the major prices paid at Chinese auctions in recent years for such booty were spent on the zealous recapture of some of the seven surviving cast bronze animal heads that graced the 12 stone zodiac figures making up the famous large waterclock in front of the so-called Palace of Calm Seas at Yuanmingyuan. Like much of the palace that underwent expansion during the mid-18th century (under the directive of the Qianlong emperor and the artistic direction of the Italian

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Jesuit priest Giuseppe Castiglione [“Lang Shining”]), these heads, thought too to have been designed by Castiglione in the prevalent *chinoiserie* rather than native Chinese style, have become, in the 21st century, a rallying cry of the current generation of Peoples Republic of China buyers. You would think, Audrey Wang points out, that items that have come to represent the wounded dignity of the Chinese people would be those that looked most like the native culture and least like that imposed by usurping foreign powers.

The moral to this story seems to be that those objects a culture invests with sacredness at a particular point in time do *not* necessarily reflect the traditional attitudes associated with the creation and original (primary-market) use of them by that culture. Here, for example, we have a group of items made in China, albeit under the *heavy* influence of a *distinctively* foreign taste (and smacking of the country's political oppressors at that) – items that have nevertheless found themselves the object of an intense patriotic fervor intended to bolster this culture's identity as distinguished from those same oppressor cultures.

Also, in my presentation in New York last year I showed an image on the screen of an 87" x 43" ink-on-silk hanging scroll painting, entitled *Along the Riverbank*, long attributed to the 10th century master Dong Yuan (c. 934-62) and described by the celebrated Chinese scholar/collector/dealer/artist C. C. Wang as “the Mona Lisa of Chinese Paintings,” yet one that was claimed by no less an expert than the late Professor James Cahill (1926-2014, former curator of Chinese art

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at the Freer Gallery in Washington), as not only inauthentic, but more astonishingly a *20th century* pastiche by the master painter/forgery Zhang Daqian (1899-1983). (This, by the way, is a controversy that has yet to be settled.) Worst of all is the light Cahill shed on the intrinsic problem of appraising and selling traditional Chinese art: the highly subjective nature of its tradition of understanding authenticity. I quoted, for example, from Cahill's 1994 book *The Painter's Practice: How Artists Lived and Worked in Traditional China*, relevant to the historic dichotomy in China between "professional" and "amateur" painters despite the ample evidence now available that this supposed distain held for selling paintings by the amateur painters was a mythology that has infested the entire Chinese tradition of interpreting provenance toward authentication. In particular, Cahill references a diary of the painter Zheng Min (1633-83) that was discovered only in the 1980s and which reveals that he, like most Chinese painters, were *very* eager to sell their work to supplement their meager income as a scholar-official.

Now, why is this truth so important to us today? Because the mythology of the amateur painter, particularly as distinguished from the professional painter, maintains an insidious misunderstanding of the way artworks were actually created and collected, a misunderstanding which taints the transmission of provenance and, ultimately, of the correct authentication of these artworks.

Of course, some items *traditionally* esteemed (even by the most conservative of scholar-collectors of both west and east), have recently

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fetched obscene prices at public auction in mainland China as well. For example, the Meiyintang “chicken cup” I mentioned earlier, which we saw in the title slide. You’ll remember I described this as one of perhaps only 17 examples worldwide that has been coveted by centuries of connoisseurs and emperors alike. Now, this particular example from the Meiyintang collection, one of finest private collections of Chinese porcelain [Europe], with provenance of Western collections going back to the 1950s, had been auctioned by Sotheby’s, Hong Kong, on April 27, 1999, for the equivalent of \$3.7 million, then the world record price for a piece of Chinese porcelain. When offered in the same sales rooms on April 8, 2014, it fetched the equivalent of \$36 million (with a catalogue estimate equivalent of \$25.6-38.5 million (HK\$200-300M), again a record for any Chinese porcelain at auction. The successful bidder of this cup was the Shanghai-based collector Liu Yiqian, described as “China’s gaudiest billionaire” (a 52/3-year-old high school dropout turned handbag artisan turned taxi driver who then made a sudden fortune in his country’s nascent stock market of the 1980s/90s). In April 2015 he was described by Nicolas Chow, deputy chairman of Sotheby’s Asia, as “the greatest force in the Chinese market.” In the words of Philip Tinari, Director of the Ullens Center for Contemporary Art in Beijing, about Liu and others like him:

These are collectors that have so much money that they don’t have to have taste because they buy everything in sight. There’s very little discrimination; they just buy the most expensive things. They’re not connoisseurs. *Liu is a*

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paradigm of the new Chinese money market player. “Whenever I saw others bidding, I just competed, and after I made the buy, I would ask them, ‘Why is this piece good?’”

Liu now has his own auction house (Beijing Council International Auction Co.) and plans on creating the Chinese equivalent of the Guggenheim or MoMa. This would be the same taxi driver, by the way, who paid \$170.4 million at Christie's, New York, in December 2013 for Amedeo Modigliani's 1917-18 canvas, “Nu Couché,” a price exactly 100 million above the previous record price for the artist's work. It would not be difficult to fantasize a parallel in our country – say Donald Trump becoming a branding-power dealer in Old Master Paintings. However, despite the bad boy persona, the new philistine collector type is more than merely accommodated in mainland China today, as they serve as culture heroes of an odd sort, spending their money on repatriating important pieces of cultural heritage from abroad (and particularly because so many of these items were taken out of China in nefarious ways, such as looting by imperialist western nations).

Art has become a kind of currency; on Chinese TV more than 20 programs offer tips on collecting and on identifying cultural relics. In the best-case scenario I can think of, the analogy here would be that the collectors making the market today were obtaining all their connoisseurship acumen from watching Antiques Roadshow.

Now, the Chinese are also buying really good stuff: Witness the sale held at Christie's, New York, over five days in March of last year of the

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collection of the dealer Robert Hatfield Ellsworth, a sale estimated to bring as much as \$35 million that brought \$134M (nearly four times the estimate). In an article by Kal E. Meyer ("The Chinese Want their Art Back" in the June 21, 2015 *New York Times*), a good look is given at the effort by the Chinese government, state-run companies, private collectors and "even, quite probably, some criminal networks" to being Chinese antiquities back home." The Ellsworth sale may be an excellent example of the power of branding used not to create markets for unknown quantities, as per the usual examples of "emerging" contemporary artists, but for items associated with traditional, deep markets.

Of course, this phenomenon is nothing new. It happens over and over again, but since nobody pays attention, you have to mention it once more. The impact of the Japanese market bubble on the sale of French impressionist and post-impressionist painting in the 1980s (just before the Japanese market collapsed in 1990) is a perfect example. When Japanese buyers were prevailing over European and American bidders at international auctions of Renoirs and Van Goghs to the tune of many tens of millions per painting, little discussion took place as to why these paintings were *so* valuable to the Japanese at the time.

It's easy to understand a cultural connection between the Japanese and a French tradition that had been nourished, if not molded, by its encounter with the traditional art of Japan. But a look at the specific

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techniques of Japanese businessmen and their tax code sheds more light on why investing in famous impressionist paintings seemed like a good idea. For example, when the Japanese paper magnate Ryoei Saito bid one of Van Gogh's two *Portrait[s] of Dr. Gachet* to \$82.5 million at Christie's, New York, on May 15, 1990, and then, two days later, across town at Sotheby's, bid \$78.1 million for Renoir's *Bal du moulin de la Galette*, few non-Japanese knew about the then-current use made in Japan of paintings for quick profit investment by corporations and money management organizations. Also, they tended to exhibit these paintings in the lobbies of corporate offices and charge public admission fees that raked in millions.

We see on the screen a binocular vision of the Freakonomics of the current Chinese art market, where the prices being bid, if not exactly *paid*, do not accurately reflect a quantification of desirability on purely aesthetic or even historic grounds. So, when we watch Liu Yiqian our guady taxi-driver-turned-billionaire, quaffing his \$37 million cup of tea, we need to consider the extent to which a nation's temporary identity crisis effects an entire *world market*. And we might also want to contemplate how changes in the perception of sacred and profane, coupled with the paucity of requisite scholarship necessary to sustain collecting criteria, can conspire to inflate a seemingly substantial market into a speculative bubble. Thank you.

Creation Lost

A Novella

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Novella: *Creation Lost*

I. Prologue

Like clockwork, Henry Flower's alarm went off at six a.m. exactly. And just in time. He had lost control of his car along the top floor of the publishing house and was now headed through a row of book-hawker's carts across the editor's office, straight for the full-length window. It was raining. His mother (or was it Martha?) was there, as well as the mayor, who had managed to escape unharmed. The alarm tripped off by his shattering plunge through the door had fused with the shrieks of unseen bystanders and arriving sirens till everything was submerged in one steady cry. With only seconds left to go before he'd hit the glass, Henry struggled to escape by means of the only muscles he could manage to move at this point, and in a last-ditch effort of concentration he opened wide his eyes.

Strangely, however, Henry could not quite tell whether he had succeeded in jumping clear of his impending death or whether he had merely entered it with the force sufficient to pass right through the painful part unscathed, so to speak. True, he could still feel himself hurtling helplessly through space. And true, the shrill din sounded even closer now than it did before. But wherever that body was which registered these sensations, it seemed to be, somehow, separate from him now. In fact, he now experienced the sensation of being little more than a cloud of disembodied memory lingering over the scene of a

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recent disaster, dissipating into the cold morning air like a puff of smoke out an exhaust pipe.

What an awful thought! All those years of experience, learning, sacrifice, and deferment of pleasure, all slowly and painstakingly accumulated into a unique and irreproducible consciousness—now irreversibly dispersing in a widening formless cloud amid the indifferent traffic of the elements. The obscene, unspeakable waste in all this was not lost upon Henry, and yet there was comfort to be found in it as well. Yes, to react this way was, after all, clearly the prerogative of the living and intact and not that of the dispatched and dispersed.

Henry was now aware of a harsh, unpleasant brightness gnawing into his world from somewhere on his right. Turning his attention to it he beheld a frightened face glaring down at him, shrieking in alarm with hands outstretched, stiff in horror, at his untimely death. Henry groped after meaning, but in vain; this may have been the familiar face and voice of a loved one, yet he could muster little more than the faintest twinge of familiarity upon the smoky screen, this widening cloud that seemed his present consciousness. He concentrated with effort upon the still-unrecognizable dial of his alarm clock, its hands and numerals illuminated in indecipherable semaphore against the darkness. Only a moment before, the two slow radii of the illuminated circumference of this dial had suddenly merged into a climatic diameter, unleashing the chaos of noise and bisecting its contents into the symmetry of perfect halves. But from out of that frozen moment burst a splinter of light as

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the second hand emerged from the vertical line like a thread of light breaking the horizon of a new day.

Slowly, Henry felt recognition pouring back in where had been till now the loose ends of confusion. And suddenly he felt his right arm emerge from the blanket into the cold toward the light. A hand dealt with a button on a vibrating surface an arm's length away and instantly there was silence. Quiet now filled the void where sirens had long screamed. The alarm clock had been muted finally, but its admonishing dial continued to record for him without mercy the ticking increments of his day he'd already lost to that insatiable Father Time.

Henry sat up suddenly in a panic of jumbled numbers and threw off the cover with an impatient sweep of the arm like someone wiping clean a slate. A front of cool morning air forcefully rushed in to displace the slow warmth that had enveloped him and cushioned his journey from being into nothingness and back. His sluggish eyes struggled beneath heavy lids to try and hold down the new hard-edged contours long enough to read meaning in the volumes they circumscribed. Through a tear-stained veil of windowpane, Henry's focus wandered out among the vague remains of night's recurrent feast, but he was still sitting in the shadow of a receding world, clutching desperately at the few slippery strands of dream left dangling upon his waking.

The car turned out not to be his or anyone else's he knew, and its shining steel wheels were clearly those of some freight train still barreling into the distant reaches of his memory. The man he took to be

the mayor was now quite obviously not. He was wearing the old red robe and thick round glasses of his own father, as well as the latter's weirdly menacing suggestion of a smile. His right arm was extended stiffly in what now appeared to be a gesture of pride (or, perhaps reproach?) and held between the thumb and forefinger of his gloved hand a sheet of hand-inscribed paper – possibly an award of some sort, though held before him with a sense of admonishment more fitting the presentation of an arrest warrant.

But whatever this piece of paper was, it was *his* somehow, as he now observed it to be inscribed in his own distinctively familiar hand. Yet, peer as he did through the turbid, gelatinous aspic of oneiric memory, he could make out not a jot of what might have been this memo's content, and so he found himself searching the puzzling face fading before him for clues. Without taking his eyes off the stranger, he slowly reached his right hand out across the top of the nightstand with the careful deliberation of someone suddenly face to face with a long-awaited score to settle. In fact, so charged with the tension of high drama was Henry's bedroom now that it was difficult to avoid bracing oneself for the thunderous report of a bedside revolver, which would awaken the neighborhood while he plugged this nefarious intruder (as well as an unsuspecting bureau beside him) with lead.

Actually, Henry had only been reaching for his notebook. You see, for years he'd committed careful record of the fleeting images and sensations salvaged from the briny deep of sleep in a special notebook I'd given him specifically for this task. Yes, it must be confessed here that our beloved, prize-winning novelist, so widely admired for “the

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rich, unpredictable fecundity of his creative imagination” (in the words of an otherwise notoriously praise-retentive critic) was, in reality, slavishly dependent for even the *least* original of his literary ideas upon the stray glimpses of magnificent worlds he was able to reconstruct each morning out of the nighttime dreams I’d metaphorically poured into the porches of his sleeping ear. And it was in this ready bedside notebook that he would so diligently collect, day after day, the precious chips and slivers found along the dim-lit low tide of his waking consciousness from out these quick-vanishing nighttime worlds I’d tirelessly bestowed on him.

Of course, Henry knew quite well that the delicate traces of those worlds to be sucked from these morsels of recovered dream did not *really* survive the bright light of day and sharp end of a pencil. No, inevitably, he found the poetic panorama of 5:59am, with its fertile fields and shimmering cities, would be trampled flat by the goose-stepping prose of 6 o'clock and instantly reduced to a mere rubble of emptied words and overturned props, the mere husks of once-thriving worlds. Yet, he knew equally well that among these husks could be found, here or there, a tiny seed that, under the extreme heat of creative imagination, would open into exquisite flowers and rare fruits, and that from these, in turn, would drop the pollen, spores, and seeds of entire future vistas. Hence, you see, the supreme importance of this notebook of Henry's and the reason it hasn't left his bedside reach for as long as anyone can remember.

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In any event, it wasn't there *now*. Henry slowly turned his numbed gaze finger-wise for guidance, but he dimly felt and saw nothing book-like there. And as a newly emerged foot explored the cold, uncarpeted floor beneath him, a surge of frightened blood now rushed undiluted panic to his brain.

There seemed to be only one reasonable explanation to this phenomenon: He had as yet not awakened from his dream (hopefully). Yes, as reason trickled down in calming spurts to thin his rising fear, Henry watched impotently as his future seemed to slowly consolidate into two distinct options: a.) that of waking up to find the book exactly where he'd left it on his nightstand; or b.) that of staying awake for a while in the comfort of option a. in order to gather more material for his current book.

Henry's decision was predictable. However, the handle to his proverbial "door #1" wouldn't budge, and as he pondered this disconcerting fact he thought he could just make out the sound of the latch to the second door falling into place as well. (*Gladly, now, would he have settled for this second door.*) Turning toward the light suddenly visible at the far right of his mind's eye he now beheld what could only be defined, figuratively, as door #3, this one larger and sturdier looking than the first two but removed from its hinges and leaning against the jamb of a brightly lit hallway. It may have been a tad late, however, to call what he saw through that door an "option." Indeed, the idea of waking up and *not* finding this notebook appeared, increasingly, to be

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all that was left to him. Like it or not, there was now nowhere else to go, metaphorically.

Physically, however, Henry had not budged from the bed in which he'd awoken, and he was now probing the darkness with his raised right hand as if in search of some seam separating those two states of consciousness found along its undulating daily trajectory of wakefulness and dreaming. And quite as though he had found this seam, the world around him vanished beneath a sudden flood of harsh lamplight unleashed between his thumb and index finger. The rude, humorless reality awaiting him was fuzzy-edged but unmistakable: A pencil lay stranded upon that desolate stretch of landscape separating lamp and clock, no longer holding its place for Henry in his notebook. This most horrifying sight left Henry's heart pumping vigorously between his ears. Meanwhile, his eyes devoured the poignant arrangement before him with the concentration of a seasoned lawyer scanning legalese for a loophole.

What Henry needed now, of course, was a fourth or fifth option, for it was quite clear by now the first two were long gone (if indeed they ever *did* exist). Had Henry not been such a creature of habit and, moreover, was not possessed of so vivid a recollection of scribbling in the book only a few hours before, he might now have been savoring the false hope of finding it elsewhere in the house. But the uncompromising truth pinned down by this lone pencil told him indeed that this had been no nightmare, technically.

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So then, where could this book have gone? Who in their right mind would bother to sneak into and out of a house so well appointed as his and purloin only some illegible, dog-eared notebook? (They would have to walk right past the *Bath of the Nymph*, the silk prayer rug, and the heirloom clock made by an 18th-century ancestor of Henry's.) But more importantly, what earthly good could such a book be to anyone but Henry?

Frankly, as I flip through the damned thing now, I can only wonder, *myself*, what possible good it could be to Henry. I mean, if *this* stuff is all he has managed to catch of the diverse splendors I've showered upon him nightly, then either someone else is writing his prize-winning books for him or he's writing behind my back. But either way, my recent suspicion will be confirmed: namely, that the causal relationship we've rightfully maintained and necessarily enjoyed from the beginning has somehow deformed into a *casual* one. It is a dilemma more fundamental than could ever be fixed with the insertion of a proofreader's squiggle, and it flies directly in the face of common sense. Yet, how else could it be that I found myself shocked and enraged by the content of his latest book, *On Time*? That it earned the most prestigious of literary awards certainly came as no surprise to me, but that it was hailed by the critics as modernity's answer to an author of whom I'd never heard was, I think understandably, more than a little unsettling. Previously, the concept of stealing a peak into his notebook would have seemed preposterous and pointless. Now, it proves merely prudent. And just as

I anticipated, none of this stuff looks even remotely familiar. From the looks of *these* reviews of the late-night features I've bequeathed to him, you'd think I'd been mistakenly working away in someone else's screening room all the while. Turning back to the pencil furrow, what do we find our wayward bard and dream recorder to have most recently scribbled here:

Our world proves still the heir of Hesiocl.

?

Of whom? Who the hell is Hesiocl and what's he to do with anything of mine? If this is something to do with my material, shouldn't I at least recognize it? But if it's *not* mine, then whose? Remembering the others before him that I've lost to those would-bes and have-beens, I instinctively turned in my seat to check the door, but there was (of course) no one there. Not a one of them hanging around anymore. In the past, they'd always shown at least some interest long before now. I mean, long before one of mine had achieved this much success and fame. Are they not interested anymore, or have they become so shrewd they no longer need come around? Yes, maybe they have their little rendezvous there, under the train bridge, or in a shop. And maybe he has finally given up trying to hide the material with which they lure him.

Unless, of course, this stuff is meaningless and intended for my eyes only, knowing how eaten up with curiosity I would necessarily become (and, of course, knowing how much more latitude *they'd* have in which to operate). So, I've fallen for it, then. I've stooped to their level, finally.

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The bait was cast and I grabbed it. But I will not be towed in, damn it! I will put my pen down right here and leave them all right where they are to fend for themselves.

But wait! Would he be this desperate about a notebook he really didn't need? Could it be that this drivel indeed means something to him? Could it be then that it's his, his *own*? Yes, perhaps I *have* done it, after all. Perhaps I've finally pulled off that which the rest of them would gladly sell their souls to enjoy one moment's glory of *reality*. Not the slavish imitation of it with all the attendant atmosphere and calculated effect. Not the gratuitous ring of a water glass upon a tabletop. No, I mean the real thing, *without* the quotation marks. (This would certainly explain the apparent lack of interest in him by the others. For, they wouldn't know the *real thing* if they so much as stepped in it.) If so, then I can finally sit back and revel in the unprecedented joy of actually not knowing what comes next. (Can a writer *have* a greater joy?) Finally, I would be able to put down this cattle prod of a pen, unshackle myself from this old table and get the rest I crave. As to the others, then, what will I care? They will be at *his* mercy and find themselves in *his* next novel, in this notebook....

As will *I*, damn it! What an idiot I am! They're in this together, of course, conspiring in silence until I succumb to the helpless state of a mere pronoun in a sentence for which there can be no happy ending. I've been at this too long for such an end. When I go, it will not be with

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a whimper but with as much noise as I can possibly make. But with what, this pen?

No, I've made up my mind: At the expense of the rest of history I will not give up this notebook. It will remain right here, nestled snugly under my arm like so until cause is wrested from effect and exposed for what it is. And already I can tell you that the feeling is not unpleasant to contemplate how effortlessly the whole of literary history can be bent to my will.

You see, Henry B. Flower is the picture of success for which I had always hoped. I have blissfully lost count already of the number of times his first three novels have been reprinted. His last collection of stories sent a sizable tremor through the short story world. And *On Time*, Henry's latest, albeit most controversial, triumph prompted no less formidable and praise-retentive a critic than G. D. Thompson to resort to the word *genius*. (As anyone in the literary world knows, if there is any single measurement of success recognized today, it is to have one's work classified as "genius" by this most constipated of critics.) But, as we all know only too well, the boundary separating "genius" from "insanity" has insidiously porous borders, and I myself find it reasonable to suspect that Thompson and some others really have the latter in mind when they resort to the former, the final choice of one term over another being merely one of marketing. It is, after all, a warehouse easier selling books by geniuses than madmen.

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Put simply, Henry is *driven*. He may indeed sit behind the wheel, so to speak, but obviously he has no control over *where the road goes*. In fact, he has no more idea of why he writes what he does than I have of what the critics will eventually make of it all. Corner him about this blind compulsion he calls "work" and he will undoubtedly stare at you blankly, quite innocent of the absurdity of spending one's days pushing people around on paper. Hand him plain facts about anything at all and he'll graciously hand it back to you hammered together in an unrecognizable clump of "art." And what is this "art" at bottom other than reflex, really? Obviously, writing for Henry is little more than an involuntary reaction to the stimulus of life, a cerebral equivalent of vomiting, perhaps. The slightest tickle of experience appears to excite in him the immediate and uncontrollable urge to send it back out, improved. Many a time I have watched him wipe his brow after a difficult paragraph with the relieved expression of someone finally rid of a piece of life he would have been otherwise obliged to live.

Now, if he thinks he can hide from it all behind stacks of fresh manuscript, he is only wasting his precious minutes and my good paper. The clock ticks on, the wheels ever turning, the cells ever dying, and when the minute hand has come round that last time to sweep him from this good world, there will be no jumping out of the way. The 160-odd pounds of flesh, bone, and personality that constitute the palpable and unique Henry Flower are neither uncaused nor maintenance-free.

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It's a full-time job, damn it, and the minute the lights go out here in the boiler room it's going to look like this:

But I digress. In the meantime, the strong arm of obsession has beaten poor Henry down onto all fours in submissive search of his goddamned notebook. He is now in the perfect position for a good square kick in the ass, and were it not for my unfailing sense of decorum, I would now be describing to you the frightened countenance of a man finding himself suddenly prostrate upon the floor, chewing dust balls. But you have to feel sorry for these lofty artist types once you realize how pathetically earth-bound they are at bottom.

Anyway, wiping the dust balls from his lips and torso, Henry got to his feet and headed for the hallway, stopping only to grab his bathrobe from the back of the door. As the blood returned from his head to his lower extremities, the previous expression of confused irritation seeped back into his face. Once out of the doorway, the hall was quite dark, and all you could see was the (*whoa!*) glare of the overhead light ignited by a nervous finger. As if spooked, Henry stopped dead in his tracks and abruptly turned around to confront whoever was following him. (I need to be more circumspect, I suppose.) But it was only the belt of his open robe trailing at his feet. (Good catch!) Satisfied with the cause to this effect (I'm still in control around here, regardless how it sometimes

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seems), he continued on down the hall on noisy leather slippers, visually scouring every surface along the way for the one thing in this petty world that mattered to him anymore.

While Henry proceeds with his tour of the house I will confess to you here and now that it is not without discomfort that I prod him thus. Believe me when I say that this is easier for you than for me. He's mine, after all, for better or worse. Yes, you will close this book and walk away (or drop it open, face-down over your snoring nose), blissfully free from any responsibility for Henry, his wretched life, his offspring, theirs, etc., while I will not enjoy the luxury of packing up and following you. Instead, while you move on to other whims, I'll still be here, busy with utility bills, clothing, groceries, car repairs, train schedules, and a million other things born of that damned alarm clock every morning – things that *you*, in your dull comfort, will never need to worry about. Oh, to be you, dear reader, and free from eternal scrutiny!

Now, I am the first to admit Henry has turned out differently than expected. In fact, I can't help taking silent pride in this sometimes; *anyone* can draw a character that does what he's trained to do when prompted to perform. The ideal protagonist Henry admittedly is not. No, but when I look back over my others and *their* blemishes, I often repeat that most memorable phrase of his ex-wife, "as well him as another."

At times, I used to look at him and even see myself. That must have been quite a while ago, for these days I see only the compulsiveness,

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irresponsibility, and tunnel vision one naturally expects to find behind the wheel of real artistic talent. I suppose that deep down I do begrudge him the immense technical prowess and erudition I have bestowed on him from I know not where. While *my* daily appeals to the Muses continue to echo off unanswered, Henry only reaches for his pen and immediately you hear the nine of them calling in chorus, cheering him on in their lusty, full-throated voices. But then again, are they not *really* calling to me? (Whenever you get a bunch of zealots together shouting the same name, it's *bound* to sound garbled.) How the hell would he, on his innocent own, ever come to have known Memory carnally, yes, to wrestle with her sweatily, night after night, in her lascivious bed and wake heavy-eyed each morning to the melodious calls of her daughters? Thompson and the rest might just as well address *me* in their reviews as continue in the perpetuation of this convenient myth of “the irrepressible Henry Flower.”

The fact is Henry would be hard pressed to justify and explain much in the world he calls his own. If his readers occasionally notice a stray glove left limp and inconsequent amid the peripheral clutter of a scene, don't think for a minute either Henry or *his* characters recognize such a sign from above. Take that glove, pick it up, and see for yourself how it is none but *mine*. Send it off to the lab if you like; the report will come back showing the fingerprints of the one who moves Henry and his characters (and *theirs*). After all, they are still all *my* words, *my* ideas – even my *mistakes* – regardless of what *he* makes of them. Obviously, he

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can only know what I know – *unless, of course, I choose otherwise*. What he somehow fails to realize is that his next critical success could just as easily turn out to be authenticated as a long-lost manuscript of some yet-undiscovered literary giant as that of his own and that his quite dispensable existence could, in an impatient moment, be consigned to the cobwebbed clutches of oblivion in as much time it takes to spell out the word **a c c i d e n t**.

And bigger names than Flower have been rubbed off the tablets of literary fame. Consider, for example, Grimmelshauser, Karamzink, and Guicciardino. Where did their arrogance ever get them? Why, after not much effort on my part at all, really, there isn't even a place left to check the correct spelling of their names anymore, now that their works have been redistributed among the oeuvres of shorter, more congenial, names. And what about Pierre Menard? You'd think the author of a work like the *Quixote* would be a household name around the world! Yet, the only person I have ever found who knew anything at all about Menard's existence was a blind old librarian in Buenos Aires (who was *himself* rather confused on the subject, now that I think about it). One thing should be plain by now: But for my genuine interest in Henry, the man, he might now be a mere museum piece, embalmed in biography, wrapped in Mylar, and buried along side his unfortunate siblings beneath the nose-smudged plate glass of a manuscript vitrine.

In the meantime, however, it is Henry and not I who has received the impressively large cash advance for his current autobiographical

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work—the largest such outlay in publishing history, I might add. I suppose it is well that the check was made out in his name and not mine. I would have certainly spent it on the critics and bought *myself* some good reviews. But really, I care nothing about the money. What matters most is that these eleven letters spell out *my* Henry's name and not some other's. If I *am* bothered by anything at all concerning this measure of his success, it would be only the product itself that this money of theirs is purchasing. Never before has Henry bothered to look at himself with such intensity or honesty. Never before has he found the need, let alone the means, to examine each pore and pustule. Call me old fashioned if you will, but I question the artistic value of what he will find there. As far as I'm concerned, there are *some things* better left unwritten, for you never know what kind of crackpot might come along and publish it!

But who cares! It is *their* money they're wasting, not mine. If that is what the public wants, they shall have it, and have it till they yell “enough!” And besides, what better proof of my prowess than to sit back and let Henry show the world how different we really are and how autonomous he is? His unpredictability, once irksome to me, I now see as nothing short of the highest mark of good craftsmanship—particularly in this world of ours, so overpopulated as it is with cardboard characters. Each unexpected move and inexplicable act of Henry's stands witness to my own thoroughness and invention.

Invention? What about *intention*? For, I have spent too many hours of breathless concentration toiling over novel worlds within his skull

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each night for there to be left so scant a record as this! You might think I'd been doing this for my own amusement, which couldn't be further from the truth, so burdened am I with the myriad responsibilities of running this world of his. Yes, busy as I am without him, I'm always there to guide him. Every time he drifts off, dead to the world, into the obliterating numbness of night, I am waiting there to guide his ship out into the regions of the lawless and uncharted. For, it's only there, amid that dazzling firmament of billions of madly firing neurons, that I can bestow on him images and experiences that become his very own. Bathed in the strange reflected glow of those celestial fireworks, I can dredge up for him the truly unprecedented specimens: those never to be found in the transparent, shallow waters of daytime musings, and which never survive the journey back into sunlight (where they might be identified as mine). All that is ever left of them are a few fossils scratched out on a notebook page, and these only to be fleshed out by memory's inaccurate fancy and lost forever. But these are magical moments for me, these embarkations into the unforeseen. Waiting for the readying of his ship, I look around me and breathe in the rare quiet of those hours. It is a memorable image, I imagine: just me and my beaker of acetylcholine in the light of the raging moon, awaiting high voltage time in the ponto-geniculo-occipital region. Once his eyelids start fluttering like sails, I know that the shallow, predictable inland waters are already far behind us. And immediately these sails become the gently billowing walls of a carnival tent enclosing raucous parodies

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of contemporary life before a captivated summer audience. But yet, on closer inspection it is clear that these same tent walls are really just large tarpaulins hung in haste to cover the books, because that is all one actually finds everywhere: books, endless walls shelved high with neatly ordered *books*. Yes, mirroring this resplendent celestial canopy of twinkling circuitry high above are vast walls of book spines as far as the eye can see, each bound thick with the thinnest paper printed with the smallest details. Yet, urged on by another drop or two from my beaker, the library clock strikes 6:00pm, sending the librarians running for their commuter trains back home, and once again the place is converted back to the unbounded playground of illogic. Down the endless labyrinthian aisles are loosed the frenzied messengers of randomness, romping noisily like hyperactive children with tummies full of sweets. They run and climb, helter-skelter, pulling down chance volumes as they go with no concern for content. And unless you have poised and ready in your other hand your trusty acetylcholinesterase (not to mention norepinephrine and the rest) there is no telling just what they will find or when they will stop. What may have been a quiet repast of daytime memories distends suddenly into a banquet hall of rowdy Babylonians toasting everyone and anyone announced at the door. Room is made at Belshazzar's table for the unexpected guests, and above the loud clatter of knocking chalices, Chaldeans, and knees are heard in answer the drunken shouts of long live Banquo, Brutus, and Bartleby! And while the first two newly seated squint in vain to read the menu scrawled

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upon the wall, the last stares horridly into his plate as fistfights break out further down among the hundreds resettled before unfamiliar plates. Meanwhile, still more trickle in at the door, though the welcoming cries of *long live Bezukhov, Belteshezzar, and Beelzebub!* are mumbled weakly and half-heartedly now as dissatisfaction grows among the ones preparing to move again to still another's plate.

Yes, the truth is that no matter how bizarre and incoherent you think your night-time dreams are, you would be amazed at the chaos unleashed via the inadvertent drop too much of this or that. I submit to you my poor Gregor as a classic example. What began innocently as a characteristic nightmare of sleeping through his alarm, missing his train, and angering his boss was suddenly transformed into monstrous proportions and implications, all due to a simple jolt of the wrist. At a most inopportune moment I was startled by an unexpected knock at my door – I am convinced it was planned, the scheming little wimp! – and it was not long before I realized all was lost with my poor Gregor – short of simply exterminating him and beginning fresh with another (such as his sister, for example, on whom I'd had my eye for quite some time). Of course, optimists will inevitably point out the supposed “instructional value” of that which ensued: namely, the chance peak I got at the shockingly dark feelings he had been harboring against his family, against me. But what do I care about that now that he is long gone? All I really care about is that...

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Wait a minute! What in hell am I talking about, and where was I? Gregor...missed trains...books, books, books—tarpaulins—sails (sales?)—wasting my time doing...yes...Henry's notebook, the fruit of my labor, yes.

Ultimately, the question remains, why else have a man grope through the thick and thin of life if not to gather material for his dreams? Henry's flesh-and-blood existence is of no consequence to the world beyond whatever experience sticks to it. Would he have been missed had he instead been Herman or Humbert, or maybe not at all? Of course not. Things would have been considerably easier had there been no impetus to create him. Had his current fame been mine all along, Henry would now remain a superb unblemished nonentity. But what to do with him now that he's here, taking up literary space? He's just one more possession to keep from the clutches of others. For, like his predecessors, I knew damned well he'd eventually become the prize catch of some one of the host of vultures hanging around at my door. I pride my worldly savvy, yet why did I not conceive a true cardboard character to throw to the hungry mob while I worked on Henry?

In sly jerks and turns I feel Henry loosening himself from the promising future I've prepared for him, as did my poor Bartleby before *his* demise (which is yet another sad story, one I refuse to go into now but which you can read on your own time). I would just let him go and see for himself the wasteland awaiting him out beyond my guidance, but I cringe at the very thought of the mess that I would then be left

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with to clean up. The unattractive outcome of my generous bequest to Henry is the complacency you see in him now. He has come to expect the call of the Muses as you or I might the morning birds. He looks in the mirror and sees in an inherited face the proud features of a self-made man. Does he never wonder whence came those eyes, those teeth, that nose? (The familial resemblance is difficult to miss: You cannot look at him and not think of me. If not for love, consideration, and good genes he might be peering around a prominent proboscis while brushing his tusks.

It is now 6:30. I mention this only because you would be hard pressed to know such a detail on your own at this point. In another household you might look up and see for yourself; here in Henry's home, the only clock that runs anymore, and that because *I* wind it, just landed face down upon the nightstand amid a man-made tremor some ten minutes back (“kick in the ass” or thereabouts). The very hands that helped bring him into this world a mere thirty minutes and eighteen seconds ago have been consigned to gesture in vain to a wilderness of dust and mahogany grain.

Henry emerged from the dressing room, dressed. Seeing him in such a state, I felt a sudden stab of uneasiness between my shoulder blades, as if I had imprudently turned for a moment with my back to verisimilitude. Upon reflection now, it seems to have been the sensation of two images colliding headlong in the dense fog of perception: a.) the initial hopeful one of a man who was able to put the object of obsession

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behind him long enough to cloth himself like a normal functioning adult; and b.) the slower one (weighed down by truth humming towards image “a.” with overpowering momentum) of a man who has merely put on his person anything in his path which was not his book. And then, of course, unable to swerve around the wreckage in time, crashes c.), the ominous realization that this was the very first time in recent memory that Henry has dressed himself before first partaking of his ritual wake-up shower and shave. Concerning anyone but a monomaniac, such a minor deviation from the sure tracks of routine would suggest little else than a refreshing breath of variety, but with Henry the backwards sweater, rumpled trousers, and unmatched socks—as discomfoting as they may at first seem—all pale in significance when compared with the matted hair and the stubble.

Henry finally returned to his desk and perched himself on his chair like a bird of prey waiting for something to swoop down upon. It is in these seemingly innocent mannerisms that one catches the best glimpse of the true Henry Flower in all his smug self-sufficiency. If I so chose to keep him waiting for hours on end for the next new idea, indeed I would. But having gone through several thousand tedious pages of that game with my Marcel before his death, I have grown impatient with the thought of testing my endurance again.

Henry sat there pulling at his matted hair as if attempting to uproot dormant thoughts, his gaze lost amid a prosperous lawn of bull thistle, cocklebur, deadnettle, henbit, ladysthumb, and mugwort, all glistening

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triumphantly in the moist morning light. (He was continually amazed at how so hearty and luxuriant a lawn could grow out of a plot of ground he lavished such unadulterated neglect upon—especially remembering the arduous lengths to which his parents had gone just to maintain grass there. But whatever the secret, he loved to let his eyes roam and frolic amid the complex and provocative terrain.) A squirrel scurried here and there on spinal impulse, searching frantically to unearth something, anything at all, for Henry to write about.

It is a testament to the tremendous tensile strength of irony that a world-renowned author such as Henry Flower should be left to rummage for his creative sustenance in so derelict a corner of the earth as this while I, whose name is rarely pronounced, let alone pronounced correctly, draw inspiration from a vista of paradisaical splendor. From where I sit watching over Henry and the rest I have an unobstructed view of the mightiest, most awe-inspiring of metaphorical rivers. Far behind me I hear it gather at its unseen source in the hills of ages past; looking straight ahead I barely make out its widening mouth emptying the stuff of today into tomorrow. Each night I watch as it slyly feigns sleep, creeping quietly in the blanketing dark beneath the dim nightlight of the moon. Then, when the horizon ignites in an oracular pool of red and orange light, and the fiery disk of the sun emerges from the water to climb into the frightened sky, I look up from the hectic business of Henry's dreams to witness the ceremonious unveiling of the riverbanks and the mysterious frozen forms that guard them. And

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when the sun is high and my ink is flowing freely, I look out again upon the broad expanse of shimmering water, now coursing resplendently between bright green banks like a well-fed python winding lazily through the grass, and let my eye travel down its shiny scaly back from bend to bend to catch fleeting glimpses of Henry's future achievements sparkling in the surface like diamonds. And flanking it in the emerald earth all the way to the horizon, magnificent slow-motion pink and white fountains pour forth as weeping cherries, flowering dogwoods, redbuds, magnolias, crabapples, and peaches stretch out multitudinous fistfuls of ecstatic flowers. And far off in the distance can be seen the late-blooming hawthorns too. Yes, it was along these very banks that my love-stricken Marcel had wandered in his youth and buried his head in the lap of my frenzied hawthorns. However, he could no more hear the rush of these waters behind him than could I smell from up here the enthralling fragrance that he so laboriously attempted to describe for me. But as the sun completes its vast arc circumscribed above the river and once again descends toward its spectacular watery death, I often wonder how it is that a landscape so sublime as mine yields no more long-lasting beauty than does Henry's pathetic little plot of weeds.

Anyway, the squirrel, having found a few of those indescribable trifles that squirrels prize highly but which matter little to most men, scampered off like an imbecile, leaving Henry pretty much on his own amid his desperate search for inspiration. Meanwhile, an earthworm had blindly worked its throbbing coiled length out of an aperture in the

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earth inadvertently opened by the rodent and was now basking in the morning moistness beneath a woolly clump of mugwort. Ordinarily, such a self-sacrifice upon the altar of Henry's imagination would be richly rewarded in literature, its streamlined setae glistening for all eternity within the unearthly prose of the all-too-earthly Henry Flower. But all this was calculated and positioned in vain: Henry could see nothing of the worm from the distance at which he was sitting, and before long our patient annelid passed quietly, thanklessly, and even poignantly from the world of literary promise into the darker one of ornithic nutrition. What a waste! Why, here was a terrestrial oligochaet, nature's most perfect microcosm of the great sun-swallowing python of time, stretched out in all its hermaphroditic loneliness and metaphoric splendor, waiting selflessly to be digested in the juices of human imagination and transformed into the finest of reading matter – only to meet its end in the crude stomach of a common robin. My anger at such wholesale squandering of good symbolism is further inflamed with the thought of the countless authors the world over sitting at a window such as this with little or nothing to write about while another dull-witted bird gets too fat to fly straight.

A minute or so elapsed that was not worthy of the retelling. (Open just about any work of fiction and you will find, quite to the contrary, that events inevitably occur in conspicuous sequence, one after another, line after line, like a strand of knotted pearls; rarely if ever do you see them happening many at a time with the leftover space left trailing

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clumsily at the end, as in life.) The I of squirrel, which was as far as he got on that subject, so traumatized was he still over the loss of the notebook, gave birth to a prominent tail in search of an appropriate verb, swerving dreamily into convolutions near impossible to describe precisely without actually drawing them for you. (Were I to do so, my pen would trace a cyma followed by a scotia, a torus, then a cyma-recta, bolection, and cyma again before reeling off into a tight spiral at the edge of the page.) A peek inside Henry's concentration would have granted you the corresponding view. It seemed for a moment that all was naught: The birds were quiet, the wind still; nothing could be heard but the chaffing of my nerves.

Then, far in the distance, a clanging bell could be discerned, followed by a long low rhythmical rumbling, slowly fading. Fate could be heard bearing down, gaining momentum. Gradually, as the pale images of recollected dreams flickered again in replay upon Henry's internal viewing screen and the protean authoritarian in glasses finally faded from vision before him, figures emerged from the surrounding murk. They were entirely unfamiliar to him; he could not recall having seen them upon awakening and could not be sure that they had not barged in by accident from a neighboring dream. They appeared to be hurried and scared, these featureless men, women, and children, and were dragging behind them their earthly possessions against a backdrop of smoke and shooting flames. Indeed, sighs and shouts were to be heard all around, and birds and animals could be seen swiftly stealing into the

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shelter of the surrounding woods. Following the commotion at some distance, a train of seven figures emerged into view: Seven men of uniform size and expressionless features, all marching slowly, methodically, and at an equal distance from each other. Their bodies were obscured by large white rectangular planes, which, on closer inspection, turned out to be sandwich boards (this is great!), each painted boldly in black with a different letter of the alphabet. When they came to a rather sudden halt at center-screen, in full view, the preoccupied last letter bumped mindlessly into the guy in front of him before backing off to an overcautious distance. Against the stark white of my lost patience, thick black letters a couple of feet tall spelled out the only word that really mattered to me anymore: **H e s i o c l**.

Almost immediately Henry began to write. And then he stopped. He leaned back in his creaking chair as if to gain an aerial perspective on what he had just written. Here, finally, was my long-awaited opportunity to glance down and dull a couple of toothy questions that had been gnawing at raw nerves for quite some time now: first, who the hell is Hesiocl?; second, how the hell did he get into Henry's notebook if *I* don't know who he is. But this seemingly simple act was considerably easier to propose than to do, and my overwhelming initial reaction was, curiously enough, to avoid doing so entirely and to look the other way. It was almost as if Henry had removed not his forearm from the page before him but rather his underwear from his body. Now, I have never thought of myself as the superstitious type, yet how do I

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explain the sudden urge to look the other way, if not for the fear of what I might see?

I made up my mind: I would look *next* morning. After all, I was in no real rush. Nothing of any real importance could happen in this world without me. Besides, the sabbatical would do me good. Knowing Henry as well as you do, by the way, it should come as no surprise that the view in the other direction was blandly predictable: books, books, and more books – shelf after shelf of them – all leaning over towards their spillage off the ends where bookends would have normally been placed in your more normal household. Finding myself with some unexpected time on my hands, I decided I would call off the titles to you. (After all, there is much you can learn about a person's library by reading the spines.)

What *am* I doing? What crap! Would there flow ink from his pen if not first from my own? Would that magic wand of his spur life out of language, or character out of cardboard, without the constant prodding by my own august scepter? Why, with one careless swoop of mine he can be harvested from the face of the page in but a second's notice. As Henry leaned back in his creaking chair, two lines of neatly ordered ideas were revealed, testament to the awful authority I wield over him:

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?

As Henry leaned back in his creaking chair, two lines of ordered ideas were revealed, etc.:

////////////////////

//////////....

Virgules.

Years from now the professors will undoubtedly learn to read between these lines and find all the evocative richness Henry has presumably packed there: perhaps the brandished rod of an angered god, or the titling spikes of the fierce driving rains he sends down as proof of his authority, or the slender fingers of the morning sun administered later like balm upon his devastation, or the river vista serving as the proscenium on which his didactic drama is enacted, and where time is measured out in railroad ties winding off like a zipper joining valley with mountains, and where telephone poles chart the progress like the ticking of a clock, etc., etc., etc. But until that time, I will consider them mere teeth marks in the very hand that feeds him his ideas.

Suddenly, I am visited by unpleasant memories of similar frustrations, and can see, for one, my poor Bartleby of years past sitting there, spiritless, broken, his great work yet undone. It is true that the best writing is done undercover, so to speak, and that the writer has to keep up a certain pretense of living in this world while attending to his

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own. But I have learned from bitter experience, nonetheless, that even the most ingenious ploys may come to naught; even the most seaworthy of ships can always run aground. When I first hit upon that copyist job for Bartleby, I chuckled with delight at my ingenuity. After finding the ideal employer to harbor him – they don't make Wall Street lawyers as spineless as *him* anymore! – I felt finally certain that he would indeed have the quiet existence needed for finishing his magnum opus. For, who could discern from the scratching strains of the pen the exact identity and authorship of the text? Here then, finally, was the one place he would actually have been paid to sit and write by himself, with the fewest of interruptions and the least ties to the world of practical existence. And yet with horror did I begin to notice that this yarn I was holding was slowly but surely unraveling before my eyes, as if some other guiding force was muscling in on my plans, bending them to his own perverse ends (like a hermit literary spirit, if there can be such a thing). As Bartleby withdrew into his mental exertions, gradually forgetting his pretense altogether, I watched in quiet desperation as my own creation gradually slipped through my tense fingers into the cold embrace of a stranger. And as if that were not enough, Bartleby's manuscript, the fruit of sleepless nights and weekends, never survived to vindicate him. It was indiscriminately packed up, together with the stacks of worthless legalese, and moved into storage at an undisclosed Wall Street address. Years of inquiries, letters, and searches have

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yielded nothing, and I'm left with only the painful memories as reward for all my loving labor.

I am back to the book, rummaging for more evidence. So far, I have found nothing but what I am looking for, as I see that NONE of this stuff is recognizable as mine. Furthermore, there's nothing remotely literary about any of it. But nothing is so perniciously disquieting as this "Hesiocl," and I am determined to track down this usurper if it is my very last act. (I know that I am upset now, because I am otherwise never this forthcoming about my intentions.)

I have taken this name or acronym or whatever it is that Henry now feigns either ignorance of, or indifference to, and I have inscribed it deeply and unmistakably upon the fresh surface of a virgin leaf yanked from the spine of his cursed notebook. And after careful consideration of the subsequent action of this story, I left the page flat on the floor beside his feet, where it would be in full and unavoidable view at just the appropriate moment. (If I didn't know better, damn it, I might mistake myself for one of his characters, so dependent have I become, ironically, upon *his* actions!)

A minute or so elapsed that was nearly identical to the preceding one in which practically nothing at all had happened. (That two such uncommon minutes should happen practically back to back *in prose* is more than just uncommon; it is unprecedented. I welcome you to search through the stacks of the largest library for another.)

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Suddenly, like a bright new age yawning open out of the tired old one, a gentle thud of world news resounded against the front door, and Henry instinctively jumped up to retrieve it for me. Turning toward the direction of the door, he noticed the slight quiver of my paper messenger at his feet from out of the corner of his eye. His heart throbbed in immediate recognition, but just as he prepared his upper torso for the plunge and braced his calves in counterweight, his attention was kidnapped by a violent ringing noise emanating from the kitchen. Had I planned ahead, I would have unplugged that damned telephone during the night. Actually, Henry has been toying with the idea of removing it himself for quite some time now and has resisted only on the outside chance of a call from Martha C.

I'm afraid some explanation is necessary here. Lest I be judged incompetent, it should be pointed out that the idea of so unlikely a lover for Henry was not at all mine. In fact, I was much against it from the start. I have no idea where the hell this woman came from or how she insinuated herself upon my Henry, but take it from me, she is a waste of even the cheapest ink and paper. Never have I happened upon such an offensively stereotypical bimbo; at least not since that little tart of a doctor's wife seduced my good Rodolphe many years back. But fear not; I have seen to this Martha-person's indefinite unavailability. At a book promotion party a few months ago, she (just now) fell prey to the unctuous charm of Henry's best-selling rival, J. H. Percy, and then slithered out of Henry's life just as quickly as she'd jiggled into it. No

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hard words or feelings, no broken promises or china; just some well-earned peace for me.

It was a memorable scene, now that I think about it. Love at first sight, as I remember it. Yes, two stray dogs in the street would have worked in haste to compete with the speed of their intimacy. There was Percy, proud as a cock, hands in his pockets, jangling the small change of commercial success, with his broad, manly back to the fireplace, basking in the warmth of the female adulation roaring before him. He was about to recite another one of his own favorites (of his, of course) to an insatiable gathering of admirers when a straggler (out of who knows where) slinked into the doorway holding a half-filled wine glass. Back at the fireplace, two rows of pearly teeth had just parted to permit a manly tongue to caress the syllables of manly feeling the right woman can arouse in a manly man. But suddenly now the tongue lay limp and the words leaden. The eyes above this dysfunction focused like field glasses over the heads of the patiently adoring in order to register the essential features of the new arrival. It seemed indeed the trusty old object of desire was already far behind, lost in the wake of the new one pushing its prow through these waters at that very moment, this in the shape of a low-cut sweater bursting over a short leather skirt painted on atop long bare legs tapering down into steep high-heel shoes. (Welcome aboard matey! Why didn't I think of *you* sooner?)

Meanwhile, a sea of fragrant, flowing hair tossed gently in the wake of the speaker's silent ship. A mob of overdressed and perfumed sirens

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implored our illustrious hero silently but lethally from the banks of makeshift seating before him, hungry for the literary experience. But our poor poetaster, tethered to the mast of his new inspiration, was suddenly oblivious to their adoration, knees and cleavage. (Oh, I LOVE literary events!) Yes, heads turned, chairs creaked, eyes focused, and hatred spewed like oil from a distressed tanker.

A timely announcement was made about wine, cheese, and book-signing across the hall, and after the flock had fled to greener pastures and the room was obediently emptied, our new arrival strutted her way to the fireplace to untie our hero from the mast. Putting down her empty glass, she offered him her small moist palm, along with the keys to the kingdom, and gave her body a shapely two-syllable name that he'd be free to fondle in the privacy of his expansive poetaster's mind. (I'm tempted really to dump Henry and just go with *this*, for Chrissake!) The ever-ready Percy seized the dainty palm in his meaty, manly own while he partook of the soft and sibilant name, letting it scamper like a frightened deer amid the broad meadows of his would-be bardic imagination. With her free left hand, she smoothed out a tiny wrinkle in her vacuum-packed skirt and could feel his

No, you'd be bored. What really matters here is only that one thing led to another and my Henry was at last free.

Certainly, I am one in no need of bragging, but if ever there was a match made (and enforced) in heaven, it was this one here. The beauty of this rather unexpected relationship was the total lack of trust that

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bound it. Knowing this jealous Joe as I did, I could rest assured that there'd be little time for so much as a breathless call from a nearby mall. Yet Henry waited for that call. Each and every ring of the phone was sure to be her and was grabbed by the second ring. And I would laugh like hell when it turned out to be a wrong number or, perhaps even, a crank call.

Meanwhile, muffled murmurs broke out from the kitchen in short, disreputable spurts. A profile of Henry paced into view and out again in impatient five-second intervals, exactly *unlike* one answering a mere wrong number. In such cases, one need not hear exact words to know *exactly* what is going on. One knew one was going to be sick.

Henry put down the phone. It *was* Martha (bitch!). She'd wanted to get together once more and "talk about things." Unfortunately for me, the only "thing" that takes Henry's mind off work is the female body. Plop one down before our hero and watch a celebrated workroom convert instantly to a playground. I've been through this before and have made up my mind not to let it happen again, at *any* cost.

On his way back from the phone our Don Juan reached down and snatched a crumpled (cat-chased) ball of ridiculous, unavailing, notebook paper and shot it, along with the last vestiges of my patience, into the triumphant oblivion of the trash can. Looking down at his unloved bachelor body for the first time in months, lover boy previewed Martha's Henry and saw there things he did not like: one brown nylon sock frowning at a cotton neighbor of fire-engine red (with a dime-size

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patch of pink peering through it), a pair of pants legs with three sets of knees, and a scratching post of a sweater on backwards. On his return from the dressing room, where he'd righted this state of affairs, Henry plopped his somewhat less dissatisfied self down upon his chair and immediately resumed official writing position as if there had been no interruption, no Martha, no Me. With tongue caught between pursed lips, he wrote without lifting his pen for my breath. Peering over his shoulder, I could not believe what I saw emanating from the pen of our celebrated modernist master:

She unbuttoned her black satin blouse, held taught by an eager bosom of perked nipple, and drew him toward her...[etc., etc.]

He was jerking me off, the bastard! Part of the *I* that I call *me* wanted to intervene and take control; another part, gaining representation, lobbied for sitting back and awaiting a prime piece of marketable erotica.

When, finally, the testosterone began to ebb from Henry's ears (as well as mine) and he settled back with slowing pulse to resume whatever it was that he was doing before the flood, an old thought became visible upon the glimmering horizon of his consciousness. The letters that had been sandwiched around those ineffectual advertisers now stood several stories high, glowing triumphantly in the distance. (Meanwhile, I'd added to my unfortunate business agenda one cat and a woman named Martha, insidious interlopers.)

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As Henry sat there pulling at his hair (which he tends to do whenever he can't think straight, implying as it were a correlation between curls of hair and those of thought), his pen took up a corresponding line of limp curls until suddenly, it seemed, inspiration must have broken through that thick muddle of "artistry" in his skull, as Henry jumped from his desk and followed my lead towards...the bedroom? Frustration is not a strong enough word to describe the sensation of watching a full-grown award-winning man of letters lower himself onto all fours more than once for something so insignificant as a goddamned notebook. When he emerged from the bedroom, big balls of dust clinging to his frowning knees, he marched toward the kitchen with heavy trod and determined stare, the latter focused on the telephone. He placed his call. The precinct officer who answered and took the information for the theft report was doing his patient best, at first, from refraining from open laughter, but halfway through Henry's remarkably precise physical description of this worthless waste of time and taxpayer's money, officer Petrovich felt obliged to interrupt and point out the rather simple, yet statistically solid, truth that, as a rule, *real burglars don't steal notebooks*.

Suffer me to interject something during the intervening split second before the good officer finishes his learned but lumpy recitation, because once he does and Henry responds, and one more thing leads to yet another, I can't see just when or where I'd get the opportunity to do so. What I wish to convey to you now is my hope it is absolutely clear

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that it takes nothing short of painful honesty on my part to report these happenings to you exactly as they happened without the slightest attempt at beautification. It would have been considerably easier, and a hell of a lot less embarrassing, for me to bend the historical facts of Henry's comings and goings, at least enough to give you something even remotely promising plot, theme, development, etc.; but as entertaining as that may have been for you, it would have done nothing to further your grasp of reality. And I have not gone to all this trouble merely to *entertain* you, for Chrissake!

While on the subject of reality though, I think it's time to let you in on something of the unfortunate business pertaining to Henry's family and upbringing. I would have loved nothing better than to avoid the whole loathsome subject and just pretend he had no past to speak of, or that whatever past he did have exerted no discernable influence on his present or future. But I am afraid at this point Henry's behavior would be incomprehensible to you without a peek behind him. Enter the evidence:

1. *The Name*: Henry was named not after the eight kings of England, four of France, or seven or so of the German states. Nor was he named after Patrick, William, or plain old O., but rather after his mother, Henry. The name was foisted upon his poor mother by a disgruntled father determined at all costs to name his progeny after his undistinguished self while hoping for a boy and not a girl. (Henrietta would have been a practical solution to the dilemma of a girl had not

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Henry senior hated it so, as it had been his own demeaning nickname in school.) Our Henry's mother, Henry, loved and despised her namesake with irrational passion and justifiable bitterness, and she vowed one day to name her own son in his memory as a surrogate for him whom she could raise her own way to be the man she'd always wished she'd had for a father.

Few first-time acquaintances of Henry Flower could have ever known the poignancy of those two syllables to the ears of the Flower and Stackpole families. And the impact on Henry himself was profound and unfortunate. He was deeply attached to his mother, and by name literally indistinguishable. Rarely did he hear his name in public without thinking *she* was being referred to and not he, or that he was being referred to *as* her. But then again, you can't really hold anything against a woman for wanting to call her son Henry. Some of the best houses in England, France, and the Holy Roman Empire had them. Yet Henry always had the feeling he was being made the butt of some nasty family joke and grew up to be rather defensive about being called by his name.

2. *The Reputation*: I'm afraid I have failed to give you the whole picture up till now concerning what this name really means in the literary world. The overall critical response to Henry's published work has been, to be brutally honest now, *brutal*. If not for a few pretentiously styled translations that won him the unqualified admiration of a few pretentiously lazy foreign critics with no English on them

(Grimmelhauser, Karamzink, and Giucciardino, to name only the most blatant and embarrassing examples of the harebrained who manage to get their doodles published these days), the only critics to be taken in by his suave prose have been the seemingly stern but inwardly gushy Ms. Eliot and that eminent Doctor of Bullshit himself, the pious G. D. Thompson, IV, Ph.D.

3. *The Small Pecker*: Whether on account of his name, his genes, or who knows what, Henry never quite grew to resemble what I would call a *real* man—I mean the masculine type, like me. Although we have already observed no lack of libido in his physiology, I must regretfully report that Henry is under-equipped for the job as described in his own doodlings. As a matter of fact—and this is rather painful for me to admit—Henry is the only Flower I have known to exert, physically speaking at least, little perceivable effect *whatever* on either the opposite sex or his own. When Henry walks into a room, I'm afraid your eyes go right to whatever he's carrying. You may watch what he does with whatever it happens to be—an umbrella, say, or a hat perhaps—but once he puts it down, you inevitably go back to your boring small talk as if nothing at all had happened.

Of course, it would be disproportionate to blame this general lack of sex appeal on his particularly pitiful endowment. For one thing, few people ever give themselves the opportunity to blame this general lack of sex appeal on his conspicuously small inheritance. For another, few people ever give themselves the opportunity to learn of what is lacking, and for another, there is hopefully more to sex appeal than this. But all this being said, I still do find his lack of stature in this department at

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least relevant to the problem, if not downright symptomatic. Nowhere on his unglamorous person could one find screen star features, least of all between his thighs.

I could go on, but I won't. I am afraid I'd be encouraged to begin inventing material to satisfy your *obviously* generous appetite for the stuff. The truth is it's none of your damned business, really. I don't know what got into me to divulge such purely private matters to you in the first place and am half tempted now to dismiss it all as outright fabrication, thank you very much.

"Imbecile!" muttered Henry about Petrovich and his sermon as he angrily slammed the phone down onto some sort of kitchen appliance not far from the empty waiting telephone cradle. "Brainless bureaucrat!" he appended to his text out of an unflinching concern for both meticulousness and alliteration.

Dazed with rage, Henry let his gaze graze distractedly here and there about the randomly rhyming objects of the cluttered, disorganized room while his mouth worked on in silent vigor, chewing pithy, alliterative epithets for a brainless bureaucrat from whom he thought himself disconnected. (Meanwhile, a distant voice could be heard faintly calling "hello? hello?" to him from the wilderness behind the toaster before surrendering with a barely audible click to the sound of flat-line dial tone.) Henry's unhearing gaze eventually stumbled upon the unsightly remains of a breakfast I didn't remember to mention before but that he nonetheless had just as certainly as you had yours —

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one that reminded him of the morning paper he hadn't looked at and was a waste of money ordering in the first place for all he ever looked at it. Well, he desired to look at it now, damn it, and his search for the paper gradually led him down old familiar routes. As he lowered himself instinctively upon his worn-out knees to check under the bed, a sickly sense of *deja vu* suddenly soured in my gut into the realization that I have been through all this before, with him and with the rest of them. How is it the world worships these artist types who can't manage the rudimentary functions of everyday survival that even a simpleton takes for granted? (I am reminded, for one, of that ridiculous Pierre Menard with his absurd penchant for Castilian renaissance attire and archaic turns of phrase, oblivious to the modern world around him.)

An urgent beeping sound could be discerned now emanating from the kitchen, and by a quick but sophisticated chain of associated thought, Henry soon realized the source of this problem in finding this morning's paper: He had not yet brought it in from the front porch. An automatic spurt of (largely unwarranted) relief flushed his face (on the exact dot of *ahh!*) and left bits and pieces of smile sticking there in odd places like the remnants of a hurried, sloppy breakfast. He looked ridiculous: like a tragic mask painted with comic features. As he clambered enthusiastically to his feet, wiping his dusty hands upon his already unspeakable pant thighs, I caught a quick but telling glimpse of a physiognomy that read like a roadmap. It occurred to me that if I've been more successful in the past with psychological subtleties than I

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have in the case of Henry, this is obviously more a fault of Henry's than of mine. There is definitely a limit to the truths and lies one can knead into a face as inflexible as his. Henry's is a forehead more suitable for writing upon than hiding behind. Across that corrugated cardboard brow one could easily read the dishonest optimism of a man who expects to find much more behind that front door than a forgotten morning newspaper. (The rumbling, clattering sound on the tracks a few blocks away seemed to be getting more distinct.) On his way to the front door that now separated Henry from the tragically brief remainder of his story, he suddenly realized he'd never before had so much as noticed that door, let alone admired its workmanship. Now, *this* was a door! *This* was no mere rectangle of wood cut out to fill a gap in a wall. Someone (old Mr. Turmacher with the blotchy red face and sausage-thick fingers who sold the house to his parents, actually) had evidently gone to considerable trouble over this instrument of egress, with its graduated fielded panels, its curtained, mullioned window, and its brass peep hole, bell, knob, and deadbolt. To think he'd inherited this with absolute indifference to the special qualities that made this door a particular door and not just another of those abstract universal doors that swung on *a priori* hinges since the time of the first jamb! I find it curious and definitely worth the noting, for example, that after years of mindlessly opening and closing this respectable symbol of security, finality, choice, confinement, and freedom from confinement, as well as attending to the countless associated rituals of locking it, forgetting its

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key, banging on its middle panel with urgency (dancing foot to foot), taping notes to friends and delivery people upon its patient face, etc., that only *now* – now when there was so little time and when it really mattered not anymore, alas – had it finally occurred to Henry how plainly unnecessary it was to have a peep hole in a door *already graced with a large window*. And as he now wrapped his fingers around the cold brass knob (no differently than he had done thousands of times before), only now did it occur to him that this was indeed the very same sphere of brass that he'd struggled with on tiptoe when young, and upon which he had time-and-again fixed his incoherent stare when bundled up with a fever on the sofa.

How is it that you've got to go and imbue a thing with a sense of finality before a person takes any notice of it? This door, which never caused him even a moment's reflection, is all of a sudden resonant with meaning now when it may close on him for good and divest itself, finally, of all that meaning. Next time around, I think I will do things quite differently and begin right at the end where whoever it is will have already learned the intense significance of every second and the monumental meaning of every slightest gesture that cannot be imitated by a dead man.

But then again, no need putting off until tomorrow what can be done in retrospect. Experience has taught me that the same end can be achieved by simply sacrificing the beginning – like I did with Gregor's, come to think of it. After all, who today reads the bizarre record of *his*

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last years and still yearns for those long-discarded first few hundred pages? So intensely boring and monotonous was that life of his as a traveling salesman, that in retrospect it is difficult not to see the “accident” (I still do not write it off as a mere accident, by the way, no matter what they say) as a stroke of good fortune, if anything at all. The very thought of having to watch him follow his predictable routine for another forty or so years without interruption makes me shudder with relief now that such an option has been safely eradicated. But it also makes me wonder what in hell ever possessed me to focus on such a life in the first place. Was it the safe, mindless ease of it all that lured me? (There were days so similar to those preceding them that when rushed for time, all one had to do was place a fresh sheet atop yesterday and trace it word for word. Clearly, this was no life for him, or for me.) Or was it the challenge of possibly discovering entire new worlds hidden amid insignificant old details? (Such as when a period was inadvertently traced as a comma and Gregor suddenly found himself faced with raw, unallocated time on his hands and the consequent responsibility of filling it. Or the time a letter of his name was miss-drawn and he was rather instantly transformed from a subject to an object.) Whatever the initial attraction, I'm glad to be rid of all those useless years.

Done. The first two hundred and fifty some pages—right to the moment his alarm wakes him up to greet his last day on earth. Gone. And suddenly it is clear to me precisely which essential ingredient had

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been lacking all along and keeping Henry from the cutting edge of life: a healthy threat of imminent death. After all, have I learned nothing at all from Bailey's mother's finest moment? And did I not finally coax at least a drop or two of humanity out of that sentimental high priestess of priggery with that misfit's gun aimed at her? It's only a pity that one should have to do such coaxing at point-blank range. But no matter what they say, I had him make a woman out of her with that gun barrel, damn it! And I can do the same with *him* if need be. Oh, had I only kept a pistol pointed at Henry from the beginning instead of a reproachful finger, he would be sweating rivulets of existential profundities now instead of these self-indulgent frivolities. Or, in the interest of dramatic subtlety, had I merely kept one loaded on the mantel in his full view – or *yours*, at the very least. Unloaded, for that matter. Or, more effective yet, had I described merely the ghost-like outline on the mantel where this same gun had always rested *until now*, when its sudden absence would inevitably charge the atmosphere with more dramatic tension than could *ever* be achieved otherwise – even by the long-awaited materialization of the notebook). Next time.

Gone. Perfect. One good deletion is worth a thousand words; he is immediately the more interesting for his pithiness. Come to think of it, a good twelve or so hours cut from the rest of today couldn't help but improve the overall design either. *Symmetry*. I *love* symmetry! There. (Less may not be more, but it is certainly a lot easier to conceptualize.) I must remember to do the same with Anna's when I get a chance. Cut

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out, once and for all, those hard-to-stomach last couple days of apparent recuperation in the hospital which that moralizing, judgmental son-of-a-bitch put her through only to have her repent before she. (Oh, Anna, how could I have given you up to that insufferable prig like that? How could I have just...no, I won't torture myself with it all anymore. What's done is done, and there are plenty others.)

Where was I? Oh yes. Henry flung open the door with a magnificent sweeping gesture (good) that carried a poignant sense of finality with it (perfect!). His eyes fixed at the level at which he obviously expected to find the newspaper and, more importantly, the notebook, leaning against the storm door. A sharp creak of an unoiled hinge outlined the formless *woosh* of displaced air that attested to the dramatic opening of the door. The lonely newspaper (sorry, Henry) that received the full brunt of his shocked stare had landed face up when it bounced off the door earlier in the day (after several frustrating rehearsals with that impudent delivery boy) and luckily had not budged an inch since. Upon visual contact with the page, Henry's pupils swooned vigorously to the ominous dark shapes that comprised its bold headline:

OUR WORLD PROVES STILL THE HEIR OF HESIOCL

Henry stepped back a pace and stared down hard at this familiar, though now shocking, news. He cautiously bent over and lifted the newspaper in his left hand while holding the doorknob in his right (suddenly, by the way, it occurs to me that he's no spring chicken, this

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man!) and made his way through the spotted darkness back to the breakfast table where a fuzzy stack of precursors stood awaiting a belated fresh surface layer accretion. He lowered himself slowly down into his chair, his eyes still fixed on the headline. Whatever this news meant, it quite obviously did not need explication, for Henry did not bother with the columns of irrelevant print beneath it (including yesterday's flatulent editorial on the proposed welfare/tax package, reprinted in the heat of afterthought merely to supply columnar support to such a heavy headline). Laying the paper down upon the table over a corner of jellied toast, he peered out the window into the ominous sky (seemingly a mistake on my part until remembering that I had recently removed all those intervening hours) where yet-indecipherable images wrestled together confusedly in the murk. Gradually the backdrop sharpened and things took on shape, and I looked around in a panic to see who might have stolen in, for I recognized none of what Henry saw there: A Spanish-looking dining room loomed large in his sky where a ranting, deaf old man in tattered clothes vigorously jabbed and slashed with his brush on the wall, painting a dark horror inappropriate to the function of the room: There rose a lumbering, saturnine Titan clasping his prey by the blood-spattered waist, gorging his cavernous mouth hungrily and noisily.

It was awful. Worse yet, *it wasn't mine!* Henry pushed aside his plate of gory remains, grabbed the closest implement on hand (ballpoint, red, capless), and scribbled frantically down the newspaper a blood-red eye-

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witness account of what he saw before him. He stained the paper between rows of calmly ordered black signs with a stream of red that did not cease till he'd exhausted his subject. At the bottom of the page he scrupulously drew out the bold letters of a concluding observation, as if chiseling them in stone:

A brutish, jealous father devours his progeny.

The inevitable then happened. Henry got up from his table, put on his overcoat, and started for the front door. Standing on the threshold, about to pull the door closed behind him (for the very last time, I'm afraid), he abruptly paused as if suddenly remembering something important enough to justify its inclusion here. Leaving the door wide open for anyone and everyone to look in who were so inclined, he turned and marched with noisy, determined tread directly back to the...*utility room*(?). A faint smile came over his face as he eyed the tip of the screwdriver in his hand on the way back to the front door (that damned loose handle!) where he found that the screw in question spun freely in its hole with no thread left. To cut to the chase, Henry was now impatiently rifling through the three-dozen small drawers of a hardware cabinet in search of a replacement screw. (Meanwhile, the wheels were turning, the tracks humming, and the ending would not, could not, be altered under any circumstances now.) He found the right screw! (I almost couldn't believe it myself.) Back at the door, he inserted the screw with a hint of smile...that soured the moment he noticed its color, which was different from the others....

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[Editor's Note: The manuscript breaks off at this point and picks up after two missing pages.]

With pocketed hands and thinking eyes, he blindly headed toward the railroad tracks like a man on urgent business. He passed along the quiet row of stage-set shop fronts, the church, the school, and the jailhouse, and down past the city hall, where high above blinked life-size neon letters spelling out the startling announcement, “IT’S TIME!” Without looking left or right, he walked straight onto the merciless railroad tracks and...[shit!] continued across...down toward the cemetery, where his name had been engraved along a row of patient stone blocks. In the near distance could be heard the diminishing sound of a train that must have passed through the station only moments before. Suddenly, the growing quiet fed by the retreat of the train noise was shattered by a screech of tires and flash of bouncing headlights. An automobile of unknown make and origin appeared, seemingly from out of nowhere, recklessly veering at an unearthly speed. It swayed left and right and then straight up over the curb, hitting a fire hydrant that gave up a geyser’s gush that came raining down like tears around the very spot where my poor henry flower was obliterated like clockwork.

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II. Chronologue

When the second hand hit target between the 1 and the 2 of the 12, tons of metal creaked in release as the huge wheels were urged on out of stasis. Perfect circles of steel turned slowly into motion, rolling heavily upon lines proscribed in unwavering iron. Gradually, gathering the conviction of motion over the powerful lure of gravitational heaviness, the wheels turned faster and faster until the tail-end cars whipped angrily from the station with pounding, momentous might.

All the while, high above in the skies turned great spheres of rock, ice, and gas in the form of planets circling the authority of their stars. Like the steady hands of a clock, they moved in quiet ceremonial poise, measuring out the continuous attraction of the immense, hot center of their system, the terrible destructive source of everything, burning furiously toward extinction.

Momentously, relentlessly, turned the train wheels to the accelerating heartbeat of rapidly clattering track. Out across a bright-lit open vista soared this blind, indifferent symbol of fate like a mighty swollen river surging heavily to the sea. Before it tumbled the momentary scant debris of chance resistance. As the fateful hands of the clock pushed on in their terrible calm to the heavenly music of the orbiting spheres overhead, the spinning wheels traced a thread of horizontal time through the vertical ages of space. Here on both sides, in cross-section, read the unaltered record of a single perpetual epoch

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preserved in an endlessly changing tangle of life in which vine-choked, fire-charred, storm-felled trees set root in quiet descent back into the mulch from which they had sprung. And in the quick blink of a few sunspots would awaken and merge from this sleeping bulk of rotted life tall temples of bark and leaf that had escaped countless forms of chance devastation.

But beyond this heaped and layered progress of years, centuries, and millennia could now be gleaned fleeting glimpses of the eternal. Lengthening out here and there between the quickly shifting shapes of durational time were seen bright, tranquil stretches of the one great ageless surface, the one continuous sheet of fluid change seemingly unbroken by event. Water sparkled in the sunlight.

It seemed as if the vehicles of different metaphors were vying to meet and be subsumed in one. As if the distinct strains of time were finally spun side by side—horizontal by vertical, durational by experiential—the shimmering curtain of leafy foreground trees abruptly gave way with a shudder, and the rumbling, barreling train of cars was suddenly hovering in seeming stillness and cottony quiet along the broad expanse of the ageless river waters. Within the blurred peripheral fringe of the undulating grassy banks, the slow, stately surface stretched out like a languid, fearless snake, its back sparkling resplendently in the bright overhead sun like scattered diamonds. Diamonds of unfettered present joy glittered and danced in the warm sunlight above the unseen truths

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of darkness and cold. The present glittered mindlessly upon the bouncing, buoyant back of the past.

A broadening foreground bank of intensified green announced the immanent divergence and return of the two vehicles back to the tenors of their own metaphors. And suddenly, with another shudder of impacted air, a wall of tall trees rose up to sever time from time. Once again the cars were ushered upon the quickened heartbeat of rumbling, pulsating track made palpable again amid the quickly shifting forms, shadows of the past.

Eventually, dense woods thinned and died into pastures and swaying fields cut down again and again and cleared into neat lots where buildings rose and fell and where rows of eroded marble slabs pushed up from the bare bones of long-forgotten lives. From each had issued a brief muffled cry as arms had stretched out in quick futility against the indifferent sweep of the clock hand. Like short, sweet strains of song they sounded briefly, then died away in longing above the powerful ostinato of rotating wheels and revolving spheres of rock, ice, and gas around the hungry, irresistible fires of time.

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III. Epilogue

Suddenly, on the dot of six a.m., a shrill shriek erupted from the bedroom of Henry Flower, Deceased, and cut the solemn stillness like a knife. Alarm gushed forth, full and unabated, steeping the room in a cloud of confusion and discord suggestive of the gathering of the rude primordial gasses. All was drowned in the thick chaos forced in through this puncture in the fabric of quiet. Darkness prevailed over an indecipherable world: The few feeble rays of a distant dawn that made it in through the window reclaimed only random surfaces of rough-hewn forms. And those forms that could be vaguely made out seemed divested of all meaning, removed as they were from the bulk still buried in the inky shadows of sleep.

But deep within this tumultuous, shapeless murk, a faint promise of life could be discerned struggling to break through to the light of conscious order. A slight twitch of unfocused movement shivered through the blanketed bulk rising up like a mountain and suddenly rocked with a spasm of will like some huge prehistoric egg about to crack open. And by the time the very last increment of silence had been devoured by sound, a hand slowly emerged into dim view from this egg-like mound, as if a periscope sent up from the watery deep. A tiny round protrusion on the back of time was all that separated pandemonium from calm, but the five fingers sent out from the land of the dead to find it were unprepared for the complexity of the job. They

Novella: *Creation Lost*, Part III: *Epilogue*—continued

groped blindly in the dark like gesticulating madmen, and the clock was sent crashing to the floor, where it bounced and rolled into muffled exile beneath the bed. The hand that had been raised in seeming futility against this messenger of time now withdrew as mindlessly as it had entered, leaving behind a mission badly botched. A moment yawned as large as an epoch. It seemed as if a cataclysmic force was gathering deep inside the stillness of that egg in preparation for the final sundering. And when the hand finally emerged again, it came with a renewed conviction, propelled this time by the blanketed bulk that rolled to an abrupt and noisy halt at the mattress edge. Now the hand had leave all the way to the floor, where it clawed at the echoing emptiness.

When, finally, the alarm was found and quenched between desperate fingers, and time was again restored to its rightful place on high, a spacious, luxuriant calm poured back into the room, rising in delicate eddies here and there until everything was once again bathed in the beauty of creation.

The pallid glow at the window gradually strengthened, reclaiming more and more meaning from the vague forms within the room. What was obvious at this point was that the spectacle just viewed was no mere repetition of the Prologue opening, reworked out of concern for the stylistic. No, even in this dimness it was possible to make out the distinctive physical features heralding the arrival of an entirely new protagonist upon the scene. And this one, unlike the last, was truly pleasurable to behold. The brave hand that triumph back to bed, where

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a seated figure had replaced the egg-like mound. Against the broken shell of a bunched white blanket this hand could now be seen to be feminine and lovely, with fingers long and graceful, in place of the stumpy digits on the hands of the late Henry Flower. And when these fingers peeled back the blanket in slow ceremony, a goddess-like figure was revealed enveloped in human warmth in the cold dawn air. Yes, there upon the half-shell of a bed sat a vision of grace unrivalled. It seemed as if Venus herself had been born, and when you squinted your eyes, the surrounding furls of blanket looked less like shell now than like the frothy foam tossed on gentle waves before a team of jubilant dolphins. Indeed, so pure was the tone of this sensual flesh and so perfect the proportions and volumes formed of its contours, it could easily have been sculpted from the finest ivory.

But as light gradually won over dark, and the outlines of things consequently sharpened, something disconcerting was slowly made manifest: an uncanny resemblance between this visage and that of the late Henry Flower. Strange as that rightly sounds, there was no getting around it. As this similarity of features was beyond that which mere coincidence allows, it must be pointed out that this goddess we have just watched climb full-grown from the bed of Henry Flower is none other than Henry's very own daughter. Her absence from the Prologue might seem conspicuous now to some, yet it signifies nothing. Neither,

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for that matter, did I bother to mention to you the existence of Martha's nephew, Mike, nor Joe Percy's pitiable wife, etc., etc.

Her name is Henry. Few people today have any idea that Henry had been named not after her father, as reasonable as that may at first sound, but after *his* (her father's) mother, Henry. While such a trifling distinction may carry little significance to you or to me, to Henry it was charged with the stuff. She had grown up a slave to the erroneous notion that her birth was a major blow to her parents who, she assumed, had longed for a son. Where on earth she picked up this idea is beyond me. The unornamented truth of the matter is that both parents had wished for a girl all along, but secretly, each afraid to disappoint the other, whose heart each felt sure to have been set on a boy. Irony festered freely in this household. Young Henry grew up to read in the mere five letters of her name the bold-faced rejection of her by two parents who, quite obviously to her imagination, did not want a Henrietta. The warm parental love one could witness emanating from her parents bathed Henry in what she felt to be a continuous cold shower of patronizing, guilt-purging, self-deception. Each new act of sincere concern over her was just one more demonstration to Henry of the extreme lengths two parents would be willing to go in propagating their hypocrisy. (One would not be at all surprised to find such a dilemma scribbled into the galleys of some best-seller for a quick, gratuitous laugh; it is historically less common to run into it in a serious work of literature, such as this, where every word has been chosen with

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purpose. Yet, truth knows no genres.) Indeed, the important fact that most people in this world are woefully ignorant of is that Henry was named as such for no other reason than to appease her difficult grandmother Henry. This woman, of whom the least said is best, was apparently convinced of a special property to her illustrious name—call it magical if you will, although she would not have gone quite so far as that—and she saw in the perpetuation of it up the family tree the veritable continuation of a dynasty. Interestingly enough, her subtle lobbying efforts did not immediately smell of the selfishness and egotism they rightly should have. Initially, most people assumed her interest was motivated by the happy associations she might have had with a fine, if disorganized, son of that same name. But most people are naïve.

Henry (V) dreamt of Henry (IV) often. She loved him with an intensity and devotion that has always made me a bit uneasy. (If only this were a fiction where things were portrayed as they really *should* be, and not as they *are*, there would be a lot less embarrassment, discomfort, and word mincing in the telling of it.) This uneasiness on my part has less to do with any concern of mine for the normality of their relationship than it does with the simple appearance that it flies in the face of the sincere distrust Henry felt toward her parents, as articulated with care above. Surely there lies an incongruity here that reflects poor planning or an unclear grasp of themes and motifs! But no, I have proofread each line and found among them not the slenderest shred of

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untruth. The human psyche is indeed an illogical construct. Far be it for me to elucidate it for you.

In the meanwhile of a minute or so, Henry had managed to drag herself clumsily from the bed in which she'd been delivered to us and trudge her way upon slippared feet down the tunnel-like corridor that had coffee at its other end. As Henry bangs about the kitchen in pursuit of the life murmuring to her at that other tunnel end, we will grab the opportunity to linger behind and survey some of the family photos lining the walls along the way.

You will please notice, first of all, that they are all of Henry herself, at various stages of her life, and also that she is accompanied in nearly all of them by her father. Indeed, strolling down this particular corridor of memory lane, one could easily imagine the earth to have been reduced by some calamity to a tidy population of two (with say one more behind to take the pictures). This one here shows her about to fall off her first pony as her father pronounces the name of his favorite and least easily pronounceable cheese to the camera's shutter. The one above it, if only it had been shot in enough light, would have shown the two of them engaged in a rambunctious bear hug upon a bear rug, a clear (albeit dimly-lit) example of her father's insatiable love of visual puns. The overexposed enlargement next to that shows them seated at the base of a tree in an orchard somewhere, munching busily at peaches from a basket beside them, and little Henry holding up a glistening pit for the viewer to admire. But, of course, my personal favorite happens

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to be the one she likes least of all (though obviously not too little to actually display) and shows a young Henry standing stark naked, knee-deep in her toddler's tub, her father at the shutter for once, and therefore not in the picture. Excepting maybe this one shot, it is not difficult to read the underlying message nailed up on these walls, or to figure out along which borders our young Henry's sympathies were amassed at the time of the divorce.

One of the tried and proven yardsticks of truth in literature (oh, I *do* love the smell of freshly brewed coffee!) is the simple litmus test of *convenience*. Truth is almost never found there. If this story were merely some *story*, the menacing memory of a Henry (IV) could have been erased from the current protagonist's mind (and therefore ours as well) in the fifteen or so seconds it would have taken to write the following:

Henry really hated her father deep down and was relieved to be free of thinking of him anymore now that he was dead, especially now that she had grown so much closer to her mother. The gain of the latter relationship seemed to have compensated for the loss of the former.

But here in *our* story, on the contrary, you see that no such easy arrangement is possible—here where our heroine can think of no one as important to her as the very person I would give anything to forget about entirely. This is what is known as Truth, and it helps demonstrate why what you are reading will be found in the Literature section of your bookstore and not that of Romance. In our case, had such a detour around Truth via Convenience been taken, our protagonist would have

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waited all that time for her train to arrive on the cold, windy platform of denouement only to find her eventual descent from it to be totally anticlimactic. We would have seen her home, perhaps gone up to her kitchen for a cup of cocoa, heard a few stories about the trip, and that would have been it. Forget about pathos, poignancy, ambivalence, ambiguity, and all the rest we've come to expect from the human condition as we actually know it; these would have been spray-painted in bright, cheerful colors and used as decor.

Henry had determined from early on to follow in her unfortunate father's footsteps and write. Of course, it has been argued by some that had there been anything in her life resembling alternative footsteps for her to follow—I mean footsteps that actually *went* somewhere rather than those neat little talon prints of her mother's shown pitter-pattering to the water's edge and quickly back again!—she might very well have followed *those*, and that such a decision as hers to write was, for all intents and purposes, inevitable. But they know nothing. These same critics might just as well argue that my young Bartleby went on to write motivated only by the dearth of typewriters in his family home. In any event the legacy was obvious: Henry (V) had the Floral appetites for reading, writing, and impracticality, and was also fired with Henry IV's (not to mention VIII's) famous libido. For, just as with her father, the only thing that took her mind off work, it seemed, was the female body. Henry's worship of her father resulted, curiously to me, in her attraction to women who reminded her of the latter's troublesome consort of sorts,

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Martha C. In fact, when I consider the matter more closely it occurs to me the only important difference between V and IV came down to the matter of reproductive physiology. Yes, unlike her late, unfortunate father, Henry V possessed a fine, healthy, womanly body with everything just the right size, shape, and number on it; a veritable Gaia, primordial deity of the earth, though less motherly — *Considerably* less motherly, actually — indeed, the comparison should never have been made in the first place, for if any one department of Henry's life promised whole-heartedly to remain unstaffed and unfurnished, it was the children department. The very sight of one of these little gooey creatures made her stomach crawl with anxiety over her career. It was as if any sticky-fingered tyke she happened to see on the street or train might suddenly come running to her, calling mommy, mommy, with gaping mouth and watering eyes, and hang from her skirt until she gave up her career.

Henry was already working on her third cup of coffee by now. However, despair not, as we missed absolutely nothing of interest in the draining of the first two. For, she was still seated lump-like at the kitchen table by the weakly illuminated window, both hands wrapped securely and protectively around the vessel containing her only hope of life. Through gently rising curls of steam, and a broad expanse of glass, her eyes were still fixed on that same small patch of ground where they had strained long in vain to extract sense from the strange phenomenon of grass. (Like little hairs growing from the skin of the earth, she

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thought. How bizarre!) A massive double dose of caffeine was already hard at work massaging life into her figuratively stiff organ of cognition, and it was not long before the word **g r a s s** came crashing down between her ears like an icicle off a sun-baked roof. And with it was dislodged her entrenched stare from the small clump of turf, leaving her eyes free to roam and wander aimlessly over a prosperous lawn of bull thistle, cocklebur, deadnettle, henbit, ladythumb, and mugwort. As word (grass) and image (little hairs growing from the skin of the earth) slowly fused into a familiar whole (“grass”), random stirrings from the extremities of arms and legs were also registering upon her consciousness. Evidently, preparations were underway again for locomotion of some sort, although no order for such had as yet been given. It now seemed, indeed, that if she wanted to walk to her study and sit at her desk to write, there would be nothing at all to stop her now but the usual myriad forces of the outside world and its interrelation with her own. As she ambled back down the hall on her way to greet this day, she cast a feather-duster glance over the photos we have just examined and stopped to straighten the ghostly one of the bear hug/rug. (Whoops!) The elements of a smile seemed poised at the corners of her mouth, as if merely awaiting the official order to proceed. To the casual observer it would be difficult to know whence this smile came: whether from memories elicited by the picture or from satisfaction of her undisputed victory over the grass. But whatever the initial source, this faint glimmer of delight ultimately signaled nothing

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less than the first signs of literature awakening. Yes, deep within the tightly furled cerebral tissue filling up her skull, a miraculous transformation was taking place not unlike the purported appearance of real flesh and blood from out the unlikely combination of wafer, wine, and credulity. There would be art born here, miraculous as always, but this time from out of that most common stuff of grass. For, it seems these hairs of the earth's skin had confused themselves somehow with those on the bear's back as they passed each other in the dark corridors of memory, and suddenly Henry was again lost in the tight embrace of bygone days where her blind, eternal search for me was free to find expression in a symbolically sound obsession with her father. Of course, so far we have only some grass on the ass of a bear—more matter than art by *anyone's* reckoning—but the day is still young and experience teaches that art thrives in the most unlikely habitats, including dark, damp places undreamt of by your philosophers. Trust me when I tell you I will be as surprised as you to learn what Henry will create from this weird conflation, for it is not my imagination we are dealing with here, please remember, but *hers*.

Henry's shy hint of a smile inflated to a full-blown repression of laughter that immediately burst. The delight that had paced its cage with increased animation had suddenly found escape from her head through an unguarded nasal passage and announced with an explosive snort the imminent release of all captive laughter. She was making her way to her study when this happened, and the sudden eruption

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quicken her pace in such a manner that you might have easily imagined her heading for a toilet instead of a desk.

Henry was definitely awake now. She dropped into her chair with a creaking thud and sent her fingers scrambling across the keys in search of irony, paradox, and truth while the rest of her body was left behind to wrestle its way out of the merciless grip of laughter. Her fingers worked diligently and soberly while the world around them wallowed in the deepening waters of drunken revelry. When her fingers finally came to rest upon a poignant question mark, and the last tired sigh from her open mouth failed to ignite yet another spasm of outburst, Henry wiped her wet cheeks in the left sleeve of her nightgown and glanced down to check the evidence of her progress and saw:

,zjr ,sfr jod esu eoyj vstrgi;;u [;smyrf gppydry[d yjtpihj yjr yjovl htssdd.
htssdd ;olr yjr git pg yjr nrst jr esd hpomh yp djppy. niy ejovj nptr sm
omytovsyr stsnrdwir frdohm ;olr s vst[ry/

A moment of silence ensued while Henry searched the strange paragraph with expanded pupils for the sought-after irony and truth. But although she had just typed it only a moment ago her very own self, she understood not a word of it. When the realization of what had actually happened finally hit her—sort of like a whack on the back of the head—she broke into another fit of laughter, but this one a tired, feeble echo of the last that abruptly trailed off into a barely perceptible expletive of fecal subject matter.

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Henry began typing again, but this time glancing down from time to time at what she was doing. An errant tear lost its grip at the edge of her chin and fell to its quiet obliteration in the vast folds of absorptive fabric far below. Along with it went some of the truth Henry was groping after in vain at the keys. She read to herself the same passage and its continuation, retyped correctly now with her hands hovering that necessary one position over to the left:

He made his way with carefully planted footsteps through the thick grass, grass like the fur of the bear he was going to shoot, but which bore an intricate arabesque design like a carpet.

He spotted the bear, and it appeared as if the bear had spotted him as well. In a rush of adrenalin, he deftly grabbed for his back pocket, but not before the woman behind the counter startled him by saying, "I'm sorry sir, but that one's sold."

The memory had come flooding back to her now, the one of finding the printed nylon label peeping out from a seam on this thing years later and discovering her father's little lie. He'd always maintained, of course, that this "bear skin" was that of a bear he'd hunted in his youth, one that had threatened the small village where he had grown up. He had been awarded the skin by the mayor at a festive outdoor celebration replete with dancers, jugglers, acrobats, and long tables laden with sumptuous and costly foods (aside from all the bear steaks, bear croquettes, and bear ragout you'd expect at such an event). This had happened, he told her, *long* before she was born, and indeed the

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curiously archaic flavor of it all seemed to this child a product of centuries past. The images that roamed her imagination while he spoke to her of this event were oddly flat and stylized, for all their magical life, like the scenes on a centuries-old tapestry, wherein protagonists loom large, disproportionately obscuring the lesser characters into mere decorative accents.

Henry gladly suffered her father to take this tapestry-like story out of his secret hiding place (only whenever her mother was not around, of course, as the latter simply could not suffer the telling of what she considered to be mere bald-faced lies), for Henry loved the ceremony with which he would figuratively unfold it for them both to admire again and again, sometimes making minor repairs to its fragile threads as he went. She would sit in quiet reverie, transfixed by the skill of the fingers that wove bright new contours into obscure old passages. In the course of numerous such renovations, she saw the huge rifle shrink to a mere derringer in the hunter's back pocket and the bear grow to twice the size suggested by the length of the "bear skin" on which they sat. But there was nothing inherently illogical in such changes, for the smaller the hunter's gun became, the more room there suddenly was made for the bigger bear. And this story was more about a bear than a gun, was it not? Of course, as often happens with these old over-restored tapestries, many of the recent additions clashed in a charming sort of way with the original elements, like relatives from the mid-century Midwest unexpectedly dropping in for cocktails on ancestors

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of theirs currently preoccupied with one of the Punic Wars. Yet, this bothered her not the slightest, for it seemed rather that these incongruities lent the whole design a texture much more real and life-like for their inclusion—at least more like *her* life, anyway. Indeed, so real seemed this oral textile of borrowed memories that with every unfolding of it she thought she could hear the moan of the very beast on whose “skin” she sat. However, this was in fact the sound of no bear at all, but rather the anguished moan of a woman whose occasional unexpected entrance during story time would register on the impressionable child with distaste. You see, our young Henry’s mother lacked the spirit of literature. To her the world was not to be savored amid the exotic workmanship of an antique tapestry such as this, but only in the photo-studio realism of our hero as a here-and-now dumpy, balding, round-shouldered Henry Flower Sr. who had never shot a gun in his life nor walked willingly anywhere in the direction of danger. This world of hers, assiduously cleansed as it was of all creative imagination, was bounded by walls impenetrable to the hooks on which to hang such works of narrative art. And it was in reaction to this impatience of her mother’s with her father’s world that young Henry found her thrilling role as chief protector of the storeroom housing this family heirloom. For, it was here, with her father's help, that she kept the realm of possibility captive for her entertainment and enrichment for hours on end. And she intuited from early on that it was her job to keep this lair locked in order to prevent her mother from letting this

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spirit escape and then from cleaning out its cage with strong-smelling disinfectants.

It was not until years later (long after she learned that her father had actually grown up in a boringly tame, embarrassingly domesticated, suburban setting quite alien to the rustic village visible in this oral tapestry) that she found out the truth about the “bear rug.” It was the kind of truth you occasionally find printed out in large indelible letters waiting for you where you couldn't possibly miss them unless you really wanted to. In Henry's particular case, the painful, albeit funny, revelation awaiting her was in doing so upon a rayon label sticking out from a seam on the “bear's” butt. The legend read: “100% SYNTHETIC FIBERS.” Henry quietly read and reread this rayon truth that had peripherally beckoned to her for years, and while she tried reading into its legend variant connotations, she felt a strange sinking sensation in her stomach. As odd as this may sound, this was not the sensation effected by truth being swallowed whole and undigested but, to the contrary, that of a certain protectiveness toward *untruth* being suddenly reinforced. If there had been any ambivalence up till now concerning whose side of the divorce young Henry stood on, this was the moment when such ambivalence was replaced entirely with concrete. For, it was only now that she was forced to see something of the real nature of her mother's protestations all these years. She had been denying young Henry a father big enough to take into the schoolyard where all the others loomed large. But even worse yet, she had attempted to wet the

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wick of the literary legacy the girl would inherit from him. (There are many books wherein villains meet rather grisly deaths for such heinous crimes; this is not one of them, however.) After all, had her father only intended self-glorification with this yarn of his, *he would have certainly removed the goddamned label at least.*

At any rate, the image that actually ignited all those tears of laughter some minutes ago had been one relevant to this long-buried discovery of hers. This was indeed a bear stuffed not by a taxidermist with stuffing, but by a department store salesclerk into a tissue-lined shopping bag. Yes, it was a beast brought down not with the skilled precision pull of the trigger finger but with a mere flick of the hand to the back pocket where the wallet was. And it was in this fact wherein the art lurked as well.

[EDITOR'S NOTE: According to the pagination of the manuscript, ten pages originally bridging the last section with the next have not survived. Although another ten pages, apparently from a different holograph manuscript by this same author has been found early last year by Professor Verschleierungs (see *Journal of Creation Lost Studies*, vol. 324, no. 15, pp. 187-99), they have not been included here due to the various difficulties in reconciling this material with the subject text, all exacerbated by the discovery of various portions of this material in no fewer than five published novels by various authors.]

You see, Henry had never been close to her natural mother, but had developed a rather immediate proximity to her father's last lover, Martha C., before the latter's unfortunate sudden demise (as originally described with precision in the *Chronologue*, but subsequently

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removed for use in the longer, finer work, *The Death of Martha C.*) Henry often thought about the times she would sit there with Martha, gazing into her eyes as they talked, all the while imagining this woman naked, as her father knew her. She attempted, briefly, to forbid herself these imaginative excursions, but found them the more enticing once they were further embellished into contraband. Was she not just bogged down in her mother's prudery? Truly there was nothing inherently wrong with nakedness or lust, was there? After all, one is the state we're all born into, and the other simply our condition thereafter. She would often sit in a state of reverie, allowing her sensual desire to wander and explore the boundaries of various relationships encompassing her and would often feel an elevated pulse at the thought of

No, I'm losing you again. Henry often thought of her father's all-consuming love for her and how he had left even Martha out of his will so Henry could inherit everything. She found herself conducting a ritual in which she would ceremoniously unfold and read the hastily written codicil reading merely "everything for Henry" in red-inked scribble. After the memorial service, she had come back to his (now her) house and walked around in it as if for the first time. She was looking at it now precisely as he left it when he stepped out, never to return, that tragic afternoon. She saw the reddened newspaper with the corner of preserved toast stuck to its verso, the stranded nylon sock draped limp over the back of the bedroom chair, and the alarm clock ticking sternly face-down beside the vacant bed. But strangest of all was her

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compulsion to study the ball of paper she found in the wastepaper basket by his desk. It was not so much the seemingly meaningless word on it that bothered her so much as the handwriting itself. For, though her father had spent his life playing with strange words, experimenting with different handwriting styles didn't seem his game. And when she studied the seven characters on that crumpled sheet, she saw the letter *s* in it now as a snake rearing up, about to attack, and the concluding *c* and *l* persistently less as two letters than as a letter *d* now severed at the stem. As a matter of fact, it was this last that had bothered her most of all and that had been the inspiration for what *I* at least took to be her very best story. In it, her protagonist, so clearly modeled on her father (despite her irritation at the critics for presuming that), ponders such a miswritten letter and sees in it a dark symbolism in which it represents a crack in the visible world through which phantoms from alternate stories peer out at him with malicious jibes and taunts until he's driven quite mad. What surprised *me* about all this, however, was the real-life corroboration of this interpretation that surfaced soon after. For, less than a month after the story was published, Henry received a letter from a reader who had been *quite* taken with it, a scholar of the Kabbala who informed her of the “well-known fact,” according to this ancient Jewish tradition, that evil was poured into the world through such a hairline crack of an erroneously transcribed letter and that entire Torah scrolls were considered unfit for use on account of so much as a single instance of such infidelity to the transmission of the sacred word (among the

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three hundred and some *thousand* individual characters contained in it). This information unnerved Henry, and in a fit of superstition, she burnt her admirer's letter. Henry saved the crumpled note, however, along with the newspaper, and it was not until long after that she recognized the true source of her uneasiness: The note had been written in a hand uncannily similar to the font used on the newspaper headline. (It just goes to show you the enormous amount of detail necessary toward the maintenance of real literary verisimilitude. In the world of pulp fiction, I would be obliged to throw her into the angry headlight of an oncoming express train about now, lest any more yarn come unraveling from the story, but here where *I* work, in the real world of train timetables and their inevitable off-peak schedules, union strikes, and power outages, all is extravagant waste that is not carefully planned well in advance.)

[EDITOR'S NOTE: Another two pages of manuscript appear to be missing here, though no consensus has been reached in the scholarly community as to whether the deletion was intended or accidental.]

Kate sat opposite Henry, staring intently into the latter's diverted eyes across a diagonal shaft of sunlight. The room was steeped in quiet anticipation of Henry's first word, for it was clearly her move now. Commas of dust punctuated their unspoken dialogue down the light shaft streaming in from behind Kate. Henry felt her chest tightening again as she tried to take in enough air for her feeble reply.

"I'm sorry, but I have it again," Henry apologized rather insincerely to the table beside Kate. "That weird feeling...."

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There was silence now where one would reasonably have expected a completed sentence with response. She refrained from looking over at Kate, who was sprawled out across the settee opposite her in a sort of half-sitting, half-reclining pose, her legs wide open at different angles and head propped unnaturally upright against the sharp wood crestrail. Kate was trying quite seriously to look relaxed and win Henry's confidence, but she looked rather like some ancient sculpture of a *bodhisattva* in the rare position of Royal Discomfort, if such a thing existed. She was determined to avoid asking Henry the obvious question of just *which* feeling she was talking about and thereby engaging in this same old game with her. She would try a new approach this time and just wait until Henry spoke again.

"Which feeling?" she exhaled without resolve. "The one about being watched?" Without removing her eyes from the dome of the ceiling fixture she'd been studying in order to avoid eye contact with Henry, Kate continued her probe: "Is he here again, peering in from a crack in the wall?"

"Look!" demanded Henry, turning her eyes toward Kate's now that the latter's were fixed safely elsewhere. "I don't need to be reminded about what *is* and is *not* rational."

"But it's not *rational*!" Kate observed, lowering her stare quickly to meet Henry's. Her voice now gained confidence. "You claim to have no idea who it might be, yet you just 'know' hes there — here — watching us every time we..."

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“No, not *every* time,” objected Henry sternly but with an unexpected tone of playfulness, as if suddenly animated by a fond memory. “Not yesterday,” she smiled broadly, boldly drinking in Kate’s unblinking stare.

Oh, how to convey in mere words the supreme music of that deceptively simple word, *yesterday*, as delivered from the lips of my Henry Flower at such a moment? Never did the sexiest of silver-screen sex kittens ever purr more meaning out of one simple noun—at least to my ears. Whatever it was that had transpired *yesterday*, one would have given anything to be there, *watching it* transpire. Ah, if one could only capture such a triple-cushioned word just off her provocative lips and fold it up, wallet-size, to be taken out on dull days!

“Yesterday!” barked Kate, instantly restoring the word to its strict dictionary denotation. “*Yesterday*, we were in a public park, for Chissake, where *everybody* was watching!”

A short snort of unwanted laughter escaped from Henry’s direction, above and beyond all efforts of muscular repression. Hate as she did to admit it, Kate was irresistibly funny when she was so resolutely attempting something of a more serious mien, such as relaxed or rational. But Henry finally won a grip over the unwanted smile, and she diverted her eyes from Kate’s again in anticipation of the inevitable next question. For, yes, it was time again for the Who word.

“Who? Who is it, Henry?” came the well-predicted question.

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Of course, there was little reason to pose such a question really, because Kate knew quite well who the hell “Who?” was. Who else but *Henry*, Henry’s celebrated, and now infamous, father. How was it that Henry couldn’t see it? How was it she could feel this “male gaze,” as Henry called it, and not make out the face behind it? Oh, what she wouldn’t give to be able to somehow drag the old lecher into the room from behind that imagined crack in the wall for Henry to see! Then she would have slain this menacing dragon once and for all and won the pretty princess for herself, entirely for the privacy of her own intensely possessive gaze. Kate’s heart quickened to this most tantalizing of images: having the famous author there in the room with them, captive audience, as she ran off (figuratively, of course) with his good little girl for a reckless weekend in downtown Gomorrah. She could hold back no longer and watched passively as abandon quickly crested its containment wall and came trickling down in spurts of words released from her own helpless lips. “*Whoever* he is, Henry,” she beckoned darkly, “let’s give our voyeur something to look at!”

Something budged nearby. The creaking wheeze of rebounding settee cushion opposite her dislodged Henry’s gaze from its safe anchor and sent it darting nervously about the room. The bright patch of carpet that had steadily absorbed the shaft of unused commas was suddenly blotted out, eclipsed by the monumental figure of a partially undressed woman standing dimly before her. From this sudden form before her issued a beckoning command in a whisper shaky with anticipation.

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“My little Henry, what do you say we give Mr. Peeping Whateverhisnameis a peep at something he can't have?”

A bodiless blouse fell in limp relief to the floor over Henry's feet, and she looked up into the dramatic eclipse of light to find an unveiled sculpture and let her eyes feed hungrily and helplessly on it. This was it; there was no going back. Once again she had let herself be cornered like a defenseless little creature in the path of big bad Kate. It felt wonderful, for the gears had been set in motion already and no action on her part would stop the awful momentum of this mechanism. The inevitability of it all reminded her of planets turning in the skies and of huge steel wheels turning on determined tracks. Caught in the force of this inevitability, Henry's chest felt oppressively tight, as if about to erupt. So did Kate's. (So did mine; had you rubbed two sticks together, the whole place would have gone up in smoke.)

Kate lowered herself slowly onto her knees between Henry's, took the latter's head in her hands, and pulled it slowly towards hers until finally kissing her mouth long and hard, as if sucking marrow from a bone. It was the sexiest, most powerful, kiss I have *ever* witnessed, and I will never forget it. You will look in vain through all of world literature for a better one. Kate pulled back momentarily to look deep into Henry's eyes again. She was apparently checking for any residue of the anxiety she had just suctioned out with that walloping kiss. (If that hadn't cleared out the whole of it, nothing on this earth would.) Henry's heart felt as if it were suddenly halfway up her throat. Mine too. There

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was simply no use holding back anymore. Henry ran her hands up Kate's strong arms and shoulders while burying her face in her motherly breasts. Kate slowly rose to her feet, pulling Henry up with her to bathe together in the strong, warm shaft of sunlight in which all those unused commas had continuously drifted to the floor. Henry could feel Kate's hands suddenly stop her own from roving any further while the latter whispered playfully to her a seductively insincere refusal to continue. "How about Mr. Busybody?" Kate inquired. "Aren't you afraid he'll see us? Maybe big bad Kate should go now."

"No, stay...let him!" Henry welcomed in a shaky, throaty voice, obviously too far out at sea by now to worry about any rocks.

"No, Henry, I'm not sure I want some old lecher getting his rocks off on my body," Kate protested quite disingenuously while feigning distraction from the lust hotly percolating between her ears now.

"Let him look, let him *come!*" Henry urged in loud relief, vigorously swiping aside the hand that pretended standing guard. "He might as well finish it off if he's made it this far," she giggled.

Kate had finally slipped off both the skirt and the panties beneath it and was now running her hands slowly down along Henry's hips, buttocks, and thighs as if smoothing out their exquisite proportions from soft, malleable sculptor's clay. One could just feel the soft curving contours, the sensuous swell and dip of warm baby-soft flesh in one's own tingling, wet hands just by watching. All was wetness and warmth and boundless abandon. One could just shout in vicarious delight!

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Yet gradually, Kate could feel a certain shadow of self-consciousness growing over their abandon, soon followed by a feeling of vulnerability. She paused a moment in a sudden penetrating chill elicited by the strange sensation of being watched by some third party. Indeed, she couldn't get out of her mind the sense that her body was being explored and enjoyed by a second pair of hands—hands not of her lover but of some stranger...a male stranger. She gave a quick nervous turn, and immediately one could see the potent germ of unease growing in her expanded pupils. It was as if Kate had suddenly glimpsed that crack in the wall that had so crippled Henry, and the unblinking stare she now forced on it made one instinctively divert his own. Two searching hands turned Kate's head around again toward the dark, heedless splendor, but she pulled away again in growing agitation and, with a reckless toss of all caution, propriety, and unspoken contract to the wind, she demanded the truth about this male gaze they were quite palpably bathing in just now.

"So, he's watching us, your...father?"

(Whew!) With the cold bath of those two concluding syllables, all movement instantaneously ceased. She had finally done it, pushed beyond the line drawn long ago between them and respected silently since, till now.

"My father?" Kate heard repeated in Henry's voice near her. She cringed at first but then realized in confused delight that the tone was more playful than admonishing. Henry pulled away from Kate to look

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into her eyes and studied them a moment, whispering back to her slowly the words, “yes, I think it *is* him.” Upon hearing this, Kate could feel a gust from a huge bellows blowing life back into the embers that had quickly cooled upon the first utterance of those syllables.

“Yes, and he is *really* getting off on *your* body, by the way,” Henry toyed. Of course, the idea of being watched by Henry’s father had been tantalizing to Kate herself for quite some time, but that was way back when it was still safely hovering in the masturbatory realm of the imagined. Now, when it had been held up before her eyes, she shrank back in fright.

“Oh,” was all that Kate could push out of her tensed diaphragm upon hearing this. Henry, emboldened by an unexpected political power conferred on her by this change in the script, took the reins freely from Kate’s suddenly powerless grip. “Yes,” she purred in growing confidence, enjoying the unaccustomed feeling of holding such things, “though I could never get Daddy to admit it, it was quite obvious that he drew his deepest erotic inspiration from well-endowed women.”

“Admit it? You mean, you actually *asked* him?”

“Well, yes, of course. I mean, after all, the man’s love life was one pathetic chorus line of brainless bouncing boobs and butts.”

At this comment, Kate succumbed to a quick review of the suspects from her memory’s viewing stand, a lewd parade of bimbos ending with Henry’s mother and Martha C. Beads of discomfort were suddenly

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drawn across her forehead at the realization that now she, Kate, would need to be added to that lineup.

“I just can't *imagine* talking to *my father* about such things,” Kate confessed, hoping to erase this image from her head forever. “Do you know that I have never even seen that man *partially* naked – not even by accident – in my whole life?”

“Kate! Come on! Hell, even *I* have seen your father naked!” Henry demanded (disingenuously).

“Wha...?” Girlish laughter suddenly peeled out, unrestrained, in all directions, from two warm womanly bodies quivering with the relief that they could be girls again. They embraced and fell over flat onto their inhibitions and rolled this way and that, back and forth across the worn-out prayer rug between the sofa and settee. And after this long, hard, muscular tussle on the floor had slowed to a sweaty finish, Kate ponderously got on her feet while pulling Henry up with her, engaged in another of those kisses. In the very column of sun-lit particles that had separated them before, they now stood proudly engaged in a powerful embrace like a spot-lit sculpture on a pedestal. It was beautiful. Finally, after numerous unforeseen glitches and false starts, this was it: the embrace groped after by centuries of desperate sculptors. (“The beast with the four buttocks,” as Henry jokingly referred to it with little response from her partner of less Shakespearean erudition.) Style, medium, scale, angle, patina – these were all superfluous; what really mattered here was only that not a peep of sunlight was getting through

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between them. (I saved this shot, and I take it out every once in a while to serve as a model when attempting to depict the pull of heavenly bodies.)

The two exhausted bodies were now stretched out, side by side, on the floor: Kate flat on her back, staring up at the breast-like dome of the ceiling light and Henry on her side, her head raised on her hand upon her left elbow. As she ran the fingers of her raised right hand through Kate's short straight hair she reminisced back over the years they'd known each other and considered how different they each became since. She tried to imagine what Kate must have looked like back then. One fine, impatient spring day, years before they met, Katherine resolved never again to be a playtoy for men, and with one determined stroke of will clipped short both her hair and her name. (A bit green, this Kate.) She then reflected on Kate's predecessors a moment and succumbed to that same sinking realization she'd had several times before that the love of numerous women had not quite filled a certain hole in her life opened even wider by the loss of her beloved father. She had freely given each the reins she always saw him holding in her mind's eye. But either they did not do more than pose with them or their pull was *too real* to compare with the *ideal* restraint of her father. The irony here, of course, is that she owes her existence not to *him* but to ME. Had I so chosen, he might have been born the child of some peasant couple in ancient Attica, or an heir to the French or English throne, or even as her own future son. Yes, it is obviously the *prime mover* she

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yearns for, not a mere man. But the one-way window of *our* embrace does not allow my ever becoming *him*. She looks right through me in search of *him* and doesn't recognize my caresses. It is too late to remove her father to a distant country or epoch, but the future holds endless possibilities. She can learn to give up Henry IV by replacing IV with VI, for example. Of course, the likelihood of such an occurrence—for readers of limited arithmetic prowess, I mean *having a child*—rarely occupied Henry's thoughts, largely because of her uncomfortable associations with the male body. But since no one, at least in the world of *quality* fiction, is beyond the hope of change, it will not be difficult for me to demonstrate to you the omnipotence a creator wields within his created world.

Well, the improbable inevitably happened: Henry became pregnant. There was much talk around town concerning this twist of fate, as well as much futile speculation over the identity of the child's father. The fact is, of course, that Henry *herself* had no idea who the father could be. But as unlikely as this seemed, especially to Henry herself, who supposed she was the one person who *should* be able to recall the answer to this paternity question, there was certainly no denying the obvious: She was pregnant, period. My own understandable lack of first-hand experience of pregnancy and maternity prevents me from attempting a perfectly accurate description of how and what she felt and when. Suffice it to say that she found herself swelled big and taut like a balloon and, on the assigned day, delivered up one big brute of a boy headfirst into a

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chaotic world of light, din, and well-washed hands with 1.585 billion seconds of life still before him. This is oversimplification, of course, and does not do justice to an event of indescribable beauty:

The physician's due date, carefully calculated along the most precise scientific guidelines, came and went like an empty bottle bobbing past in the slow river current. But when at last the moon hung full in the sky like a bright ripe fruit, Henry's waters burst in a shower of joyous relief that splashed and splattered and dripped and trickled down in all directions, heralding the arrival of a new Flower on the Henry tree. Under the spell of a resplendent moon, the waters of the world lapped and gathered in unrest. In concert with these, the waters in which a new Henry had tossed and squirmed for months like a restless fish now overflowed their banks to carry the sea's creation toward its new life on land. Flat on her back, with legs thrust wide open, a sweating, groaning woman lay, offering up her burden to an insatiably raging moon. Upon this yielding supine form loomed a tremendous mountain of expressionless flesh threatening to erupt. And on her brow a royal diadem of glistening pearls of the salt waters surging within. Waves dashed angrily against rock and sand for thousands of miles around as the hump of raw life groped blindly toward light. And out of the violence of convulsing waters emerged a magnificent steaming sphere, wrinkled tight with relief and fear, and trailed comet-like by mindless flailing arms and legs in rebellion against their new-found freedom. After nine hourglass months, a slow-growing, dull-hulking bulge of belly had instantaneously transformed into a miraculous rich red life. And caught up in this, the moon's madness, a rising tide welled up and

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burst from eyes that seemed to be my own, showering mother and child with furious large hot drops that trickled round and off them to run in all directions for escape. Short strains of mother-child music could be heard between loud inharmonious wails that emitted from lungs and throat seemingly also mine. I looked down in confusion past a wet heaving chest upon a world now shattered by light: vaguely familiar objects swimming frantically, spasmodically, for shores of glaring sands. All was blur: things and the ink of their incarnation. Word by word rose and danced in crystal domes upon the violent splotches as ink was lifted ghost-like from the wetted paper.

The earth stood still momentarily when the creature was thrust from the darkness out into interstellar space and its lifeline cut from the mother ship. And Henry opened her eyes to behold this alien being that had come to take her career away. She looked at this piece of her own body that had fiercely declared its independence and immediately realized the imperial impulse to reclaim it. This bald, cone-headed, squirrel-cheeked, chicken-legged, chinless, scrawny, kicking, screaming being—any realist’s picture of life gone horribly wrong—elicited from Henry’s brain a bizarre chemical event that sent the rational fleeing before the tidal wave of raw instinct. But her heart squeezed fist-like for a moment when she recognized the face on her messy projectile. Indeed, it was none other than her father’s face. Henry had created her own precursor, so to speak. She groped for her bearings amid the shock of spontaneous creation, and saw in her teeming mind her grandmother’s

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delivery of her father followed by her newborn's future wife's delivery of her grandchild. And suddenly Henry realized for the first time in her life that she was truly part of something (other than an obsession and its readership): She was not just a woman, or a writer, or even a *woman writer*, but better yet, a *vehicle*: yes, an ancestor, a link in a chain stretching back to a vanishing point in the fabric of history. A quantitative awe numbed her sense of fear and discomfort, and all of a sudden she could feel her previous animosity toward unwanted motherhood slowly soften into a pocket of warmth for this strange, defenseless creature she had fed with her own blood. And yet, when she looked down at the delicate Flower before her, she couldn't help but wonder over the cruel kind of world in which a fruit would grow in so unlikely a place while so many willing, waiting wombs continued to menstruate in despair. She wondered how such a world came to be and how even fiction at its most fantastic seemed more rational than this world of purported cause and effect. Suddenly, she realized that the two worlds had come crashing together in the night and that the inhabitants of both were forever hopelessly mingled together. She pondered the validity of her writings about her father as she compared them side by side in her restless mind with the historical "facts" of his life as recorded in biography. But which was it that was actually true: that which she perceived of him with her flawed organs of sense and comprehension, or that which she conceived of him deep within the whom-like furrows

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of imagination? Were they not both a product of the same electro-chemical mechanism?

Henry's life was destined to be different now with the emergence of a new Henry to take the place of the old one. But before exploring those differences, it might be prudent to comment upon the moral question engendered with the birth of Henry VI. For, if *I* don't there will be critics who will (as sure as crows to fresh roadkill). You see, Henry's pregnancy, delivery, and post-partum reorientation—to my mind some of the most touching and rewarding pages of her life—are sure to be read by some as the stereotypical musings of a chauvinistic male mind. After all, a young woman with no interest in conceiving of a life other than those of her fiction characters has been left no choice in the matter but to do so, and all for the gratuitous satisfaction of one who would so put his creative potency to the test. Typical, is it not? Your male author in need of a new plot he can manage in the comfort of his literary limitations finds a female who will pay for it—and pay dearly at that. Where will he be when she falls victim to strange hormones and feels unwelcome in her own body? Out, playing around with the scenery perhaps? (Even *I* become caught up in the moral outrage of it all when *I* lose track and get engrossed.) Well now, it is clearly time to defend myself. Yes, if you were only sitting where I am you'd see how different everything looks from here: first of all, that Henry was not interested in having children—or, rather, was *quite* interested in *not* having children—was obviously a position she took in the comfort of

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ignorance. Having not yet had any, how well equipped was she really to make the necessary comparison between having them and not? Secondly, don't think for a moment this maternity of hers was any easier on *me* than it was on her. The splendid moment that lucky sperm wiggled its way into the confidence of her eager egg was, in fact, the very moment my *real* work *began*, not ended. Each and every physical and emotional torture she tasted was mine before it was hers. (Of course, all this could have been neatly avoided in blissful ignorance, for her *and* for me, but it is a little late for that now, and there is no sense crying over spilt ink.) And finally, that a woman was the subject of such an experiment rather than a man deserves little comment. This is a matter that must be taken up with the human reproductive physiology department a few doors further down the hall. (Even *I* cannot make a man pregnant, for God's sake!) And don't think for a moment the various possible consequences of this birth were not considered with care before plunging ahead into profligate procreation. If there is anyone who has tasted of the dark horrors latent in the germ of a new generation, it is I. Oh yes, the world that was my oyster yielded up to me many a splendid specimen formed around the slightest speck of my will. Yet, which among them now seems anything but the concretion of hostile indifference toward that very will, toward the very conception that made it possible?

One that comes irresistibly to mind is that most beautiful child I awarded my dear Hester. What more perfect gift could be bestowed

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upon a woman so desperate to be a mother as was Hester? After a husband in the old world and then a lover in the new, both as sterile as a stone, she came to the understandable erroneous assumption that hers was a womb in which no life would take hold. Hence, it became clear to me that if Hester was ever to enjoy the beautiful experience of motherhood, it would not be effected by sitting on my hands. And with pride did I rise to the occasion and plant in her that seed of my virile self that would ripen as the blushing fruit of her New World passion. But who could have guessed as to the size and bitterness of the pit in that fruit this exquisite flesh would bring innocently with it into the open jaws of the cruel awaiting world? The best of all intentions seemed to have hardened inside Hester's lovely taut belly, for it was soon obvious that what she had really brought to term was a millstone. Yet, curiously, this was a weighty stone she could love the more for its oppressive burden. And *he* gladly took this weight and wore it around his neck as well, though he really had no fertile reason under the sun to do so. I tried like hell to get through to this dimwit the one essential point—namely, that the kid *was not his* and that all this self-torture and public spectacle making was therefore worse than just tiresome drivel, it was **u n n e c e s s a r y**. In my dogged pursuit of his attention, I tried every tool in my box, including the quaint age-old device of meteor showers. Why, I even succumbed to the last and frankly most embarrassing of such measures—that of writing his name in the sky in huge red letters. Historically, this stunt rarely fails to catch the eye of

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protagonist and bystander alike, and it did in his case as well, but to no meaningful avail, as he never got past that initial capital A, convinced as he was that it abbreviated something weightier than the small *r t h u r* that followed it. I will not mince words here. In that one letter he saw the entire word Adultery spelled out. Adultery! An A for adultery? Ask any local of the day and she would tell you the word is *always* abbreviated Ad! I could give a damn about adultery; let adultery thrive for all I care!

So, you see why I don't view the prospect of new lives lightly. From the high vantage of my experience, I see each and every one of them as a sort of time bomb of potential misfortune, each with its fuse set precisely for the moment your attention flags, your eyelids droop, or your supervision is demanded elsewhere. Basically, unless you can afford to watch them every minute, awake and asleep, you really can't be sure you won't suddenly find yourself holding some unwieldy subplot in your hands. Hence, I have long ago determined to keep things more manageable by overseeing a world pared down to the essentials: a single protagonist propped up with the necessary minimum of supporting characters, a few sticks of furniture to bump into, as much landscape as it takes to fill an average window, and, above all, *a good reliable alarm clock!*

Yes, the birth of Henry VI marked a welcome change in the life of Henry V, as predicted above. The general idea, of course, was that Henry's focus would finally be shifted away from her father toward

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something that she and I could *share*, the effect of which bringing her over to my camp, so to speak. Now, it is a relatively rare occurrence, I must observe, when an idea, still in its pure and disembodied state, lines up edge for edge with its physical reincarnation known as implementation. Yet, here was that exemplary rarity. So beautiful and perfect was this concurrence that one could mistake one for the other at times, which resulted in no real predicament for one, so beautiful and perfect was this concurrence. In effect, Henry all but forgot about her father, put her biography of him on the back burner (where it reduced to an appropriate muck), and devoted all her attention to her new life with our most promising child. What was even more beautiful and perfect about this arrangement was that she did so quite happily, without remorse or even mixed feelings.

But this is bullshit. You know it and I know it, yet we conspire to pipe dreams. Why? If, in your complicity with me, you imagine yourself to be investing in some happy ending, you are simply wasting your time. I am obliged to no stockholders and can decide at any time to pack up truth and take it with me far from the best book promoter's reach, out into the pure white privacy of the empty page, leaving behind only tiny paper fibers to beckon to you like sardonic sirens. For that matter, I could just as easily give you the gratifying denouement you long for and still keep the truth to myself. But such games prove pointless, really. You and I would be left using the same page for our own ends, like lovers actively preoccupied with fantasizing other lovers.

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The truth is, Henry's new life was an absolute disaster for me. She loved and cared for her new Henry as any good mother would her new namesake, but surreptitiously found as much time for her father as before. It seems clear to me that even Henry VI himself will not be able to take away IV from V. As it looks now, Henry will probably raise her son to carry on her attempt to unravel this hopeless ball of yarn. (Good luck to him; I myself have lost the ends.)

Months passed and nothing at all happened—that is, nothing important enough to keep her from working on that damned biography of her father. Then, quite suddenly, on the very day marking the anniversary of Henry's loss of her beloved father, a strange and uncomfortable coincidence irresistibly occurred. A letter arrived—one bearing an illegible postmark and no return address—that told her of the sudden and unexpected death of her mother just two days before.

No.

Months passed and little of importance happened. Then, one day, as Henry sat amid the dying daylight, staring out into the constricting space from a body left limp from mental exertion, an irritating noise slowly penetrated the several layers of numbness that encased her fatigued brain until gradually became registered on it the ringing of a doorbell. With a juicy kiss formed upon her pursed ripe lips she opened

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the front door to find not Kate but a stranger bearing aloft in his outstretched hands a crinkly-wrapped basket of fruit.

Better.

Startled and embarrassed, she lamely muttered something to do with appreciating the gesture, which was touching, or some such thing, as if a desperate secret admirer had gone public and rented a uniform for the task. Back in the kitchen, contemplating the mysterious gift basket, Henry allowed the confession of a smile to settle down around the corners of her mouth as she ceremoniously disrobed the naked blushing fruit and ran her hand affectionately and sensually along the downy curve of the uppermost peach. It seemed to beckon to her to be consumed, and Henry found herself irresistibly drawn to that girlhood weakness of hers: the Peach. In the dulled diagonal efforts of an impotent sun, the passion food fruit glowed with smoldering allure upon the pedestal of her raised hand, and she indulged.

The fruit of the *Prunus Persica*, sometimes referred to as *Amygdalus Persica* amid close botanical circles, is a single-seeded indehiscent drupe of bony endocarp, pulpy mesocarp, and thin downy epicarp—sort of like our planet *and* our story—one developing from a simple ovary amid pink and white petals, sepals and stamen, as well as glossy green lanceolate leaves. Etymology erroneously ascribes a Persian origin to this celebrated child of the Chinese garden, but the fruit of longevity

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Henry now proposed to devour had ancestors that had sated young lovers back in the Eastern Zhou dynasty of warring states and sages.

With a total indifference to both history and botany, Henry Flower sunk her pearly gates deep into the downy rump of the peach and gently lowered her eyelids half-mast as the juices spasmodically flowed down her peachy cheeks and willing body. A mouth wet with desire received the fleshy orb while a plump wet tongue of delirious buds massaged and prodded its prey playfully over the edge to its little death in the waiting pool of her own lusty juices. An Odyssean journey lay ahead through the labyrinths of the dark caverns where the sun never shines but where the base metals of juicy flesh would magically transform to the golden peach-colored glow of a seductive cheek. Henry held the opened globe away from her pursed mouth as she squeezed the life from the residue of her initial bite. Doing so, she surveyed with an astronomer's eye a cross-section of miraculous spring growth resembling in a remote way the molten mesocarp of a split-open planet. A mysterious crater-pocked crust of deep brown core peeped out from the fiery corona while tears of joy pooled along the lower edge of the fresh fleshy wound. As Henry parted her moist lips for a second reckless plunge into the world of childhood gratification, an annoying noise erupted in spurts from the next room. It was the damned phone again! (Of course, I could detain her myself from it any time I wished with another visitor bearing gifts at her front door, but I was quite interested myself in learning the identity of this brazen intruder.) Henry

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set down the ravaged fruit on its side upon the kitchen counter and released her lithe, rejuvenated, body into flight toward the disturbance. In her absence, I eyed the fruit of long life left dying before me and grabbed for it. Until now I have never had the curiosity to even taste of the fruit of this ancient tree, but Henry's ecstatic swallows got my glands working and filled me with appetite for this specific food. As I bit down into it, the surprised tympanic membrane of my inner ear rebounded violently to the brutal pelting of eight stone-hard words echoing from out of the adjoining room: "OH, THANKS SOOO MUCH FOR THE WONDERFUL PEACHES!"

My drying lips and useless tongue reported back to me the taste and feel of the fuzzy crust of a tennis ball. This intrusion turned out to have been implemented by none other than the editor of the Journal. He called to inform her that the "Flower" issue with "the poem," whatever that might be, was right on schedule and on the stands today. Henry, as impatient and impractical as her dead dad, jumped in the car and flew to town rather than wait for the complimentary copy to arrive by mail. Exercising executive privilege, I got there first and had an issue before me sooner than she could disengage the clutch. My fingers burned with impatience as they speedread, page by worthless page, the highbrow hype:

Dr. Kunastrokius veritably pins a tail on the signified and gives deconstruction a run for its money...Professor Verschleierungs cogently argues for an autodiegetic narratology at work...the first book-length study

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on the elaborate patterning of the impotence and dying god motifs in Borodin's work....

Idiot! I went back and threw the cursed thing at the woman behind the register, pointing with mute anger at the one I had asked for in the first place had she only paid attention and told lover boy she had a customer and would call him back. A moment later I was ravaging a fresh victim, its spine rigid with anticipation in the long lifeline of my perspiring palm. A deep breath of the calming variety often resorted to in the fiction industry brought the necessary oxygen to my befuddled organ of thought and revenge and enabled me to remember to use the table of contents this time. HENRY FLOWER'S LAST POEM.... Ah, yes! Page 11. Let's see...three, five, seven, nine, *eleWOOSH!@#\$\$%....*

A blinding shower of fiery flakes came fluttering down against the sudden darkness while a hot blast of gritty desert air blanched my eyeballs dry. As the daylight slowly seeped back in, I saw before me, branded deep in the skin of the page, the blatant desecration of a whole head of sacred bovine. With a boulder in my stomach, I read it:

The following poem is the hitherto unpublished final work from the pen of the late Henry Flower. The manuscript to this poem was discovered among his papers by the celebrated author's daughter and literary executor, Ms. Henrietta Flower, shortly after the former's tragic and untimely death one year ago today. That Flower was occupied with these two stanzas right up to his death is evident: They were found inscribed upon a current morning edition of *The Time*. More specifically, they were written in red ink between the lines of a story on the now-infamous social welfare/tax package

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proposed last year — an ironic touch not unfamiliar to readers of *The World on Fire* and *The Enormity*. Yet, Ms. Flower sees in these eight lines no mere invective against big government but, rather, superimposed upon it, a caustic critique of our patriarchal society itself, all the way down to our conventional assumptions about our apparently innate need to believe in a creator of our universe. And as such, this poem makes a fitting swan song for a writer so intensely concerned with injustice on the social *and* cosmic levels:

THEOGONY

**O you Muses who taught young Hesiod to sing
Are brutal women, unworthy daughters of great Zeus.
These corpse-strewn, blood-stained pages bring
Olympus to its knees amid corruption loosed.**

**O you who promise sacred sounds to liven up the ear
Give birth a world drunk deep in violence and treachery.
And while greed dances madly arm in arm with fear,
A brutish, jealous father swallows whole his progeny!**

Oh, the irony that he should survive such a thorough, well-attended death! Millions of eyes have by now been witness to his magnificent finish. No funeral rites ever held over a man were more sumptuous than the dozen some emotional pages devoted to Henry's. (I curse myself now for their removal from the Chronologue, along with Martha's, Marcel's, Menard's, and the rest of them, in my stubborn pursuit of core-like compactness.) Yet the six feet of cold clay I firmly tamped upon him were clearly not enough to keep him down. The precision

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beat of my muffled drum has accompanied him short of extinction into mere exile, and he is back in a blaze of triumph, bigger in memory than in life. It seems I have buried his bones only to resurrect his fame. And this epilogue—what in hell is she to me but extra spadefuls of unrewarding earth?

Like from a stupor, I wake to find myself upon numbed knees, down amid upset drawers and scattered files in search of I don't know what. But just before hurling the cankerous notebook past posterity into oblivion's open maw, I notice the edge of some ill-kept secret peeping out from beneath the cover. Unceremoniously I unfold it, the worthless book falling to a dusty reward, and find myself eye-to-I with an unfamiliar penmanship that promises to "make good by you and provide the appropriate financial support for the baby, but we're both finished if this thing get's out; destroy even this note."

My crooked old body grows stiff with rage as I carefully refold this unfulfilled wish of the editor's into his very own miniature book of prayer.

I'm afraid Henry is going to be late. Yes, as a matter of fact, it is time, and she is not yet home. Her car has stalled out again on the ramp to the freeway, and again she has accepted a ride to the train. It is an express train, due at the platform momentarily. There have been several

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incidents of suicide at this station during the last few years, particularly in these dreary days of late autumn. So, Henry will be reduced to a mere statistic, an unfortunate inconvenience to commuters and a passing cash cow to the television news stations. A brief flicker in the candle flame, then forgotten. If she is yet conscious of this program, it is only as a glimmer on the horizon of her darkened mindscape. She will steer toward it only because it is a light of some sort where everything else has become dark. It has become a strange, inhospitable terrain, this world of hers, with the roots of countless thoughts and desires sticking upside-down out of the muddy ground in a tangle.

Henry distractedly furnishes yes and no answers to the friendly questions of her good and lonely Samaritan and forgets to thank him as she jumps out of the car at the station. Watching the weary crowd shuffle up the dim staircase to the platform, you would have little reason to focus in on Henry in particular. Seen from a distance, she would appear to be just another underappreciated life on the way home from the daily grind to prepare for endless more days of the same. But on closer inspection, you would easily read the psychological warning signs that single her out as the tragic protagonist among this sea of faceless walk-on bit parts. Registered on her facial features you will find a certain look of blank, unfocused determination. This look mirrors the dark, murky region of ambiguity in which tragedy festers. True, there are others among this crowd with stories just as gripping and

Novella: *Creation Lost*, Part III: *Epilogue*—continued

compelling as hers—some arguably more so—but to dwell on them at this point would be to invite disaster, structurally at least.

I have given my love a last embrace and prepared her way toward posterity, and on her face I see that she is ready. She has laid herself down across the gleaming tracks to await her deliverance from this dingy world while a platform-full of commuters study the sky or their shoes with sudden interest. Immediately I am stung with irritation by the uncharacteristic obedience—the downright servility—with which she performs her final script, as if precious life itself can be simply tossed aside like some dress that doesn't match her handbag. And, as with her father, her mother, and the rest, I am haunted at every turn by memories of their ancestors and the uncanny feeling that I've been through these scenes entire epochs and oceans away. Here, for example, it is difficult not to think of my Anna of long ago who left me standing on a platform not very different from this. After seeing her over all the necessary hurdles toward a life of ultimate happiness, imagine my anger and humiliation at watching her suddenly discard it all beneath the wheels of some intruder's moralizing judgment. When I saw her lunge for the first train, I was able to pull her back by her handbag in the nick of time, but so overpowering and instantaneous was his spell of guilt and religiously righteous judgment that there was simply no saving her a second time. I turned and looked into his beard and said, "You wanted her; she is yours now, all of her, you bastard! May you too die in such a place as this when you are cold and alone!"

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But I remind myself that this, her cruelest of snubs at me (doing precisely what she is supposed to do) is at the same time her last, poor thing, and I am suddenly made only the more resolute. I stand erect and motionless, watching down over her as the raindrops roll off her baby-soft cheeks. How is it that I have never before noticed the exquisite shape of her little nose, or the tiny mole barely perceptible at the corner of her mouth? Have I ever really taken the time to know her? I tingle with remorse at the thought of losing Henry, however the wheels have been long in motion and there is nothing to be done now but await what must be.

The train is over half an hour late, according to my quick calculations. Or is it an hour and a half? Minutes turn to hours in my mind, and there is not a train in sight, no glint of light, no consoling hum of steel. I pace and wring my nervous hands, but the huge hands of the clock overhead remain still, and the tracks silent. I know it is not just me. Turning around, I see that the platform has become even more packed with impatient people, all studying either skies or shoes.

Who the hell am I kidding? What train? Have I forgotten about the events of last night? The fact is...horrible things happened in the night. A storm of seething rains and bellowing winds blew in from a sick, tormented sea and tore down power lines and trees in a tangle of wanton destruction. The rain fell, not in droplets but in plate-glass sheets extending down from over-swollen clouds to shatter violently

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upon the ground. And with the rain came hailstones the size of peach pits, knocking birds dead from the windblown trees. But the angry icy waters could not come fast enough to quench the sudden fires raging up hungrily out of houses across town where daggers of blinding lightning hit in deafening blows.

And by the time a timid, birdless morning was about to peep under the cover of night's lusty wreckage, consummate silence hung in the heavy air, disrupted only by the muffled futile cries of the last returning ambulances and fire trucks. They waded like tired water buffaloes along river-like streets afloat with the priceless debris of fastidious homes. Had the power and transmitting stations been spared by the brutal business of the night there would have been newscasts later in the day to report the staggering toll of human life and property. Had the weather lab survived, there would have been explanations of what had transpired in meteorological terms. Had Henry and her fucking editor survived, the polar caps would have melted and the earth would have torn free from its orbit and spun off madly into a fiery death in the sun.

The rain has finally slackened to a pensive drizzle, punctuated here and there by the momentary downpour of a memory-rustled tree. It is difficult to believe that she is forever gone now, my Henry. It is hard to imagine that when her alarm goes off in a few minutes, it will not be her hand that will smother the rude noise, but that of some understudy,

Novella: *Creation Lost*, Part III: *Epilogue*—continued

about whom I shall have not the least concern. Yet, perhaps it is better this way. She was a brilliant shooting star making her way across my proud sky toward some other solar system, and I shot her down while I still had the time. I didn't bring her into this world and nurture her with the sweat of sleepless nights just to give her away to yet another hack. I will systematically search out and destroy each memory, every vestige, before she ends up trapped in the convoluted clauses of some perverse literary affair to be critiqued, psychoanalyzed, and gaped at by the world at large. No, she's better off where she is.

I look down at my desk cluttered high with aborted worlds. With one strenuous swipe of the arm, I could be done with them all and rest my tired head on the cool surface beneath. A big, clean desk and a head crammed with memories. If logic is allowed any say, forgetting should take a lot less effort than remembering, which is all that creating is at bottom, really. But then again, so what? I'll have a clean desk, a clear head, and a planet full of readers who remember. Let's face it, you can't go around telling millions of people to forget they ever heard of Hamlet, Yorrick, Corporal Trim, or Big Lambert the pig sticker. They will only cling onto them with strengthened conviction, awakened by your challenge, like a toddler warned not to stuff peas up his nose. And then there's the centuries of the dead, whose lives have already been irrevocably altered by these musings and who might have even gone so far as to respond in print. Tenacious stuff, this creation business!

Novella: *Creation Lost*, Part III: *Epilogue*—continued

It is truly uncanny how, when you listen carefully, the sound of nothing can so resemble the din of things happening. It is 5:58am, with only two minutes left before the alarm will let loose the fury of another day in creation, and never before have I noticed the deafening noise made by falling snow. As a matter of fact, there seems nothing left loud enough to be heard above the violence of snow. Like so much dust. No, that's it: *Dust*. Where a broad expanse of shimmering water once coursed resplendently between emerald banks like a well-fed python winding lazily through the grass, I look out now and find but a dry channel of caked mud beneath settling dust. Where my proud wandering eye once caught fleeting glimpses of future greatness glittering like diamonds in her scaly back, I now see only stray fragments of disappointment stuck like fossils in the dust-covered clay of her empty, barren bed.

Oh, how I wanted Henry's story to end with a great and memorable peroration, while all I seem to be able to muster up is dust! And to think that her (his, their) only reason for existence in the first place was the prospect of a big brassy finish with all stops pulled. Why, I even went so far as to cut hundreds of pages from the Chronologue—the *real* story itself, along with the characters and plot—all so as not to compete with the grandeur planned for the end. And all that was sacrificed for what? For the big, bosomy ending with its windblown lovers before an ocean sunset accompanied by full orchestra and elephants; for the grand finale that came and went in a muffled flourish, leaving not a trace behind but

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for the sound of my own blood racing madly in the capillaries of my inner ear. I destroyed her death the minute it was born, and it is mine. I shall do the same with my own when it comes.

Short Story: *A Beautiful Death*

(Begun and abandoned circa 1992 and then revised December 2018 and completed early 2021)

A Beautiful Death

Part I

Miss Bethany's death had been beautiful. Her body was found neatly composed, face up amid the scattered flowers of her coverlet, with patient arms arranged palm-down at her sides, and on her face the serene hint of a smile. This was not at all the look of a corpse born of violence and pain, nor of one found along the roadside of terminal disease. No, Mary Bethany's death looked like the long-awaited sleep of an insomniac: a soothing escape from the world's unending toil and fuss.

In fact, the only clue that Mary would not soon wake from her nap and go in to prepare tea for her sudden visitors was the presence of the little bottle lying empty on its side upon the nightstand. If only that bottle had been upright and closed it might have been easy enough to imagine her about to open her eyes and apologize for having overslept. But it had been over a day now since Mary had last been seen or heard by anyone in the building, and by the time the superintendent was called to come unlock her apartment door, it had already become clear to everyone familiar with the predictable pattern of her quiet comings and goings that things were unlikely to be alright in there.

Surely no one entering that room and seeing her like so would grudge her this death. Surely no one with a heart would refuse a

Short Story: *A Beautiful Death*, Part I—continued

woman her age and experience the dignity of the right to decide for herself when that proper time had come—particularly when the wretched business itself had been handled with such discretion, lacking as it did the slightest trace of drama or ugliness. Yet while Mrs. Stern stood there later that day looking down upon this expression of tranquility on her sister's face, she, for one, *did* feel resentment and ill will—yes, as if this unspeakable desperate action had been aimed specifically at *her*.

Martha Stern felt betrayed. This was such a cowardly, selfish...*thankless* thing to do, after all. The ultimate meaning of this unspeakable act was plain for anyone to see: Mary had quite obviously cared nothing for the close relationship they'd shared, nor for Martha's nurturing sisterly attention. It was as if she had decided that the very best Martha could be and do for her was of insufficient value.

But worse yet was the very idea that any creature could have been so hopelessly unhappy as Mary had been—so much so as to forsake all that love and concern bestowed on her and just steal away into the night without a warning, sound or trace, excepting only a discarded body, an empty bottle. How had Martha failed to save her sister?

As Mrs. Stern sat by the window watching slow cloud-like shadows of foliage sway mournfully across the illuminated lawn, she felt herself slipping helplessly backwards into the frightening darkness of her anger. If only she could clutch onto something, anything, on which to blame her sister's ugly show of thankless abandonment. But all the

Short Story: *A Beautiful Death*, Part I—continued

convoluted tangles of motivation she could construct to explain away this betrayal inevitably collapsed beneath the concrete weight of the plain and simple truth. This indiscretion did not answer to the usual suspects: the impoverished self-esteem, depressive desperation, and insurmountable hopelessness that she'd read so much about of late. This all might apply in other cases, but this, *Mary's* suicide, was little more than *revenge*. Yes, that's all that this attention-seeking indulgence signified in the end. Mary had had the last word, and from now on nothing could possibly be said or done by Martha to settle the score.

Fortunately, however, Martha did manage to convince herself that she was not *angry*, actually; only hurt. To be angry at someone who had gone this far to win seemed inappropriate and childish. Yes, that's right, Mary was simply to be pitied, not resented. And as she quietly savored the comfort found in the deception of her newly tasted martyrdom, Martha looked out onto her garden and approved of the neat and tidy life she had cultivated for herself. Walking along that little path between the perfect flower beds, who would ever suspect that she had had a sister so unhappy as that?

But, of course, her sister had not lived there with Martha and her husband amid the ideal perfume of these ordered rows of cheerful blooms. She had waited out the long years of her eventless life within the book-lined walls of a gardenless apartment on the other end of town with only her poems and little fictions to console her. How could

Short Story: *A Beautiful Death*, Part I—continued

anyone want to run away from all the beauty in this world put right before us and, worse yet, seek refuge from it amid mere words?

Having never married, raised children, or involved herself with people in any obvious way, Mary somehow became to Martha her kid sister, despite being nearly four years older. Whenever Martha surveyed the near perfection of her own life—walking along the garden path, snipping here, tamping there—she was reminded of that most persistently invasive weed she remained powerless to eradicate: The stain of her sister’s life upon her own. Martha became convinced early on that Mary’s writings, like all those obsessively driven writers she’d read about, represented little more than the sublimation of that unobtainable life she longed for into a more respectable one she could live vicariously at her devising. She was ashamed to have a sibling who had so badly lost her way, especially as theirs was just *not* that kind of family. They’d been loved and validated by their parents, who were respected, hard-working community members. There was nothing derelict or embarrassing about their home life; no reason to want to escape it. If Martha could grow up and find a satisfying life for herself, she saw no reason why Mary couldn’t—particularly since it was in fact her sister that was considered from early on the one with “promise.” But where did all this much-admired intellect and creative urge get *her* in the end?

Short Story: *A Beautiful Death*, Part I—continued

The hall runner sounded with the muffled rasp of approaching footsteps, and Martha tried in her ear's eye to fill the big bedroom slippers she heard dragging behind her with the delicate, timid feet of her sister. A strong, reassuring hand registered upon her shoulder, but she could not look up to acknowledge that it was not, somehow, Mary's frail and indecisive little hand. (Of course, Mary would never have given her such a gesture of assurance, even were her hands strong enough to offer it.) When her husband lowered himself into the easy chair opposite her with his morning paper and coffee, his eyes fixed on hers, all she could look at was his hands. They were big and clumsy, these hands. How is it hands this size lacked the strength to prevent all this from happening? How could this man, who had been her companion and anchor, have actually allowed such a thing to happen?

She knew John was looking at her, trying to read her like a weather forecast and learn if there might not be a break yet this day from the seemingly endless gloom that had settled over their household. Mr. Stern was conscientiously respectful of what he imagined his wife must be going through right now, and he therefore gingerly avoided delicate topics of conversation. The difficulty was that *everything* proved delicate. It was less out of some special affection for his late sister-in-law that made John Stern wish he could turn the clock back for Martha's sake than it was his desire to have his own life back in again. And you couldn't really blame him. Martha had been wrestling with these dark emotions for many months now. Surely it was time to just move on.

Short Story: *A Beautiful Death*, Part I—continued

Frankly, he'd long been impatient with hearing of the pointlessness of Mary's life, and now he would have to hear about that of her death too. Mr. Stern looked hard into his wife's face and saw there the eyes of a frightened child. He wanted to run away. He quickly averted his stare out the garden window past the oppressive flowerbeds to follow the blind confines of the stone wall. A long silence ensued. Something would have to be said.

"When are you going to go through her things?" he exhaled in a cautious near whisper, as if not the fourth or fifth time he had put this to her. He prepared himself with a slight wince for the expected reply.

"Not yet, John, I...just can't."

Mr. Stern waited and said nothing, attempting to hold back a contemptuous little chuckle at the absurd irony of it all. This woman who had never given a second thought about peering into every dark corner of her sister's life was now unable to bring herself to rummage through a few drawers of clothing and some stacks of paper.

"Well, you know, we should really get all that stuff out of there if we don't want to pay yet another month's rent for nothing. I mean, we're using an apartment as *a storage unit*," he told the stone wall at the end of the garden.

"You want me to just go and get rid of all her things...just like that?"

"Well, if not, let's at least pack it all up and move it into our garage until you work up the nerve," he responded mechanically from his memorized script. Mr. Stern wasn't sure if things like this he said to her

Short Story: *A Beautiful Death*, Part I—continued

even qualified anymore as “suggestions.” A suggestion, after all, was a verbal proposition conveying some meaning that could be perceived, understood, and considered by some other person—most importantly, all as some sort of *option toward a particular action*. He did know, however, that such a statement as this would have conveyed meaning to just about anyone else out there. But then he remembered that lame-brained idea of Martha’s some years back about Mary moving in with them, and he felt a shudder of relief go through his body as he contemplated this comfortable distance that intrinsically separates mere ideas from actual realized action. It occurred to him that the wastefulness of continuing to pay rent on that apartment to just sit there like some goddamned mausoleum was not nearly so depressing as the idea of succumbing to *live* in one himself.

Martha Stern would often relive that brutal moment when she first walked across her sister’s apartment threshold. She’d received a call from Luke, the ubiquitous but unintelligible building superintendent, who fumbled about in spluttering fits and starts in his attempt to convey his inability to rouse Miss Bethany, and Martha immediately knew what that meant. And when the elevator opened opposite her sister’s jarred apartment door, and she saw beyond the blurred backs of the manager and policeman the pair of stockinged feet stretched out upon the flowered bedspread, Martha recoiled as if she had stumbled into the room of a total stranger.

Short Story: *A Beautiful Death*, Part I—continued

She vaguely recognized the sound of a solemn greeting from the two men but could not open her mouth to acknowledge it. And when Luke cautiously nudged open the bedroom door for her to enter, she felt as if she'd left her body briefly in the terror of that moment. The flowery bier that loomed before her displayed a body deep in the arms of sleep, ostentatiously adorned like an offering to some jealous god. Martha was suddenly paralyzed by the murky shadow of a heavy memory that evaded all attempts at identifying it. When she woke from its grip, she unthinkingly grabbed the corpse by the shoulders and began shaking it while calling her sister's name, as if to awaken it from the stupor of deep sleep, until Luke lurched forward out of instinctive courtesy for the dead. As Martha slowly straightened her shaken self upright again, she caught sight of the overturned bottle on the night table, and without a moment's thought snatched it up and threw it into the wastepaper basket in one quick, forceful arc of uncontrollable, unconscious movement.

You see, she'd been here before—in this situation. Yes, this had been that prophesy-come-true she'd concocted and then carefully protected, like some wound to be licked in private compulsion, ever since she and Mary stood together in raw horror over the motionless white body of their older brother Larry all those years ago. It was the ominous feeling of anticipating the insidious progress of the inevitable: the fateful unfolding of a family curse. Martha had been certain that this worm-like essence in which their brother's unspeakable suicide resided would

Short Story: *A Beautiful Death*, Part I—continued

eventually work its way up the Bethany family tree, corrupting every fruit it found to be penetrable. She'd both heard and read of the heritability of suicide risk and so decided to close her ears and eyes to any more discussion of it out of superstitious fear of finding yet more corroborating evidence.

* * *

Martha remained hostage to the shadow of a memory that had crept up and hit her from behind upon that threshold. It sat dully and impenetrably upon her mind like a dense fog until a stray glance down again upon the faintly smiling lips sent home the awful chill of recognition. It was the lipstick: the stripe of red drawn clumsily along her lips, as if on those of a child playing grownup. It came back to her in an instant: the sight of her sister, age twelve, playing dead on her primly made bed in their old home, her vigorously painted lips puckered up longingly for a kiss from a Prince Charming who would never come. Martha had long forgotten this and other games of attention her intimacy-starved sister had played in her youth, and she drew in a deep breath at the horrible irony that such a dreamy-eyed girl should have somehow grown old outside the world of requited love. These were lips that Martha imagined to have quivered longingly to be chewed in erotic passion. This was the same delicate body that had once waited with open arms to be crushed against the impatient trunk of a man. But those arms had remained wide-spread and those lips unchewed. And here she lay, still a girl of twelve were it not for

Short Story: *A Beautiful Death*, Part I—continued

wrinkled skin. It was as if she had been lying there enveloped in stillness for over half a century now with only the gradual erosion of her body to mark the relentlessly steady progress of time.

There seemed to Martha an incomprehensible cruelty behind it all, and when she gradually became aware of the uninhibited sunshine of a cloudless sky pouring in exuberantly across her sister's death and the ebullient chirping of an indifferent life outside those windows, she was gripped by anger at the injustice of it all.

* * *

The minister grasped the edges of the lectern confidently as he pronounced on the darkness of sin and God's just punishments for it. In his expanding enthusiasm, he became reminded of various parables and quotes with which to bolster his timely message with the necessary note of scriptural authority. Martha looked up through her darkness to watch the moving lips in a futile effort to prevent each dreaded word from sounding. She wondered if the minister had forgotten that she, a surviving sibling of this suicide, happened to be present in this very room and especially vulnerable to the injury of such unkind words. And then she remembered that such trifling concerns as hurt human feelings were of less interest to the Creator than to the petty world of his fallen creation. Besides, the minister was not casting his own judgment, but merely unveiling for their sake the seemingly harsh but ultimately necessary disposition of God. After all, human life is a divine privilege.

Short Story: *A Beautiful Death*, Part I—continued

To dare return it before one's Creator has deemed it the proper time is not merely selfish and cowardly but brazenly disrespectful and disobedient. It is *self*-murder, no less sinful, technically, than the murder of one's neighbor. Worst of all, it is an act of sacrilege, a deluded pretense to the imagined dominion over what is God's own property, an insult to the inherent sacredness of His creation. Martha's contemplation of these ramifications of her sister's sin drifted to the disturbing historical descriptions she had heard in her youth of suicides who'd been refused proper burials and had their property confiscated by the church, or even more savagely, those who'd been dragged face-down from the heels and then perhaps finished off with a stake driven through the heart. But how could a God whose love transcended and sanctified everything imaginable embrace in his authority punishments so uncompromisingly severe and unempathetic as these?

Suddenly Martha felt the need to turn around and see who else was in the room. Eerily, she'd become aware of a strange sensation wherein the minister's words seemed directed at *her* and that the target of God's disapproval had not been, in this case, the actual murderer herself. Martha kept her eyes focused on the minister's mouth though and, in doing so, found herself suddenly surprised: The man's teeth were not real! How is it she'd never before noticed the incongruous perfection of those dentures, like pearl-like gates opening onto darkness to reveal the mystery of God? She had never paid much attention to her surroundings here in this church, but now it seemed to her difficult to

Short Story: *A Beautiful Death*, Part I—continued

avoid seeing only tawdry cheapness and hypocrisy everywhere she looked. The intermittent feeling of safety and inclusion that had kept her in at least occasional attendance now seemed quite far away, and she felt suddenly stripped naked before well-dressed and disdainful strangers. Would the minister and his flock remain so judgmental concerning a suicide who acted less from disobedience, deluded presumption, or cowardice than out of some organic predisposition she was simply impotent to stave off? What would it take for God's authoritarian indignation to be melted into parental empathy, pity, and care? More important, perhaps, was the bigger question: *Whose life was it anyhow?* God may have brought it into existence – she really wouldn't know about that – but who, after all, was the one left responsible for its proper maintenance and use?

* * *

Short Story: *A Beautiful Death***Part II**

I wrote the above pages over 25 years ago, not long after the suicide of my mother's beloved sister Mary, in an aborted attempt to memorialize the emotional chaos pervading my family's world at the time. In my struggle to commit the experience of this dismal event to words, I began to sense a certain futility in attempting to finish *recording* a story that wasn't *in itself* finished. Yes, the fallout of a suicide lives on as long as its survivors do; the story *cannot* be finished yet. And though I hadn't yet realized this truth while at work on the above pages, it has become increasingly apparent to me over the intervening quarter century.

When I began this story, I tried casting it in the first person, as I am finally doing now. But I was uncomfortable with adopting this voice, which seemed to keep *me* at the center of a story *that was about someone else*. Hence, my decision to resort to the traditional omniscient narrator; it was an attempt to objectify the incident and get closer to its "truth," untainted by subjectivity.

Of course, I now see there *is* no one truth to this story, no more than there is, really, to *any* story. And therefore, I've decided to continue this account of mine without such a crutch of emotional distancing. It has been my experience that the story of a suicide eventually develops into the story of the suicide's survivors. And being one of these survivors myself, it *is* my story anyway.

* * *

Short Story: *A Beautiful Death***Part III**

I wrote the above page (Part II) several years ago in an attempt to gain yet more perspective on treating this uncomfortable subject matter. However, I found it difficult to proceed with my story at this point, at least in this newly adopted first-person narrational perspective, and have since come to believe that the reason for this difficulty may be discovered in the underlying reality of my actual involvement in the subject matter, *which is largely fictional*.

I say “largely” because although it is *untrue* that my mother had a sister who took her life, our family *did* in fact suffer the trauma of a suicide. This event, which happened back in 1997, was the death of my paternal first cousin once removed, a smart and sensitive boy whose suicide at the tender age of 14 years old shook us to the core. However, this event transpired some five years *after* the bulk of Part I of this short story was already composed, and I am left to believe that despite my longstanding interest in cognitive science (including all that can go *wrong* as well as right with the complex workings of a brain), my gradual promotion of this interest from the general and academic to the emotional equivalent of a front burner may be explained, at least to some degree, by this tragedy.

All this said, I have no idea how, or even *when*, I will attempt to continue with Part IV. Before that happens, I will have to grapple a good deal more with how we distinguish between that which we label fiction and that which we decide (and ultimately *conspire*) to call “truth.”

A Note on the Author, the Work, and this Book

The volume you are reading is the companion volume to my *Collected Poems*. Up until the year 2019 my poems, essays, and fiction had all been collected in a single omnibus volume. However, continuous additions to that book (entitled, variously, *Collected Poems [& Prose Works]* and *Collected Poems & Essays*, etc., throughout the years) resulted in what by now would make a rather unwieldy single volume (nearly a thousand pages), and hence this separation into a volume each for poetry and for prose.

What follows is merely a repeat of the note on the author and work found in that first volume (*Collected Poems*). I beg the reader's indulgence here, particularly as this introduction was originally intended to address issues of composition regarding poetry rather than essays and fiction. But as I can't be sure whether the reader of the subject volume will have seen a copy of my *Collected Poems*, I'll use this as an opportunity for advertising that volume:

* * *

Although till recently a professional appraiser of art and antiques by day, my early morning hours over the last quarter century have been devoted in large measure to the careful composition of formalist poetry upon a variety of themes. Among the most prominent and persistent of these topics are erotic love, classical music, the visual arts, the literary experience, and, last but hardly least, that most exalted phenomenon of consciousness itself.

A Note on the Author, the Work, and this Book – *continued*

This last subject, one I have characterized in my work as “dreams of night and day,” relates to my special interest in cognitive science in its various disciplines (e.g., neuroscience, philosophy of mind, etc.). In fact, my only poems to date that have seen hard-copy publication are eight sonnets from this particular category. Three of these, “Proof that Dreams are Real,” “From Matter into Mind,” and “To Dream, Perchance to Think” (sonnets no. 76-78, respectively, as numbered in my *Collected Poems [& Essays]*) can be found in Nicholas Tranquillo, Editor, *Dream Consciousness: Allan Hobson’s New Approach to the Brain and its Mind* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing Switzerland, 2014 [“Vienna Circle Institute Yearbook,” being Volume 3 of Vienna Circle Institute Library series edited by Friedrich Stadler, Director, Institut Wiener Kreis and University of Vienna, Austria]) where they appear showcased as the chapter heads to Professor J. Allan Hobson’s three distinguished *William James Lectures* that constitute chapters 2, 3, & 4 (on pp. 9, 29, and 51, respectively). (The publisher, Springer International Publishing, was the first hardcopy publisher of these three poems and has been given notice, as per contract, of their copyrighted appearance here.)

The other five, including “Manifest Latency,” “Mysticism Explained,” “Extrasensory Deception,” “Why I’m Skeptical of Santa,” and “Ye Olde Christmas Virus” (sonnets 80, 75, 74, 94, and 95, respectively, as numbered in my *Collected Poems*) can be found in Allan Hobson and Nicholas Tranquillo, Editors, *London Bridges: Essays on Collaboration* (East Burke, VT: Allan Hobson, 2016), pp. 38, 42, 73, 160,

A Note on the Author, the Work, and this Book – *continued*

191, and 271, respectively. And my essay, “The Belief Machine...,” can be found published as the first chapter in this same volume, pp. 6-18.

Three more sonnets, including “Leaping from the Flaming Tower of Psychobabble,” “The Problems Gods Must Have in Worlds Such as Ours,” and “The Devout Atheist at Worship” (sonnets 100, 90, and 96, respectively) appear presented as chapter endings in Professor Hobson’s 2019 book, *Godbrain* (for which I also wrote the foreword).

Out of this fascination with the physiological mechanisms underlying consciousness along its continuum (from rational thought through the delirium of dreaming, psychosis, insobriety, etc.) also springs my preoccupation with human brain as an exalted (and dangerous) engine of belief. And moved by the long history of suffering our species has endured as an unfortunate byproduct of the proficiency of this engine (wherein the essential learning tools of Belief are so easily forged into the fetters of Faith), I have composed numerous poems meditating on the subject of religion and its discontents—not surprisingly, perhaps, from an atheist perspective.

This may be seen to have become a major theme at work (and play) in *Chasing George*, my 3,456-line subversive verse epic (in 24 books of 24 stanzas), a lyric-narrative that might be most succinctly characterized as a search through the continuum of consciousness for Selfhood. And probably even less effort will be required of the reader in ferreting out this particular concern of mine within the 700 lines of my second-longest poem, my loving parody of Geoffrey Chaucer’s magnificent

A Note on the Author, the Work, and this Book – *continued*

poem, *Parlement of Foules* (also known as *The Parliament of Birds*), which I have entitled *The Parliament of Foul Ideas*.

My compositional efforts have been confined almost exclusively to verse strictly cast in meter and rhyme, nearly entirely in iambic pentameter, and chiefly in traditional fixed forms (such as the sonnet, villanelle, tail rhyme, ottava rima, rhyme royal, and—in the case of *Chasing George*—Venus & Adonis stanza).

I believe (or at least *hope*) this predilection of mine is due *not* to a particular lack of imagination on my part but rather to a deep respect for the liberating rigors of poetic vehicles that have proven over the many centuries to invite the tightest and most nuanced technical control over the artistic use of language discoverable in English. However, as a lover of poetry of various types, “formalist” and “free,” and being neither a theorist nor polemicist, I consider the ultimate arbiter of a poem’s quality to be *the ear* and not the current popularity of the model of its vehicle.

Also relevant to the above subject of prior publication, mention should also be made of my readings of my poems (along with those of other poets) on Spokane Public Radio (KPBX 91.1 [as well as KSPC 91.9 and KPZ90.3], an NPR member station serving the Inland Northwest [including eastern Washington, northern Idaho, western Montana, and southern British Columbia]). These are part of an ongoing series entitled “Poetry Moment,” which showcases a local poet for a week at a time, each comprising a three-minute reading at 9:00am from Monday through

A Note on the Author, the Work, and this Book – *continued*

Friday of that week, curated by the poet to include readings of his or her own work as well as the work of others, present and past. So far, I have completed four such weeks of readings, including those aired on May 20 through 24, 2019, November 29 through December 3, 2021, December 26 through 30, 2022, and May 15-19, 2023. All these readings are archived and free for the listening any time on the KPBX website (spokanepublicradio.org) under the header, “Poetry Moment” and searchable by poet/reader.

And finally, as mentioned above on pp. 2 and 496, all the poems in this volume, along with all the prose in the accompanying volume – i.e., the one you are reading now – *Collected Prose* (including essays, fiction, and professional lectures), may be found free for reading (only) in full on my website, *David Borodin, Formalist poet*, which may be found at davidborodin.org. As I tend to incorporate additions and changes to these (read-only) PDFs on this website far more often than I bring out a new printed hardcopy edition, it is important to note that *the version found on the website* will ALWAYS represent the most recent *and therefore most valid and authorized* edition of my work. In other words, any discrepancy between a particular hard-copy edition of my work and the version found active on my website (David Borodin, Formalist Poet, at davidborodin.org) may easily be adjudicated in favor of the website version.

Collected Prose

David Borodin

[Edition 10.24.24]

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(*The essays and works of fiction in this book were composed broadly between 1990 and the present, with numerous undated revisions to most of them along the way. Specifically, the essays were composed as follows: no. 1 between 2015 and 2024; no. 2 in 2013 (though published not until 2016), no. 3 in (published 2019); no. 4 in 1990 (published 1991); no. 5 in 1996; no. 6 in 1989; and no. 7 in 2021. The two lectures were composed in 2015 and 2016, respectively, and then transcribed with revisions in 2022. *Creation Lost* was composed in 1989-91 and revised in 2016. And, finally, *A Beautiful Death* was composed circa 1992 and revised first in 2018 and then 2021. The above latest copyright date of 2021, shown above reflects all revisions.)

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[**Note:** See p. 2 for the full title page with copyright and illustration details.]

[**Note #2:** *Collected Poems* [by] **David Borodin**, a 496-page companion volume to the subject one, but containing only my verse, is also available in hardcopy as well as in PDF format (for reading only) on the above-cited website.

This book is set almost exclusively in *Book Antiqua* (by Monotype Imaging Holdings, Inc.), a renaissance-style serif typeface based closely on *Palatino*, a design by the celebrated 20th-century German type designer/ calligrapher Hermann Zapf (1918-2015), circa 1948 (released in 1949 by D. Stempel AG of Frankfurt am Main) and named after the 16th-century Italian calligrapher Giovanni Battista Palatino (c. 1515-75). Previous editions of the subject book were cast almost exclusively in the aforementioned *Palatino* until August of 2021, when this font was found to no longer support the ability to employ bold without italics.

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