Quantum Reading vs. the Rabbit Hole

A state of shock is what happens to us—individually or as a society—when we experience a sudden and unprecedented event for which we do not yet have an adequate explanation. At its essence, a shock is the gap that opens up between event and existing narratives to explain the event. Being creatures of narrative, humans tend to be very uncomfortable with meaning vacuums—which is why those opportunistic players I have termed "disaster capitalists" have been able to rush into the gap with their preexisting wish lists and simplistic stories of good and evil. The stories themselves may be cartoonishly wrong . . . But at least those stories exist—and that alone is enough to make them better than the nothingness of the gap.

Naomi Klein (8-9)

1.

Much of what follows here will be an exploration of the human inclination to endorse inane conspiracy theories or join insane cults in favor of actual thinking, an inclination that is running more amok these days than at any other time in my life, the ongoing mass-surrender

of personal agency to a rogues' gallery of seamy grifters and scary charlatans, Gog and Magog masquerading as Goofy and Mr. Magoo, appearing at first far too absurd to take seriously but extremely dangerous for precisely that reason, given the series of "shocks" recent history has inflicted on the American experiment, the level of trauma they have induced, and the desperation with which so many now crave coherent "stories," no matter how deranged, that promise not only to make sense of it right now but to end the confusion once and for all.

For a variety of reasons, I've been wondering lately how "intelligent life," which is how we advertise ourselves to the universe, can be such gullible prey for the "disaster capitalists" Klein talks about. The reason she proposes is that human beings are "very uncomfortable with meaning vacuums." But what does that mean? The kind of discomfort she is talking about is not physical of course but psychic. I'll take the liberty of translating it into "anxiety," which, when it is intense enough (I know from experience) turns into a very specific kind of fear, one that can become vaguely generalized, especially when there is a "meaning vacuum" instead of a real threat. The effect is to feel under threat all the time, unsure from what, remaining always on high alert, brain awash with adrenaline, noradrenaline, and cortisol, that chemical soup designed to operate in short bursts not as long-term addictions.

After a while the only way to relieve the discomfort is not "fight or flight," which are appropriate responses to an immediate threat, but to "run and hide," away from the nagging dread that chronic fear imposes. That's where the "rabbit hole" in my title comes in, a commonly used metaphor for the cults and conspiracy theories that are one of my targets here. To make my connection, I want to highlight the figure of the rabbit in this image. We all have seen video of rabbits running away from predators. Under those conditions, pretty much

any hole will do for cover. If they find one that feels safe, they stay until the coast is clear, then come back out and operate as usual, case closed. Now imagine that rabbit feeling under such threat all the time even with no predator chasing it. In desperation to relieve its instinctual fear, it will seek out the deepest hole it can find and dig deeper and deeper into it until it finally feels secure. Doesn't matter if it's a pleasant place to be or if there is a good way out. It stays. Disaster capitalists—i.e., many politicians, pundits and priests, among other authority figures—know this instinctively. So they generate as much fear as possible, usually without too much specificity, then proffer their pre-made holes and invite the rabbits in, where they are more than happy to sacrifice personal agency to whoever dug the "safe-hole" for them.

There is I know an antidote both to this generalized fear and to rabbit-hole-relief for it. But how to name it? I just couldn't come up with one that satisfied me. Last night I finished a complete first draft of this essay. Its working title was "Off the Rails," which I knew was not quite right. This morning I woke up with the term "quantum reading" flashing in my head. Based on long and considered experience, I trust my dreams implicitly to help me solve my most intractable problems. That term struck me at once as both perfectly on point and pretty preposterous, and I couldn't decide which to go with: pitch it or ditch it.

One of the primary features of quantum phenomena, in the material world at least, is a simultaneity of seemingly contrary, even contradictory, conditions or states. The particle-wave duality that photons and electrons express is the Ur-example of this: What in a "natural" state is always-both becomes, at the moment of measurement, one or the other, depending on what question the experiment is asking. I could see that I had already laid out a number of such anomalous concepts along the way: systems-level thinking, stacked reading, mystery,

negative capability, creative irresolution, and non-contradiction, among others. What I needed was an overarching metaphor to unify them. Quantum reading seemed just the ticket for that. So there it is now, leading my charge in a title that sounds more like an MMA cage match than an academic essay. I know enough about quantum mechanics to know that quantum reading is a stretch. By the same token, the term quantum has entered the popular lexicon in ways that broaden its application considerably. I'm taking advantage of that definitional flexibility to deploy the term in this new way.

I want to open with a unique and illuminating reading experience I had last month, one element of which I'll try to simulate here in a formal way. I'm hoping it will serve as a proper portal into those larger questions about personal agency, how to maintain and sustain it, that I have on my mind right now. As to that "formal" matter: I noticed as I was writing the first several pages of what has turned into this essay that I was periodically spinning off into seemingly impertinent asides—some based on prior thinking or reading, some just loopy—more so even than I usually do, what feels to me *in situ* like attempts to re-purpose old knowledge toward a new end, as if the "story" I was concocting in the moment could not be complete without these ancillary asides it was spawning along its way. I have had now to go back and excise all those asides for the sake of coherence in this final version.

Rather than simply trash that material, though, some of which I liked, I decided to add the asides as an appendix. Each one is numbered sequentially in the text and hyperlinked to its counterpart on the "Asides" page, where you can read it, then toggle back; or you can read them all at once after you've read the essay; or you can just ignore them completely. They may not be crucial for you to "get" what I'm talking about here. But they were crucial to my method

of composition—this extemporaneous thinking I typically indulge in, the porous text open to all sorts of intrusions—and helped to get me where I ended up going in this piece, which both is and is not what I had in mind when I started. And, by happenstance, they add an additional "quantum" layer to the argument I proffer here.

About that "unique . . . reading experience": All of a sudden, in late October, I went from having no books on my docket to five, each of which looked really interesting to me. They were: two books by Chellis Glendinning: *Off the Map*: *An Expedition Deep into Imperialism, the Global Economy, and Other Earthly Whereabouts* (1999), a semi-autobiographical narrative/manifesto concerning the deleterious effects on Indigenous people of unscrupulous land-rights practices in New Mexico, and *My Name is Chellis and I'm in Recovery from Western Civilization* (1994), a book she says she wrote "as a mental-health professional who has researched personal issues of healing and recovery, as well as global issues concerning the psychological impacts of environmental disaster" (xi), both recommended by a friend; Elaine Pagels' *The Gnostic Gospels* (1979), one of the first deeply scholarly treatments of the lost gospels that were unearthed in Egypt in the 1940s (a current passion of mine, as you know if you've read my most recent book of essays, *waking up: reading wisdom texts*), suggested by another friend; *The Selected Writings of Mikhail Bakunin* (2010), a 19th century lapsed-Marxist-turned-anarchist, whose name I just happened upon provocatively in a review of Pagels' book; and *The Banished Immortal: A Life of Li Bai* (2019), Ha Jin's biography of the eighth century Chinese poet Li Bai (Li Po in Western culture), a favorite poet of mine, sent to me by a friend.

I figured I'd read a bit of each to decide which to focus on first, then stage the others going forward. They were all so captivating to me, though, each in its own way, I just couldn't pick one. So I ended up reading them all simultaneously, ten or fifteen pages of one, maybe a chapter of the next and so forth, night after night for a couple of weeks. I have often, previously, read a series of disparate books in sequence, divining a commonality among them, one that would not be evident if the books were approached discretely; this is the first time, though, I've intentionally "stacked" that process into a singular event.

Very shortly a wonderful thing began to happen: I'd be in the midst of one and would think I was still somehow in the midst of one of the others. Or, occasionally, all of the others! It was as if I was not reading five separate books about widely divergent subjects set in vastly different contexts, but one book with five different facets. I began to wonder how that could possibly be. There were no obvious resemblances in authorial style (even the two Glendinning books were quite different), and the books' themes, historical moments and ideological imperatives had nothing specifically in common. If I drew a Venn diagram with those various circles there would be very little, if any, grayed-out overlap at the center. So what was it, I wondered, that led me to this peculiar sense of simultaneity?

After I read in this way or a while—i.e., from what I call a "systems-level" [*1] (a concept commonly used these days in relation to biological, social and institutional matrices, which is, most generally, the capacity to examine complex part-whole relationships holistically, from an organic rather than a mechanical point of view)—I could see that what these books shared at their respective cores was a very basic premise: the belief that current and seemingly intractable cultural dysfunctions could be traced back to a specific tipping

point in the past when things started to go badly wrong, though each located their preferred tipping point at a different moment in time, anywhere from decades to many millennia ago, sometimes precipitated intentionally, sometimes inadvertently, sometimes via broad cultural shifts, sometimes via individual initiatives. They were not then, taken together, simply a congeries of alternative blame-narratives for the current state of affairs but felt representative at this deeper level of a stereotypical habit of mind that seems perpetually to afflict generational thinking: Things would be way better now if this or that had not happened somewhere along the way, as in "before my time," to set them awry, and I need to try to figure out when and why [*2]].

Counterintuitively, the practical effect of this was to force me to focus on the present moment as both intensely real—immediate, local, exactly what it is, no matter how it got this way; and fully negotiable, so how if at all can it realistically be altered going forward?—rather than to lament that it is not what it should be, the only real solution going back in time for a mulligan, which is not yet, I'm sure for the best, a technically feasible option! If there were this many different ways of explaining how things went off the rails stacked at my bedside, there were likely many, many more. And picking one felt more like blowing smoke into a smoke-filled room than finding the smoking gun.

At impasses of this sort—when we believe that things are wrong and there seems no obvious way to set them right again—we have a decision to make: throw up our hands in despair or plot out some path forward that, while not ideal, is at least potentially productive. Whichever of these we pick, though, there is an even more consequential choice to make: whether to turn over our allegiance and our energies to an outside agent to provide an already

packaged narrative purporting to make sense of the problem/solution paradigm, often these days some conspiracy theory or cult, among the latter of which I will include (unfairly you might say, though I don't), most "organized" religions [*3], especially of the fundamentalist ilk; science, when it is overly valorized or demonized via the popular media; and all party-line political ideologies, from mainstream to delulu [*4]; or to assert personal agency via what I called "actual thinking" above, which begins in chaos and moves grudgingly toward narrative, if it ever arrives there at all. The former require almost no work, research, fact-checking, new-knowledge-formation, time, or these days, with audio-visual social media the information source of choice, even reading: just opening the spigot and glug-glug-glugging whatever it proffers. Thus its appeal. The latter requires all six of those and then some.

So where does each of these books locate the pivot point toward our current dysfunctions? Glendinning identifies the problem materially, specifically how the meaning of "land" changed as it moved from an unbounded reservoir of vital resources for the sustenance of early human communities, to the individually owned "properties" typical in Western societies. She adheres to the now commonly held theory that this transition began to occur millennia ago, as humans turned away from hunting and gathering as their mode of survival (which requires constant changes of venue, therefore no excessive attachment to specific bits of land), to farming (which requires sustained settlement in a fixed place and significant investments of energy and resources that then necessitate such attachment.) In the latter case, the argument goes, one needs to mark off one's territory and protect it from others. In other words, "own" it. This land-protection strategy gradually evolved into the plot-based system of land management typical in the European societies, which traveled with

them as they colonized the rest of the “off the map” world, enforcing their conventions for “owning” land as modes of cultural privilege, a process that can involve anything from buying it with trinkets to displacing with violence whoever happens to be on the land at the moment [*5].

*Off the M*ap reports specifically on the insidious effects of such land-rights practices in New Mexico, Glendinning’s home at the time, via the many kinds of duplicity, chicanery, fraud, and when necessary forced displacement, that have effected the gradual translation of Indigenous/Native land over to White “settlers.” *My Name is Chellis* offers a more theorized view of these matters, some of which derives from her professional experience as a psychologist, some from her background in feminist cultural studies. Both books are grounded in her personal experiences as a child who was sexually abused in a grievous way by her own father, which in some ways becomes a metaphor for the many other kinds of rape that patriarchal Empires inflict on “land” and those who inhabit it.

Bakunin locates the problem immaterially, in the ways we think about and relate to God, most particularly the God of Abraham, the transcendent creator who stands at the headwaters of all three of the major Western religions: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim. For Bakunin, given his Marxist roots, this God is an entirely human invention that inevitably displaces authority out of human hands and into a transcendent nether-sphere, a move that not only disables collective earthly enterprise for practical betterment, but also insidiously provides the template for authoritarian political systems, especially class- or caste-based hierarchies that create mega-power and -wealth at the top of the pyramid at the expense of the “working classes” at the base. The logic for this analysis is pristinely Marxist—think his

"opiate of the masses" trope for example—familiar, lucid, and persuasive; and his case is surprisingly well-documented. He understands European dialectical philosophy quite deeply, of course. But he is also well-versed in Biblical literature and history.

What interested me most though was Bakunin's eventual turn away from Marxism, arguing that as Karl Marx became more and more domineering in his approach to what the "dictatorship of the proletariat" would look like in the shorter term—which by most accounts he did, egomaniacally, over the course of his life—Marxism itself began to replicate at a structural level the very God-problem it purported to override. Bakunin doesn't say this specifically, but he implies that any calling card that has "dictatorship" in its mission statement will ultimately be used to justify not a transitional but a permanent authoritarian system that simply remolds the God-topped power-pyramid into a different template: a worldly State overseen by a few human "gods"—dictators *cum* oligarchs, a privileged aristocracy of overlords flourishing extravagantly at the expense of "the masses" —instead of by one transcendent God. Bakunin is writing this well before the Russian revolution and the creation of actual communist states in the 20th century, which turned out in most cases to become exactly what Bakunin predicted they would. The mode of anarchism Bakunin endorses is surprisingly cogent and orderly, a "systems-level" approach to non-authoritarian social reforms, quite unlike the forms of anarchism we are familiar with these days, whether from the left (Antifa, e.g.) or the right (Proud Boys, e.g.), many of which are violent more for the sake of generating chaos than reform.

Pagels also locates the problem in the God-matrix, specifically during the Romanization of the Catholic Church in the 4th and 5th centuries, as the Church bureaucracy

decided how exactly to organize the relationship of authority between the individual practitioner and the clergy, finally ultra-valorizing the latter over the former. This required resolving two impediments to unanimity: establishing the exact nature of the divinity of Jesus, which turned out to be quite a prickly logical problem; and codifying a universally orthodox Bible, which involved excising with prejudice, via the heresy route, all alternative views competing with the newly minted orthodoxy, their books banned, buried or burned in the process. In other words, to create a religious system mirroring the Roman imperial system, power-based, with which the Catholic Church was now allied: "universal," patriarchal, hierarchical, vainglorious.

Among the many casualties in this process were the gnostic gospels, which generally favored individual enterprise over externally imposed authority in spiritual matters. We now call these the "lost" gospels, most of which remained so until they were unearthed by accident in the mid-20th century. It might be more accurate to call them (though she doesn't) the "disappeared" gospels, given the extreme forms of censorship that excised them not just from the canon, but from material existence. Had not the Nag Hammadi trove been buried, most likely in the fourth century, the vast majority of this material would not be available to us in any form at all. Given that we are living through a similar kind of censorship era, ranging from "cancel-culture" to, more recently, rabid book-bannings, there is an air of currency about this now long-forgotten example of the purgation of alternative ideologies in favor of an externally imposed orthodoxy [*6].

The outlier book in this group was, obviously, the biography of Li Bai who is Chinese (all the other books focus on Western culture exclusively) and was about an individual life (not a

tradition of ideas, a movement, or a paradigm shift.) What made this an interesting counterpoint in this five-piece puzzle was how, in my mind at least, Bai [Chinese naming conventions place the surname before the given name; I borrow here Jin's preference, both with Bai's name and his, for treating the given name as surname-equivalent] embodied the larger scale problem in his singular life, which was riven by the competing aspirations that his own culture at the time made irreconcilable by definition.

His public ambition, a deep and fierce one, was to make a name for himself in the upper echelons of the military and political hierarchy in China at the time, an almost inescapable masculine trope in all patriarchal cultures, East or West. Early on, Bai used his astonishing abilities as a writer and his very large personality as devices to pursue such a rise in status. These skills did usher him into circles of wealth, privilege and power, but, as his biographer makes clear, he ended up always being perceived more as an entertainer or mouthpiece, a tool for aristocrats to use to further their personal ambitions, most often at the expense of his. In short, despite a lifetime of earnest pursuit of his goal, he never achieved any permanent position or commission. There was always inevitably a falling out that left him once again adrift, on the road to somewhere else, living off friends. The problem in most instances was a combination of: his creative genius, which made him intolerant of the shallow and calculative stupidity that regulated public life, and which those in power found just as threatening as they did alluring, the former winning out sooner or later over the latter; his expansive ego, which he was chronically unable to temper in the company of lesser mortals, often offending them; and his uncanny ability to pick the wrong side of whatever conflict or intrigue he found himself enmeshed in.

Bai's private ambition, on the other hand, was to become a legendary poet living a reclusive life in the service of his spirit, another common trope for creative "geniuses" in cultures, like his and ours, that work hard both to celebrate their work and to keep them safely neutered on the sidelines, the old "pretty cool but too hot to handle" conundrum. Those two halves just don't work together, obviously. His life was, then, a series of chronic failures in personal terms, while he was alive, and the achievement of extraordinary fame in historical terms, mostly after his passing. As Jin explains:

> For decades Bai had been torn between two worlds—the top political circle and the religious order—but had been unable to exist in either one. In his own words, "Trying to be prosperous and divine,/ I have simply wasted my life pursuing both." . . . He had imagined each world as its own kind of heaven . . ., where he was unable to remain because he was doomed by his love for both. (285)

So, Bai traversed two paths simultaneously and was incapable of choosing, though it is telling that Jin (and Bai in his poetry) characterizes only one of them as "divine." He fits into the cohort I'm writing about as a good example of what happens to someone with great creative gifts when they are unwilling or unable to be absorbed into, or submit to, the dominant ideology of the moment. Established and taken-for-granted cultural systems simply do not reward the most incisive forms of internal critique—and Bai was temperamentally inclined both to deep insight and naïve honesty—at least not with the kind of advancement Bai craved. In other words, he is akin to the "lost" gnostic gospelists Pagels documents, the marginalized anarchists Bakunin speaks to and for, and the Indigenous locals being fleeced of their land

rights over and over by White settlers in Glendinning's New Mexico: all always shoved to the fringes, cast adrift, on the outs [*7].

Everything they say may stake a claim to "truth," but that is never enough to win the day in a cultural economy where "power" is the dominant, often the only, currency. "Speaking truth to power" simply cannot work, then or now, when one's interlocutor(s) do not believe in even a flimsy, diaphanous "truth" that transcends or subtends their self-interested discourse. Truth stands relatively firm in its relationship with language and thinking, flummery floats around wherever its momentary purposes are best served, like those untethered statues Socrates assails in his vituperative argument with Meno. No historical moment in my lifetime demonstrates that dissociative tendency—discourse intentionally detached from evidence, fact, reason, or logic: all truth-related mechanisms—better than the one we're enduring right now.

2.

For my upcoming weekly family Zoom with my brother, my sister, and a family friend, one of our "assigned" topics has to do with "conspiracy theories," specifically if there are any we find personally attractive enough to at least semi-endorse. I thought of a couple that are minimally interesting to me: the Kennedy assassination, an enigma that seems perpetually intriguing to my generation, traumatized by that grievous moment, and alien life. I actually enjoy watching the cheesy "Ancient Aliens" series on TV from time to time and believe there is intelligent life throughout the universe, though I'm not persuaded it has either sought out,

made, or wants any contact with ours, which it may not feel qualifies as “intelligent.” I feel no personal urgency to endorse any specific solution-theories to these enigmas. They are simply entertaining for me to think about. So my initial thought process for my report was brief and shallow, two things, done.

What did, though, engage my thinking was the larger question of why humans seem to be attracted to conspiracy theories in the first place. The vast majority of them appear (to non-adherents at least) patently inane, arranged via a logic that may be internally consistent but is completely disconnected from external fact- or evidence-based “reality.” Yet they still seem to have a deep appeal to the human imagination. And these days, they are especially pervasive and insidious organizational motifs in the political, religious, and social arenas of our public life, an index to the level of trauma recent events have induced. The very fact that most of us have ensconced in our personal lexicons tropes like Q-anon, Pizzagate, and vaccine-injected RFID microchips (the first three I thought of in about five seconds) demonstrates the attractive power of the strange “rabbit-hole-type” belief systems that subtend them. So that’s what I thought about.

When I began to ask myself why this was so, the first thing that crossed my mind was one of my go-to critiques of the modern imagination, especially its hyper-expression in the US these days: the inability to tolerate liminal states of mind, those situations, ideas or experiences that are ambiguous, ambivalent, anomalous, especially when they have two quite distinct, seemingly contrary, but mutually essential aspects, which is, according to quantum mechanics, exactly what the physical universe we live in is like at the subatomic level. And in my view at least, exactly what human intelligence is still good for discerning and

attending to, now that computers, robots, and AI can, theoretically, do all the more basic things humans used to do to make sense and money.

The everyday term I personally prefer to name such states of mind is “mystery,” one that was instilled in my inner world when I was quite young, middle-school age I’d say, ironically by Sister Paschal, the nun teaching my after-school Catholic catechism class, hardly a venue where you’d expect liminality would find a good home! She was introducing the concept of the trinity, the three-persons-in-one nature of the Christian God. But instead of giving us a long-winded theological disquisition, which is what I was expecting, and there are many of those I now know, hair-splittingly arcane [*8], she said it was simply a mystery that you should (as a “good” Catholic) accept on faith without expecting to figure it out by conventional analytic means. Or not accept it, of course, though she didn’t proffer that option. In either case there was no point seeking its solution. It was unfathomable. Instead of being disappointed by this “punt” I was delighted by it. I was already by my nature inclined to see all manner of things in this world as fundamentally mysterious. It was what made them interesting to me, worth exploring. And I now felt fully authorized to indulge my curiosity not by trying to resolve such enigmas—putting an end to inquiry—but to sustain attention on them, in many cases extending now over my lifetime [*9].

Almost immediately, as I remember that moment, I felt happy and relaxed, absent confusion or anxiety. And I seized on this concept—mystery—as a worthy way to name all those life events, spiritual conundrums and intellectual enigmas that resist explanation via the most commonly available instrument: language. It’s not that mysteries could not be understood. Nor was language useless to that process. It was more that a mystery had to be

encountered first via an “experience”—which I believed back then and still do, despite the protestations of postmodernist ideologies, arises prior to and aside from words—that language can then explore along many paths without ever reaching a singular destination, a process that leads finally to “wisdom,” a highly specialized form of knowledge that emerges after language has done its work, resists commodification, and, most importantly, never achieves finalization. I put those two words—experience and wisdom—in quotation marks because they are in their own right mysteries, to me at least.

In other words, I began to develop for myself a theory of imagination and an idea of the role thinking could play in enacting it, analogous to the model of quantum theory I was beginning to learn about via my fascination with physics. What a great gift that has been. It has allowed me to contemplate: the depths of the material reality of our universe, which quantum mechanics says is similarly unfathomable, except mathematically or metaphorically; all kinds of spiritual, ethical, and philosophical systems, seeking their common ground (as I was doing with this array of stacked books) without feeling compelled to choose one exclusively, becoming captive to an specific -ism; and, of course, poetry, the appreciation of which always exceeds any critical ideology that culture has invented to “interpret” it, as in the case of one of my favorites, Emily Dickinson: Unless you can hold two or more distinct, and often mutually contradictory feelings, insights and thoughts in mind simultaneously you will never “get” any of her poems, nor those of many worthy others, nor any of the other mysteries that arise from being alive in this astonishing universe.

So, what to say about this general human intolerance for states of inner irresolution, often produced by what Naomi Klein calls, above, a “shock,” which provokes a discomfort that

demands relief by any "story" available, no matter how bizarre its narrative line? My favorite source for thinking about matters of this sort is John Keats, specifically what he famously called, in a letter to his brother George in 1817, "negative capability;" that is: "when [one] is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." In another 1817 letter, this one to Benjamin Bailey, he recommends "the authenticity [or later, truth] of the imagination," as the antidote for the inefficacy of "consecutive reasoning" to fathom the most important and interesting matters that inevitably concern us in this life. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69384/selections-from-keatss-letters)

Keats may seem a remote and problematic source to go to here for several reasons: He's writing this stuff over two centuries ago at the height of the Romantic movement, which has long since passed its sell-by date. He mentions most of it briefly and offhandedly in these otherwise mostly personal missives, never following up with any in-depth explanations of these concepts, there or elsewhere. He was a poet, a suspect source of "truth" in Western philosophy ever since Socrates exiled poets from his Republic. And he was only 22 at the time, hardly a seasoned intellectual. Still, there is a brilliance to the insight that, to me, has an uncanny currency in a world that, on the one hand, now recognizes, as a matter of verifiable scientific fact, the material "uncertainty" (see Heisenberg's "principle") built into the fabric of the physical universe; and, on the other hand, is manically obsessed with relieving even the slightest twinges of psychic uncertainty with any sort of off-the-shelf "consecutive reasoning," no matter how detached from reality it might be. Better always to relax comfortably in the

liminal spaces of irresolution—the true resting state of "reality" in my view— than to sacrifice sanity for the illusion of clarity or stability [*10].

None of this is to suggest that inner states of irresolution produce confusion (nothing is knowable), cynicism (therefore nothing matters), or stasis (so all available options are equal.) Quite the opposite. They are ongoingly generative of new knowledge. Nor is it to say that closure is precluded. One can at any moment choose simply to stop inquiring into a situation or problem for any reason at all, or no reason at all. Time and mental energy are finite after all. It is, though, to say that deferring to "stories" provided by outside "authorities" that purport to fully explain the mystery at hand is a certain path both to delusion and the loss of personal agency.

3.

So how does each of these writers settle with such confidence on the main "problem" that afflicts the current moment, as well as their proposed "solution" to it? In *waking up: reading wisdom texts*, I proffer the term "cultural predestination" to explain how two different thinkers, in this case Pelagius and Augustine, who duke it out for control over the fate of the Catholic Church in the 5th century CE, can be reading the same texts, in this case the Christian Bible, so contrarily [*11]. I believe similar forces operate for these authors, their respective "predestination" charted generally by a combination of murky personal and professional predispositions, what Gadamer calls "preunderstanding."

Chellis Glendinning, for example, is a psychotherapist by training. So she tends to see problems as a function of largely unconscious psychological processes induced by traumatic experiences, both personal (in her case a childhood riven with incestuous rape) and cultural (the analogous rapes of Indigenous peoples by the forces of "Empire.") It is only now, in retrospect, that I am beginning to disentangle her two books, which, with all the others, tended to blur into one cosmic conversation pertinent to personal agency. *Off the Map*, for example, combines autobiography with a close examination, *a la* cultural studies, of cartography as an instrument of oppression. To the extent that it proposes a "solution" it is via a call to resistance and activism in response to imperialism. *My Name is Chellis*, written earlier, provides a more theorized context for understanding her overall project. Seen through the longest lens, the shift from a transitory (hunter-gatherer) to a sedentary (farming) lifestyle inevitably reshaped attitudes toward "land" and the way we humans occupy it, gradually skewing things toward the current conventions, with increasingly deleterious effects from her point of view. The most obvious ways to get back on a good path again—going back in time or returning to a hunter-gatherer lifestyle—are not available to us, of course, though the latter may become inevitable if we destroy "civilization as we know it" via unabated climate change. Why not, then, just give up and wait for our inevitable demise? Well, for one thing, that makes for both a sad life and a bad book. So there must be some other alternatives.

One of them is built into the personal narrative component of her argument in *Off the Map*: activism right now, where one lives, to influence policy decisions around land-rights and land-transfer issues. But the one I want to focus on here is more conceptual, derivative from

her training, i.e., finding ways to get into intimate touch with what she calls our personal "primal matrix." Here's how she describes what that is:

> People have a natural state of being. It is variously known as "being integrated," "human potential," and "merging mind, body and spirit." Taoist philosophy refers to this state as the "balance of yin and yang." To Lakota (Sioux) Indians, it is known as "walking in a sacred manner;" to the Diné (Navajo), "standing in the center of the world." I call this state of being our *primal matrix*: the state of a healthy, wholly functioning psyche in full-bodied participation with a healthy, wholly functioning Earth. (*Name,* 5**)** [*12]

Glendinning covers a lot of multi- and cross-cultural ground here, in the hopes I imagine that at least one of these potential sources for her term is familiar to the reader and can serve as a portal for understanding its nature and implications. She goes on:

> And what is this healthy state? From the perspective of the individual, it is a bodily experience, a perception of the world, and an attitude about being alive that is characterized by openness, attunement, wonder, and a willingness in the here and now to say YES to life. It is a sense of ease with who we are and fulfillment with what we do. (*Name*, 5-6)

So the primal matrix is both body and mind operating in what sounds to me much like the way Keats considers optimal. Unfortunately, her "map" for achieving this "healthy state" is almost as vague as his is.

Primal/matrix-oriented discourse extends tentacles in many directions historically and culturally: mathematical linear programming, where it organizes relationships between primal

and dual functions; analytic psychotherapy (Freudian and, especially, Jungian approaches); cognitive-behavioral psychology, especially trauma-based therapies; religious theory, including early-Modernist Christian feminism and, via the film "The Matrix," Gnosticism; Taoism; and Native American spiritualism. As you can see above, Glendinning includes most of these (except for the mathematical and Christian) in her terrain. But understanding what it means in existential terms is no simple matter, absent some background in at least one or two of these discourses and/or some profound personal experience with transcendental/liminal states of being in the world [*13].

For example, as soon as I read her definition, I instantly translated it into my own inner parlance, what I now call the "kingdom of heaven" state of mind I often enter when I walk in the forest, and lately via various smaller-scale meditative techniques I deploy to counter daily anxieties and irritations. The woods-walking version of this came first, as a mode of personal experience, a deeply felt sense of communion with trees in particular, inner and outer worlds melding into one, before I had any name for it. I've written about this copiously in all of my books, as the foundational state for almost everything I think, write and do now. Here's a passage from *waking up: reading wisdom texts* that describes one such event:

> Every walk in this place [Woodard Bay] is emotionally meaningful to me in some way: soothing, restorative, illuminating, relaxing, thought-provoking, etc. Every now and then, though, one of them is literally ecstatic, in the etymological sense of that word: I am released from "myself" and enter into a deep sense of communion with everything around me. There are no boundaries between and among us any longer. It is a wonderfully liberating

> feeling. The phrase that kept repeating in my head today was "I love you," and I couldn't tell whether it was coming from the inside-out toward the forest or outside-in toward me. They were in fact exactly the same thing. This state of mind lasted at its highest level of intensity for about fifteen minutes, then gradually settled into a more "normal" kind of grateful peace of mind. (62-63)

I have experienced this state of being from time to time for as long as I can remember, and I've had an assortment of names (or no name at all) for it along the way. It wasn't until I began to study early Christian literature—the New Testament and especially the lost gospels—with an exclusive focus on what Jesus actually said, my personal jam, that I finally chose my preferred moniker, this "kingdom of heaven" trope that both I and Jesus and many others understand is not out there, either in the remote past or the remote future, but right here and now, available at any instant for anyone when they are willing to accede to the state of "uncertainty" that transcending one's personal identity in favor of a universal one—a routine existential condition in Indigenous cultures but now so alien to modern cultures—brings into being. While my trope may have a religious ring to it, what I believe is in most of its aspects decidedly heretical in relation to Christian doctrine (as is most of what Jesus said in most "organized" denominations these days). So to me it is almost entirely absent any conventional theological connotations.

Elaine Pagels' book is a good entry point into this particular discourse for conceptualizing what having/inhabiting a "primal matrix" (she never uses that term of course) is and feels like. She is an accomplished scholar in religious history as well as an ardent

Christian, which inflects her analysis of the lost gospels, where Jesus' concept of "the Kingdom of God" (capital K and G) as a self-induced state of being is ubiquitous. My personal favorite among the lost gospels is the *Gospel of Thomas* about which I wrote in detail in *waking up*: *reading wisdom texts*. Pagels summarizes it this way:

> So, according to the *Gospel of Thomas*, Jesus ridiculed those who thought of the "Kingdom of God" in literal terms, as if it were a specific place: "If those who lead you say to you, 'Look the Kingdom is in the sky,' then the birds will arrive there before you. If they say 'It is in the sea,' then . . . the fish will arrive before you. Instead it is a state of self-discovery: . . . the Kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to yourself, then you will be known, and you will realize that you are the sons of the living Father." (128)

The inside/outside dynamic Jesus describes is crucial to the gnostic understanding of the Kingdom, as it is for me. Once the customary, taken for granted, boundaries between those two dimensions of being begin to blur, and then disappear entirely, both merging naturally and intimately, the kingdom (small k for me) is immediately at hand, as in right now, the only "place" it can ever truly exist. This is a radical departure from the way the Synoptic gospelists (Matthew, Mark, and Luke), and ultimately Church orthodoxy, define the Kingdom (capital K): in remote temporal terms, first the advent of Jesus himself as an historical person and then a futural moment of harmony and/or cataclysm.

Glendinning also mentions Taoism as a potential touchstone for understanding what the primal matrix is and does, though she doesn't say which features of Taoist thinking are most pertinent, aside from the generic yin-yang balance. One of them, from my point of view

at least, is the conception of cosmic creation, and therefore "nature," as a feminine process, foundational to the thought of Lao Tzu and Zhuangzi. Many of the lost gospels share a similar point of view. As Pagels explains:

> The *Apocolypse of Adam* . . . tells of a feminine power who wanted to conceive by herself:
>
> . . . She came to a high mountain and spent time seated there, so that she desired herself alone in order to become androgynous. She fulfilled her desire, and became pregnant from her desire. . . (54)

Along the same lines:

> Followers of Valentinus and Marcus [second century gnostics] . . . prayed to the Mother as the "mystical, eternal Silence" and to "Grace, She who is before all things," and as "incorruptible Wisdom" for insight (*gnosis*). (54)

And again, a "voice" in the *Trimorphic Protennoia* cries out: "I am androgynous. . . . I am the Womb [that gives shape] to all" (55).

The female figure as either an important or the primary human protagonist is also a common feature of gnostic narratives, as in this case, from *Authoritative Teaching*, in which "The rational soul longs to 'see with her mind, and perceive her kinsmen, and learn about her root . . . in order that she might receive what is hers . . .'", thereby enacting the most essential aspect of gnostic thinking: self-initiated seeking for the self-knowledge that is the key to entering the Kingdom (112). There are many more such examples in various gnostic texts, and the analogy to Taoist ideas is unmistakable. Several other contextual sources for Glendinning's

concept are Indigenous and Native philosophies, which also tend either partially or ardently toward matrilinear and feministic power dynamics.

It may seem a stretch to transition from such matriarchal paradigms to the dialectical thinking of Marxist and post-Marxist philosophers in the 19th century, already by then at least a couple of millennia into the toxically patriarchal cultural systems that characterize Western societies, made even more so by the 4th and 5th century formation of the Catholic Church, during the great gnostic purges, Pagels' historical wheelhouse. But she actually provides a transitional figure for me to get to Bakunin's version of a "primal matrix." As she says:

> Many gnostics, then, would have agreed in principle with Ludwig Feurerbach, the nineteenth-century psychologist [a prominent influencer for both Marx and Engels] that "theology is really anthropology". . . For gnostics, exploring the *psyche* became explicitly what it is for many people today implicitly—a religious quest. Some who seek their own interior direction, like the radical gnostics, reject religious institutions as a hindrance to their progress. (123)

And further,

> Some gnostic Christians went so far as to claim that humanity created God—and so, from its own inner potential discovered for itself the revelation of the truth. (122)

Bakunin obviously believes the first part of that statement. It is just with the effects of that process of invention that he takes issue. While Feuerbach argues that "[i]f man is to find contentment in God, he must find himself in God," Bakunin might say that "if man is to find contentment in history, he must find himself in collective relationships with others." The God-

part, from his point of view, no matter the best intentions of the practitioner, inevitably ends up creating a cohort of human god-substitutes as overseers who enslave the masses.

To the extent that Bakunin has something akin to a "primal matrix" or "kingdom of heaven" in his system, I'd have to say it is in his concept of "Liberty" (capital L), which weaves in and out of his critique as an heroic prime mover toward what he calls the "real emancipation of the proletariat" (118). As he says:

> The first word of this emancipation can be none other than "Liberty," not that political, bourgeois liberty, so much approved and recommended as the preliminary object of conquest by Marx and his adherents, but the great human liberty which, destroying all the dogmatic, metaphysical, political, and juridical fetters by which everybody today is loaded down, will give to everybody, collectives as well as individuals, full autonomy in their activities and their development, delivered once and for all from all inspectors, directors, and guardians. (118)

This is his utopia, historically possible if approached via the right path. He goes on:

> The second word of this emancipation is "Solidarity," not the Marxian solidarity from above downwards by some government or other, either by ruse or force, on the masses of the people; . . . but that solidarity which is on the contrary the confirmation and the realization of every liberty, having its origin not in any political law whatsoever, but in the inherent collective nature of man . . . (118)

That's a grand vision, the "inherent collective nature of man," a "kingdom come" of sorts. In Marx's system the "dictatorship of the proletariat" is a vague kind of utopia with which the dialectic of history will ultimately culminate. For Bakunin, a collective anarchism—an interesting paradox in its own right—can bring that about right now. The specific sort of freedom being described here—via collectivity—is different from the gnostic version, which arises from individual enterprise and strives for transcendence from both cultural binaries and externally imposed authority. Nor is it identical with Glendinning's primal matrix, which begins with self-inquiry and strives to exceed individual identity in the service of others, yes, but even more so of the natural world, a figurative ground absent in Bakunin. What he does share with both of them, times ten, is a deep distrust of any "of the vicious fictions used by the established order—an order which has profited from all the religious, metaphysical, political, juridical, economic and social infamies of all times—to brutalize and enslave the world" (136).

While Bakunin doesn't refer to Liberty as "she," the term has, quite often, taken on a feminine aspect in Western thinking. The Statue of Liberty, for example, a feminine icon commemorating the friendship between the United States and France, both of which elevate "Liberty" to a nearly transcendent status, was, by coincidence, erected not long after Bakunin's death in 1876 [*14].

As was the case above, the book most difficult to coordinate with the others in this regard is Ha Jin's account of Li Bai's life. I am quite sure it does, I just have no idea yet how. So I'll do what I normally do in situations of irresolution like this: start to write and follow the path the writing opens. I think I'll open with one of the ongoing questions I had in the back of my

mind as I read this extraordinarily detailed account of a life lived over a millennium ago: To what degree should I accede to Jin's narrative line as an accurate template and not a superimposed trope for the life of a misunderstood artist? I don't mean to question his methods or authority. He spent years culling foundational materials to create this elaborately detailed tapestry, materials I have neither the time nor the inclination, or most likely even the opportunity, to review. Jin is a fastidious, meticulous and consummate professional in that regard. This has more to do with how individual human lives are made sense of from the outside in, and the degree to which that sense accords with how they are made sense of from the inside-out.

My prior experience with Bai's work was exclusively through his poetry. He is one of my favorite poets. I had read a lot of his poems with care and enjoyment, even wrote a book of my own that is a poetic conversation between us. On that basis I concocted my own Li Bai, one with a foot clearly planted in the "heaven" he refers to repeatedly in his poems, often via the figure of the "star river," the Milky Way. Jin focuses more on his other foot, planted firmly in the "real world" of professional ambition, marriage, family, etc., all of which has the stereotypically troubled aspect that characterizes so many human lives when viewed in retrospect. As I explained above, Jin overlays a distinct pattern over Bai's life, one with many consecutive iterations: He works his way into a relationship or situation that might lead to his desired goal—a position or commission in the hierarchy of power in his moment—then either by arrogance or bad judgement or the built-in duplicity of the social order or simply the vanity and stupidity of those empowered to facilitate his advancement, it all comes a cropper.

My Bai's lifeline, built up on the basis of his poetry, seemed both much less orderly in its sequences and much more consistent emotionally. He had such a deep relationship with the natural world, for example, the material source for his imagery, a "primal matrix" of the highest order, inside and outside merging in the most heartfelt ways. He is, yes, afflicted by loss, but more often the kind that arises from love than from ambition. To me, he had a genius not for the exaggerated display that might advance a career but for creating intimate images that almost anyone can relate to (though Jin makes clear he did a lot of the former as well) [*15].

So which of these is more accurate? Well, of course, both are essential for understanding who Bai was and where he placed his "faith." And there may be many other angles of entry as well. Every human life, no matter how far "off the grid" it is lived—and Bai was eternally in motion, chronically itinerant, always seeking his next opportunity, until his final years, spent in contemplative seclusion—still takes place in this world, locked intimately into the fabric of its particular historical moment and its particular cultural context. It seems that Bai had his feet equally balanced between the diurnal scrum of power politics and the eternal "heaven" of his imagination, both of which he experienced on a grand scale, the former as a series of chronic failures, the latter as an array of spectacular successes, at least in his after-life. His most famous poem is short, simple, and incomparably beautiful, one that Chinese children learn in elementary school, written in a moment of great despair, "ill," "destitute," "stranded," about to be evicted from his room, unable to contact a friend for help. As Jin explains, "One night, unable to sleep he watched the moonlit sky out the window [some

commentators believe he was actually inclined on a chaise longue outdoors at the time] for a long time and composed this poem:

Moonlight spreads before my bed.

I wonder if it's hoarfrost on the ground.

I raise my head to watch the moon

And lowering it, I think of home." (67)

The moon, the dazzling ground, the head lifted up and then down, heaven and earth together, here and home, now and then, one "foot" in each realm, perfectly balanced in four lines. The poem may sound kind of bland translated into English, which stretches images into phrases and sentences. In Chinese, each line has five characters, spoken with single strong syllables, sounding more like beating a drum than the phrasings of a piccolo. Magnificent.

So where does this get me in this argument? Well, for one thing, I'd say if you want to know what anyone's "primal matrix" might be, listen to what they say/write closely and carefully. It will reveal itself in time. For those already passed, there are only the documents they leave behind, breadcrumb trails to follow carefully, hopefully. Poetry happens to be the literary genre best suited for rendering that aspect of human experience, the primal matrix part, a great gift to a biographer. Jin quotes and comments on a lot of poems in his book. But given his genre here, they become either illustrations for or evidence in support of the overriding narrative line that he prefers for organizing sequences in Bai's life. I wish he had read the poems more intimately, trusted them more than what others had to say about Bai. But that is not his job; it is mine.

Not surprisingly, Bai's poetry was considerably undervalued during his own time. He was justifiably frustrated by this reception, a not uncommon experience for great artists. Jin recounts one particular example of this, his encounter with a popular poetry anthology compiled by an influential Tang dynasty critic, Yin Fan, a two-volume set available for study to this day. Bai was "pleased to find himself included . . ., but was disconcerted to see his thirteen poems outnumbered" by poets he considered much inferior. "Worse still, in the commentary Yin remarked on Li Bai's work with reservations, saying 'Like his personality lacking in restraint, his style is self-indulgent . . .'" Bai's abundant ego resented this dismissive gesture. Until "he noticed that his friend Du Fu was not in the anthology at all" (250-1). Du Fu, whose reputation has matched Bai's in the meantime, was almost entirely ignored in his time. And, not surprisingly, he left a similar trail of failures in his attempts to procure a professional appointment.

That's one thread of my thinking about this: the chronic incapacity of human society to recognize artistic greatness in its own time, a parsimony rooted in the general resistance to rewarding the foot planted in "heaven" (always a threat to the status quo) instead of the one planted on "earth." Some radical poets, like William Blake and Walt Whitman persist and survive with modest recognition. Others, like Emily Dickinson and H.D. remain either entirely invisible or way under the radar during their own lifetimes. There are exceptions of course, like William Wordsworth or T.S. Eliot. But there are many nameless others, I'm sure, who never achieve any acclaim at all either in their own time or in our "histories."

The other has to do with the conundrum I allude to above: the almost inevitable friction that characterizes a lived life, one's personal desires or ambitions abrading against the

cultural norms of the immediate historical/cultural/social moment. For most, the latter wears down the former until it fits, personal vision meshing with established norms, leading to success, even fame, or just to normalcy, a settling into relative comfort. For creative figures generally out-of-kilter with their historical moment, the former grinds away at the latter, leading to frustration, even duress. The interesting thing to me about Li Bai, especially if I add my poetry-based narrative line to Jin's, is that he lived on both sides of this frictional surface: penalized while he lived, apotheosized only after he died, an irresistible force straining always against an immovable object, until, with his passing, there was only one foot left planted, the one in the heaven of his poems.

Immediately after the passage I quote in section (1), about Bai being caught between two incommensurable worlds and thereby feeling he had wasted his life, Jin says:

> However, Bai's conflicting pursuits stemmed from the same thing: his awareness of his limited life span as a human being. Wealth and fame would maximize his experiences, while Daoism was a way to extend his time on earth. Both of his pursuits produced only pain and loneliness. (285)

I'd add to that last sentence that they also produced poetry of the highest order, which became, in my view, the means by which he entered an entirely different kind of "heaven," one that surpasses the "pain and loneliness" Jin proposes. And this is my connection, via his poetic "heaven," to the "kingdom of heaven," to the "primal matrix," and to the most precious sort of "Liberty" one can find in a world that both celebrates it (occasionally) and undermines it (always).

All of this is simply to say that there are many routes available to rise above the infernal oppressions of our historical moment. What these authors share in common is a profound and hard-earned distrust for externally imposed, state-sponsored orthodoxies (in relation imperialistic ambitions, priestly elites, or autocratic political dynasties) designed to enforce social order at the expense of the "masses" (whether Native inhabitants, churchgoers, workers, poets, or "thinking" folks just trying to get by.)

4.

December 2, 2023

I had such a wonderful walk this morning, down the hill from my house along the narrow, mazy streets and lanes of Olympia's Eastside to and then along the boardwalk that wraps around Budd Bay downtown, a three-mile circuit that takes me about an hour now, including multiple stops to take photos of whatever along the way happens to catch my attention or take my breath away [*16]. I have a number of pleasant chores to do today, each at a specific time, and on days like this, when I don't have (or I don't want to take) the time to drive to one of my preferred woodland sites, this walk downtown and along the water is my back-up plan, a comparable alternative to the woods, equally calming and restorative I found out during the pandemic when the woods got crowded with "tree-tourists" and the town emptied out enough to provide the kind of solitary stroll I prefer.

Olympia is farther north than any place I've lived before, so the daylight portion of these late-fall days becomes more and more abbreviated, 8+ hours a day this time of year. I

don't necessarily mind darkness, temperamentally, but I prefer light, especially bright sunlight, and find myself craving that more and more as the years pass. Summertime here is idyllic in that respect, weeks and weeks of pristinely sunny days that seem unending, earth leaning toward the sun, the opposite aspect of northerliness in relation to daylight. By contrast, when the earth tips back, fall and winter days tend more and more toward the gray, many mornings a high ceiling of sun-blurring clouds just sitting there, sometimes amplified by dense ground-level fog. This murkiness can last until mid-late morning or even early afternoon. Today the sun was out in all its glory from the get-go, radiant, exhilarating. The sky was light blue, wall to wall, with the now waning moon, halfway to "new," floating like a semicircular slice of ice, brilliantly backlit in a perfectly still sea. At the "shore" of this blue sea, just above the Olympia skyline, huge mounds of curvaceous cumulous clouds rested, as if a vast range of rolling ridges, peaks rounded off with deep layers of new snow, had come to rest on the rooftops, their shapeliness mesmerizing, seeming to float weightlessly on the hardscapes they highlighted.

I was thinking again while I walked, full of inner peace, self-possessed, about what makes human beings inordinately vulnerable to relinquishing their agency to outside forces. The obvious answer is fear, of course, which is why politicians, the church and the media are so adept at deploying it. This can range anywhere from a chronic low-grade anxiety, the kind weather reporters use, for example, to keep us coming back for weather updates, a sort of mild addiction; to the kind of mania politicians and news media seek to induce, highlighting the horror *du jour*: one of the many ongoing wars, literal or cultural; the most recent mass-murder, daily occurrences now in our gun-drenched society; the stultifying in-fighting in

Congress; or, if nothing else pops up to steal the show, some Trump-related tidbit to elicit squeals from both sides of the current divide by picking at wounds that never heal.

I began to realize how this control mechanism functioned some time in the 90s, at the lower end of the scale, watching the local weather report in Pittsburgh, which was delivered back then, every day, every time, from "The Severe Weather Center," as if severity was an eternal condition for the weather. One night the reporter concluded his spiel with something like this: "The Severe Weather forecast is sunny and mild, temperature in the 70s, for the next several days." The absurdity of the prediction was built into that sentence: You may think it will nice today, but that is at best temporary, perhaps even a delusion, because the threat of severity is imminent. So keep coming back—the primary goal of most TV media, way more important than matter-of-fact reporting—and we'll keep you safely informed. I realized the efficacy of that strategy because I was watching weather reports multiple times a day, even on the nicest days, a deleterious addiction to be sure. I stopped watching those reports, and local news generally, that very day, going "cold turkey," preferring simply to look out a window or step out my door. [*17].

I began to realize how this mechanism functioned in the mid-range of the scale during the Bush (#2) presidency, all personified by Dick Cheney, the functional president during those years. He was masterful at using fear to assert control, including over George Bush, who was advised to tell us to stock up on duct tape, for example, to protect our indoor space from a terror attack. That was, for me, the moment that ripped away the curtain, revealing the clown behind. And the moment I started thinking in earnest about fear as a lever of power. In short, if you keep someone in state of constant anxiety, with the promise, forever withheld,

that you have the means to relieve it—from duct tape to a couple of unwarranted wars—they will be at your mercy, not just willing but eager to duck down the rabbit hole you proffer (and duct tape yourself in) for the illusion of safety. The solution, of course, is not to be or become afraid, which is way harder to do than it sounds. And it begins by realizing that those who deploy fear as an instrument of control are not trustworthy leaders, full of truth. They are very dangerous clowns: liars, grifters, and crooks with despotic ambitions [*18].

At the far end of the spectrum, in relation to terror, that is especially hard to do. The mania that gripped our nation after 9/11, or that grips Israel right now, are good examples. When such conditions arise, I try to remind myself that I have lived my whole life under the threat of global nuclear annihilation. I had to come to terms with that fear as I kid, and I did. The various forms of "duct tape" made *de rigueur* back then—hide under a desk at school, store some water bottles in your basement—seemed utterly ludicrous to me. We lived 130 miles from New York City. Any nuclear attack would either obliterate us immediately or doom us to death from fallout. Even a child could see that. I recall now having many dreams in which I was standing at the tiny window in our basement looking out in the direction of NYC waiting for the mushroom clouds to rise up. When they did, they appeared majestic to me, harbingers of death, yes, but at the same time mesmerizingly beautiful. And I was no longer afraid. Fearsome things happen routinely both in the world and in individual lives. Death is not the worst of them. Acceding to their inevitability transforms a dysfunctional fear, which leads to a relinquishment of agency, into a functional one, which inspires courage. That latter may seem a stretch to you. If so, you haven't yet learned how to inhabit fear in a functional way.

To get there, one has to restore a feeling of self-possession in the heat of the moment, when things inside seem to be falling apart. And the best way to start is with small things. This past week, for example, has been an anxious one for me, for many reasons and no reason at all for it, the way these fritzy states of mind come and go in a rhythm, if not for everyone at least for me. Sometimes all it will take to settle them is a morning like this, sunlight, moon, clouds, a walk by the water. One of the terms I've been playing with to try to make shifts like this more intentional and predictable is "disengage." It came to me spontaneously while I was Zooming with a friend, trying to describe how I'm now coping with social moments that irritate or sadden me, leaving me slightly discombobulated, most of them arising from my sense (whether accurate or self-generated) of being ignored, misread or misunderstood for no reason except the inattention of my interlocutor(s). The practice I've recently initiated, once I recognize one of these fleetingly deleterious disconnects beginning to take hold, is simply to turn my head away and aside, usually to the right, looking afar or down. I might look out a window at a tree or focus on a water glass on the table, pretty much anything that distracts my attention toward something substantial and right in front of me in a way I find momentarily mesmerizing. Like instant meditation in a sense. Somehow, this lets my hard drive restart, resetting my mood, and I can go back to the conversation much-mellowed.

I recalled on my walk today the first time this technique revealed itself to me, quite suddenly and accidentally, an event I recorded in *This Fall: essays on loss and recovery* this way:

> A few years ago Carol and I met a friend of ours at a restaurant downtown, someone dealing with a traumatic loss at the time. I was sitting across the

> table from her. Her reddened face looked like it was in an invisible vise, which was squeezing out tears a few at a time, an agony in the eyes. It brought tears to my eyes to witness that much pain. I glanced to my left just then and saw a young couple striding by outside the window, just inches from my face, laughing, happy. I turned back to the scene in front of me. I made no value judgments one way or another about any of this. What I realized, and decided to remember, was that these two realities, seemingly so opposite, so remote, from one another, are pretty much always just like that. Whichever one you're looking at, the other is right there in the corner of your eye, a few inches aside, that nearby. Thereafter, whenever I have found myself sinking into, being sucked into, a deep muck, I just look askance for a second or two. The other world, the rest of the world, is always there, walking by. (132)

Yes, that other placid, happy, world is right there all the time, right next to me, if I'm able to overcome the gravity that keeps my head focused on the upsetting one directly in front of me. What I've been doing lately is like that, except for much smaller moments. I look aside and right there a material world, completely outside of the social world I'm angsting about, is standing ready to astonish and relax me! That's what I now call disengagement. It is different from more traditional terms like detachment, *a la* Buddhist meditation, which strives to replace something with next-to-nothing. To disengage is simply to replace something upsetting with something else that is vivid, real, capable of occupying all of my attention, enough so that I forget what was bothering me before I turned my head.

Once I realized the efficacy of this simple shift of attention, I turned it toward less obviously social situations which affect me in a similar way, activating my native anxieties around external validation. My Instagram page is a good example. For almost a year now, I've been putting up roughly two posts a week that combine photos I take on my walks with bits of what I call "my tiny poems," most often with a musical soundtrack, and lately with an epigraph from a "wisdom text" my tiny poem responds to conversationally. It is like assembling a complex puzzle when you don't have the finished image to guide the process. In other words, it takes some work, which is quite pleasant when inspired from the inside-out, serendipitous moments of genuine invention; and quite unpleasant when it feels forced from the outside in, the need to keep up with a schedule or appeal to an imagined audience, gaining those precious "likes," which has been more and more the case lately.

It seemed like every time I opened my site I felt a little anxious as I waited to see evidence of reception, followed most often by disappointment at its paucity. This emotional dynamic was, I knew even as I repeated it, dysfunctional and stupid. I wanted to put a stop to it. So a couple of weeks ago I decided to disengage from that process, too, let it rest for a while. I'm not making new posts and I'm not looking at my site. This interlude has been so enjoyable to me, more so than I could have predicted. I may never go back to creating new posts, or I may in a few weeks or months. But if it's the latter, the work will look and feel quite different in ways I can't yet begin to imagine, and my reaction to the responses, or lack thereof, will be different, too [*19].

These may seem like trivial things compared to Dick Cheney or nuclear war. But at the root of all of them, small to big, is an addiction-based response that is typically human: We

feel anxiety or fear, which releases a soup of fight/flight chemicals that puts us on high alert. If we keep doing it persistently, that chemical-induced high becomes a chronic state of body/mind. The human organism is not designed to sustain itself long-term under such conditions. How do I know that? I lived in such a state relatively unconsciously for a couple of years—for what seemed like good reasons at the time—before what I called, in retrospect, my nervous breakdown (no medical professional ever used that term, preferring to localize an array of symptoms via their own parlance), in the early 90s. It took me a few years to recover from that. The main thing I learned from it was simple: Don't do that again! Maybe I could have sustained myself longer if I had found a conspiracy theory or cult that provided a "story" to explain why I felt that way and promised some futural relief. Given what I feared, that was not possible. I am so grateful for that. Otherwise I might now be among the many dotty, doddering Boomers lost down one of the ridiculous rabbit-holes dotting the landscape in contemporary America instead of reading and writing about a stack of really interesting books piled by my bedside.

After I got back from my walk I did my first scheduled chore for the day, a visit to the Olympia Farmers Market, a highlight of my Saturday mornings. Most often my daughter Bridget arrives just as I do—not because we necessarily timed it, but because we operate on similar inner-clocks. She is one of the few people in this world who actually "gets" me in that respect, the cross-generational brilliance of genetic coding. There is not a lot of fresh produce for sale now, of course. Mostly root and leafy vegetables. So I buy what I need of that. The rest of the stalls are occupied by local craftspeople making baked goods, chocolate, tea mixes,

vinegars, ceramics, carved wood pieces, fabric art, bath salts, etc., Christmas-gifty stuff, I mean. Very festive. Today I splurged on a beautiful wreath for my front door.

I'm sure you could care less about the minutiae of all this. But I feel warranted to keep it here as evidence for the salutary effects of disengagement, which relieves any temptation to become captivated by those tiny, personal "conspiracy theories" that arise in the moment when we try to fathom someone else's unexpressed intentions, usually weaving them into some longstanding and entirely private psychological drama that has been going on for a lifetime, one we are barely aware of, if at all, instead of just conceding to the inevitable mysteries that regulate human communication, inflected as it is not only by the same kind of largely unconscious dramas ongoing in our interlocutor's head, but also by the slipperiness of language itself, which never renders anything fully and truly, in all its dimensions, no matter our proficiency with it. When I am able to short-circuit my "fritziness" via "disengagement" even the blandest or most aggravating moments become magical.

5.

Which gets me to the final point I want to make about all of this: how that "slipperiness of language" takes on a more sinister aspect in a cultural moment like ours, already off the rails, not just in relation to conspiracy theories or cults, which use language to alienate followers from any reality that resides outside of language, but in the political arena and news media. Right, left, no matter, it is all a sort of Orwellian trance that keeps us riveted on whatever the daily drama happens to be, agitated and disempowered all at once, waiting for

the news-cycle to click over to tomorrow, hopeful it will be less horrifying, though it never is or can be given the obsessive need for both politicians and the media to keep our attention riveted on this reiterating car crash on the other side of the freeway, *ad infinitum,* until we lose control ourselves, look for the next exit ramp to Rabbit-Hole City where we can pick one to duck into.

. . .

About two weeks ago three college presidents from among the most elite universities in America—Penn, Harvard, and MIT—testified before Congress with what are now notorious, even disastrous, consequences. Two have since resigned, the other is hanging on precariously. How could such a thing happen? Well, there is no way for me to explain it outside the parameters of this matter of conspiracy theories and cults. On one side was the primary Congressional interrogator, Elise Stefanik, the formerly moderate New York congresswoman who rebranded as MAGA during Donald Trump's presidency. She was clearly primed for a stereotypical far-right kneecapping moment, asking each president in sequence: "Does calling for the genocide of Jews violate [your college's] rules or code of conduct on bullying and harassment?"—a simple question that each president answered tentatively and seemingly evasively.

All Stefanik wanted, or would accept, was a yes/no answer, and it would seem then, on balance, that the most appropriate answer would be, simply, yes, as a form of dangerous or threatening hate speech, for example. Case closed. My question is not why Stefanik behaved as she did. She is simply playing to her type: a right-wing ideologue more interested in scoring points with her "base" and getting publicity than solving problems. My question is why these

very highly educated and intelligent young leaders were not prepared for this kind of a bushwhacking, or why in the moment, they weren't clever enough to see that just saying "yes" was the only way out of an otherwise unavoidable abyss of cultural lunacy. Some have suggested that they may have spent too much of their prep time with university lawyers, borrowing their "slippery" discourse for their talking-points. I think it's more complicated than that.

I have to go back some distance, to the 1970s, to get on the runway toward my answer. I started graduate school in the early 70s. All of my preparation, or if you prefer an insider term, "formation," as a critical reader beforehand, from grade school through college, was under the terms of the Modernist agenda, which fetishized text-based reading practices, a very specific kind of "close reading" that expressly, by definition, must set aside the autobiographical predilections of the author and the reader. At that historical moment a dramatic sea change was taking place in relation to critical ideology in the culture at large; emergent was what would very shortly come to be called "postmodernism" most broadly, or, even more specifically, gesturing to its roots in French philosophy and theory, "poststructuralism" and "deconstructionism," et al., all of which shift the balance to the reader-side of the interpretive equation. Those monikers are widely recognized now, if not very well understood at the level of practice. They were not, for me and my generation, in the early 70s, when Michel Foucault's work first entered the American academy via translation. And shortly thereafter, Jacques Derrida's.

I realized very quickly that I was not well-prepared, via my deeply ensconced critical habits, to succeed in this new marketplace of ideas, that I would need what was called back

then a “retooling.” Big time. As in recognizing how and why everything that had been taken for granted about literary-critical reading practices for two generations—ever since the rise of the New Criticism, a weirdly indigenous American expression of the text-valorizing approaches that evolved first among post-WWI British scholars and poets, at least some of whom, like Ezra Pound, T.S Eliot, and Hilda Doolittle, were American ex-patriots—was now outmoded. All of a sudden, this array of now-new approaches, radically reader-based, anathema to the New Criticism, were all the rage [*20]. The old order collapsed suddenly and completely, as old orders always do when mutually irreconcilable systems collide at volatile historical moments, the new vanquishing the old. And no moment in my lifetime was more volatile than that one, the established social order coming apart at the seams in America’s streets: race, gender, sexual identity and class being renegotiated down to the ground. Changing our preferred ways of reading was significant, but hardly the most urgent concern at that moment.

Like the rest of my cohort seeking to “professionalize” ourselves in durable ways, I set about retooling myself with a vengeance. I had an easier time than most, I suppose, because I already believed that the extant critical ideology was backward and bankrupt, unsuited to my instinctive preferences. So I was happy to welcome an alternative powerful enough to demolish it, even as I found it comparably self-aggrandizing in its ambitions, similarly unsuited to my preferences. The fact of the matter, I knew, was that if I wanted a career in my field, I would have to become adept with these new instruments.

The most salutary side-effect of this transition—the new one now in place, the old one still there, as all “first” systems are, though “under erasure”—was my immediate recognition that all critical systems, and therefore all ideological systems, were historically contingent,

intrinsically local, relatively short-lived (a couple of generations in this case), and quite arbitrary, the winners among the several contestants during those relatively brief windows of cultural collapse—like the post-WWI era, when modernism took command, and the post-Vietnam war era, when postmodernism replaced it— where foundational change not only becomes possible but inevitable.

The internal mechanics of this are quite simple: When one's deeply held belief system falls apart and must be replaced, one understands down to the bones the fundamental duplicity of ideology, the way a divorce or getting fired alters one's sense of the inviolability of established cultural contracts forever. They are no longer eternal verities—which is how they announce themselves—but paper tigers, really, there and gone once the next match is lit. In other words, they feel in those interims very much like the "cults" I am trying to write about here, ardently supported to the preclusion of alternatives. Until something comes along to wake everyone up again, something that will thereafter be recognized by those in the throes of change as another cult, perhaps a preferable one. And that, once fully ensconced, will not be recognized as such by anyone. Just the way things are, should be, and always will be.

The next-and-new alternative in my critical reading scenario was in that regard, I knew, exactly the same as the one it was working to replace: It would be there for a while and then be dismantled by the next powerful alternative already "slouch[ing] towards Bethlehem to be born," as Yeats says in "The Second Coming." Oddly, given my anti-authoritarian bent and addiction to change, both of which are temperamental, instead of vesting myself deeply in what was being proffered, I was already eagerly awaiting its demise, couldn't wait for it, really, even as I understood I would have to become proficient with this now-dominant currency of

the moment, and I did do that quite successfully. In other words, I could use it, but I could also see its future-fatal flaws.

A problem, though, arises for those indoctrinated during the second generation of such a movement. Their formations, from grade school on, have been univocal in critical terms, as mine was in the 50s and 60s. This now fully established orthodoxy is singular, unitary, without competition; so it will be received unquestioningly. There is simply no competitor on the scene, or even the horizon, to challenge it. All of the college presidents testifying before Congress last week were “formed” in this second generation of the postmodernist era. And their answers were couched in that discourse, one immediately legible to an insider; but sounding ludicrous to someone operating in the framework of an entirely different “cult,” like MAGA politics.

This is not to say that right wing politicians are entirely ignorant of the critical systems that regulate life in the American academy. Their weaponization of the discourse of those systems—stigmatizing "woke,” for example, which arose initially as an honorific term—is evidence of that. They simply operate from a different one. It may not be very sophisticated in philosophical terms—they haven’t read any of the foundational material that generated the system or its discourses—but it is quite powerful in ideological terms, which is why we now call these skirmishes “culture wars.” The moments in the congressional hearing that were career-altering for those three college presidents occurred in exactly this sort of a cauldron. And I believe they were unprepared for them precisely because they could not yet fully imagine that a frontal challenge of this simplistic sort could gain such purchase.

One can blame arrogance for that, of course. But I blame generational luck, bad or good, depending on your perspective. Anyone who experienced the destabilization of their inner compass as I did 50 years ago, would not just be prepared for but would fully anticipate exactly the sort of ambush that Stefanik had planned. And would have answered "yes, it is a form of hate speech that is threatening and dangerous," which might at least deflect, perhaps even defuse the explosive argument the question was expressly designed to set off.

This highlights one of the other effects of the postmodernist emphasis on discourse and the relativism of readerly responses it promoted [*21]. If the only realities are discursive, language can easily be dissociated from the "truths" that come before it (the experience and observations that produce verifiable facts, evidence, etc.) or after it (action and the presumption that one will live up to one's "word.") I have railed against this unintended side-effect repeatedly. It actually created the conditions for the current fetishes for alternate facts, gaslighting, witch hunting, fake news and outright lies that we basically take for granted as foundational to our public discourse. Those things would be, and were, considered intolerable offenses in the context of modernist systems, which is why Richard Nixon was forced to resign for much less egregious offenses than Donald Trump, who may well be reelected! In fact, I believe there would be no MAGA movement right now were it not for postmodernist critical ideologies, which laid the foundation for these ongoing sacrifices of truth to power. Their versions are of course bastardized mis- or non-readings of the originals. But so few, outside the academy, have read the originals that they can't be challenged in a way that even makes sense to them.

Those who *have* read them must find ways, now more than ever, to fight back; in this case, for example, before not after the forced resignations, while there is still a recognized position of authority to speak from, as these three might have, both individually and collectively, once they realized their fates were sealed, by calling out the tacit misogyny (why only female presidents?) and racism (one of whom is black?) that were baked into the proceedings, even alluding to those among Stefanik's "posse" who deploy anti-Semitic, Islamophobic, and even genocide-endorsing discourse, some expressly, more often of the dog-whistle variety, including Stefanik's chief "handler" Donald Trump—and then later, at the institutional level, by standing ground in the face of such bear-baiting tactics. And it would be a good opportunity to call attention to the denotative difference between characterizing one of these apparently correlative modes of hate speech as "anti," i.e., oppositional, and the other as "phobic," i.e., fear-based, a "slipperiness of language" with significant implications and consequences. These are not moments for knuckling under to bullies; they are the "Have you no sense of decency" moments that finally brought Joe McCarthy's equally self-aggrandizing campaign against good people back in the 50s to a grinding halt.

That none of these presidents, nor the universities they served, were able to do this says something about the dire state of the "idea of the university" in the American culture right now. Again, I had to ask myself, how could something like this happen? And once again, I have to go back a ways to get on the runway toward an answer: I worked in a wide range of university cultures for almost 50 years, starting in the early 70s when innovative new programs and institutions began to pop up and prosper, state support for public education was impactful, and a teaching-nourished vision of what higher education could do and was for

flourished, all fruits of the radical reform that spread across the wider society in the late-60s. Within a decade, the historically conservative nature of the American university as a cultural institution reasserted itself and gradually clawed back the status-related powers it had lost in this moment of creative vibrancy. By the mid-1990s, that battle was over, a top-down corporate model having reshaped higher education in fundamental ways, especially in R1 universities, which, not coincidentally, ushered in the era of bank-financed student debt that now encumbers so many college graduates.

Where I worked, the administrative cadre expanded dramatically as the teaching cadre contracted, more and more tenure-stream positions transitioning to part-time and adjunct lines. The authority that faculty once shared collaboratively in governance matters was significantly diminished and power was translated to the upper echelons, as it is in all "organized" capitalist institutions, religious, political or corporate. At the same time, the teaching/research binary became more and more skewed toward the latter—where I worked with the enthusiastic support of the most elite faculty, who promoted a book-fetishistic approach to publication and demeaned teaching as a (p)raise-worthy credential. It is time to begin to reverse that dysfunctional trend, to recover some idea of "the good" in our idea of the university, where the "primal matrix" should not be in the board room but in the classroom. Period.

I don't think right wing politicians and pundits have any idea how much they owe to the "elite" academic culture they take such pleasure in skewering. Without the latter, none of the former would have their ground to stand on; or more accurately, they would have to find some real ground to stand on, one where words were still connected to meanings and

consequences. It's not that one is a cult and one isn't. They both are. As is every other ideological system that seizes the public imagination and exiles all competitors via whatever is the currently acceptable mechanism for enforcing heresies to aggregate power. The academic culture does this quite as well as popular culture does. It just sounds a lot fancier as it goes about it. The proper response is not another cult, but actual thinking.

I've tried along the way here not to delimit too much what actual thinking might look like, which will be different for everyone, one of the wonderful truths about personal agency: As long as you keep it, you retain the authority to define what it means both for what you say and what you intend to do with what you say. There are many different ways to characterize what words "mean." In the current political and social media arenas there is a tendency, as I say above, toward dismissing even the most egregious verbal affronts as "just language," therefore inconsequential. Lindsey Graham did exactly that yesterday, in exactly those terms, as he poo-pooed the idea that Donald Trump's reference to immigrants "poisoning the blood of our country," a direct draw from Adolph Hitler's hit list, was offensive. His advice was not to listen to the words but "to get it right," which in this case could mean many things, all of them bad.

This disregard for the importance of one's words is so chronic we hardly blink at such an outlandish excuse for them. The antidote is one I've noted repeatedly over the years: behaving routinely as if our words are promissory, encapsulated in the everyday phrase I prefer: "keeping one's word." This phrase elevates the concept of "word" from an externally inherited ideological gesture to an internally generated ethical imperative, one that presumes the connection I mentioned earlier between experience and wisdom, with language not as the

end but the means to get from one to the other, a way of thinking that has become so dissociated from public discourse as a precondition that someone like Lindsey Graham actually sounds reasonable to some while he "White-washes" this frightening fascist trope.

I've tried in this essay to enact a way of reading that breaks through the invisible walls that tend to separate, via literal "covers," one book from another—a de-siloed way of reading in other words, to use another word from "systems" discourse, one that seeks to find common ground rather than to highlight difference. On a small scale, this promotes a broadly metaphoric habit of thinking that looks for connections where none were necessarily intended, as in the case of my five books, or where they were intentionally obfuscated, as in the case of Lindsay Graham's comment.

Siloed reading has many benefits, of course, and I don't mean to dismiss them. But in a cultural moment, like ours, that fosters cultish thinking—in relatively innocuous ways sometimes, from the self-help industry, which promotes competition among approaches, often leading readers on an endless, unhelpful merry-go-round ride from one to another to another, to the more insidious forms of dogmatic ideology that have instigated, on the political side, the slow-motion civil war we are now enduring in our country or, on the religious side, anything from random acts of terroristic violence to outright genocide, all in the name of spiritual movements designed to promote peace—developing this habit of mind, this way of thinking, is especially crucial, for our own personal sanity at least, and, perhaps, for creating communities capable of functioning collaboratively. More broadly, I believe it can help to restore some semblance of integrity between language and meaning, which, for me, arises inevitably when I say what I mean with care and mean what I say with care, which sounds like

a cartoon version of Doctor Suess's elephant, I know. But that cartoon is way smarter in every respect than whatever one was playing in Lindsey Graham's head when he opened his mouth to speak yesterday.

Something utterly unpredictable became visible to me when these five books coalesced into one, simply by reading at a systems level, what my dream told me to call quantum reading. From that vantage point, each of these authors' problem/solution paradigms becomes one potentially legitimate alternative among many, instead of the only viable one. And I can enjoy a condition of intellectual liminality that makes it impossible to devote myself utterly to any singular -ism, a frame of mind that then makes all the available -isms visible as alternative options, that insists on personal agency and not externally imposed orthodoxy as the only real guide toward crafting a preferred position, which is not precluded by that multiplicity but actually becomes possible because of it.

That is its beauty not its deficit. That is the beauty not the deficit of liminality. That is the beauty not the deficit of mystery. While there may be nothing that is ever The Absolute Truth, there are many, many things that are absolutely stupid. Culling those off makes it possible to approach along a tangent some potentially true things. Avoiding concessions to the stupid may seem like a pyrrhic victory when what you want is a "story," a narrative live, some "consecutive reasoning" that removes all ambiguity, that answers all questions. But it is way better than running scared down the nearest rabbit hole from which there will be no exit.

This is the final stanza of John Keats' famous bit of "reading" in the British Museum, his "Ode on a Grecian Urn:"

O Attic shape! fair attitude! with brede

Of marble men and maidens overwrought,

With forest branches and the trodden weed;

Thou, silent form! dost tease us out of thought

As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!

When old age shall this generation waste,

Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe

Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,

'Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.'

https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44477/ode-on-a-grecian-urn

Thinking (which is always moving, "as doth eternity") teases us out of thought (which is fixed, like the "marble men and maidens overwrought"—in both of its senses.) When our generation has passed, with all of its preferred explanations for how and why we ended up in such a mess, there will be another and another "in the midst of other woe," each seeking their own explanations. Truth and Beauty, paired here, like many comparable other such pairs, are in perfect quantum balance in Keats' imagination, his ultimate mystery. I like it, as I do many comparable others, but even at my age I haven't yet settled on the one I want to finalize. Which is where I began and where I want to end, in a quantum ambivalence that captures the enigma of life in this universe. Always.

Afterword

The original title of this piece—"Off the Rails"—was, as I said at the outset, not quite right for what I was trying to get at here, implying that there is a set of "right" rails that keeps us "on track," and that going off them is the problem. It's much more complicated than that. So I'm going to return to that metaphor briefly here to make one final point. In fact, I would say, the set of conventional rails we inherit thoughtlessly simply by being born in a specific time and place, while it may be comfortable, will never lead to "actual thinking." Nor is going off them the solution. There are always rails. The only question is whether we will lay our own or rely on others, whether respected authorities to help us with the work or unscrupulous con-artists to do it for us.

Finding a set of rails that suits one's personal values and temperament does, yes, require getting off the rails inherited from family, church, school, workplace, nation, etc., the standard tropes that cultural systems use as modes of indoctrination. At least for a while. That's why many Catholics, even devout ones, spend some time in a "lapsed" phase along the way. Once one is off those rails, the real work, the work of a lifetime, can begin, what I have generically named as "actual thinking," which requires all those things I mentioned: work, research, fact-checking, new-knowledge-formation, time, and reading. At some point, going back to one's original rails is a legitimate option, of course, sometimes a good one. See Descartes for example. As is cobbling together a completely unique one, my own preference.

During that interim, while one is off one set of rails and hasn't quite found or laid down another, as I was in graduate school back in the 70s, a chronic state of irresolution is inevitable. I happen to like such states, as most poets do. For others, they incite the

intolerable anxiety Naomi Klein indexes, and looking for a quick exit, the rabbit hole, becomes pressing. Resisting that anxiety long enough to make a considered choice is important, to avoid being victimized by a set of externally imposed rails that is even worse, another array of equally off-the-shelf cultural tropes, for example; or worst of all, one of those conspiracy theories and cults I allude to generally here. I was lucky to learn very early on not just to tolerate but to enjoy irresolution, to experience it as generative, creative, which over time allowed me to access the "systems-level" I talk about, from which I could view all the lower levels of rails I left behind or encountered along the way with equanimity, searching for what they share in common, as in the case of my stacked reading experience this month.

Chellis Glendinning, the gnostic gospelists, Mikhail Bakunin, and Li Bai (especially late in his life, once he chose his preferred "heaven") are afflicted by the same concerns you and I are: Things are not right. And none of them is necessarily wrong about how or why we ended up in such a mess, nor is any "solution" they proffer necessarily preferable. There are hundreds, thousands of other complainants scattered across history with similar tales to woe. None of them is necessarily wrong, either. Human civilization went off the rails forever ago—which is why we have imagined so many different Edenic paradises from which we have "fallen"—and did again today while we weren't yet looking. No matter. We need to think to find any path forward from these otherwise dead-end moments. Reading provocative, well-written books, whether five or five thousand, trying to decipher some true things they might share in common, is among the ways we are still fortunate to have for doing that—despite the many book-burnings, -buryings and -bannings our civilization has endured—truth and beauty pulsing in quantum superposition across human history, then and now, there and here,

separate and the same, one with many, many into one, waiting patiently for us to find our own personal moments of synchronicity. That may not be all we know on earth, or all we need to know, but it's one of the best ways I know of to exercise my personal agency and, if I'm lucky, to learn some new ways to fight back. I highly recommend it.

Asides

Aside1: I'm now addicted to this term and the kinds of thinking it codes, courtesy of my daughter Bridget, who is expert at that way of examining complex cultural or institutional problems. I can see through our conversations that this has been my preferred way of both reading and thinking for as long as I can remember, standing above and apart from the immediate option at hand, trying to understand how it fits or doesn't in the array of other options that contend or cooperate with it, now or in the past, always looking for common ground, and where that is not possible, looking for what I consider a good through-path among those available.

An analogy: A year or two ago I saw a documentary on leaf photosynthesis. Researchers were baffled by the light-speed at which photonic energy seemed to be shared, leaf with tree. They finally concluded that the process had quantum properties in that as soon as a photon of sunlight entered the system at a specific point, the leaf (or the photon) was able to calculate every possible avenue for sharing its energy, choosing instantly from among them the most efficient. It would be as if a mouse entered a maze and instead of testing each

corridor and turn willy-nilly until it found the right path, it could see them all at once and take the correct one directly to the exit. Were trees not capable of this mysterious mode of sharing, the scientists seemed to be saying, they would not be able to grow to their great heights. It would just take too long to move the energy necessary to do that from where it entered the system to where it could best be used.

Another analogy: the quantum computer. Traditional computers operate using a strict binary code, ones and zeroes arranged in linear circuits. So a complex operation involving many, many steps must be completed in its proper sequence, which takes time. Most problems are amenable to this method and can be "solved" relatively quickly, at least by such circuits operating in parallel arrangements. But many problems cannot. Quantum computers borrow the chimeric features of subatomic particles, each of which can be "up or down," the equivalent of one or zero, or both, or anything in between. Just a small number of these can therefore perform in seconds or minutes calculations that would take a traditional computer decades or centuries to complete.

Systems-level thinking may not be quite that powerful compared to sequential thinking, what Keats calls "consecutive reasoning." But it has the same effects. My favorite systems-level thinker of all time is Plato, who never records a single word in his own voice. I wrote half a scholarly book about his work earlier in my career (*Writing/Teaching)* with my general aim to reimagine his dialogical method in that paradigm, which requires thinking in new ways about the degree to which Socrates is/is not his ventriloquistic mouthpiece. Spoiler alert: In my opinion he is not, at least not in the simplistic way traditional scholars of philosophy, and most Western thinkers, have so blithely presumed. Socrates and Plato, the

author who never speaks and the character who can't stop talking, are more like those subatomic particles: either and neither and/or both all at the same time.

Walt Whitman is another good example, always above and outside of the many frays he enters poetically. As he says in "Song of Myself:"

Apart from the pulling and hauling stands what I am,

Stands amused, complacent, compassionating, idle, unitary,

Looks down, is erect, or bends an arm on an impalpable certain rest,

Looking with side-curved head curious what will come next,

Both in and out of the game and watching and wondering at it.

This describes the systems-level angle of vision exactly as I experience it. Then as the poem closes he asks:

Do I contradict myself?

Very well then I contradict myself,

(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

It's from a systems level that apparent contradictions are in fact resolved, able to reside not just side by side but intimately together, two (or many more) merging (uncertainly) into one, the foundational mode of quantum duality. That is where one can be "large" and "contain multitudes" while still remaining entirely oneself.

Aside2: This is the backward-looking counterpoint to the equally useless tendency to blame dysfunctions on a specific current cultural phenomenon: rock and roll, TV, video gaming, rap, cell phones, social media, to name a few of the whipping posts I've witnessed in

my little lifetime. I realized the inanity of this latter tendency when I was teaching one of Aristophanes' plays about twenty-five years ago, can't remember which. An elderly character is complaining about the "younger generation" in exactly the same way that my parents' generation complained about mine: derelict, degenerate, certain to precipitate the downfall of civilization. And he seized upon the same kinds of superficial evidence for support: their equivalent of "sex, drugs and rock and roll." So, I thought, 2500 years haven't changed much of anything about the generational conflicts of the moment. And I vowed not to fall prey to that kind of stupidity when I got "old." I knew nothing then, of course, about what it means to get old. I do now. And the temptation toward that temporal fallacy can be intense. So far, I've not only resisted it, I've gone the opposite way: I actually think my generation has been the "problem," our arrogance, greed, shortsightedness, and selfishness (I guess my parents' generation was right, but for all the wrong reasons) and that the generations a couple of steps behind mine, millennials and Gen Z, so much stronger, wiser and better, may be the salvation from us, assuming it's not already too late for that. Over and over when I talk to my generational peers who are deeply pessimistic about the future, I try to persuade them that these good young people will make a better world, no matter their affection for TikTok or avocado toast or whatever the target *du jour* is on Fox News. And they are both surprised and grateful to hear that, even if they don't believe it.

The failure of my generation to envision a long-range future for subsequent generations may be one of the reasons why so many now can't foresee the demise of "democracy," the "American Empire," or "nature" itself, all of which are happening at quite a brisk pace right before their eyes. Noticing that requires an extra-generational approach to history and

knowledge—a past that came before me and the future that will come after I'm gone. If you read any history, you know that all Empires fall, most by rotting from the inside out, precisely via the sort of inattention, denial, infighting and wishful thinking, we are indulging in right now, well before they are overtaken from the outside in.

Aside3: Early Christianity—first, second, and third centuries CE—was, as I point out in *waking up*, a remarkably diverse, tolerant, and generative culture comprising many distinct communities that shared a few basic premises and ideals in common. I called this a "disorganized religion," one that came to a gradual but devastating halt during the fourth and fifth centuries CE, as the Church consolidated its power, settled on its orthodoxy, excised all competitors, and transformed itself into an "organized religion" with all the basic features of the imperial Roman state with which it was allied. And it has stayed that way, astonishingly consistent, ever since. I said in that book that I believe all organized religions function in the same way cults do: buy in or get out. A couple of days ago Pope Francis issued an edict saying it was now acceptable to bless (though not perform) same-sex marriages, something Jesus, who was quite tolerant, would certainly approve, as he pointed out. Right wing Catholic cardinals, bishops, et al., have gone ballistic, regurgitating longstanding rules and prejudices with little if any support in the New Testament, which is the specifically Christian half of the Bible. I rest my case.

Aside4: I saw this word somewhere online and decided to Google it, a search that took me on a very charming ride through an assortment of current slang terms I was unfamiliar

with. I write in *waking up* about a similar experience maybe 10 years ago when a brilliant student I was getting to know introduced me to some of the lingo becoming current then. I remember "woke" and "lit" specifically, both of which sounded like something I wanted more not less of. The former term has since been so desecrated by far-right ideologues to become, oddly for me, more a red badge of courage than a cool moniker. I immediately felt the same way about "delulu," short for delusional, which means most practically "out of touch" in a negative way. But delulu sounds to me like a state of mind that might also be fun, playful. So I'm coopting it to describe the many kinds of loopy inner moods I so enjoy experiencing, even as I use it to name the absurdly stupid narratives that waylay those who indulge in conspiratorial or cultish "stories," my primary theme here. Some of the other words I liked were bussin' (really good), drip (sophisticated), cray (wild, out of control, as in crazy), and touch grass (get a grip.) I'd like to live in a world where drip was bussin' and cray was sometimes the best way to touch grass and go delulu (in my good way.)

Aside5: All imperialist regimes have done something similar, of course, most egregiously the Roman Empire, which enforced its laws and standards to the best of its ability in all the new lands it conquered. But none of them from my point of view has accomplished that sort of domination in the granular way and with such duplicity and furor as the Anglo-European Empire has over the last six hundred years.

Aside6: It was no accident, in my view, that all of this happened in the immediate aftermath of the Romanization of the Christianity via Emperor Constantine's conversion in the

fourth century, initiating a process that, within about a century, utterly transformed a very diverse and in many ways subversive congeries of religious communities, oriented around local scriptures, into a monolithic and monocultural state-related religion (the Catholic Church) organized hierarchically and patriarchally in much the same way as the Roman imperial system was; as pretty much (me talking again, not Pagels) any dictatorial system is, whether it is based on cultural privilege, economic/political domination, or religious orthodoxy.

Aside7: One thing that stunned me in reading this biography was the almost infinite wealth of documentary material that Jin seemed to find on which to found his narrative line. Remember, this is the 8th century, the "dark ages" in the Western world. An historian documenting an individual European's life from that period might have difficulty asserting with confidence much more than a born/died chronology. But almost every little shred of Bai's life seems somehow to have been recorded, either expressly or inadvertently, in forms preserved intact for over a millennium now. How was this possible? The only answer I could come up with was a material one: The Chinese had available to them paper, one of their cultural inventions, a cheap, storable, and relatively sustainable medium for archiving information. The Western world relied on parchment, derived from animal hides, a difficult to produce and therefore expensive medium in limited supply. The impact of this difference on general cultural literacy was dramatic—almost everyone Bai encountered along the way seemed to be able to read and write, thus the intrinsic value of his own prodigious literary skills. And his life and exploits were well-documented. In the West, literacy was limited to religious elites, who

could afford to produce and read the lavish parchment-based books that have survived from that otherwise “dark” era.

Aside8: I now know a very great deal about how this thorny God-problem was resolved in the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries by a number of synods and councils assessing the various options for dealing with the presumed divinity of Jesus. The winning formula ended up in the Nicene creed as the words “one in being with the Father,” the implication that Jesus was with the Father God, along with the Holy Spirit (what we called back in my youth the Holy Ghost), always and forever, before there was anything, even time. He was what John the gospelist calls the Word, which then became flesh when he was born into our world. He was always fully God and then for a while also fully man, end of story. To give you an idea of how delulu (in the bad way) this process was, here are a few of the other contenders: (1) Arianists argued that Jesus is God but wasn’t there right from the outset. He is made not of the same stuff but similar stuff. The technical terms for this distinction were *homoousios* (literally the same being or essence) and *homoiousios* (similar but not identical being or essence), fighting words back in the formative years of the Catholic Church, that one letter added creating turmoil not only in the church, bishops like Athanasius being exiled then restored then re-exiled over and over depending on the favored theory of the moment, but also in the Roman Empire, which vacillated back and forth on this matter emperor to emperor, with one, Julian, seeking to reverse the Empire’s connection with Christianity completely. All of this sometimes resulted in violence and death, as in the brutal murder of Hypatia and her followers in 415 CE at the hands of a Christian mob, mobilized by Bishop Cyril of Alexandria. (2) Docetists (a term

that was applied retroactively in the 19th century for a fourth century heresy) argued that Jesus' body was an illusion, not materially human but some sort of spiritual substance, meaning his physical life and death were not "real" but apparent. This belief is evident in some of the gnostic gospels and is often mistakenly (in my view) attributed to Gnosticism generally, primarily as a means of making that heresy case stronger. (3) The Adoptionists denied the pre-existence of Christ (as integral with God) and therefore denied his full deity. They believed that Jesus was simply a man tested by God who after passing the test was given supernatural powers and adopted as a son (at his baptism). Jesus was then rewarded for all he did (and for his perfect character) with a resurrection and absorption into the Godhead. I personally like this one, even though it is heretical, because it opens a way to consider other great spiritual leaders as similarly godly in their missions here. (4) Apollinarianists denied the true and complete humanity of Jesus, asserting that he did not have a human mind, but instead had a mind that was completely divine. This heresy diminished the human nature of Jesus, via that radical dualism, in order to reconcile the manner in which Jesus could be both God and man at the same time.

There were any number of other less influential approaches to this conundrum scattered across the first millennium—e.g. Nestorianism, Eutychianism, Monophysitism, Monothelitism; all of which were declared heresies by various synods and councils, inciting the requisite book bannings and burnings. My brief summaries are just that. Whole books have been written about the ins and outs and minutiae of each of these, fetishizing this problem almost comically to the nth degree. Of course, these -isms would argue that the orthodox explanation was merely the institutionally endorsed heresy of choice. The early

Church would have been much saner if it followed my nun's advice: It's a mystery, stop splitting hairs and spilling blood. Just get over it.

Aside9: In some practical way, Sister Paschal's simple "solution" to an intractable "problem" sanctioned my unending personal devotion to all the "mysteries" that this world and life itself proffer, some of them spiritual (a fascination with the many religious ideologies humans have created, seeking never to elevate one to supremacy but to understand what they share in common, which is what systems-level "wisdom" is from my point of view); some of them philosophical: the nature of Being, capital B, for example (via the vast reservoir of Western and Eastern systems that attempt to address it, seeking again not to pick one but to revel in their diversity, creating a path specifically suited to me); some of them material, the fundamentally baffling nature of reality, not only at the subatomic level, (Heisenberg's "uncertainty principle" the keystone there); but also at the brain-function level, via a concept like imagination (the brain's capacity to function multidimensionally); some of them literary and creative (especially my longstanding devotion to reading and writing poetry, but even more so, for living day to day with the eyes and ears of a poet, awake, even if none of that experience eventuates in words on a page.)

Aside10: That is especially so in personal and intimate relationships, where our inner worlds interact and interface more like swirling waves on water than fixed "plots." I've written about this previously in *In Dreams*, where I critique both the concept and the possibility of a full "understanding" of another animate essence in our universe. My argument includes a

detailed examination of "misunderstanding," concluding that the presumption of full understanding, of ourselves or others, is by definition a misunderstanding. Given this, the worthiest quest is, as many philosophers and poets have suggested, an ongoing, lifelong process of attempting to "know" oneself, an always unfinalizable quest. In doing that, one can, I believe, counterintuitively, come to know everything else out there much more truly than is possible under the aegis of a presumed, externally imposed, "understanding." The application here is obvious: Cults and conspiracy theories purport to be conclusive understandings of otherwise mysterious situations or events. And they are, therefore, from my point of view, bogus by definition.

Aside11: Augustine and Pelagius were the two primary contestants who battled over this matter in the 5th century, each relying on contrary takes of what the New Testament (which was already pretty well firmed up in its current form) asks us to do with our life and time in this world. Augustine roots his position primarily in Paul's letters, Pelagius in "what Jesus actually said." Here's how I set up the contrast between them in *waking up:*

> Specifically in relation to the 5th century theological argument I'm looking at, these terms [prelapsarian and Manichean] establish different genealogical relationships with the original (Judeo-Christian) human man, Adam, and, of course, his equally "original" sin. Augustine focuses on the aftermath of the fall and says we are all spawn of this flawed man, destined to live permanently in the shadow of his malfeasance, which is inherited at birth via the equally profane sexual intercourse that led to our conception.

Only God can rectify this aberration, first via Jesus' pilgrimage to earth and thereafter only via baptism and God's grace, following Paul's quite clear preference for grace, or faith, over good works as the key to salvation.

Pelagius presumes a more Edenic heritage, saying that Adam's corruption, while consequential, was not universally and perpetually damning, leaving considerable room for genuine "free will" in affairs of the human spirit and assigning considerable weight to good works, intentionally performed, as a way to rectify one's relationship with God, a position he turns to Jesus' words to support. We are in effect foundationally "good" from the moment of our conception, making sex sacred rather than profane, only losing our way because of cultural or individual weaknesses. In short, Pelagius believes we are born "with God" Augustine believes "against."

I've put together a list of all the binaries I could think of that derive inevitably from these two foundational positions in relation to original sin and organized them in pairs that seem related to me, for ease of exposition in relation to Pelagius, below. There may be others as well, but whatever they are, the template I'm using applies. As to their ways of constructing and thinking about binaries, a prelapsarian approach (and Pelagius) is biased toward everything on the left side of each backslash, Manicheanism (and Augustine) the right.

1. good/evil; unity/duality
2. light/dark; life/death

3. matriarchy/patriarchy; feminine/masculine
4. community/authority; equity/hierarchy
5. tolerance/orthodoxy; freedom/control
6. love/fear; truth/power (122-3)

Aside12: A quick Google search of "primal matrix" turns up two very current but interesting threads, both more recent than Glendinning's book. One of them pertains to the multiplayer video game *Wildstar*. According to one source, "the Primal Matrix unlocks the latent power in every hero on Nexus allowing for additional advancement at level 50. Through Drusera you'll be able to further increase your power by way of Primal Essence—an element that's collected in and spent through the Primal Matrix interface—allowing you to customize and unlock your newfound potential . . ."
[https://steamcommunity.com/games/376570/announcements/detail/240217180983075529]

I have never played a video game and likely never will so I have no expertise with this particular application of the term. The pertinent fact here is that the game was released in 2011, long after Glendinning coined her version of the term. The other thread pertains to a current lifestyle movement that promotes "childhood deconditioning" as a path to self-recovery, also more recently formed, but more in Glendinning's general wheelhouse.

Other potential analogies that cross my mind derive from: (1) Buddhism, both the Chan version (rooted in Chinese Taoism) and the Zen version (now more familiar, transported via Japanese practices), in terms like "dharma" and "Zen" itself; and (2) fractal geometry,

whereby the sequential, progressive solutions of specific equations produce not just the beautiful images made famous by Benoit Mandelbrot, but the foundational forms of the natural world, which may appear random and chaotic but are in fact simple forms iterated infinitely and elegantly.

Aside13: In one interesting and provocative side note she says:

> … in the latest and perhaps most subtle effort at suppression of the primal matrix, university-taught deconstructive and New Age "you-create-your-own-reality" ideologies are training people to deny the existence of human universalities and a preference for well-being in favor of superficiality, absolute relativity, and meaninglessness. *(Name*, 8)

I call attention to this because, as a long-time university professor during the poststructuralist era, with expertise in those systems of inquiry, I agree with her. As I say here and elsewhere in my work, what started out as long-overdue and much needed counter to the patriarchal systems and discourses of modernism ended up (as Bakunin believes Marx does) simply reincarnating the same hierarchy with different elites operating despotically at the apex of the pyramid.

Aside14: Bakunin proffers an interesting set of rules of order that those who want to "come into our camp" must "promise" to uphold. (1) "To subordinate . . . personal . . family . . . as well as political and religious bias . . . to the highest interest of the association." (2) "Never . . . to compromise with the bourgeoisie." (3) "Never to attempt to secure a position above your

fellow workers . . .” and (4) “To remain . . . loyal to this principle of the solidarity of labour” (131).

I’m not sure why I wanted to include these here. They are just interesting to me, pretty plain-speaking and level-headed, almost bureaucratic-sounding, for an anarchist!

Aside15: I wrote quite extensively about this conundrum in *In Dreams* (as I mention above) under the aegis of the term “misunderstanding,” suggesting that the sorts of “stories” we either invent or borrow from others to account, via “consecutive reasoning,” for the “mysteries” at the core of lived human experience and the material universe, are by definition reductionist. Essential maybe to promote communal enterprise, even sanity, but never, either singly (especially) or in combination fully adequate.

It’s not a matter of which of us (Jin or me) might be right or wrong. It’s more a matter of what difference method makes: Jin seeks out and finds reams of external documentation to piece together his paradigm for Bai’s life, (mis)understanding him from the outside-in. His chosen title for the book implies that he is highly conscious of both the power and the limitations of his method: His subtitle is, after all, “*A* Life of Li Bai” not “*The* Life of Li Bai,” implying that there are other, even many other, ways of making sense of this “larger than life” character. One of them may be mine: I read and react to Bai’s poems and end up with a different one from his, (mis)understanding him from the inside-out, which is not to say that my take is more authentic or deep: In the end, every one of us is “larger than life” when it comes to composing and telling a “story” about that life—our own or someone else’s—in words, such a feeble currency for this purpose. Both Jin and I project over the densely

granular texture of Bai's "life" a pattern of "understanding" that is as much our own as it is Bai's. I'm very happy I have now acquired Jin's. And I am very happy I had mine to feather out the hard lines Jin marks over and around Bai's life-line. And I will be pleased to add other layers of (mis)understanding to my relationship with Bai, should they come along.

Aside16: I read an article a few days ago about how walking faster amplifies the health benefits of a good walk. I used to walk quite briskly, a mile in sixteen minutes or so during my final years in Pittsburgh (I actually timed it once for reasons too embarrassing to explain.) Now I think it's closer to 20 minutes. Age is a factor in that, of course, but more importantly I think is the level of inner intensity, the grief-fueled angst—what I've called constructive rage—that amped up my walks during the first several years after my wife Carol passed so suddenly and unexpectedly. In any case, I'm as skeptical of that article's claims as I am of pretty much everything that comes through the media that way, whether it's medical or political or sports-related, all prone to the one- or two-day media circus-cycle we have become culturally addicted to.

I recalled the other day, thinking about this, when speed-walking was an Olympic sport. Maybe it still is. But back in the 60s it was all the rage. I was a high-end sprinter in high school, so I was addicted to speed. I took to this weird way of walking immediately, loved everything about it—all the hip-swiveling, elbow-windmilling, duck-waddling elements of it, one's body like a finely tuned machine maximizing all of its energy to cover ground faster. And I was good at it. I have no idea how fast you can cover a mile that way, but I'm sure it's way faster than sixteen minutes. I think I will try that mode of walking one of these days, when no

one is looking (it is so out of fashion now it might appear more like lunacy than life-extending exercise.)

Aside17: “Cold,” now that I think about it, is a good example of what I’m talking about. I was already walking in the woods daily no matter the weather. But on especially cold winter days, near or below zero, say, the reporter would always include some warning about how quickly skin freezes, like ten minutes, and suggest staying in. I knew from experience that I could easily walk for an hour or more in those conditions with no ill effects, aside from a bit of discomfort. And I enjoyed watching shows set in the Arctic, where people routinely go out to hunt, trap, fish, or just do chores in weather far colder, 30-40 below zero, without freezing their faces off. That may take some acclimation, but, of course, staying in is crucial if you want a viewer like me to keep checking the weather report until some talking head tells him his face will not fall off.

The discourse of weather reporting has become even more apocalyptic in the meantime. When I moved out to Western Washington five years ago, the waves of moisture that drift up from the tropical Pacific during the winter months were called "The Pineapple Express," a soft and sweet-sounding sort of precipitation-delivery system, in keeping with what it most often felt like at ground-level here. Now each of these waves is called an "atmospheric river," as if we are about to be drowned or washed away by chronic deluges. I've had friends back East reach out to me from time to time to ask if I was still okay in the aftermath of such an event reported to them with this new moniker. When I look out the window or walk out the door, it is simply raining, as it was five or five hundred years ago at this

time of year. Same goes with terms like "bomb-cyclone" and "snownado," designed more to scare (thus returning for weather updates) than describe, as in look out the window or walk out the door and decide for yourself whether your life is imperiled if you want to walk downtown.

Aside18: For this week's family Zoom, my topic was to ask the group: "What's up with Liz Cheney?" who is on her book tour right now. I'm attracted to her current status as a public figure because she embodies, to me, one of the great, almost comical, ironies of 21st century politics: She was railroaded out of office and out of the Republican party by a man who created his public persona—bully, intimidate, never apologize, lie, lie, lie—from the playbook created by Liz Cheney's father, Dick. Liz and Dick co-authored a book (*Exceptional*, 2015) flogging Barak Obama for his weakness, declaring what we needed was a "strong" president to restore the status of the US on the global stage. They both supported and voted for Donald Trump twice, endorsed all of his policies and decrees. Then, oops, he went a step too far. Like Bill Barr on the high end or Cassidy Hutchinson on the low end, et al., they saw the light way too light, their reputations in tatters, their influence diminished, too young still just to skulk off the stage as George Bush had, so they rebranded into "woke" critics warning us from the sidelines on their book tours or through piecework gigs on CNN or MSNBC. I just don't trust them. I think the only thing they would change about the narrative that ruined them would be the 2020 election results, which would have made January 6th unnecessary. Donald Trump would have had his second term and they would have considered it all hunky-dory. Will Cheney's current protestations about the dangers of another Trump presidency alter the

outcome of the election? I don't think so. Not unless the count is as razor thin as the Bush-Gore "hanging chads" fiasco in 2000. But at least she'll sell some books.

Aside19: I've been working ever since I arrived in Olympia 5+ years ago on overcoming, to the extent possible, my dependence on this sort of external validation, which I have come to realize is an addiction like any other, one created by those aspects of late-day capitalism that have little if anything to do with money. There are many different kinds of "capital" operating more surreptitiously in our culture, the approbation of others a particularly intense one, sometimes redemptive, sometimes insidious. The shape this takes for a writer is response from an audience. Up until two years before I retired, I lived in a warm sea of approbation about which I was almost entirely unaware: My wife loved me, my kids loved me, my students loved me, many of my colleagues respected, even admired me, my scholarly work was well-received, I was in a home and a city I knew intimately. In swift sequence, all of these sources of gratification, except for my kids, disappeared. My wife's sudden death was the catalyst that started it. Very shortly my job became intolerable, my social circle contracted dramatically, my writing seemed staid and pointless, my home felt inimical to me, and I left all of that behind to move out west here, *sans* pretty much everything but myself and the affection of my two children. I did, of course, feel bereft about these losses, even though most of them were intentionally self-inflicted. But I presumed I would be able to start over and make a new life for myself in a new place. I had done that once before, when I was thirty, and expected the same result. It took me at several years to realize that was delulu. What is possible at thirty is not possible at seventy. Still, I was a writer and believed if I wrote enough

in my now-new way and shared it with enough people I could find and maintain an "audience," the capital that the literary marketplace traffics in. That turned out to be delulu, too. So overcoming this addiction has been a highlight of my inner life. I've made so much progress, but still have some work to do. I'll be so happy when I get there, though I suspect there is no such there to get to.

Aside20: In *Rereading Poets: The Life of the Author* I propose a tripartite "systems-level" paradigm for how reading-related habits change over time, at least in the American academy. Every literary-critical system, I argue, must account for the three primary "actors" in the interpretive moment: the author who crafted the text, the textual artifact itself, and the reader who receives it, all cultural constructions. One of these three, as I see it, always ends up being privileged in relation to the other two. The New Criticism (and Modernist systems generally) privileged the text, demoting the author via what was called "the Intentional Fallacy" and the reader via "the Affective Fallacy" to relative irrelevancy. In each case biography and history were, in effect, dismissed as heretical to the reading process. Postmodernism shifted the reader to the apex, calling into fundamental question any stable conception of either the author or the text. My own preference, which I detail in *Rereading Poets*, and the system I believe is coming to the fore these day as an alternative to the now played out postmodernist approaches, privileges the author, more though as a personal force than as a source of authority, as was common in the latter half of the 19th century, the last time an author-oriented economy of reading was in effect.

Aside21: Truth is a viable competitor vis-à-vis power in a text- or author-based economy of interpretation. It is not necessarily enfeebled in a reader-based economy. What ends up doing that, though, is a popularized perversion of the concept of "relativity." Relativity, whether from Einstein or continental reading theorists in the 70s and 80s does not mean that anything anyone sees or says about something is equal. When the relativity of positionality gets transported into the moderately illiterate idiot boxes of politics and the media (how many politicians have read Jacques Derrida or Wolfgang Iser?), where language has no necessary connection to anything demonstrable, it warrants a kind of free-for-all in which if there is any truth left, it is the manque version of "truth" that gets created when you repeat something over and over and over, like "the steal," or "the deep state" or "a witch hunt," until it becomes "real" enough to serve as the inciter of fear and an engraved invitation to the nearest hole for the frightened rabbit to dart down.