Reading/Writing Outside the Lines

essays by

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Cover image by Joseph Kameen:
"The Cartographers"

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Dedication

For Bridget and Joseph, whose amazing art works have graced my book covers repeatedly over the years. And in memory of Carol, whose creative gifts, visual and tactile, they inherited.

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An abbreviated version (minus the "asides," among other things) of "Quantum Reading Vs. the Rabbit Hole" is forthcoming in *Reader: Essays on Reader-Oriented Theory, Criticism and Pedagogy*. I am deeply grateful to Pat Donahue and Bianca Falbo for being so receptive to this new work and for curating this remarkable journal. Both "The Medium is the Hyperobject" and "So this is what I was thinking when I wrote 'that sentence'" are forthcoming in *Intermezzo*, an online journal that specializes in essays too long for print journals and too short for a book, my "goldilocks zone." I am deeply grateful to Jeff Rice for managing this unique venue and for being so generous with my submissions.

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Preface: Taking Revelatory Turns

Words can be such inflexible vessels for ferrying meanings back and forth, especially in Western linguistic systems, which rely so heavily on polar binaries, often arranged in temporal sequences that imply causality. This book seeks to liminalize two such binary pairs—reading/writing and teaching/learning—until they are no longer categorically separable, one from the others. In the most conventional ways of understanding those binaries, the former precedes the latter and, if not exactly causing it, at least makes it possible. Anyone who has learned to write and read in order to teach others how to write and read understands that this sequencing is at best clunky if not nonsensical. In "live action" there are countless permutations not only for each of these singular activities but also for the complex ways they intersect with one another. The cliché that Inuit-Yupik-Unangan languages have seven or fifty or a hundred distinct names for the snow was debunked long ago. But they do have considerably more root words+suffixes than most European languages do for naming the many varieties of frozen water. It would certainly be easier to think in more complex ways about the four concepts I name above if we had a similar inventory for distinguishing both their individual varieties and their many modes of interaction. In the absence of that, one is left with demonstration, showing instead of telling, as precisely as possible, what such interactions look, act and feel like in practice. That's exactly what this book does.

The reading/writing aspect of the equation is self-evident at the level of method: Whenever I have more than one book on my bedside table, books I've aggregated coincidentally

rather than intentionally, I prefer now to read them simultaneously instead of sequentially. And I start to write about those books while (not after) I read then. Then I reread and rearrange in a recursive way what I happen to be writing, turning it back on itself until it yields a new and unexpected layer of meaning, what I call a revelatory turn, the ultimate "point" of the essay revealing itself in the final act. This process violates many of the stereotypical ways of sequencing these activities temporally, with quite salutary results, at least for me. Each of the essays in this book enacts one of these events.

The "outside the lines" part is also self-evident at the level of method. Engaging with multiple texts simultaneously may not be the most conventional approach to reading, but it is by no means uniquely eccentric. Anyone who has done systematic or in-depth research spends at least some of their time with an array of related texts "open" (either physically or electronically) and in front of them at roughly the same time. The various protocols that organize that reading toward some synthetic purpose are tacit preconditions in almost every classroom (syllabi and disciplines e.g.), workplace (professional discourses and standards), and publishing marketplace (the genres and formats that regulate what makes it into print and what will not.) Those "lines"—the key words being related and purpose—are normally both invisible and non-negotiable within their contexts, which very rarely simply say "let's throw an assortment of *unrelated* things together just to see what happens." Which is what I'm doing here. A reading strategy like this cannot by be guided by a preconceived "purpose" (that bellwether of all capitalistic enterprises.) It simply assumes that one will emerge, via an equally unregulated mode of writing in this case, from the innately

figurative tendencies of the human mind, which seeks meaning in coincidental multiplicity, not by overriding that multiplicity with analysis but by plumbing its possibilities with discernment.

The one professional arena where something vaguely like this happens is in "basic science" labs, where researchers sometimes bring an assortment of previously unrelated compounds into some mode of consonance, either simultaneously or in sequence. They, though, are usually trying to solve a specific problem, therefore have a putative purpose. They just have no idea how exactly to achieve it. And the fruits of their experiments are sometimes unexpected and surprising to them, solving an entirely different problem, one that beforehand may not even have been recognized as one. Teflon is one quite famous example of such a successful "fail." The obvious difference with my method of reading here is that it is not trying to solve any preconceived problem. I simply perform the experiment and wait to see what happens. That's at least part of what I mean by "outside the lines." The other part of it is ensconced in the term "quantum" that I deploy quite frequently along the way, what may seem at first like an out-of-place, even impertinent intrusion from an alien universe of discourse. It is in fact key to my argument in ways I will try to bring into focus later in this preface and to conceptualize in more detail in the first essay. In brief: the multiple probability states that define quantum wave functions, and their collapse into one of those states at the moment of observation, provides a very elegant analogy for the sort of reading/writing I enact in this book.

Most students and professionals cannot, of course, indulge in this sort of open-ended experimentation routinely. The

penalties are too severe. But there is a big difference between "not routinely" and "never." Everyone has "free" time to engage in their own thinking. This book argues—via demonstration—for the value of using at least some of that time to practice a mode of reading/writing that is free from externally imposed preconditions. Just to see what happens. And, ideally, to take a bit of that experimental serendipity back into their more regimented educational or professional settings.

The teaching/learning binary I mention above becomes clear as the essays evolve, though it is more difficult to describe. In *Writing/Teaching: Essays Toward a Rhetoric of Pedagogy,* I wrote in some detail about the dynamics of the Platonic dialogues, where the writer (Plato) never says anything in his own voice; where the teacher (Socrates) never writes down one of the words he voices; where the immediate audience, Socrates' various interlocutors, serve as what I call "student-functions" whom Socrates is trying vigorously, often unsuccessfully, to teach; in whose stead we, Plato's readers, can stand to learn the quite different lesson Plato is trying to teach; and where, if we do that work attentively, we can teach ourselves something quite distinct and different from what is being proffered to or by any of the other players in the game. In other words, teacher and student, writer and reader are so intertwined it is impossible to separate them formally or functionally. That is exactly the dynamic that animates this book, where I am simultaneously writer and reader, trying mightily to teach myself something I need to learn in the hopes that a generous reader will learn how to write about their own reading in similarly revelatory ways, teaching themselves something entirely different in the process.

As I explain in "Quantum Reading vs. the Rabbit Hole," here's how simply it all started:

> All of a sudden, in late October [2023], I went from having no books on my docket to five, each of which looked really interesting to me. . . . 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. . . . 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. (26)

This book documents my responses to successive iterations of that wonderment and to the various revelatory turns they invited me to take along the way. There is obviously no way to pre-script an experience of this sort. It is less like engaging intentionally with a single interlocutor, the typical readerly experience, and more like attending a party crowded with interesting people and ending up in a long conversation with a few of them who happen to join you out on the veranda. Liminality, serendipity, mystery, negative capability, these are some of the terms I use to describe how such a conversation moves and feels. Who you are when you enter conversations of that sort is not

who you are when you leave them, having been transformed by the strange alchemical process of genuine, participatory dialogue, which favors revelation over information, memorable insights over memorizable "results."

As the passage above suggests, what follows here is less a commentary on the many worthy and provocative books my essays focus on than an argument on behalf of an alternative way of approaching them, what I call systems-level or quantum reading, a method (not a theory) of reading that uses the interactive conversation that emerges among multiple books to inspire a revelatory turn toward an end that could not even have been imagined let alone predicted beforehand. Which is often what happens when physicists attempt to "read" the material universe at the quantum level. As I further explain in that opening essay:

> 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. (24-25)

In "Quantum Reading vs. the Rabbit Hole," my holiday-season extravaganza, the five books I ended up reading simultaneously could not have been more different: one highlighted a 20th century indigenous/settlers land-rights conflict in New Mexico; one the shift from hunting-gathering to agriculture many millennia ago; one a 4th century institutional crisis in the formation of the Catholic Church; one a 19th century argument between a Russian anarchist and the Marxist orthodoxy he had disavowed; one an 8th century Chinese poet struggling to find a balance between worldly fame and spiritual renown.

The thread that ended up weaving them together was the concept of a "primal matrix" I borrowed from one of the books and applied to all of them. The revelatory turn I took was toward an event happening right then, one quite

disturbing to me given my professional history: the calamitous spectacle of those three university presidents flailing away at the Congressional hearing focused on antisemitism on college campuses, which laid bare "the dire state of the 'idea of the university' in the American culture right now" (72), cultures at war with one another in the most helter-skelter ways, a critique I've had simmering in the back of my head for years.

In "The Medium Is the Hyperobject," two intellectual titans—Marshall McLuhan and Timothy Morton—one on each side of the two-generation interim that spanned my professorial career, end up threaded together not on the basis of any obvious set of common interests but via "a sort of Einsteinian wormhole" that opened between them, "making weirdly palpable what we now call, most generally, the postmodernist epoch, the former book facing toward it just before it arrived, the latter gazing back at it just after it passed, ancestor and descendent suddenly 'seeing' one another, at least in the alternate universe of my imagination" (105-6), eye to eye for the first time.

The revelatory turn I took was toward the "medium" (McLuhan's keyword) to which they both instinctively defaulted: "the book," quotation marks meant to emphasize its role not as a material artifact but as a cultural icon, a "hyperobject" (Morton's keyword), that "generic tabernacle within which the ideology of Western patriarchy, power, and privilege has been ensconced serially for more than a millennium—at least since the codification of the orthodox Christian Bible in the 4th and 5th centuries CE" (107), including in the contemporary academy—one that impacted my own professional progress in the ways I document in the narrative that concludes the essay.

Each of these essays has a second layer that adds dimension to the argument, documentation of some ancillary revelatory turns I experienced in the process of composition (for "Quantum Reading vs. the Rabbit Hole") or reception (for "The Medium is the Hyperobject"), the behind-the-scenes thinking that every creative enterprise involves, active for the writer, largely hidden from the reader, a kind of quantum superposition in that both layers coexist synthetically until the apparatus that measures them, in this case the traditional essay, forces them into one or the other of their possible states.

In the case of "Quantum Reading vs. the Rabbit Hole" it is a series of 21 serendipitous "asides"—some of them personal, some of them scholarly, some of them simply whimsical—that arose as I wrote the essay, the sort of background noise I assume all authors experience as they write. The given forms for sharing intellectual work, which pre-script both writers' and readers' expectations, tend to exile material like that to either silence (excision) or the sidelines (traditional endnotes) in order to make the main argument more legible. I decided to retain them in their original, more casual form to conserve their improvisational character, sometimes matter-of-fact, sometimes edgy, sometimes playful, the way they arose in the moment as I was composing.

In the case of "The Medium Is the Hyperobject" that second layer is another full essay, "So this is what I was thinking when I wrote 'that sentence,'" which evolved after the fact from a long conversation with a friend about a densely-packed sentence in the original essay, in the course of which I tried to explain in detail why I chose the seemingly abstruse discourse I used to set up the overall

paradigm for my argument. I planned initially simply to write a long, more traditional, endnote to explain and justify the arcane terms that end up so tightly compressed there. But it turned into an essay in its own right, the final essay in the book now, one that does exactly what its title says: It unpacks "that sentence" at a granular level, demonstrating that what appears on the page is often merely the tip of a very large and mostly submerged iceberg, and accessing that deeper level requires ongoingly dialogical curiosity and engagement from both reader and writer. In certain respects this essay might serve better as a preface than a postscript to the one it comments one, which my most trusted readers felt was a particularly "difficult" one. But all the ways I've been imagining to do that so far seem awkward and wonky. Kind of like that sentence itself, before I wrote this backup essay to make the case for why it's not.

The revelatory turn I took was toward a futural imagining of what kind of poet the next epoch might require—a future deeply vexed by the political dysfunction "Quantum Reading vs. the Rabbit Hole" indexes, and the even more imperiling technological (AI, e.g.) and natural (global warming, e.g.) threats that loom gravely just up ahead, the kind that haunt the "The Medium Is the Hyperobject." As I argue, the postmodernist moment has played itself out. Whatever is coming next has not yet fully fledged. What that turns out to be will emerge during the coming years. The stakes are particularly high at transitional moments like this. I am full of hope about our future, both in the academy and in the culture at large. And I'm hopeful that what I proffer here will contribute in some small way toward new ways of thinking about how we might promote innovative reading and writing strategies as agents for

personal and cultural change. And in order for me to be a party to that change, I need to change myself radically, to the core, taking every revelatory turn that presents itself on my path further and further outside the lines.

Though "quantum reading" is new for me, I've been reading/writing outside the lines for most of my life. It all started when I fell in love with poetry in the seventh grade. There was nothing whatsoever in my personal, family or local cultural experience to account for or reward that. It just happened, right in the midst of the post-Sputnik crisis in American confidence. I had extraordinary gifts in science and math and was, I can now see, being not-so-subtly groomed for a career as a space scientist. I wanted to hide my poetic inclination, so when I went to the school library I would take a large science book off the shelf along with a smaller poetry book. I'd sit with the big book open and visible to the librarian, the smaller book open and visible only to me. I kept up this charade until the middle of my junior year in college, when I changed my major from physics to English, a decision that stunned the faculty, my family (all of whom had every reason to assume a career in science was in the cards for me), and basically everyone I knew or who knew me. The physics professor I had to speak with to approve the change told me I was "wasting my gifts." My father said pretty much the same thing. But it was the late-60s and I would not be deterred.

Instead of applying to elite graduate schools I became enamored with a new and radically different program for envisioning a professorial career in English, the Doctor of Arts—one of those lovely innovations in higher education that emerged briefly, like spring wildflowers on the tundra, from the chaos of the late-1960s—which expressly

encouraged reading/writing outside the established disciplinary lines, fusing critical with creative discourses and teaching with scholarship. During these "formation" years, I crafted my professional identity hybridically at the intersections among composition studies, literary theory, pedagogy, and poetics—and I ended up teaching all of them—at a time when siloing in specialisms was the order of the day.

In the early 80s I coordinated the implementation of the first WAC program at the University of Pittsburgh, writing the guidelines and chairing the College Writing Board that administered the program. Throughout the 80s and 90s I directed most of the Western Pennsylvania Writing Project's Summer Institutes for K-12 teachers, fostering across-the- curriculum collaborations in the local public schools. All that while, my scholarly work promoted cross-disciplinary ways for connecting writing and reading, with a specific focus on the scholarship of teaching. Concurrently I published at a normal professorial rate: two scholarly books; the equivalent of a couple of others in articles, and of another in poems published separately. So I have a long history of writing/teaching about what crossing lines can do for reading/learning (to remix my initial binaries) at all educational levels. I enjoyed all of that work immensely.

Then, on the verge of my retirement, my wife passed away suddenly and tragically, a trauma that sent me into a tailspin. The retirement years I had envisioned would be like rowing a boat across a calm lake on a sunny afternoon, enjoying the company of my wife, have turned out to be more like riding down a raging river in a thunderstorm, trying to avoid catastrophe as each boulder or set of rapids appears as if out of nowhere. My way of coping has been to

read voraciously about all manner to things, from ancient wisdom texts to contemporary quantum mechanics, from the not-so-secret life of plants to how the human brain works, always multiple books by my bedside, all in the service of the full identity reboot my life required. And I wrote about all of them, fiercely, at a two-book a year pace, an astounding schedule of production for me.

The first book I wrote in the aftermath of this loss—*This Fall: essays on loss and recovery*—was founded on the walks in the woods I was then taking alone every morning, after many years having taken them together with my wife. It is a wonderful book, my best I think. When I finished it, I had to decide what to do with it, publication-wise, and I knew immediately and instinctively that I could not run a book that intimate through the gauntlet of the extant publishing marketplace, which I had some familiarity with. So, I decided instead, with only the vaguest premonition about the implications, to publish it on my own. I knew, of course (and was later reminded by my colleagues) that self-publication crossed a very hard line in the academic marketplace, delegitimizing the work forever. But I did it anyway, as much an act of defiance as a gesture of love.

First, I created a personal website and uploaded my manuscript, in PDF format, free to anyone who wanted to read it. A few months later, I created a paperback version of *This Fall* and made it available online at cost of production. I was stunned by how simple it was to create a book that looked exactly like any other book on a bookstore shelf. And how fast it could happen, in minutes instead of years. For someone deeply afflicted by the sort of chronophobia that often follows a traumatic loss—for me the practical effect was an inability to imagine a future any

further ahead than a week or so—this was a wonderful gift. *This Fall* went on to win an Indie-best-book award and received other plaudits as well, all outside the academic marketplace, of course. Having thus perfected this new (for me) method of publication, that is what I then did with the eleven books of essays (including this one now) and six collections of poems I've written in the meanwhile. It has been a stunning journey for me, one I never could have experienced had I stopped to seek a publisher for *This Fall.*

Readers read for a variety of different reasons, of course. The method I propose here favors deep insight on behalf of personal growth rather than knowledge formation for professional purposes, though the latter is not out of the question. And while the ultimate effect may be therapeutic, it works much more like taking a Rorschach test than buying into a self-help program, in that it reveals how one sees things right now, and then explores that figurative response in unexpected ways to reveal more. As I say at the end of "Quantum Reading vs. the Rabbit Hole:"

> 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. (77)

. . .

One final set of observations about what may seem at first glance like a new-agey abuse of the term "quantum" to modify what I'm doing with reading/writing in these essays:

I am not a physicist, of course, and a text is not a subatomic particle. So why, you might fairly ask, resort to the exotic discourse of particle physics to conceptualize such routine macro-world activities as writing and reading? Well, for one thing, as I say above, if you engage in those activities seriously or professionally you realize very quickly how limited and cumbersome are our conventional ways for describing and explaining how they work interactively. It's kind of like trying to apply Newtonian mechanics to the quantum universe. Pretty soon it just doesn't compute.

This mismatch has riven Western philosophy from the outset. Take for example Plato's *Phaedrus*, where Socrates intones his famous critique of writing, which, he argues, is profoundly limited as a rhetorical medium (vis-à-vis oral dialogue) because "written words . . . seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say . . . they go on telling you the same thing forever" (521). Superficially, that may appear to be true, in that the actual words and sentences in a printed text have a spatial fixity that sonic waves do not. But Plato, a consummate *writer*, obviously thinks otherwise. For one thing, he has Socrates perform multiple readings of the cynical "speech" Lysias *wrote* to recruit Phaedrus into a pederastic relationship. Three separate times Socrates counters that text with responses that are not just variants

but are profoundly different in every respect. The same sort of multiplicity of readings insinuates itself into Socrates' long disquisition on the rhetorical texts popular at that moment, a portion of the dialogue that seems dismissably tedious, aside from the point I'm making with it here. In other words, Plato is demonstrating expressly, in *writing*, the exact opposite of the "point" about writing he has Socrates make authoritatively as the dialogue closes. Plato is way too smart to have *written* those *words* naively. So what, as attentive readers, are we supposed to do with this contradiction, one that philosophers and critical theorists have been wrestling with for over two millennia now, a line of thinking that reached an apogee during the postmodernist era, which obsessed over this problem?

Last Sunday afternoon I stopped by a local park to see a puppet show. There were maybe three hundred of us sitting on a shaded hillside lawn, mostly multigenerational families with very young children among them. I had no idea what to expect, so I was both surprised and delighted that the "plot" of the show was designed to illustrate, for children, some of the fundamental principles of quantum mechanics. Would a particle physicist have approved of every aspect of the script in strictly scientific terms? Probably not; but the foundational assumption that quantum mechanics can be child's play was brilliant and persuasive. In fact, a child's perspective, which has what Edith Cobb called, in *The Ecology of Imagination in Childhood*, an "open-systems attitude," may be more amenable to the counterintuitive aspects of quantum mechanics because it has not yet been indoctrinated into "classical" Western ways for organizing causality and temporality. Try to imagine creating a puppet show with postmodernist critical theory—ultra-adult thinking—as the "plot." I rest my case.

Let me give a few basic examples of how elements of the discourse foundational to quantum mechanics can be applied analogically to clarify not just the sort of reading/writing I enact in these essays, as if it's unique, but what reading/writing almost always is, once it's liberated from the stereotypical constraints that pre-script it in many school- or work-based settings. In other words, once it moves outside the lines.

Take the concept of "superposition," the capacity of quantum wave functions to exist in multiple probability states—both wave and particle, say—prior to observation, akin to what a text is before it is read or written. At the moment of measurement—from that first printed word one's eyes scan or the first typed word that flashes up on a screen—the wave function begins to collapse into one of those probability states. Ask that wave function a different question, via another measurement device—by rereading or rewriting, say—and it will collapse into a different one of its probability states. That is exactly what I do in "Quantum Reading vs. the Rabbit Hole:" read and reread multiple texts simultaneously, using them to ask different questions of one another, revealing, via my writing, which also interrogates itself, at least a few of their probability states in the process. None of them "go on telling you the same thing forever." They "go on telling" things they could never have otherwise imagined, collectivity surpassing individuality in the service of a larger purpose, that revelatory turn.

Or take the concept of "entanglement," the ability of two distinct quantum systems to become so intimately linked that any perturbation of one will be immediately expressed

in the other, what Einstein called "spooky action at a distance." The back-slashed concept at the center or this book's title—reading/writing—is a good example of such an entanglement, two activities conventionally conceived as separate acting in tandem, in that the writing *produces* a reading that could never have come into being without it; and the reading *engenders* a written text that could never have come into being without it. Socrates privileges oral discourse because it is intrinsically dialogical, evolving serendipitously via unscripted mutual responses. But even he can't escape from the scribal aspect of such discourse when he praises dialogue for its capacity to leave truth "*written* in the soul of the listener" (523). Plato, as I said, uses his *written dialogues* to simulate the very same effect. The inherent multivocality of that medium invites, even compels, the reader to add her own "voice," via writing that is either express (on the page) or tacit (on the soul), as an active party to the ongoing conversation.

The sort of compositions I create here are different from Plato's, of course. What they share with his is a fundamentally dialogical spirit, simulating the same sort of multivocality that invites the same sort of active engagement, all of which amplifies exponentially the complexity of the wave function of every text in the conversation, including mine. At a more granular level, the two books I read and write about simultaneously in "The Medium Is the Hyperobject" behave in a similarly entangled way: What I write about one of them takes on its meaning only as it reverberates with the other, and vice-versa. Move one, moves both. And as is often the case with entangled systems, it is the missing-middle-between—in this case the historical epoch that separates them—more so than the wave function at either end of the dipole that

becomes the primary locus of the experiment, the scene for my revelatory turn.

Or take Heisenberg's "uncertainty principle," which regulates the accuracy with which complementary aspects of quantum systems (like velocity and position, or energy and temporality) can be measured. What it states is that the more precisely one tries to measure one side of those binary pairs, the less precisely one can know the other. This "margin of error" (Planck's constant) is not a function of the mechanical limitations of measurement devices but is built into the fabric of the universe. In "So this is what I was thinking when I wrote 'that sentence'" I move to one extreme to measure assiduously the "energy" of a single sentence from the previous essay, in the process of which that essay's "temporalization" is fully obfuscated. It is like excising a still image from a video reel, blowing it up until every single pixel is visible as a distinct entity, then examining one of those pixels. You can learn a great deal of consequence about the composition of the whole by that means, but it must be extrapolated by returning to the whole for another look. Which is why I had a hard time deciding whether to place this essay before or after the one it comments on. If a book could behave like a quantum system, it would be in both states at the same time! Until I made the decision to close with that essay, that is exactly the state this book was in, at least in my imagination. And the fact that I call attention to its potential dual function leaves open the possibility that you might at some point have the same sort of superpositional experience, before and after somehow simultaneous, and use it to take your own revelatory turn.

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 asterisk-numbered sequentially in the text. You can flip to the **Asides** pages to read it (starting on page 89

here; the electronic version of the book has active links that toggle back and forth); 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 to 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 for vengeance 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]. [I actually started up again, by happenstance, exactly, to the day, after a year, the work similar, my reaction to the responses, or lack thereof, totally different so far.]

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 [first] 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 [now has been]! 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.

The Medium is the Hyperobject

"What is most monstrous is sequence."

E.L. Doctorow

I read Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* back in the mid-1970s, a novel loosely based on the trial and executions of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, their fictional son trying to come to terms with the traumatic effects of this historical event on both him and his sister, the last chapter of which includes a parodic allusion to the Biblical Book of Daniel, where God tells Daniel to "Go thy way . . . : For words are closed up and sealed till the time of the end," hyper-ballooning the bubble of time being explored via the "story" from a couple of generations to eternity. It was a required text in a course I was teaching called Fiction and Fact, a forum for exploring interconnections between these purportedly distinct modes for distinguishing what is "true" from what is not, which so often elide in "real life." The single sentence of my epigraph leapt out at me back then, one I couldn't fully fathom either in the context of the book or in general, which is probably why I remembered it, the only vestige of the book that remains literally intact in my memory, its vague mystery both haunting and inspiring me ever since, a gnomic prophesy pertinent not just to the traumas chronicled in these two books of Daniel, but to life itself, time with its ceaseless sequences our ultimate overseer while we're here.

I say this at the outset to indicate that what follows—this essay on my reading of two apparently unrelated books separated by two generations of cultural history, my professional era, each of which seeks to find a way out of the dysfunctional tropes for temporal sequencing that are endemic to their respective moments—is as much an essay about time, a lifelong preoccupation of mine, one I've written about repeatedly in both my poetry and prose, as it is a commentary on the books.

Reading is of course a temporal activity, all those separate words sequenced out in endless processions waiting to meet us, or for us to meet them, their order of arrangement seemingly inviolable. For some readers, that is the "pleasure" of it, they say, the soothing regularity of alternative time creating an illusion of orderliness in life's often intractable chaos. For me, though, reading has always been the opposite of that, work, hard work. It wasn't until well into my adulthood that I began to understand why. I am, have always been, afflicted by a very bizarre sort of dyslexia, one that I believe derives more from my psychological relationship with time than my visual relationship with words. By which I mean I have a desire, an overwhelming urge really, to perceive a written text, to absorb it perceptually, the way I do a visual image, not incrementally but all at once, as when we look at a tree or a painting, seeing the whole before we examine the parts.

The material effect of this desire when I enter a text is my tendency to read very, very fast, almost manically, scanning whole paragraphs, even pages, at once, to look at these big chunks as if they are amorphous units of meaning simultaneously present instead of increments staged over time, past to future, my eyes jumping back and forth, up

and down, trying mightily to override, to violate, the innate sequences of the words they are trying to apprehend. Obviously, this doesn't work well, especially with texts longer than a page or so, which is probably why my preferred literary genre has always been poetry, especially lyric poetry. It is only after I engage in a reading of this sort as a first encounter with a text— its flow and silhouette clear in my forebrain, a jumble of puzzle pieces struggling to conglomerate sensibly in the background—that I can stand back, slow down, begin to assemble it for further consideration, which I tend to do in multiple stages of rereading that proceed eccentrically, asynchronically, a series of "windows" through which I can re-view what I've already "seen," inciting a revisionary process that invites me to write, often, as in this case, in a similarly recursive manner.

The essay below re-enacts such a process with two books I've been reading and rereading obsessively this month (Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* and Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*), each of its windows one of those moments of measurement. They are arranged now out of their original calendric order, more by how they interacted in retrospect than by how they happened in real time, transforming them into a temporal sequence. My hope is that by looking through those windows in that sequence, you'll get some sense of what the books did for and to me, not individually but in tandem, the four of us, McLuhan, Morton, you and I, dancing the night away.

Pre-lude: February 16, 2024

Prelude (n.): mid 16th century: from French prélude, from medieval Latin praeludium, from Latin praeludere 'play beforehand', from prae 'before' + ludere 'to play'.

Like most of my essays, this one moves in unusual ways. So I'll open with this pre-lude, the hyphen added to foreground its play-beforehandedness, already a violation of the in-built temporal sequence of reading, since I'm writing it after the fact. And I'll introduce each of the five "windows" the essay comprises with a much briefer one. This essay explores two books, unrelated thematically or historically—Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964) and Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (2013)—that I've been working through concurrently, more by happenstance than pre-planning—they just ended up on my bedside table at the same time—over the last two weeks or so, writing parts of the essay while, not after, I read, a practice of simultaneous reading/writing I took up some time ago more by accident than intention, one that has proven to be quite salutary for me in many ways, some of which I report on in "Teaching Secrets" (from my book *waking up: reading wisdom texts*) where several "gurus" end up conversing cross-culturally and trans-historically to open a path for me to think about some "problems" that are afflicting me, and us, right now, including global warming; and some of which I detail in "Quantum Reading Vs. the Rabbit Hole," the lead essay in this book, where I promote this mode of reading as an effective prophylactic for the sorts of cults and conspiracy theories that are so pervasive and deleterious these days, including the ones that pre-constituted the disastrous performance of those college

presidents at last year's Congressional hearing prompted by the catastrophic war ongoing in the Middle East.

In the latter, I call what I do now systems-level or quantum reading, i.e., reading outside the "silos" of separate texts, which promotes (for me) a liminal state of mind where various seemingly unrelated books can enter into ex-temporaneous dialogue with one another, with surprising results. I use a hyphen once more to highlight how a process of this sort suspends many of the time-related constraints that impede dialogue across wide historical gaps, including among disparate texts that make no express gestures toward, are even entirely unconscious of, one another. It differs from the sorts of field-dependent reading strategies scholars typically use, most of which are pre-arranged by some concept of disciplinary "history," with temporality moving sequentially and progressively, even teleologically, many "thens" gestured-toward to create a context for the "now" being proffered. Both of the authors I'm looking at here, for example, locate their work, as critiques of their cultural moments, in stereotypical templates of that sort, tons and tons of back-references to establish their authority to say something forward-oriented.

This is not, then, an explication of, a commentary on, or a review of the two books, neither of which I would likely have written "about" for anyone but myself had I read them in isolation from one another. Reading them in unison, though, opened a sort of Einsteinian wormhole that, among other unexpected things, both excised and highlighted the historical interim they bookend, making weirdly palpable what we now call, most generally, the postmodernist epoch, the former book facing toward it just before it arrived, the latter gazing back at it just after it

passed, ancestor and descendent suddenly seeing one another, at least in the alternate universe of my imagination, on opposite sides of their temporal divide. To use an automotive metaphor Morton introduces early in his book: "Objects in mirror are closer than they appear," which in this case is more a temporal than spatial illusion, one convex mirror reflected in another, the object-oriented metaphysics of modernity seeing the object-oriented ontology of post-post-modernity and vice-versa, the vacuum of subject-oriented epistemology foreshortening the interim that separates them, just as relativity predicts would happen near the speed of light that each of these books indexes in some way to make its case.

My problem with postmodernist critical systems (and I've said this repeatedly and variously over the years in any number of venues) whichever flavor you prefer, is not that they set about dismantling well-established cultural tropes, systems, and constructions, most of which had long since passed their "best by" shelf-life. That was urgent and necessary, and I did my share of that work along the way. It was that once all these "ivory towers" were down, there was neither the will nor a way to dismantle the scaffolding that had been erected to accomplish the deconstruction, cumbersome mazes of planking and pipes left standing around empty space. Slap up a flimsy, whitewashed veneer to create the illusion of solidity and, *voila*, there is the ivory tower again, except way bigger, proclaiming all the while that it is not a tower at all.

As is always the case when I read and write in this manner, something quite startling emerged along the way, something nowhere near my horizon of possibility when I started. In this case, it was the "monstrosity" of "the book,"

not as a literal artifact but as a cultural construction, that generic tabernacle within which the ideology of Western patriarchy, power, and privilege has been ensconced serially for more than a millennium—at least since the codification of the orthodox Christian Bible in the 4th and 5th centuries CE—come again to fruition in these two arguments, ensconced in a medium so ill-suited to their purposes, the very thing that created all those ivory towers in the first place being deployed un-self-critically in an attempt to disassemble them: the medium as hyperobject, indeed!

The line of thinking that led me that way started innocently enough with my wondering at one point why these authors *chose* it as their "medium," one that seemed both much too long and way too a-sensory to suit their "messages." These are both smart men who must have been able to see that. So why wouldn't they have followed the imperatives of their own arguments and chosen some of the available multi-media formats for their presentations? McLuhan's many binaries—eye vs. ear, hot vs. cold, community vs. individuality, simultaneity vs. sequence, etc., all those structuralist contraries echoing through his work—would, for example, have *felt* more compelling had he used some combination of the media he purports expertise with—radio and TV, say, sound bites and video snippets moving at the speed-of-electricity (one of his obsessions)—rather than many thousands of mute words strung out like an endless mule train crossing a white-sand desert. And Morton's foundational references both to art (he does offer a few images as a centerpiece in the book, but too isolated from his commentaries on them to resonate) and music (especially contemporary experimental varieties, the subject of his final, long chapter) would, for example, have *felt* more

compelling, too, had he used the kind of audio-visual "streams" contemporary media make available—PowerPoints, Ted Talks, YouTubes, Instagrams, whatever, the swoosh of images and sound (one of his obsessions) cascading along at the speed of light—rather than inaudible strings of stylish prose. In other words, why do they print out the ledger sheets instead of showing me the money?

I think the answer is simple: because "the book" remains the only fully legitimized format for sharing the fruits of scholarly enterprise in the contemporary academy, which is where both of these authors want to live, or at least to be welcomed. So they default to it instinctively, no matter how averse it might be as a medium for their messages. Despite everything that McLuhan understands and believes about the limitations of phonetic literacy, despite everything that Morton believes about the vitality of thingness vis-à-vis words, despite everything that all those theorists in between said about "the death of the author" and the "destabilization of textuality," the book somehow remains as the preferred (if petrified) vehicle for intellectuals to reach an audience of their peers.

I understand the problems each author wants me to attend to—McLuhan the dramatic impact of electricity on how information was being propagated, with equally dramatic psychological and social effects that were being underestimated, misunderstood, even ignored; Morton the dramatic impact of a wide range of larger-than-us entities haunting us now, including several of our own making, while we indulge in either doomsday or fake news fantasies about their implications, the only visionaries experimental artists and musicians few of us have heard (of) or ever will. I just wish they had seen more clearly that the very medium

they chose to convey what they had to say is part of the problem, as complicit as anything else they call out along the way. I would have been satisfied, and this essay would not likely exist, if they had acknowledged, even passingly, that contradiction, admitting that while not the most fitting, the book was still "the gold standard" for commodifying their intellectual work in the economy of the academic marketplace. Instead, they simply defer to the numbing anesthesia of words on a page, many, many pages, which slo-mo temporal sequences via visual abstraction, instead of riding the fast-forward synesthesia AV media creates via intersecting eddies of vivid sensation.

Window 1: February 8, 2024

Pre-lude: I wrote this section in the midst of my first high-speed reading of the two books, trying to find a rhythmic relationship more with their moves than their "ideas," creating a simulacrum if you will of their surface textures, something I always do when I read a "difficult" text, my way of training my wavelength to the author's, more a temporal than a semantic move, until, as Yeats says, I can no longer "know the dancer from the dance."

Just by happenstance I've been reading two books this week that have no apparent connection with one another, either thematically or historically. One is Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, his fluidic post-post-modernist approach-avoidance to the many overwhelming "entities" that haunt us peripherally and scarily, constituting an ephemeral "mesh" (which he calls a "sensual object" foregrounded for its for-ness, and not an actual object in the way Object Oriented Ontology defines one) that orchestrates our experience of "the world"

now that (he says) it has "ended," not so much because of those entities but because we can longer sustain the illusion that they are somehow outside of and subordinate to us. It is (counterintuitively) by residing within/outside the overwhelming gooiness of hyperobjects that a "no-self" state [a term Morton borrows here, interestingly, from the "Oxbridge utilitarian" Derek Parfit, but could just as easily have derived from his personally native Buddhism] becomes not only possible but inevitable, instigating "a radical encounter with intimacy" (139). We have now, he argues,

> entered the time of hyperobjects [which] is a time of *hypocrisy*, *weakness,* and *lameness.* . . Hypocrisy is a pretense, an act. But it is also simply hidden doom, a message sent from somewhere obscure. Or a message that is secret . . .: encrypted. (148)

All of this is well within the wheelhouse of the Object Oriented Ontology Morton speaks from and for, which even claims to reclaim "[t]he thing called 'subject' [that cornerstone of postmodernist epistemology] as an object" (149).

I find Graham Harman a more legible spokesman for what "object" means in OOO, but Morton has his moments, most especially in the chapter titled "Hypocrisies," where the fog started to clear for me and from which the above passages are extracted. Interestingly (to me) it is here that he opens that unintentional wormhole I can whoosh through all the way back to 1964, via an "uncanny" (a favorite word of his) reference to the traditional rhetorical concept of "delivery," a la Demosthenes, that stands at the root of the term "hypocrisy." He says:

> Delivery is physical. . . . Think about it. A CD is a delivery. An MP3 is a delivery. A vinyl record is a delivery. . . . each one is an object: not some merely neutral medium, but an entity in its own right. (149)

Which "delivers" me directly to the other book on my docket, Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man,* celebrating its 60th anniversary this year, which is what led me to buy it, the original edition, a yellow-paged used version with "DISCARD" stamped on the bottom edge, a book I think I read in college back in the late 60s but remember almost nothing about except the famous catch-phrase, "the medium is the message," his turgidly pre-post-modernist take on the radical cultural shift that was being instigated back then via electr(on)ic media, opening an era where, he says, a "medium" must be understood not as a value-neutral vehicle of conveyance for delivering a "message" but as an extension of human embodiment, one that impacts both individual cognition and social organization, a shift that has progressed at hyper-speed in the meantime, sucking us all both addictively and kicking and screaming into its swirling yaw while we indulge in its excesses and resist its imperative for change. All of which subverts the antique Wordsworthian equation about "all the mighty world [o]f eye, and ear,—both what they half create [a]nd what perceive."

In McLuhan's vision, it is the "mighty world" of media that creates what eye and ear perceive, not vice-versa, no halfway or two ways about it. His two primary examples are radio, his own coming-of-age medium, which is "hot" in its capacity to reanimate the primitive ear-oriented intimacy of aurality/orality that favors community; and

TV, which is "cool" in its capacity to simulate visually the sequentiality instilled by the eye-oriented print culture that favors individuality, another unexpected point of contact, of "intimacy," between these two remotely arranged moments, McLuhan and Morton suddenly resonating, in tune with one another. In McLuhan's view, a medium is not simply "an object in its own right." It is "an extension of our central nervous system" (264), a hyperobject of sorts.

For McLuhan "the ear is hyperesthetic . . . ["aesthetic" is a term Morton uses over and over to characterize our relationships, vexed as they are, with hyperobjects] intolerant, closed, and exclusive, whereas the eye is open, neutral, and associative" (264). I don't think it's too much of a stretch to say that the former is more likely than the latter to promote a "no-self" relationship with what or whoever else is there, of the sort that Morton ascribes to Keats, who, in a roomful of others, becomes more "like a chameleon when 'not himself goes home to himself,' because the identity of everyone in the room has pressed upon him and annihilated his identity" (197), a set of terms he takes almost verbatim from a letter Keats wrote to Richard Woodhouse in 1818.

In general, there was something similarly exhilarating and frustrating about my experiences with both of these books, feeling in some strange way, despite their obvious philosophical differences, to be cut from the same cloth: products (literally) of the academic book-centric culture that pre-scribed scholarly enterprise during my 50 year career in university communities, which started when I changed my undergraduate major from physics to English in 1968, a few years after McLuhan's book appeared, and ended

formally when I retired in 2018, a few years after Morton's book appeared.

At first approach, each book seems to have a fairly straightforward position to elaborate: Everything is changing in fundamental ways right now, respectively, and we need to adapt to those changes not just discursively but philosophically and materially by revising our previously taken for granted assumptions about the foundational concepts that end up in their titles: media and objects. My expectation was that their definitional work would be done quickly, locating me firmly within their preferred paradigms, and the implications would be unraveled gradually along the rest of the way. My readerly experience was the opposite of that: I had no firm idea of what either of those concepts meant for them or, more crucially, for me, until quite late in their books, all the discursive sleight of hand finally stilled.

I actually wondered just today, while I was out walking, whether either author knew exactly, from the get-go, what their key terms "meant" before they started writing; using instead the process itself to tease all that out. As a reader, I felt constantly off balance, tantalizingly close to something I might call an "understanding" but unable to reach it, as if their books were not media for sharing what they knew, but scrims for both of us to learn what we didn't yet know. I have no problem with that because it is exactly how I write myself, never quite knowing what I want to "say" until I find out what that is as I write, a process as exhilarating and frustrating for me as reading their books was. So once I adjusted to the uncertainty built into the vehicle, I was happy to go along for the ride.

My experience of reading Morton, for instance, was less a process of assimilating a new discourse by translating his into my own vernacular, or of comprehending his "point" in the normal sense of that word, as in "Oh, I see what you mean now, Tim;" it felt more like skating along over black ice, trying to stride faster and faster to keep up enough speed to stay upright, resisting any temptation to look directly down, where all I'd see is my own feet skittering over the bumps of his many gestures toward outside sources, some of which I knew—thus the temptation to slow down and try to recalibrate my stride with his—some of which I didn't—thus the temptation to stop and add them to my mental catalog of things to get to someday, maybe even right now, by getting off his ice and onto someone else's—either of which would disrupt my rhythm enough to end in a stumble, a miniature "end of the world," at least as it pertains to reading a book like this.

All the while, I was scanning the path forward the way one does while driving, looking at what's immediately upcoming without apprehending it, gathering vague impressions from peripheral asides, remembering fleetingly what just flew by, an ongoing "aesthetic" flow of sensation that becomes instantly vertiginous if one has a sudden self-reflective connection to the immediacy of the embodied moment, as in "what the hell am I doing whizzing along here at 75 miles an hour in a large tin can, among all those other large tin cans whizzing by barely an arm's length away, any sudden shift in the wrong direction precipitating a 'fall' of catastrophic proportions:" reading as a simulacrum of life-in-time, the speed of life, always seemingly just this side of catastrophe. In other words, I read Morton the way I learned how to read Derrida and Heidegger (one of Morton's primary recovery/disposal

projects here) before him, what's left after the (f)act a residue of method and rhythm that I can then apply to anything in my vicinity I want to write about in order then to think about, always in that order.

My experience of reading McLuhan was similar, though given his historical moment, those last few seconds of late-modernism, right before the water froze, it felt more like riding white water after the spring melt, all his equally copious citations looming up like boulders I needed to navigate a way around or bump into, still-iconic literary and philosophical masterpieces (including ample doses of Shakespeare, whose work seems present to McLuhan in a way it could never be for Morton, who prefers poets like Blake or nursery rhymes), the sort of allusive mode of reference that was the staple of modernism, post-Eliot, all of McLuhan's extraversion in this respect a way both to create an aura of authority and to hint toward the elusive meaning of his famous meme, one he seems constantly to be both pointing toward and withholding, as if even he isn't quite sure what it means (prompting some of the many critiques of this book in the meantime.)

McLuhan demanded the same sort of speed and balance as Morton: just go with the flow and make instantaneous adjustments to each shift in the speed and turbulence of the text, new vistas appearing out of nowhere at the same frequency as they do in *Hyperobjects*, but with a stability and "mass" they would soon be deprived of by an assortment of continental thinkers (Heidegger's concept of "withdrawal" a good initial step toward understanding the unnerving experience of encountering what is there more in the ways it is not there than how it is), the foundational slipperiness of scholarly discourse shared across both of these platforms

as if nothing has changed, at least on that level, in the two generations that separate them.

This sense of simultaneity in my ways of slip-sliding across those two different states of water, one rushing with me in it, one frozen with me on it, was somehow subtly depressing to me, these two iconic books, standing like bookends on either side of my personal intellectual history, college to post-retirement, seeking to compress both within and between them all the other books I either read or meant to during the interim that separated them, a portal in their shared hyper-space of ideas opening up for direct transit, at either side of which is an electron, entangled with its partner, communicating with one another not via speed-of-light signals but instantly, Morton the McLuhan of my post-academic life, McLuhan the Morton of my pre-academic life, two peas in a pod, sharing their own two cents with one another via the electricity that starts with my eyes, those portals toward a dissociative "literacy" McLuhan claims was substituted for the intimacy of ears when the phonetic alphabet, the basis for Western imperialism, pried individuals from their communities with effects that have led directly, it seems now, to Morton's "end of the world," haunted by hyperobjects, those frightful figments ushering the Anthropocene toward whatever comes next (for Earth if not for us), all on filmy, flimsy pages flipping by, littered with millions of black marks colliding finally in the labyrinthine archive of my hidden brain.

Which is how I ended up deriving my title from their merger. We are finally now so deep into the electronic age, media-saturated to the extreme, that it is pointless to dissemble about our capacity to examine them specifically

and analytically as discrete cultural functions, the way McLuhan does in the latter half of his book: 20-some brief, discrete chapters on media that range from clothing to TV, all of which (and many more) are now arrayed in a collaborative unison that retreats as we approach it, hides as we examine it, absorbing us into its gooey aura whether we like it or not, no matter our political or ethical inclinations, or what we actually say we believe about any of them. Those 20-some separate things are now one thing, a hyperobject, that keeps "warming" us "globally," surrounding us, filling us up, emptying us out, remaking us over and over in its own image.

Window 2: February 2, 2024

Pre-lude: This is the first chunk of stuff I wrote for this essay, while I was reading the opening sections of the books, trying to get my bearings with their respective projects, beginning to feel connections forming between them, sounding more like a review might. I wrote a lot of multi-book reviews for a small magazine early in career, a genre, still one of my favorites, that demands focus and concision.

Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World, both as a book and as a concept, is Timothy Morton's attempt to reconfigure our relationship with our "world," once we acknowledge that it has now "ended" and we are displaced permanently from any semblance of a position of privilege vis-à-vis all the other "objects" with whom we shared spaces and times in what it once was. He proffers a litany of approach/avoidances early on, as if one of the best ways to understand this new "(dis)order of things" is not top-down or bottom-up conceptually, that delusional

remnant of Western philosophy now in tatters, but inside-out and outside-in, materially, the object-ness of Object Oriented Ontology that Morton both endorses and elaborates via his work.

Global warming (which he prefers over the more antiseptically de-anthropomorphized "climate change") ends up being his chief concern, the *raison d'être* of the book in a way, a kind of looming presence/absence haunting his thinking as it haunts ours; but his inventory ranges spatially from quantum clouds of subatomic particles to the farthest astronomical reaches of the cosmos, both of whose secrets have been partially peeled back during his lifetime; from the sheen of radioactive after-glow sprinkled over the earth's surface to the specter of nuclear annihilation those little clicks on a Geiger Counter force us to live with endemically; and temporally from the tiniest tick of time, the present that disappears even before it evanesces, that mysterious irregular metronome that defines what "life" is and means for us in this universe, to the lifespan of that universe, Big Bang to whimper, its intrinsic futurality washing over us repeatedly like waves on a beach, rather than emerging unblemished from a frittered-away past, a radical reordering of the presumed directionality of time.

Both of these, space and time, blend into one another until neither is quite there any longer, a sort of eternal tactile present that is no longer present to us in any recognizable respect, allied with one another in a surrealistic version of Einstein's dream until neither is what it was or seems, evading even their own names. Pretty slick in a way, if you just skim over the surface of his elegant prose without stopping repeatedly to process one of his references to some text that is not his, the beautiful and burdensome bane of

both philosophical discourse (let me show you I know it all, from Heraclitus to Harman) and of post- (and now post-post) modernism generally. But also pretty sticky, given the medium that serves as his conveyance: Materially, there is this book, "his" book, that artifactual antique of the print culture that indemnifies intellectual work against both dismissal and radical innovation, a hyperobject of vast proportions masquerading as something I can hold in my hands; and intellectually by the sort of "monstrosity of sequence" that Doctorow's Daniel finds intolerable in his search for meaning, in this case the always-default position of the philosopher in Western culture: the beginning to now narrative of dialectically impelled progress that emerges from the sediment of citations along the way, each new work purporting to be both continuous with and discontinuous from that "story," its temporary capstone, if you will.

At the risk of sounding glib, one of the simplest imperatives I read in OOO is "it's not about me now," the underlying tenet for the two primary identity roles I created as an adult because of personal choices I made to become a teacher (first) and then a father, each of which turns on a massive, blinding Times-Square-type-light-scroll with that sentence repeating over and over. I knew I could respect its imperative or not. But either way, it was just true. And it was not rendered, crucially, as a provisional statement, as in, "it's not about me any longer," which is how I was first tempted to read it. It was in fact, as Morton makes clear, never about me. Not now, not before, not ever. OOO simply invites me to expand that imperative to larger and larger levels until I understand and accept that this "about me-ness" is the foundational delusion of cultural privilege that animated the Western history portion of the

Anthropocene, with all of its excesses, arrogances and devastations on all the other alleged not-mes out there.

Understanding Media: *The Extensions of Man*, both as a book and as a concept, is Marshall McLuhan's manifesto for radically reorienting our way of thinking about how we communicate with and relate to one another, now that the hegemony of print was being undermined, if not deposed, by the cascade of audio-visual alternatives that emerged during the first half of the 20th century. Since McLuhan came of age during this moment, his own formation was vexed by these crosscurrents of "in-formation," shaped "in-timately" under the aegis of those new ways of making meaning, yet still regimented foundationally by the print-based culture of the academy. The fact that he renders what he has to say in a book, the most conservative and stolid index toward the latter, puts him at odds with his argument materially in ways that certainly inflect its pertinence.

But what in fact does he hope to get across by assembling his two key terms—"medium" and "message"—in this order, the all-important "is" asserting a directional identity between them? Is the key element the sequence? Or is the absence of a "not" the key? And is any of this still relevant? McLuhan's assertion that media are not vehicles of conveyance but extensions of embodiment seems so obvious, now that Elon Musk is implanting microchips in human brains, Apple is selling goggles that turn us into walking Googles, and ChatGPT is capable of doing so much of the pre-thinking we need to do to think that it's easy to think we barely need to think at all.

His primary obsession early on is with electricity (his equivalent of Morton's global warming), the force that feeds all the then-new media that interest him, one that jump-starts, ironically, an evolutionary reversion to the sort of aural, tactile culture that pre-dated the printing press, where simultaneity replaces sequence as the order of the moment, introducing a lag between habit and possibility. McLuhan seems to believe that we were right then on the cusp of a fundamental shift in how "subjects" (as in domains of knowledge, not people) might be arrayed in K-12 settings, moving away from the mechanical model founded on the industrial economy where the "parts" were discrete "entities" with no essential interrelationships, and toward a more synergistic model where learning, he says, will be experimental, serendipitous, discovery-oriented, fundamentally creative, a "humanities"-based approach that will produce "artists" capable of presenting (not re-presenting) synesthetic experience, promoting even more rapid adaptation to new media. He was clearly wrong, at least as far as schools go.

A seventh grader these days still tramps from one room to another, math here, English there, art around the corner, without any systemic structure for perceiving them as facets of an organic human experience rather than slots of knowledge, like separate silos full of corn and wheat and oats in a giant barn. And while university students experience their array of choices via electronic rather than hard-copy "catalogs" now, they are still coded as a series of discrete "fields of study," like Aristotle's bookshelf, each subject between its own covers, all the titles facing outward for selection, no book ever able to bleed sidewise into the one it's sitting next to let alone into all the others—the this is this and that is that and that is not this and this is not that

approach to knowledge and learning that makes it difficult for any of us, students, teachers, professionals, everyone, to bleed into one another in some collaborative way toward common understandings. The radical transformation McLuhan seemed to believe was right around the corner, Morton seems to imply we are still awaiting, as the future rushes in, premeditating each present moment rather than un-premeditating time so we can find a path forward from where we happen to be now and now and now, those empty "sequences" both Morton (the various kinds of resistance to incremental change—cynicism, rage, wishful thinking, et al.— that afflict left, right, and middle, especially in relation to global warming) and McLuhan (the way media indenture vast and unreflective "audiences" to banal entertainment and chronic distraction rather than to education and activism) angst about. And at the foundation of all of it, for some reason, remains "the book."

That this radical disconnect between cultural imperatives and institutional adaptation has not been catastrophic is due in large part, I think, to the fact that young minds instinctively learn what the media of their moment make possible via an on-the-fly autodidacticism, making them more expert with the technology "at hand" than those who purport to teach them how best to use it. McLuhan for example writes more compellingly about radio as a form of social currency, his own coming-of-age medium, than he does about TV, which he would have first encountered as an adult. In the former case, he seems to have what Morton would call an "intimate" connection to his object. In the latter case, he sounds more like I would if I tried to write with authority about rap music or TikTok. Someone of my vintage might find what I had to say interesting. Someone who grew up with those media would find it comical. I

grew up with TV and I find most of what McLuhan has to say about that medium more weird than wise.

Window 3: February 12, 2024

Pre-lude: I don't underline text when I read, takes too much time. I fold back the top corner of pages that have material of especial interest to me, hoping I'll remember why when I come back to them. I compiled the lists below retrospectively by going back over the various pages I had marked in this way and then typing out the passage that I assume I wanted to remember. Then, for efficiency's sake, I winnowed that list down to my top fourteen for each book, mostly to highlight my readerly predilections in each case—time for Morton, education for McLuhan—long term obsessions of mine mingling with theirs, as is the case with every reader who writes about what they read. I insert it here so you can "listen to" some snippets of their "voices" before mine fully takes over.

From *Hyperobjects*: *Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*

"Global warming denial is also a denial about what causality is after Hume and Kant—namely a feature of phenomena rather than things in themselves." (16)

"In a sense, we can expect human egos to be pockmarked with the traces of hyperobjects." (51)

". . . the undulating fronds of space and time float in front of objects." (63)

"This wake of causality would appear to flow backward 'into' the present." (67)

"Objects do not occur 'in' time and space, but rather emit spacetime." (90)

"Appearance is the past. Essence is the future." (91)

"What is called nowness in Buddhist contemplative theory is not a point or even a bubble, no matter how wide, but a fluid, uncanny washing back and forth like a current and an undertow." (93)

"Futurality is reinscribed into the present, ending the metaphysics of presence: not through some neat philosophical footwork, but because the very large finitude of hyperobjects forces humans to coexist with a strange future, a future 'without us.'" (94)

"What is left if we aren't the world? Intimacy. We have lost the world but gained a soul—the entities that coexist with us obtrude on our awareness with greater and greater urgency. Three cheers for the so-called *end of the world*, then, since this moment is the beginning of history, the end of the human dream that reality is significant for them alone. We now have the prospect of forging new alliances between humans and non-humans alike, now that we have stepped out of the cocoon of *world*." (108)

"This is the momentous era, at which we achieve what has sometimes been called ecological awareness. Ecological awareness is a detailed and increasing sense, in science and outside of it, of the innumerable interrelationships among lifeforms and between life and non-life." (128)

"Thus the time of hyperobjects is a time of sincerity: a time in which it is impossible to achieve a final distance toward the world." (130)

"The proximity of an alien presence that is also our innermost essence is very much its structure of feeling." (139)

"What is doom? . . . Doom can mean fate, destiny, and in a stronger sense, death. Finally, doom means justice . . . a figure that Derrida calls synonymous with deconstruction, in that it is irreducibly futural. . . Doesn't this rich range of meanings suggest something about the hyperobject? The hyperobject is indeed the bringer of fate, destiny, death. This destiny comes from beyond the (human) world, and pronounces or decrees the end of the world." (147-48)

"Large, complex systems require causality theories that are not deterministic. The oppressive drive to repeat the epistemological thrills and spills of the correlationist era by returning to Humean skepticism is itself a symptom that the nonhumans are already here." (177)

From *Understanding Media*: *The Extensions of Man*

"We are no more prepared to encounter radio and TV in our literate milieu than the native of Ghana is able to cope with the literacy that takes him out of his collective tribal work and beaches him in individual isolation." (31)

"The giving to man of an eye for an ear by phonetic literacy is, socially and politically, probably the most radical explosion that can occur in any social structure." (58)

"The new media and technologies by which we amplify and extend ourselves constitute huge collective surgery carried out on the social body with complete disregard for antiseptics." (70)

"I am curious to know what would happen if art were suddenly seen for what it is, namely, exact information of how to rearrange one's psyche in order to anticipate the next blow from our own extended faculties." (71)

"Language extends and amplifies man but it also divides his faculties." (83)

"Electricity points the way to an extension of the process of consciousness itself, on a world scale, and without any verbalization whatever. Such a state of collective awareness may have been the preverbal condition of man." (83)

"The Greek myth about the alphabet was that Cadmus, reputedly the king who introduced the phonetic letters into Greece, sowed dragon's teeth and they sprang up armed men. . . . Letters are not only like teeth visually, but their power to put teeth into the business of empire-building is manifest in our Western history." (85)

"It can be argued, then, that the phonetic alphabet, alone, is the technology that has the means of creating 'civilized man'—the separate individuals equal before a written code of law. Separateness of the individual, continuity of space and of time, and uniformity of codes are the prime marks of literate and civilized societies." (86-87)

"By imposing unvisualizable relationships that are the result of instant speed, electric technology dethrones the visual sense and restores us to the dominion of synesthesia, and the close interinvolvement of the other senses." (108)

"Such has always been the case, most notoriously in government censorship of the press and the movies. Although the medium is the message, the controls go beyond programming. The restraints are always directed to the 'content,' which is always another medium." (266)

"The only medium for which our education now offers some civil defense is the print medium. The educational establishment, founded on print, does not yet admit any other responsibilities." (267)

"A cool medium . . . leaves much more for the listener or user to do than a hot medium. If the medium is of high definition, participation is low. If the medium is of low intensity, the participation is high." (278)

"In education the conventional division of the curriculum into subjects is already as outdated as the medieval trivium and quadrivium of the Renaissance." (301)

"Our education has long ago acquired the fragmentary and piecemeal character of mechanism. It is now under increasing pressure to acquire the depth and interrelation that are indispensable in the all-at-once world of electric organization. Paradoxically, automation makes liberal education mandatory." (310)

Window 4: February 5, 2024

Pre-lude: I wrote this section just after I wrote Window 1, as a way of "getting to the point." It was McLuhan's chapter on radio, and Morton's chapter on hypocrisies, both very late in their respective books, that oriented their key terms retroactively and clarified the implications of their arguments, at least for me.

Okay, I've had my fun looking at these two books from the other side of Alice's looking glass, my language mirroring Morton's and McLuhan's, who, though separated by the two generations during which postmodernism came and went, my adult life, seem to me to share the same DNA, one riding over white water the other gliding over black ice, same medium, different messages, or vice-versa, depending on which point in the temporal range one is stepping back into from behind that glass. I need now to do some actual work, first to try to understand for myself what new things McLuhan was trying to say about media back in 1964, and then what new things about objects Morton wants to call my attention toward in 2013. And maybe to get to a "point" that is not just more and more words about words, to "rise up" to a level where I can actually see McLuhan's media as Morton's hyperobjects and Morton's hyperobjects as McLuhan's media, both of which I'm quite sure (though "quite sure" is not a state of mind I experience with any confidence as it pertains to these books and those problems) would be considered anathema by their respective creators.

So let me begin at the beginning, that title of mine, which I hope I can persuade you is something more than just a cutesy merger of their respective memes. In 1964 the media that McLuhan was primarily concerned with would be considered quite primitive by our standards. He talks a lot

about TV, for example, and radio, and movies, none of which provides the possibility for interactivity, a feedback loop, all of which simply ferry their cargo to those who witness them: I sit and watch or listen, absently present, an image or sound wave making an impression on me, with (perhaps) dramatic effects on my social and psychological matrices I am largely unconscious of. End of story, at least in the relatively simple realm of the mid-20th century media economy.

What McLuhan says, first of all, is that all of these medias' messages are themselves other media, disturbing the long-entrenched linearity that print literacy induced technologically, which promoted individualism over kinship as the foundational social imperative, and, more mechanically, the sequential arrangement of all sorts of intellectual and economic structures, along the lines of moveable type, the foundational difference between imperial and indigenous cultures (a distinction he makes via the term "civilization.") At least some of the media that emerged via electricity reverted, quite suddenly by evolutionary standards, to those prior modes. One example of this is the movie, "[w]herein we return to the inclusive form of the icon" (27). To explain this, he turns (oddly) to a seemingly static medium, painting:

> It was at this moment of the movie that cubism occurred . . . [C]ubism substitutes all facets of an object simultaneously for the "point of view" or facet of perspective illusion. Instead of a specialized illusion of the third dimension on canvas cubism sets up an interplay of planes and contradiction or dramatic conflict of patterns, lights, textures that "drives home the message" by involvement. . .

> Cubism, by seizing on instant, total awareness [i.e. "sensory awareness of the whole"], suddenly announced that the *medium is the message*. . . [which is] the moment that sequence yields to the simultaneous. . . . [and s]pecialized segments of attention have shifted to total field . . . Before the electric speed and total field, it was not obvious that the medium is the message. The message, it seemed, was the "content" as people used to ask what a painting was *about*. (27-8)

Yes, the moment that sequence yields to the simultaneous, its "monstrosity" finally overcome!?

And finally, late in the book, in "Radio: The Tribal Drum," his coming-of-age medium, he seems to me to come clean:

> Radio is provided with its cloak of invisibility, like any other medium. It comes to us ostensibly with person-to-person directness that is private and intimate, while in more urgent fact, it is really a subliminal echo chamber of magical power to touch remote and forgotten chords. All technological extensions of ourselves must be numb and subliminal else we could not endure the leverage exerted upon us by such extensions. (263-64)

Here, the storehouse of cultural information implied by Eliot's concept of tradition, that bedrock of modernism, one that can only be acquired by Herculean feats of bibliophilic labor, becomes in McLuhan's late-modernist moment instantly available in theory and impossible to fully process in practice, via electricity, which short-circuits the sequencing of words into the simultaneity of sensation:

Radio affects most people intimately, person-to-person, offering a world of unspoken communication between writer-speaker and the listener. This is the immediate aspect of radio. A private experience. The subliminal depths of radio are charged with the resonating echoes of tribal horns and antique drums. This is inherent in the very nature of the medium with its power to turn the psyche and society into a single echo chamber. (261)

The aurality of radio is "intimate," "private," "immediate," oddly "unspoken," a sonic boom that rattles everything at "subliminal depths," scribal to tribal, just like that!

Morton achieves a similar if quieter effect via sound late in his book, especially in the chapter called "Hypocrisies:"

> The Aeolian properties of objects are well accounted for in OOO. OOO holds that there are real things, and that those real things are objects, every single one. We humans are objects. The thing called a "subject" is an object. Sentient beings are objects. . . There are all kinds of objects that so-called subjects don't apprehend. Global warming existed long before human instruments started to detect it. For millions of years oil oozed around deep under the ocean. All kinds of objects apprehended it, of course. When we are conscious of something, we are on a continuum with rock strata and plankton that apprehend oil in their own way. (149)

Here a sort of eerie wind-played music that emanates from objects including even subjects-as-object both delineates them as distinct "things" and invites us into a continuum with all of them, like McLuhan's "subliminal echo chamber

[with] magical power to touch remote and forgotten chords." Again, simultaneity overrides sequence, language succumbing to sensation, subject yielding to objects, one and then all, just like that!

And further:

> According to OOO, objects have a very interesting property. We only see their sensual qualities, in interactions that spontaneously spawn new objects. Me smelling an oil spill is a whole new object in the universe . . . This object has special properties. What are they? Just like all objects, hyperobjects *withdraw*. (150)

Finally, hyperobjects, like all objects, withdraw. This may not make hyperobjects analogous with McLuhan's "all technological extensions of ourselves must be numb and subliminal else we could not endure the leverage exerted upon us by such extensions," but it sounds to me like it's in the same neural ballpark.

Window 5: February 19, 2024

Pre-lude: I return now to "the book," to explore more deeply its status as a cultural icon rather than an artifact, a hyperobject rather than one of the things I held in my hands while I wrote this essay, the quotation marks highlighting that distinction. I want to frame what I have to say with a quote from each author that, while not materially connected with the narrative that follows, indexes, via Kant and Hume, one of our conventional ways for measuring change: cause and effect.

"It was David Hume who, in the eighteenth century, demonstrated that there is no causality indicated in any sequence, natural or logical. The sequential is merely additive, not causative. 'Hume's argument,' said Immanuel Kant, 'awoke me from my dogmatic slumber.' Neither Hume nor Kant detected the hidden cause of our Western bias toward sequence as 'logic' in the all-pervasive technology of the alphabet." (88)

Marshall McLuhan

"Hyperobjects are not just collections, systems or assemblages of other objects. They are objects in their own right . . . Least of all, then, would it be right to say that hyperobjects are figments of the (human) imagination, whether we think imagination as the bundling of associations in the style of Hume, or as the possibility for synthetic judgments a priori, with Kant. Hyperobjects are real whether or not someone is thinking of them. . . . Hyperobjects force us to acknowledge the immanence of thinking to the physical. But this does not mean that we are 'embedded' in a 'lifeworld.' (2)

Timothy Morton

One of the most surprising things about writing, at least as I experience it, is that it quite often reveals (to me) what I don't yet know (at least not consciously) rather than reports (to you) what I do know or have come to know by reading someone else's writing as if it reports (to me) what they know. In other words, in practice, the stereotypical cause/effect sequence we presume inheres to writing and reading as knowledge-making technologies is inverted. At least for me. I'm not sure what if anything Hume, Kant, McLuhan or Morton would say about that. But together they somehow opened this final window for me to see

something I never anticipated when I sat down to read these two books or when I started to write about them, how their medium of choice, "the book," in its hyperobjective mode, opened a portal toward the very long runway that brought me here.

I'm going to head down that runway in reverse, starting with a personal experience rather than an historical trend. After my wife Carol died suddenly and unexpectedly in 2015, a deeply traumatic event for me, I concluded that the status-related mechanisms I had been indenturing myself to in order to "progress" through my profession were much ado about nothing that mattered even in the short run let alone the long run. All of this had been percolating inside me for decades as I endured the typical no-exit hazing routines imposed episodically in my profession, "the book" the primary cudgel for enforcing their imperatives. Unfortunately, it took an event of this magnitude for me to see that the exit was right in front of me all the time, this window I'm looking back through now from the opposite side.

The first book I wrote in the aftermath of this loss—*This Fall: essays on loss and recovery*—was founded on the walks in the woods I was then taking alone every morning, after many years having taken them together with my wife. It is a wonderful book, my best I think. When I finished it, I had to decide what to do with it, publication-wise, and I knew immediately and instinctively that I could not run a book this intimate through the gauntlet of the extant publishing marketplace, which I had some familiarity with. So, I decided instead, without a clear premonition of the implications, to publish it on my own.

First, I created a personal website and uploaded my manuscript, in PDF format, free to anyone who wanted to read it, assuring thereby that what I called at the time the "profanities" of money and fame, those currencies of status in the capitalistic economy of the knowledge industry, would not sully the memory of wife. Then I recorded and uploaded an audiobook version, also free. Almost immediately, the book found a few readers in various parts of the world dealing with loss and grief who let me know how valuable it had been for them, which told me I was on the right track with this venture.

A few months later, more out of curiosity and boredom than ambition, I decided to create and publish a paperback version of *This Fall*. I had no interest in the old "vanity press" marketplace, where one pays someone else a lot of money upfront to end up with a stillborn simulation of a book. I wanted to do it all myself and to make a book that would be indistinguishable from all the others out there in the marketplace. I quickly found that the online tools necessary for this were freely available and extremely user-friendly: upload a PDF, create a cover, press a few buttons, and a few days later, for a small expense, a very nice-looking book will arrive at your doorstep. The one I created for *This Fall* looks and feels just like any book you might pick out from a bookstore shelf, beautiful cover (via an image of a painting made by my son, an accomplished artist), quality materials, etc.

I reported all of this casually and in passing to my chair at the time, who told me sternly: "You know that book doesn't count, don't you?" I was taken aback by the tone of contempt in his voice. Most literally, of course, that meant that it could not be "counted" additively in my personal

inventory of credentials, on my CV or in my annual report, say, to leverage a raise. But more importantly, of course, because it had not been processed through the approved machinery of the academic marketplace, that it had no legitimacy, could not be "counted-on" by anyone who might want to read it. In other words, it was a book that was not "the book" in any of the certified ways such a designation was institutionally authorized. It was a no-book on a no-shelf, something like the no-self Morton talks about.

I knew all of that full well, of course, which is what I told him. And, I said, that was exactly why I did it! I explained how from my vantage point at the heart of this loss, where life and death collide and collude in the most awful and awe-filled ways, none of that mattered to me, not a whit. He looked at me as if I was lost instead of found, which was what I was trying to tell him: that I had found, through this no-book, not just my no-self, but freedom from external validation, and control over my "means of production," all in one fell swoop, exhilaratingly rare in the academic marketplace, where what is called "freedom" is quite often merely control exerted invisibly, claustrophobically, from the outside in, until its work of colonization is completed and it operates automatically from inside out, "work" fully overtaking "life," to use that lame binary academics often claim to be struggling to "balance."

As I used to tell graduate students who were trying mightily to assert some personal agency via this life/work conundrum in their ongoing, often very stressful, formation (that maddening "between" state of wanting, needing, to establish an authority of their own while at the same time feeling indentured to so many external authorities, from

their immediate mentors to the disciplinary matrix in which they were ensconced professionally), that that binary was at best a misleading guide toward their goal of finding a state that merited the tag of "happy." At worst it guaranteed finding the opposite. In my view, one of the wonderful things about committing oneself to the "life of the mind," and to writing and teaching, the mind's avenues back into the world, is that one's work is, by definition, full of life. And one of the wonderful things about living one's life in the world *mind*-fully, as a partner, a parent, or more generally as a human being, is that it takes a lot of ongoing work to do that well. To imagine one's work aside from one's life or one's life free from work, is not only delusory, it could well end up being ethically compromised. So, for me, the solution was not to separate the two categorically, but to call out and amplify the most joyous elements they share in common, revel in them, allow them to merge recursively, one's work animated by life, one's life guided by work. My new book provided me a template for exactly that kind of merger.

Just above, I referred to "the book" in its hyperobjective mode as the "primary cudgel" for "enforcing" the "no-exit hazing routines imposed episodically in my profession." That may sound overly dramatic. But the real drama of history is often enacted via seemingly benign instruments of this sort. My career was impacted in quite significant ways by those routines, as the following narrative will document. While this story is rendered in personal terms, I believe it may speak for and to many of my generational peers, who will recognize its outlines and outcomes in their own autobiographies.

When I entered the profession "the article" was considered a legitimate and favored vehicle for conveying scholarly work to the marketplace, and I wrote lots of them. I loved that genre, adapted so well both to radical insights and sweeping recommendations for disciplinary change, promoting ongoing and often intense dialogues in both print and at conferences, which I found exciting. I came up for tenure at precisely the time that the first book-related shift of consequence took place where I worked: Articles, while not dismissed as credentials, were, quite suddenly, "counted" only as opportunities to publish a chapter of "the book," already in its hyperobjective form, which became the prerequisite. That I didn't yet have one was a significant problem. My tenure was held up for many months as I, but mostly others, given the power dynamic in academic systems, argued that my articles, looked at collectively, were at least the equivalent of a book. Their arguments apparently won the day and I was promoted. Based on this close call, I shifted my writerly schedule away from articles to books, and I wrote one that was very well-received, including winning a national award in my field.

Several years later I put myself up for promotion to full professor, which in my department, at that time, required a book-since-tenure. This was, unfortunately, at exactly the moment that mid-level universities like mine with aspirations toward upward mobility in the national rankings were elevating their "objective" standards across the board—SATs for undergrads, GREs for grad students, and "the book" for faculty. At the very meeting that was called to consider my case, which met each of the established criteria with "excellent" credentials, the full professors rewrote the guidelines to add an additional book. My application was immediately rejected.

So I spent the next seven years writing another book and resubmitted my portfolio, with some anxiety because in the meantime "the book" standard had been rewritten to preclude many of the kinds of books scholars in my field typically publish, and two cases in advance of mine, each with two books, were rejected because those books were disqualified, deemed no-books. My fate turned out to be better for reasons I can't entirely account for, probably because my two books somehow squeaked between these much narrower guardrails. On the basis of all this first-hand experience, I think you can understand why I became wary of the largely arbitrary ways the academy deployed "the book" to parse the legitimacy not only of texts but of those who wrote them.

That my new no-book didn't "count" in my professional community was a detraction, but I was well-compensated. I realized very quickly, for instance, that I could continue to revise it in any way I wanted, any time I wanted, as often as I wanted; not just "corrections," I mean, but radical revisions, significant additions—like the final two "epilogues" that close the book, written almost a year later—even after it was published. As *This Fall* evolved through its multiple editions—at hyper-speed, a new one every few months, impossible via the traditional press—it grew and changed in the most unexpected ways. This process felt to me more like a marriage than a funeral, to borrow and hack into a set of metaphors Walt Whitman uses in his preface to *Leaves of Grass*, the closest thing in the 19th (or 20th!) century to what I was doing right then. In other words, my book was alive, growing, changing, along with me, a relationship I reveled in. And in some ways that helped to keep alive my relationship with my wife, no small

thing. *This Fall* went on to win a "Notable Indie" award in a competition I submitted it for. And it has garnered other plaudits as well.

That book, and the way I commodified it, opened the floodgates to an astonishing era of creative enterprise in my life. I went on to write, at a breakneck pace, (more an expression of recovery from trauma, I believe in retrospect, than a career-related evolution) a dozen other books, on a wide range of literary and philosophical topics, all made available for free on my website and sold at cost. As I said often along this way, had I stopped to find a publisher for *This Fall*, a process that takes years not minutes, I knew from experience, much, perhaps all of this new work would not have found its way out of my head and into print.

Unfortunately, that also meant it could not find a pathway into the general marketplace. I now have two CVs, one for professional purposes with all the countables from my career, another that includes all these other living things I have made, and continue to remake, in the meanwhile. I tried in each case to experiment with some innovation that would be impossible with a one-and-done book in the conventional marketplace. For example, for the trio of poetry chapbooks I wrote so furiously, grief fueled, during September, 2016, I actually created the poems "live," in real time, on my website, just sat down and typed them up as they came to me, sometimes several poems in one day. As far as I know there were only a few occasional witnesses to that process. But their experience, they told me, was unique and stunning. If I had created a month-long, fixed-position, stop-action recording of it and then played it back at hyper-speed, it would look like one those nature videos

that shows a snowmelt, a seed sprouting, and the evolution of a full-fledged flower, all in a few seconds.

In another of the books I amplified its various parts over a 6-month period with new, dated material, expanding the book like an accordion, from the inside out, creating a sort of temporal palimpsest. In another I worked to hybridize genres in a way that would have been difficult to explain let alone sell to a publisher. And often, I was able to keep in material that felt, from my point of view, crucial, but was simply weird, something for which I have a much higher level of tolerance than is common in the commercial marketplace of ideas. I also along the way experimented with all kinds of social media and AV-related modes of expression: Instagram, YouTube, audiobooks, even Bandcamp, so I have a pretty good idea of what each can and cannot do as a venue for creative and intellectual exchange.

I have not, of course, made any money or accrued any professional status from all that. And my readership is small (I know nothing about marketing and have no interest in learning about it). But the adventure has been breathtaking, not least of which is a sense that I may be blazing a trail toward a new way of composing, one that remains chronically open rather than closed, resembling more in that respect the sort of multimedia compositions I would have preferred Morton and McLuhan to have used.

Perhaps the most radical aspect of this process, initiated in my deepest grief without any foresight of what it meant, was how I proffered my books: Instead of saying I had "published" them, I took to saying, simply, that I "shared" them with anyone interested, which is exactly what I did,

free on my website, of course, but also, whenever possible, mailed for free in paperback form. That distinction—between published and shared—may seem specious, even duplicitous to you, but it meant everything to me, not simply as it pertains to the production side, but even more so on the reception side, where it rejiggers the relationship of authority between author and reader in quite fundamental ways, leveling it. In the local examples of my new books, this meant that I had quite personal interactions with almost all of my readers, even made new friends on the basis of what they then "shared" with me, extraordinary gifts.

In a more general sense, this approach transfers the responsibility for qualitative assessment almost entirely over to the consumer, which may promote a more refined critical sensibility and a sense of personal agency among readers, who have to *learn* how to do *their own* vetting, or find *trusted* others to help them with it, in exactly the same ways that consumers of social media need *right now*, quite urgently, to learn how to discern what is "real" and what is "fake" in the endless streams of "(dis)(mis)information" inundating them, with AI looming and the longstanding firewalls that journalistic, political and juridical arbiters once provided having been breached by various lunatic fringes competing for power in the dystopian landscape of our public commons, an ongoing slow-motion civil war that propagates cults and conspiracy theories like Cadmus' sown teeth sprouting armed men.

Those culture warriors, marching now under banners like "the Freedom Caucus" and "Moms for Liberty," are genuinely terrified, as they should be, that the ideals their names seem to be endorsing might somehow become

universal, de-privileged in relation to race, gender, class, and religion. The primary historical matrices for promoting that kind of democratization—literacy in the service of critical thinking—are the public schooling system and libraries. Anything, therefore, that hobbles them is not simply attractive to them, it is absolutely crucial for their long-term survival. Thus the current obsession with book-bannings, and all the assaults on anything in either arena that has "critical" in its title. I'm surprised they haven't mounted campaigns against the concept of "critical mass" in nuclear fission, or the term "critical condition" that the media uses to describe so many of the victims of the gun violence that is being amplified exponentially by these very same "warriors."

Their goal is not to dismantle public schooling completely, reserving education exclusively for the elite, which might incite significant resistance, but to disable it so that it can't function as a significant threat to their preferred social order. That project started in earnest a generation ago with Bush the 2nd's No Child Left Behind, the effect (and I would argue the goal) of which was to transfer the center of gravity in K-12 education out of classrooms with their many local, inside-out economies, and into the stateroom with its one global, outside-in economy. Stagnant funding that has left teachers' salaries in the poverty range in many states, driving many from the profession completely, and a chaotic pandemic, along with the ongoing assaults on libraries and librarians, have accelerated this transfer of power exponentially. It remains to be seen whether the complementary rise in state-sponsored voucher programs, spawning all kinds of largely unregulated alternative schooling options, will decenter state control, though it seems (to me) that they are generally designed more to

undermine the public schooling system than to enhance educational opportunities, especially among less privileged constituencies, the "parental control" trope more a feint than a vision.

It is ironic (to me) that one of the primary arguments on behalf of this movement, promoted and often funded by states, is to escape from the various standards-related protocols the state(s) insisted, two decades ago, were the solution to deficiencies in the system, using in that case those "less privileged constituencies," quite cynically, as their targets of opportunity. Depending on your perspective, this may or may not be a good example of a fundamental principle of capitalism: In order to dismantle an organization or system, you need first to control it; and quite often, as in this case, you can use the same set of tropes duplicitously to justify both ends of that process.

That mission finally moved into higher education about fifteen years ago with externally imposed "outcomes-based" protocols, same ambition, same effects, some of which I witnessed, with deep concern, during the late stages of my career. This assertion of governmental control has intensified considerably in the meantime via state level interventions in what and how disciplinary material can/must be taught, in admissions, staffing, and hiring policies. It reached a chilling watershed moment last fall via the tumultuous Congressional hearings that resulted in the resignations of two presidents from elite universities [the third has since resigned], a stunning humiliation for "the university" as a cultural institution, once a revered paragon of independence, one that was made easier, as I argue in "Quantum Reading vs. the Rabbit Hole," by gradual corrosion from the inside out (what I call the

"corporatization" of the university) during the 80s, 90s, and 2000s. All of which calls to (my) mind that gory, apocryphal anecdote that Chinghiz Aitmatov narrates in *The Day Lasts More Than a Hundred Years* in which Stalin plucks a live chicken to demonstrate how best to keep "the people" weak and dependent.

In 1964, as I said, Marshall McLuhan believed we were on the cusp of a radical transformation in our ways of schooling. He would be aghast to see what that transformation has amounted to. It will take generational work from countless creative individuals committed to working from the inside out to shift the balance toward his vision. I spent almost 50 years teaching writing and reading, much of it at the entry level, by far my most enjoyable pedagogical arena. I witnessed firsthand how transformative it was when students experienced the excitement of realizing they could "think for themselves." So I have a deep and abiding faith that good things can and will happen once our culture wakes up from its current self-induced nightmare, and they will arise from the bottom up (not be imposed from the top down), one roomful of minds at a time. It may even spur more of these thinkers to create and share their own work, not because it "counts" but because it matters to them.

Which gets me at last to the final point I want to make concerning the two books I've been writing about here, specifically how each of their authors defaults unreflectively to this material precondition, "the book," one that evades notice not by how small it is but by how big it is. Neither of them mentions that move as problematic, or even as a choice. Had I read them separately, as if they had no connection with one another, I may well have acceded

equally unreflectively to those defaults. Reading them together, though, somehow made visible how their preferred "medium" worked against rather than with their "messages."

This started as a vague sense about midway through my reading that both books could, and should, have been shorter, more efficient. My hypothetical imagined range was about 100 pages. In, out, done. But there is simply no template in the print culture (even now) for scholarly books in that range, a no-man's land rather than my "goldilocks zone," a perfect example of how invisibly hyperobjective the medium has become. As I read further, a gnawing doubt began to grow about whether "the book" itself, no matter its length, was the best venue for what they had to offer. Why, I wondered, hadn't McLuhan used some combination of the AV media of his day to make his point, each element not a "static" description, little sparks discharging harmlessly from my fingertips every time I picked up his book, but an "electric current," enough zip to zap me off my feet? His argument would have made more sense to me that way and would have had a much more intense impact, the inbuilt vitality of images and sounds replacing the sluggishness of words arrayed in sequences. In other words, the medium would be more with than against the message.

I answered my own question almost immediately: because that sort of a presentation lacks the cultural status of "the book," most especially in the academic community, often as "hidebound" in its orthodoxies as books used to be in their leather jackets. Beyond that, there is an ephemeral aspect to multimedia presentations, a there-and-goneness, that impacts not just their gravity but their durability, especially

given the rapidly accelerating rate at which technologies for archiving such performances keep evolving, threatening to leave content beached in unreadable oblivion, which McLuhan was surely aware of. "The book" might be snail mail by comparison, but at least it was a stable technology, easily portable, not dependent on the outside oomph of electricity.

As to Morton: His most compelling material examples for revealing what hyperobjects do are the visual art pieces he comments on and the musical pieces he describes. He does provide a mid-book sheaf of illustrations of the former, but so far removed from his individual commentaries and so poorly rendered that they feel more like a skippable afterthought than the foundation for significant parts of his argument. And there is, of course, no aural component to his book at all. He writes copiously and beautifully about music along the way and closes with a long encomium on various kinds of avant-garde sound compositions, most of which I was unfamiliar with. I tried to imagine while I read how much more impactful that would feel if I could hear cascading snippets of the amazing sounds he was describing, his commentaries either voiced-over or visually staged via one of the many media formats available to him, amplifying the impact of his examples exponentially. I could, of course, have interrupted my reading over and over to search out a recording of the piece he was talking about. But that would not only take an enormous amount of time, it would be a chronic distraction from his line of thinking, the reason I was reading *this* book in the first place.

At least during McLuhan's era, that last gasp of modernism, one could argue, as Eliot did a couple of

generations earlier, that "the tradition" inflecting his book could and should be acquired before not while or after reading it. In the information age, that is clearly impossible. There is no singular, coherent tradition any longer, Western or otherwise. Only streams. Lots of them. And the unscripted, serendipitous, hypertextual "surfs" they invite. It's possible that had I initiated one of those at some point during Morton's final chapter, I would never get back to his book at all, making it irrelevant, the ultimate insult to the cultural tradition "the book" is designed to reinscribe.

The term "aesthetic" is foundational to Morton's discourse, the "shimmering," "oozing" effects/affects of being alive in "the world" now that it "has ended." The term "synesthetic" is similarly pervasive in McLuhan's discourse, the speed of electricity with which experience and simulations of experience are experienced. Both terms gesture toward the inviolably embodied materiality of their "objects" of interest. A book is, of course, an object (I've been leafing through these two repeatedly as I wrote all of this) and can be used to point to such things. But (unless it is poetic, and these don't make that cut in my opinion) it is neither an aesthetic nor synesthetic "experience," more like an after-the-fact blueprint for a spectacular edifice than an animate rendition of the edifice itself, "the book" instead of Coleridge's Xanadu.

I understand why these authors felt they had no viable alternative in this matter. I just wish they had been more mindfully upfront about the consequences and limitations of that fact, that all of us in the business of scholarly enterprise would be more mindfully upfront about what this by-default *medium,* "the book," does and cannot do, not only as we exchange messages with one another, but even

more so in how we create elaborate hierarchies of value, a collegial pecking order for example, on its basis, one that regulates both literal and institutional "sequences" relentlessly from the outside in and remains functionally invisible from the inside out. All of which I hope makes clear why I see "the book" as an unacknowledged *hyperobject* in the academic marketplace, one that now exceeds any capacity of the culture that created it even to comprehend it, let alone bring it to bay, global warming between two hard covers.

Afterwards (literally)

All of this begs the question, of course: What if anything insulates this book from the charge of hyperobjectivity I've been angsting about? All of its essays have now, for example, found their way into the scholarly marketplace, which seems to make the whole project complicit with the conditions of commodification I'm critiquing.

Well, for starters, as I've made clear, "articles" no longer have much status in my field, aside from the books that ultimately comprise them. And the book that comprises mine failed to find an eager publisher despite a couple of earnest attempts to market it. Even if it had found such an outlet, though, I would still resist the inclination to call it a hyperobject in the sense I've been writing about "the book" thus far. What's the difference, I can hear you saying, between one of "their" books and "mine," which looks and sounds and feels like every other scholarly book out there after all? Well, if you ever experimented with self-publication I think you'd know that immediately.

The concept of "sharing" I talked about is one index to that difference. I contrasted it with "publishing" but could just as well have contrasted it with "selling," not so much in terms of the individual monetary transactions for those who purchase my book on Amazon, but more in terms of ownership. When I published my first countable book, I was stunned by the contract I had to sign. It was pages and pages long, detailing all the rights that were no longer mine. As in none. It's possible that somewhere in all that boilerplate was a prohibition against dreaming about it without prior permission! Buying a book is capitalism writ small. Buying the rights to a book is capitalism writ large, the ticket price, really, for the potential to become a countable author, to become, in short, eligible for the brand of hyperobjectivity the academy traffics in. Just above I distinguish between "theirs" and "mine." I'd argue that until mine becomes theirs, with the loss of personal control implied by that transaction, hyperobjectivity, which is partially defined by its out-of-controlness, is highly unlikely.

Secondly, my self-published books are available in PDF form for free for anyone who wants them, and I intentionally price the paperbacks at-cost, so I don't profit from that side of equation, for the deeply personal reasons I've explained. Making money may not be an essential element of hyperobjectivity, though intentionally choosing not to at least provides me some traction for the "resistance" I'm claiming a right to.

Thirdly, and primarily, this book could never have been written had I not first written all of the more experimental books that preceded it, making it akin to them aforehand, redeeming it from hyperobjectivity even if it had found a "real" publisher. Books in the alternative mode I've been

practicing for almost a decade now are more like *hypo*-objects. They find their way deep "under my skin," course around inside me in the most therapeutic ways, inoculate me against some of the most insidious kinds of externally-imposed nonsense that seek, these days especially, to colonize closed minds via those "simplistic stories of good and evil" Naomi Klein forewarns us about in *Doppelganger*. That may seem, again, a specious, even duplicitous defense—implying that my maybe-book is not what it aspired to become—neither of which makes it necessarily untrue. As neuroscientists who study the quantum properties of the human brain have demonstrated, it seems expressly designed to hold two (or more) seemingly contradictory positions simultaneously without short-circuiting. Poets (like Keats) have known that for centuries, perhaps millennia. It is in fact, I believe, the distinctive human quality that will most likely be hardest to replicate via AI, thus ensuring a place for people in even the most dystopian visions of what the world will look like a few generations from now, robots in charge, humans being sidelined, or worse.

Which gets me to my final point: change, and how books, including mine, should any of them become countable in the marketplace of ideas by the alternate path I have set them on, can effect it. As I said above, I do not read for "pleasure," have no idea what that might feel like, except maybe in the rarified sense that Wordsworth uses that term in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads*. I don't write for "pleasure" either (again, see Wordsworth.) I write to change, same reason I read, except from the inside out instead of the outside in, to find out what I don't yet know so I can change *myself,* first and foremost, before I give even the slightest thought to changing others. My books "educate"

me in the root sense of that word: They "lead me out" and "bring me forth" in the most salutary ways. When I share them, I hope to persuade others not to follow my lead, but to lead themselves out, in order to change on their terms, not mine, maybe even write books of their own to help them do that. In other words, I am far more interested in what books can *do*, under the skin, than in what they *are* in the pantheon of cultural icons.

My need for a unique "education" of this type was precipitated, as I said, by trauma. Trauma is often associated with creative production. It is rarely associated with scholarly enterprise. That binary makes no sense to me any longer. As I look back now on my last decade, I see the long path I have had to take to reanimate myself as a public intellectual, which demands an inner spirit that is patient (it takes a long time to find a publisher for a book); persistent (one needs, I know from my long experience publishing in the academic marketplace, to become inured to rejection, which is quite common in this process), and confident (which derives from a clear sense of exactly where one wants to stand in relation to the larger cultural marketplace of ideas, a firm identity, in other words.) It is very difficult to muster those qualities sustainably while one is in the midst of a hard reboot.

Here is an excerpt from a poem by Li Bai that says something pertinent to this:

> Here, after wandering among these renowned
> mountains, the heart grows rich with repose.

Why talk of cleansing elixirs of immortality?
Here, the world's dust rinsed from my face,

I'll stay close to what I've always loved,
content to leave the peopled world forever.

As I say in "Quantum Reading vs. the Rabbit Hole," Li Bai left "the peopled world" late in his life, lived in solitude in the service of his spirit. That's what my work over the last ten years has been about for me. I left "the peopled world," quite literally, not only in professional terms but in social terms, have lived in self-absorbed solitude, working diligently to rebuild myself from the ground up. My first steps along this path were actual steps: I spent an hour or two every morning doing what the Japanese call "forest bathing," first in the stand of woods outside Pittsburgh my wife and I had walked together through for decades, then in the various temperate rain forests I found when I arrived here in Olympia, luxuriating in the healing mist of phytochemicals always in the air there, and even more so in the redemptive aura of care that leafy things exude when they are allowed to grow together in their natural habitats. Flora in such settings, especially trees, once they know for sure you are not there to "harvest" them, which takes just a few weeks, are extraordinarily receptive, compassionate even, happy to welcome grieving visitors into their communities, unlike the human universe, these days so death-averse, friends frozen with fear, like deer caught in headlights.

And I wrote, fiercely, copiously, book after book, initially about these walks, then, serendipitously, about a wide array of philosophical and poetic matters that emerged for me to

think through as I worked out my path forward, all based on copious reading. That I am now not just ready but eager to return to the fray of public life as a creative thinker, via this project and several others that are happening concurrently, is both stunning and heartening to me, verification for what writing and reading can do to promote change, fundamental change, the kind that alters lives, that heals. I felt 10 years ago that, like Bai, I was leaving the peopled world forever. It is my writing and reading, or more precisely my writing about what I was reading, that opened a way forward for me. Most of that work is, and will likely remain, largely "beached in . . . oblivion," given how, as a culture, we commodify authorial status via "the book."

It is certainly fair, then, to ask: Was it worth all the trouble? As Seneca says:

> "For whose benefit, then, did I learn it all?" If it was for your own benefit that you learnt it you have no call to fear that your trouble may have been wasted. (Seneca, 18)

And further:

> Equally good is the answer given by the person, whoever it was (his identity is uncertain), who when asked what is the object of all the trouble he took over a piece of craftsmanship when it would never reach more than a few people, replied: 'A few is enough for me; so is one; so is none.' (Seneca, 19)

Where, in my case, the "none" was just me. Worth "all the trouble?" Well, it brought me here, to this grand

(re)opening, hopeful again, patience, persistence and confidence restored. So, yes. Absolutely. Yes, indeed.

Which takes my "runway" all the way back to its origin moment: Given my strange perceptual relationship with print texts, that ambition for all-at-onceness I described earlier, I didn't start reading "real" books (as opposed to schoolbooks) until I was a teenager, mostly poetry, which I fell in love with. I felt for the first time in my life that I was being changed in ways I had never imagined were possible. I loved that effect, the ongoing change, even more than the media that were instigating it. So, despite the work involved, I began to read voraciously. Because I was extremely adept at math, I majored in physics in college, which was a breeze for me. But it was also boring, changed me not at all in those fundamental inner ways I had become addicted to. So late in the game, I changed my major to English and set myself on a path toward teaching others how they, too, could use books to do what they were doing for me. I have spent a lifetime in that pursuit, in little rooms with young, lively minds and via the many kinds of writing I have done, including now this new work, which embodies exactly what I most value. I am not proffering here a *theory* of reading; I am enacting a *method* of reading, demonstrating at a granular level not what to do, as an assertion of authority, but how *I* do it, in case you're interested in trying it.

The sentence that opens my first book, *Writing/Teaching*: *Essays toward a Rhetoric of Pedagogy*, is "To teach is to change." Unless a book changes me in some way as I read it, I find it tedious. I give the two books I've been writing about here full credit for doing that, changing me, I mean, as my unexpected revelatory turns prove. I could never have

thought those things apart from all that reading. Which is also to say: My reservations concerning McLuhan's and Morton's books are not to suggest they are not wonderful books, well worth reading, books that merited all the time and attention I lavished on them, books that changed me in exactly the way I always hope a book will when I turn the first page. It is simply to say that their authors seem to me to overlook alternative modes of presentation that might have been more effective without accounting for why, a blind spot that is not individually but culturally induced, which is my point. That, finally, may seem a specious, even duplicitous addendum, neither of which makes it necessarily untrue.

So this is what I was thinking when I wrote "that sentence"

Introduction

"To use an automotive metaphor [Timothy] Morton introduces early in his book: "Objects in mirror are closer than they appear," which in this case is more a temporal than spatial illusion, one convex mirror reflected in another, the object-oriented metaphysics of modernity seeing the object-oriented ontology of post-postmodernity and vice-versa, the vacuum of subject-oriented epistemology foreshortening the interim that separates them, just as relativity predicts would happen near the speed of light that each of these books indexes in some way to make its case."

from "The Medium is the Hyperobject"

Last night I Zoomed for a couple of hours with a friend who enjoys my work and wanted to find a way into "The Medium is the Hyperobject," which she hadn't yet read. She proposed reading it aloud, stopping as necessary to wander off on whatever byways it opened. She has such a pleasant voice, so enjoyable to listen to, so that sounded great to me. She read the first few pages at a normal cadence, a few brief asides. But this sentence was a sticking point. We spent over an hour on it. It is riven with the sort of slippery gibberish clotted up with fuzzy buzz words that academics often turn to either to cover over a paucity of genuine knowledge or to impress/intimidate readers with faux insight. I knew that I had spent a considerable amount

of time choosing all the terms I use there very carefully and intentionally. And, over the course of that hour or so, she invited me to explain them. This essay originated with that conversation. I wrote it in part to explicate that sentence, hoping to demonstrate that it's not just empty verbiage. But more so I think to sort some of this out for myself. I've made headway toward that in many of my previous books and essays, this piece, that piece. I'm hoping now to put it all together in one place for myself and for any reader curious enough about this process to entertain using it.

An essay I wrote 40-some years ago called "Reading Poets" opens this way: "In *A Defense of Poetry* (1595) Sir Philip Sydney sharply differentiates the philosopher, 'who teacheth obscurely, so as the learned only can understand him,' from the poet, who opens truth to the eyes of all." That essay goes on to make an argument on behalf of poetics as a sort of bridge between poetry and philosophy with poetry the apex discipline. This is another such. It started off innocently enough as an explanatory footnote to that particularly turgid sentence my friend and I had just talked about, a belated attempt to unpack in practical detail the abstruse philosophical terminology I chose to make my initial point. I've tried my best along the way to resist my temptations toward pedantic blather, which all too often win the day, and be as matter of fact as I can about how and why I used this arcane terminology.

My guiding principle, following Sydney, is that I am a practicing poet, not a philosopher. I read a lot of that latter kind of work but bristle at the obfuscation inherent in philosophical discourse and, especially, the dialectical progress-narrative that animates the discipline. Neither am I a literary critic aspiring to translate, for uninitiates,

opaque poems into lucid prose alternatives. I read a lot of that kind of work, too, and write about it. I was an English professor, after all. But it's just not my jam. Poems seem to me to say quite clearly exactly what they mean, so I chafe instinctively against any such attempts by outside authorities—most especially those who are not practitioners of the art they claim expertise with—to teach me how to "appreciate" them. I prefer to figure that out *for myself*: their effects, yes, but mostly how they achieve them. Sometimes so I can do something similar with my own inventions, but more often just out of curiosity, without any ambition toward emulation, the way a tinkerer likes to figure out how any machine operates, whether he intends to use it or not.

There are two primary techniques I use toward that end: First, I don't read single poems as one-off experiences, a la Cleanth Brooks, e.g. I read *poets*, i.e., many poems by an individual author. Thus the title of the essay I quote from above, "Reading Poets," which morphed into the trope that served as the title for a book I wrote about 30 years later, called *Rereading Poets*. To figure out the dynamics of a poet's system and enter it as fully as possible—what I describe in several of my books as a merger or fusion of identities—I need to absorb a significant sample of their work relatively quickly. Only then, from the inside, do I feel confident that I can deduce their "recipes," which I then do through the close examination of individual poems, as you'll see below.

Such a transmigration of identities can be initiated by many different kinds of media: visual art, music, even the natural world, and of course all sorts of linguistic interactions, including intentional conversations, like those in the classroom. The opening sentence of my book *Writing/Teaching* is "To teach is to change." I certainly

hoped to promote change among my students, but I especially appreciated when they promoted change in me. In fact, I believe that the first effect is unlikely if the latter is not invited. All that such interactions require are assiduous listening—by which I mean stilling as completely as possible the chronic noise in one's own head to make room for someone else's—and pertinent responses—the sort that arise synthetically from the moment and not those that are pre-scripted. Do that for a few minutes with anyone, and you will become more them as they become more you. Quite enjoyable.

Among linguistic media, poetry has a special power to effect change of that sort. The main advantage poetry has, vis-à-vis other literary genres, is that, like music and dance, rhythm is a primary rather than secondary element in its operations. Rhythm is basically a way of orchestrating time, in my opinion the most foundational element of human experience in this particular universe. While most of our habits of temporalization are inherited from culture, everyone (I believe) has a unique permutation of it, like fingerprints. Poets simply have the ability to record theirs quite precisely in verbal sequences. To adapt to someone else's "timing" requires a willingness (even an eagerness, as in my case) to yield your own temporal habits to another. Walk, dance, sing with someone else, and it takes ongoing intuitive adjustments to get and keep on the same wavelength. Same with poetry. The reading "quickly" part may seem counterintuitive. Why not slow down, go poem by poem, piecemeal, making certain to get it right? Well, take the examples of walking, dancing and singing. You can learn how to do these things better by studying of course. But walking, dancing, or singing with another person happens at the speed of life, the joy of it, not the speed of

school. And that's why I read a lot of poems by a specific poet quickly. Less me, more them.

To see how this works, read 30 Shakespearean sonnets quickly aloud. When you next start to think, it will be, guaranteed, in iambic pentameter and often in the rhyming patterns he preferred. Or read big chunks of Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* quickly. Soon you will be thinking in fourteener-style quatrains. Even if you don't assimilate one iota of their "content," your headspace will be re-timed. As to 20th century poetry which generally eschews these traditional organizational motifs? Every poet I know from that era has a distinctive rhythm they prefer. Some of them work quite hard to describe what it is, like William Carlos Williams who talks about the descending "stepped" "triadic" line and "variable foot" that organize time in many of his poems. Charles Olson talks about how his time moves "instanter," Ezra Pound how his follows the "the sequence of the musical phrase." Etc., etc. And poets who don't talk about their temporal preferences still have distinctive rhythms that, independent of the "content" or "meanings" of their poems, a reader can easily adapt to experientially. Again, pick any one, read 30 poems quickly, and you'll see what I mean. Sometimes I enjoy reading poems in languages I can't speak simply to adapt myself to their rhythms. Just do that and you'll understand how much of the freight of a poem's meaning inheres to its rhythms.

Once I rejigger my own inner rhythms, I am primed for the sort of identity-blurring that I crave. Which is to say again: When I read poets I want to be less me and more them. Becoming more-other promotes the intention-driven liminality that is foundational for genuine love of any sort,

especially of the unconditional variety, where self and other coalesce, which is what I'm talking about here, and it is not only useful but essential, counterintuitively, to becoming more oneself. Lao Tzu, Jesus (both of whom I talk about specifically below) and many, many other gurus across history pretty much agree on that. And I agree with them.

Secondly, I read all kinds of statements, manifestos, treatises, essays, aphorisms, notes, etc., that those poets write to try to explain how and why they make what they make, anything that might facilitate the kind of merger I crave. Some poets are quite astute about their methods, others less so, but they are all interesting to me. "Recipes," the term I use above, may seem like a trivializing concept. But you have to remember: Great poets create strikingly original pieces that challenge discursive norms, leaving a wide gulf between their innovative expressions and the extant conventions for reception commonplace to the moment. They want/hope, despite that, to be understood. Laying out some sort of a bridge, even if it's rickety, to close that transactional gap is one way of accomplishing that.

To see a good example of this, read the sequence of prefaces that William Wordsworth wrote for the book of "experiments" he co-authored with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads*, first published in 1798. In that first edition his preface is a two-page "Advertisement," a "defense" of their enterprise that is literally, almost comically, defensive. He says, for example:

> Readers accustomed to the gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers, if they persist in reading this book to its conclusion, will perhaps frequently have to struggle with feelings of

> strangeness and aukwardness: they will look round for poetry, and will be induced to enquire by what species of courtesy these attempts can be permitted to assume that title.
> http://www.viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/viscomi/coursepack/wordsworth/Wordsworth-1798_LB_Advertisement.pdf

Basically, he's saying that apprehending this new work through the lens of the readerly conventions of that moment (the neoclassicism of the late 18th century) is a "you can't get there from here" experience. A mere two years later, his reputation having gotten some purchase, this little piece evolved toward the grandiloquent manifesto of Romantic poetics that Wordsworth ultimately became famous for. How Wordsworth made that transition so quickly from apologist to oracle is as much a mystery to me as how Walt Whitman made the transition from itinerant journalist to mystical singer of "myself." But both happened. They became, via poetry, something other than they were. Which is as I said what I want, too. And part of what makes that possible is trying various types of such recipes.

For example, whenever I taught Wordsworth I took students to this paragraph in his next preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, written in 1800, just two years later:

> I have said that poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion, kindred to that which was before the subject of

> contemplation, is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind. In this mood successful composition generally begins, and in a mood similar to this it is carried on; but the emotion, of whatever kind, and in whatever degree, from various causes, is qualified by various pleasures, so that in describing any passions whatsoever, which are voluntarily described, the mind will, upon the whole, be in a state of enjoyment.
> https://viscomi.sites.oasis.unc.edu/viscomi/coursepack/wordsworth/Wordsworth-1800_LB_Preface.pdf

If you follow that prompt step by step, you will end up with a Romantic poem in Wordsworth's style. Try it and see. I do the same with T.S. Eliot's definition of "the objective correlative," which I quote below. Same thing: Follow the directions, an Eliot-like poem will ensue. May not be a good one, but you get my point. And the same goes for many other such "recipes."

This interrelationship between poems and poetics, which is the subject of this essay, becomes more complex once you get to the 20th century, when taken-for-granted cultural assumptions about the order of things—what I'll call myth in my treatment of modernism, below—are no longer broadly shared. These secondary "bridges" operate then like little guidebooks to help one navigate a way through an alien universe. The difference between the late 18th and early 20th century was that in the former case, the equation, old to new, was one-to-one. In the latter case it was one to many, each one unique.

I say all of this to both justify and distance myself from the discourse I use in the sentence that serves as my epigraph, which relies heavily on a hyper-compressed sort of philosophical discourse to warrant the distinctions I want to make among the three "epochs" of poetic enterprise that cover the last century or so. In one way, what follows here is a very extended translation of that sentence via poetics, "teaching" it all less "obscurely," I hope! It would be absurd to insert it in place of that sentence in the original essay. But I think it's useful to write it in any case so that sentence is not so easily dismissed as cryptically absurd, maybe provoking an engaged/enraged reader to quit the essay in frustration.

Part 1: Modernism

I differentiate among these three historical periods I reference in that troubling sentence (modernism, postmodernism, post-postmodernism) using three traditional terms for types of philosophical inquiry—metaphysics, epistemology, and ontology. There are all kinds of ways to arrange them in relation to one another. Some sources, for example, say that as ways of approaching "being," metaphysics and ontology are essentially the same thing. Or that epistemology—as the study of how we come to know "being"—is implied by metaphysics. So separating the terms categorically, as I do here, is problematic. But I do, and did it for a reason, as I'll explain. I also use two conventional Western concepts for dividing up primary modes of human experience—subject and object— a clunky binary. It is a dizzying assemblage, to be sure. So let me try to unpack it in terms of the practical poetics I prefer.

Probably the most contentious term among these is "metaphysical," which I assign as the primary philosophical project of modernism. Here's why: In the aftermath of the devastation of WW1, both "the mind of Europe" (to use Eliot's phrase) and its body, ground-level literal I mean, were in a shambles. All of the commonly shared tropes, motifs and matrices that held that culture together—what I'll call "myths" in the broadest sense of that word— during the 19th century were leveled. And they were clearly never going be to set upright again, let alone resuscitated. Every one of the major modernist poets (and artists and intellectuals of all kinds) recognized that. And they all set about creating alternative "myths" of their own. One longstanding literary genre for doing that via poetry is the epic. So poets wrote them. For Pound it was the *Cantos*, for Eliot *The Waste Land* and the *Four Quartets*, for Williams *Paterson*, for H.D. a series of collections that strove to recover ancient religious traditions and recast them toward a feminist modernity. All of these are epic, not lyric, in scope and ambition.

Even those poets who didn't write "long poems" of that sort found unifying motifs to promote a renewed mythic vision for the modern experience. For Wallace Stevens it was "Imagination." For Robinson Jeffers it was the "Wild." And as essential companion pieces to help explain how to read and understand those myths, these poets also created prose texts that laid out the structural principles underwriting their visions. Pound did most of this secondary work in little blasts of manifestos, especially early on, and then in the *Cantos* themselves. Eliot wrote *The Sacred Wood*. Stevens wrote *The Necessary Angel*. Williams wrote *In the American Grain* and *Autobiography*. H.D. wrote *Notes on Thought and Vision*. Jeffers wrote lengthy tracts of prose in the

midst of his poetry books. And that's how you create a "myth" when there are no commonly shared cultural tropes: You write an epic and then try to teach readers how to read it. Which, to me, is a (possible) textbook definition of a metaphysical enterprise. Yes, there are epistemological and ontological elements in play, but all in the service of this larger, grander vision for regenerating a habitable mental "world" when the one in place has been demolished. And that's why I used that term that way.

I'll turn next to the "object-oriented" modifier that, I say, modernist and post-postmodernist approaches share in common, starting with modernism. As I said, my background and expertise are with poetry, not philosophy, so I'm going to couch my argument in that body of evidence. What modernist poets said about and did with "objects" is quite different from what Object Oriented Ontologists say about and do with objects these days. Most generally, early modernist poetry is a reaction against late Romanticism, which the new generation felt was driven primarily by the vagueness of "emotion" and an obsession with grandeur. The antidote they proposed was a return to a very specific kind of classicism (unlike Pope's 18th century version in almost every way.) The program that became foundational to modernist poetics is one vested in "things," that enigmatic keystone of the first of Pound's "Three Tenets" of imagist poetry—"Direct treatment of the thing whether subjective or objective"—which appeared in his little manifesto "A Retrospect" in *Poetry* (1912) (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69409/a-retrospect-and-a-few-donts), kicking off the imagist movement that soon became all the rage—in England first, via various American ex-patriots, most importantly H.D., Pound's protégé, and then later in America, a much softer

version (championed by Amy Lowell) that Pound derided as "Amygism."

So what are these two varieties—subjective or objective—of what Pound calls a "things?" What do they share in common and how are they different? Good questions, which he doesn't answer specifically. Making headway on them takes some additional reading. For example, one of the foundational documents for Pound's tenets was an essay written by T.E. Hulme, part of Pound's London coterie in the pre-WW1 London. That essay, "Romanticism and Classicism," written in 1908, is both a radical critique of romanticism and a fascinating cultural meander that touches in the most interesting ways on figures as diverse as Darwin, Pelagius, Savonarola, Calvin, Racine, Swinburne, and Nietzsche, among many others. Here are a few of the things Hulme says about the transition (from romanticism to classicism) he wants to promote:

> I want now to give the reasons which make me think that we are nearing the end of the romantic movement. . . .
>
> We shall not get any new efflorescence of verse until we get a new technique, a new convention, to turn ourselves loose in. . . .
>
> Although it will be classical it will be different because it has passed through a romantic period. . . .
>
> On the one hand there is the old classical view which is supposed to define it as lying in conformity to certain standard fixed forms; and on the other

> hand there is the romantic view which drags in the infinite. I have got to find a metaphysic between these two which will enable me to hold consistently that a neo-classic verse of the type I have indicated involves no contradiction in terms. It is essential to prove that beauty may be in small, dry things. . . . There are then two things to distinguish, first the particular faculty of mind to see things as they really are, and apart from the conventional ways in which you have been trained to see them. This is itself rare enough in all consciousness. Second, the concentrated state of mind, the grip over oneself which is necessary in the actual expression of what one sees. . . .
>
> Poetry . . . is not a counter language, but a visual concrete one. It is a compromise for a language of intuition which would hand over sensations bodily. It always endeavours to arrest you, and to make you continuously see a physical thing, to prevent you gliding through an abstract process. . . .
> Images in verse are not mere decoration, but the very essence of an intuitive language. Verse is a pedestrian taking you over the ground, prose—a train which delivers you at a destination. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69477/romanticism-and-classicism)

Pound boils all this down to that first "tenet" of imagism ("Direct treatment of the thing, whether subjective or objective"), a gnomic pronouncement, to be sure; but one that Hulme's essay gives some dimension to, this "new technique" that will find "beauty . . . in small dry things," seeing them "as they really are," via a "concentrated state

of mind" that issues forth in "language visual and concrete," vested in "sensations bodily," that "arrest" attention so it might "see a physical thing," not an "abstract process." And the vehicles for this thingness are "images [that] are not mere decoration," as in romanticism, but "the very essence of intuitive language."

This "new technique" gained immediate traction in Pound's circle, which included many of the major poets of his generation, morphing into the two primary kinds of "thing-based" poetry that defined modernist poetics. Most simplistically, one approach works outside-in, transmuting "objective things," which retain, for the most part, their "natural" relationships with one another, into images the poet then arranges to make another kind of "objective thing" called a poem. The other works inside-out, transmuting "objective things" *without* any regard for their "natural" relationships with one another, into images the poet arranges to make "subjective things" communicable *as* poems, which are also objects in their own right. In both cases then, object-based images are deployed, but in two very different ways, to produce poems, which are objects of new kind. Thus my term "object-oriented," where the ultimate objects are the poems.

The latter method—subjective things dominant—was worked out in detail by T.S. Eliot, one of Pound's protégés, who became the scion of American modernism for almost two generations. It is primarily via his work that I settled on the term "metaphysical" to characterize modernist poetics. It all began early on for Eliot, with his dissertation, entitled "Knowledge and Experience in the Philosophy of F.H. Bradley." Bradley was a proponent of a very austere kind of

monistic idealism, a metaphysics, that Eliot indexes in one of his infamous footnotes to *The Waste Land*:

> Also F. H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality,* p. 346:
>
> "My external sensations are no less private to myself than are my thoughts or my feelings. In either case my experience falls within my own circle, a circle closed on the outside; and, with all its elements alike, every sphere is opaque to the others which surround it. . . In brief, regarded as an experience which appears in a soul, the whole world for each is peculiar and private to that soul." (47)

Yikes! The implication for a poet is that their "experience," especially "feelings"—which Eliot says, following Bradley, are the proper province of poetry—are cut off from direct expression, a pretty extreme sort of solipsism. So how then can it be possible to share those inner perturbations of the "soul" with other "souls?" In *The Sacred Wood*, Eliot offers an elaborate "recipe" for accomplishing exactly that.

He lays out most of his program in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," where he compares the poet's mind to the platinum catalyst in that famous chemical experiment where a different compound is produced without assimilating anything new, essentially the way a catalytic converter works in contemporary cars:

> The analogy was that of the catalyst. When the two gases previously mentioned are mixed in the presence of a filament of platinum, they form sulphurous acid. This combination takes place only if the platinum is present; nevertheless the newly

> formed acid contains no trace of platinum, and the platinum itself is apparently unaffected; has remained inert, neutral, and unchanged. The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum. (104)

"The mind of the poet is the shred of platinum," the catalyst that creates something new without adding any taint of itself to the resultant compound, an "inside" element, both generative and inert by its very nature, the essence of an "object-oriented metaphysics."

This radical depersonalization of the poetic process is Eliot's trademark. As he explains, with a snide twist at the end:

> There is a great deal, in the writing of poetry, which must be conscious and deliberate. In fact, the bad poet is usually unconscious where he ought to be conscious, and conscious where he ought to be unconscious. Both errors tend to make him "personal." Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things. (107)

Okay, poetry is an "escape from emotion [and] personality." What that means in practice begins to emerge from his critique of Wordsworth's conception of feelings and emotions in the sentence I quote above ("Poetry is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity.") Eliot counters:

> The business of the poet is not to find new emotions, but to use the ordinary ones and, in working them up into poetry, to express feelings which are not in actual emotions at all. And emotions which he has never experienced will serve his turn as well as those familiar to him. Consequently, we must believe that "emotion recollected in tranquillity" is an inexact formula. For it is neither emotion, nor recollection, nor, without distortion of meaning, tranquillity. It is a concentration, and a new thing resulting from the concentration, of a very great number of experiences which to the practical and active person would not seem to be experiences at all; it is a concentration which does not happen consciously or of deliberation. These experiences are not "recollected," and they finally unite in an atmosphere which is "tranquil" only in that it is a passive attending upon the event. (107)

Feelings are what poems are about and for, but they are insubstantial and incommunicable directly. To get these ineffables across to another "soul" requires "new emotions," and they need not even be one's own, which is Wordsworth's wheelhouse. Understanding and accepting this radical distinction between "feelings" and "emotions"—the latter secondary, merely suggestively allusive toward the former, which are primary—is crucial to understanding Eliot's poetics. Here he doesn't even mention Wordsworth's name, he is that dismissive. And by "inexact" he means Wordsworth's assertion is absolutely, entirely wrong in all of its elements and in its purpose. Wordsworth's definition of emotion may be vanquished. Only to be replaced by one still working from the inside

out. In other words, subject still trumps object, just in a different way.

The most practical element of Eliot's "recipe," little more than an aside in his essay "Hamlet and His Problems," is what he calls the "objective correlative," which became the cornerstone of his brand of modernist poetics. As he explains it:

> The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. (141)

Here is a perfect illustration of the inside-out dynamic I describe above. The "feeling," which cannot be expressed directly, comes first. The outside world is like an old attic, filled with an inventory of specific "things" that a good poet can piece together and render into images to ferry a simulation of that feeling into another properly attuned consciousness. The feeling is everything. Things are functions. The poem is a sort of sophisticated telegraphy to send coded messages from one "peculiar and private soul" (the poet's) to another (the reader's.) As I said above, start with Eliot's initial assumption about our primal isolation from one another, apply this recipe, and poems like his are inevitable.

If you're wondering why anyone should be bothered paying attention to these arcane arguments among poets nobody reads: Eliot's recipe for making a good poem was translated

into a pedagogy for appreciating good poetry by the American New Critics, a process that began with that weird and troubling book by the "Twelve Southerners" called *I'll Take My Stand* (1930) and culminated with Wimsatt and Beardsley's *The Verbal Icon* (1954), which perfected Eliot's text-based biases by officially exiling the author (via the "intentional fallacy") and the reader (via the "affective fallacy") from the interpretive transaction. This became the standard template for teaching not just poetry appreciation but critical reading itself in K-12 classrooms for two generations, including mine. That's how broadly impactful a poet's work can turn out to be!

There are, on the other hand, a variety of kinds of "objective-things-based" poetry in the modernist movement that sought to reverse this dynamic, replacing it with something closer to an outside-in application of Pound's founding principle, objective over subjective. William Carlos Williams is the most famous practitioner of this model. As a fervent advocate of things "in the American grain," especially the poetics of Walt Whitman, Williams was devastated by the publication of *The Waste Land* (a poem vested in what Eliot calls "the mind of Europe"). His response to Eliot was his little book *Spring and All*, published almost immediately in its aftermath.

Here's what he says later in life about what was happening at that moment:

> Then out of the blue *The Dial* brought out "The Waste Land" and all our hilarity ended. It wiped out our world as if an atom bomb had been dropped upon it and our brave sallies into the unknown were turned to dust.

> To me especially it struck like a sardonic bullet. I felt at once that it had set me back twenty years, and I'm sure it did. Critically Eliot returned us to the classroom just at the moment when I felt that we were on the point of an escape to matters much closer to the essence of a new art form itself–rooted in the locality which should give it fruit. I knew at once that in certain ways I was most defeated. (*Auto,* 174)

If Eliot's poem was like an atom bomb, Williams' response to it is at least a stick of dynamite. Even his definition of "the imagination," an ongoing trope in *Spring and All*, has a curiously objective aspect to it: "To whom then," he asks, "am I addressed ? To the Imagination" (3). There is that odd "to whom," he is being "addressed," which is not the conventional way of orchestrating our relationship with what is traditionally considered a mental faculty, an interiority. Here, the imagination is a being in its own right, both inside and outside at the same time, rhetorically speaking. A couple of pages later, he adds time to the equation: "The imagination is supreme. To it all our works forever, from the remotest past to the farthest future, have been, are and will be dedicated" (5), further emphasizing that the imagination is transcendent, not personal. All of which, in my view, amounts to another kind of object-oriented metaphysics.

Williams' most famous expression for this enigma is "No ideas but in things," from his epic *Paterson,* a pronouncement just as gnomic as Pound first "tenet." In Williams's system, "things" clearly maintain some sense of their own status and identity, their own inherent privileges,

once they enter the poem. But the purpose of the poet is to discern their "ideas" and use them to create a poem that can take its own place among them, as an "object" in its own right. Williams does not suggest that poetry is (merely) descriptive of "reality." He actually says the opposite. It is at that juncture between words and "reality" where "things" reside, along with their "ideas." He says:

> When in the condition of imaginative suspense only will the writting [sic] have reality, . . . Not to attempt, at that time, to set values on the word being used, according to presupposed measures, but to write down that which happens at that time—(*Spring,* 48)

Like right then, he means, in the moment, the force of imagination fusing world and word, creatively. So the key to me in understanding Williams is not to focus solely on the "things" that illuminate his poems, like that "red wheel/barrow/ glazed with rain/water/ beside the white/chickens;" but on the "so much" that "depends upon" them, the poem itself.

He says later:

> [The poet] holds no mirror up to nature but with his imagination rivals nature's composition with his own . . . .
>
> Poetry has to do with the crystallization of the imagination—the perfection of new forms as additions to nature. . . .(50-51)

> To understand the words as so liberated is to understand poetry. . . .
>
> Imagination is not to avoid reality, nor is it description nor an evocation of objects or situations, it is to say that poetry does not tamper with the world but moves it—It affirms reality most powerfully and therefore . . . it creates a new object. (91)

The work of the poet then is to create artifacts that are "objects" even more "real" than the actual objects they comprise. That, too, is an object-oriented metaphysics.

To close, I want to swing back around to the term "image," one Romantic poets used almost never and then only vaguely in relation to their poetic method. Suddenly, via Pound, it became the cornerstone of a new poetics. Here is some of what he says about it in "A Few Don'ts by an Imagiste," published in *Poetry* (1913).

> An "Image" is that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time. . . . It is the presentation of such a "complex" instantaneously which gives that sense of sudden liberation; that sense of freedom from time limits and space limits; that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art.
>
> It is better to present one Image in a lifetime than to produce voluminous works.
> https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/58900/a-few-donts-by-an-imagiste

Figuring out what an image is and is for in his system is as vexing as the "tenet" that generated it. But the key point is that for him it is "an intellectual and emotional complex," all subjective. Its effects are subjective as well: "sudden liberation," "freedom from time . . . and space," "sudden growth," all of which are alienated from the natural world of things, the province of imagist poetry in the Asian traditions Pound is indexing, here and elsewhere. Take Pound's meme-famous imagistic hokku-manque, "In a Station of the Metro," published in *Poetry* (1913), which became a template for his method, that "one Image" that initiated his "lifetime" of "voluminous works," for "better" or worse:

> The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
> petals on a wet, black bough.
> https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/12675/in-a-station-of-the-metro

Pound's poem has too many syllables and too few lines to qualify as a hokku, but it seems clearly to be aspiring to *act* like one. Here, though, the traditional hokku relationship between nature and observation, is inverted. Rather than being the focal point of the poem, the "wet, black bough" is secondary, snapped off as it were from its natural setting, and held up not to help you see *it* better but to see the *apparition* better, its role merely functional. That is a perfect example of the inside-outness of Pound's method that informed Eliot's way of using "objects." And as in the case of Eliot's critique of Wordsworthian emotion, it is "entirely wrong in all of its elements and in its purpose," at least in relation to the hokku imagist tradition.

Pound's primary protégé early on was Hilda Doolittle, another American ex-pat, whom he rebranded as H.D., "Imagiste" par excellence! Her imagist poems, unlike his, retain the outside-in dynamic of the traditional hokku, though, they, too, don't follow that form. Here's one from her first book *Sea Garden* (1916), called "Sea Violet:"

> The white violet
> is scented on its stalk,
> the sea-violet
> fragile as agate,
> lies fronting all the wind
> among the torn shells
> on the sand-bank.
>
> The greater blue violets
> flutter on the hill,
> but who would change for these
> who would change for these
> one root of the white sort?
>
> Violet
> your grasp is frail
> on the edge of the sand-hill,
> but you catch the light—
> frost, a star edges with its fire.
> https://poets.org/poem/sea-violet

Here the violets retain their organic connection to their natural locations, and they are the centerpiece objects of the poem, which is designed to help a reader see *them* more vividly; the poet doesn't assert an obvious presence until her question at the end of the second stanza and the figurative

gestures she proffers in the last line. This is the outside-in method that became Williams' *metier.*

I bring this up here in part to highlight the distinction I've been talking about, and its importance for distinguishing two very different kinds of object-orientation. But even more so to introduce one of the more deleterious aspects of modernist poetics in general: its tacit gender-bias. By tacit, I mean it is masked by a discourse that presumes that the "universal" position and voice, aspirational for all the modernists, is, by default, male. I'll say a bit more about this later. Its explicit effects become clear if you look at how H.D.'s extraordinary body of work was largely shunted aside during the modernist moment. Here's what I say in *This Fall: essays on loss and recovery* about her astonishing little book *Notes on Thought and Vision*:

> This is a book almost no one reads. I don't think I've ever run across anyone who had read it before I taught it. As is the case with H.D.'s work generally, that staggering and magnificent oeuvre produced over her lifetime, clearly, to me, equal in innovation, scope and eloquence with anyone in the top-tier of male poets from her generation—Eliot, Williams, Pound, Stevens, any of them. As the magnitude of her accomplishments became more and more evident to me over the years, just through more and more exposure to the work, I started wondering why I hadn't been apprised of her status when I was in college, reading all of those modernist master-poets in my first survey course. So I went back to the *Norton Anthology* I used that term. I have no idea why I still have it, but I do. This iconic compilation, the gold standard for surveys back

> then, three inches thick, containing a little bit of everyone and a lot from all the big boys. I wanted to see what part of H.D.'s work was there. Well, it wasn't, none of it, nothing. I couldn't believe it. And now, further, why don't we read this little book I was reading. We read Eliot's *The Sacred Wood,* all those short, sharp blockbuster essays, and Williams' *Spring and All*, every bit as eccentric, serendipitous, outlandish as H.D.'s little book, tuned to the masculine register of tropes. But not *Notes on Thought and Vision.* (80-81)

This is again to say that the relationship between poetics and culture is deep, and sometimes troubling. The patriarchal bias of Western culture certainly preceded modernism by millennia. And modernism simply adapted to it, largely unconsciously, via the inbuilt duplicity of its preferred discourses. It took two generations for H.D. to gain a spot in the anthologies that record the "major" work of that era. That is simply a fact worth including in a treatment of this sort. Poetic ideologies may promote dramatic change via the poems they make possible. They also remain captive to their cultural moments in ways that, looking back, are pernicious.

Pound set in motion new ways of orchestrating "things" to create some badly needed myths. He also made radio broadcasts in Italy to promote fascism during WWII. Trying to sort out how that can be somehow all of a piece is beyond the scope of this essay, which focuses more on how poems are made. But it is a part of the whole picture, adding a cautionary note: "being unconscious where he (sic: the patriarchal discourse) ought to be conscious," to

repurpose Eliot's snide observation, can lead not only to "bad" poetry, but to other kinds of bad thinking as well.

I refer above to the "inbuilt duplicity" of language, and to the inbuilt duplicities of ideology and discourses many times in this book and throughout my work. I want to stop briefly here to comment on what I mean by that. Most commonly, the word duplicity implies deception for nefarious purposes. But I use it in its more balanced root sense, which is literally "double-braided." All language—from the most complex ideological discourses to everyday words—is *always* performing two acts at once, inextricably entwined, like twisted licorice sticks: disclosing and hiding, declaring and denying, revealing and obfuscating. It is only a matter of how the balance of these binaries plays out: more toward the front sides and the chances one's words will have salutary effects are increased, more toward the back sides and the chances one's words will have "pernicious" (the word I use above) effects are increased.

A common sports reporters' meme applied (ironically now) to great athletes is "you can't stop him, you can only hope to contain him." Same with language. That's why, as I say later in this essay (and throughout my work) almost all "gurus" of historical consequence are dismissive toward language as *the* path toward enlightenment. Just the opposite is what they say: the "light" part, to the extent it is possible to attain it, begins to emerge before language arises and becomes self-evident only after language, whose role is transactional, is silenced. For them, "containing" language to its proper province is paramount. It may seem counterintuitive for a poet to endorse such a position. But I think otherwise: poetry in its essence (to me) is a way to contain language in the service of the light.

We all, of course, swim in the nearly transparent discursive waters of our cultural moment, absorbing unconsciously vast arrays of cultural tropes—religious, political, economic, nationalistic, ethnic, et al. Becoming fully conscious of everything those tropes are hiding, denying or obfuscating, things that a generation or century hence might be seen as deficiencies, lies, even atrocities, is of course impossible. The trauma of that insight might be lethal. But remaining utterly oblivious to them leads to death(s) of other kinds: in one's own spirit and in the literal deaths of other living beings who are, via those tropes, presumed to be expendable. In the example I use above, the trope is patriarchy, which has been the tacit bias of Western discourses since time immemorial, one we struggled fitfully to become more conscious of during the 20th century, progress that has been put in reverse in the 21st, thanks to the Trump-inf(l)ected Supreme Court. Which is to say that change is just as hard to effect, and sustain, at the cultural level as it is at the personal level. Hiding, denying, and obfuscating work the same way collectively as they do individually.

So why, you might ask, point out scathingly this bias in an historically remote discourse that can't see it? Well, because doing that work with discourses one can examine relatively dispassionately—as in those that are outmoded or defunct—can instill a set of critical habits and skills that are transferable to contemporaneous systems, making the current water at least somewhat more visible. It is the intellectual equivalent of Archimedes famous claim: "Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it and I shall move the world." Time can extend our critical lever outside the paradigm of the moment toward remote

fulcrums that then allow us to move the world we live in, opening a way to translate unconscious reflexes into conscious intentions. That's one of the main reasons I've spent so much of my time and energy studying literary history, including writing this essay. As Edmund Burke warns: "Those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it," which presumes, via "doomed," that this is a pretty terrible fate. I've studied enough history in my own bailiwick to agree with him.

What differentiates the object-orientation of modernist poets from the one I assume will begin to emerge from the context of Object Oriented Ontology is that the poet/creator, whether as first person voice in the lyric mode or narrator in the epic mode, is writ large. Very large. The egoism of modernist poets seems a defining feature of their agenda. Robinson Jeffers is a good example. His work, much of which laments the destructive impact of humans on a "wild" spirit-saturated natural world, has a contemporary "ecocritical" feel about it. But his own presence as a spectral force gazing out from his self-made stone "castle" on an escarpment on the west coast, overwhelms everything. The real hero of his poems seems to me to be the poet and not all the natural places, birds, etc. his poems celebrate. OOO would/will (I hope) make that domineering mode taboo.

And that, in a nutshell, is why I chose the moniker "object-oriented metaphysics" to characterize the modernist moment, and why it is so important to me to differentiate it from the "object-oriented ontology" that is likely to animate post-postmodernism, should the real thing ever arrive.

Part 2. Postmodernism

The moniker I chose for the postmodernist era replaces "object" with "subject," which is what I believe all postmodernist ideologies, both critical and poetic, did systemically. Given that, I assign to it the primary philosophical activity that subjects engage in: knowledge-acquisition and -formation, i.e., "epistemology." So why do I call postmodernist poetics "subject-oriented" when two of the "schools" I'll discuss–deep imagism and projectivism—seem at least tentatively inclined toward "objective" realms? Two reasons: Postmodernist philosophical and critical ideology begins with the foundational assumption that word—language, discourse, whatever—precedes world, which makes it subject-oriented by fiat. And why epistemology? Well, the way one comes to understand what texts of this sort "mean" is via something akin to psychoanalysis, as if texts themselves are subjects dreaming away their unconscious desires through the intricacies of language. We readers are their analysts. That makes the hermeneutic process, which is epistemological, central both to writing and reading. That's why.

I'm going to open with a mode of invention/theorization that may seem way far afield from postmodernist poetic systems both historically and conceptually. But it seems (to me) in one way or another foundational to all of them: surrealism. Yes, I know, what? Well let me try to explain. There are four primary movements or schools that, in my view, emerged during the early formative stage of the postmodernist epoch, each of which privileges subject over objects in a different way: the confessional poets, the language poets, the deep imagist poets, and the projectivist poets. All of them in my view end up being dissociative in

much the same way that postmodernist theory is. For the confessional poets, that dissociation is psychiatric; for the language poets linguistic, for the deep imagists oneiric, for the projectivist poets, mythic. And that, in general, is their shared connection with surrealism.

There are two distinct versions of surrealism that informed poetics in the latter half of the 20th century, each with a different way of orchestrating the subject/object relationship. One has its roots in the French tradition, one in the Spanish. Both of them rely on the metaphor of the "dream" to enact their method. A dream in its essence is a mechanism that uses outside material to do some meaningful work "inside." For the French, the vector is pointed in, for the Spanish it is pointed out. That's a big difference with significant implications. But a dream is still a dream. This is the postmodernist version of Pound's subjective-objective conundrum in his first tenet: two alternatives, inside-out or outside in, pick one.
The name itself came into currency via the "Manifesto of Surrealism" written by Andre Breton in 1924. He says early in the essay:

> Beloved imagination, what I most like in you is your unsparing quality.
>
> There remains madness, "the madness that one locks up," as it has aptly been described. That madness or another… And, indeed, hallucinations, illusions, etc., are not a source of trifling pleasure. The best controlled sensuality partakes of it . . .

So, imagination, madness, hallucinations, illusions. That's a pretty fierce "final four," and a pretty good window into the

variety of inside-out visions spawned by mid-century postmodernism.

Breton then offers a cogent critique of "the realistic attitude" which he equates with positivism, and the opening move to his alternative for it:

> We are still living under the reign of logic: this, of course, is what I have been driving at. But in this day and age logical methods are applicable only to solving problems of secondary interest. . . Under the pretense of civilization and progress, we have managed to banish from the mind everything that may rightly or wrongly be termed superstition, or fancy; forbidden is any kind of search for truth which is not in conformance with accepted practices. It was, apparently, by pure chance that a part of our mental world which we pretended not to be concerned with any longer -- and, in my opinion by far the most important part -- has been brought back to light. For this we must give thanks to the discoveries of Sigmund Freud. . . The imagination is perhaps on the point of reasserting itself, of reclaiming its rights. If the depths of our mind contain within it strange forces capable of augmenting those on the surface, or of waging a victorious battle against them, there is every reason to seize them . . .
> https://www2.hawaii.edu/~freeman/courses/phil330/MANIFESTO OF SURREALISM.pdf

Again, superstition, fancy, the forbidden, the dream, all legitimate counters to the overbearing "reign of logic" Breton so laments. The invocation of Freud and that

potentially "victorious battle" against surface concerns is especially telling. For Freud, a dream does not find its origin and meaning in external objects or facts. It culls the object-symbols it needs from "out there," strips them of their organic connections to where they come from and uses them to serve the purposes of the unconscious.

Breton defines surrealism itself this way:

> SURREALISM, n. Psychic automatism in its pure state, by which one proposes to express—verbally, by means of the written word, or in any other manner—the actual functioning of thought. Dictated by the thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern.

You can see that inside-out dynamic here. Unconscious thought (absent imposed controls) is first, words arise, almost instinctively, to depict it, connected to some out-there only in the most tenuous way, if at all. Breton goes on: Not only does this unrestricted language . . . not deprive me of any of my means, on the contrary it lends me an extraordinary lucidity . . . I am not talking about the poetic consciousness of objects which I have been able to acquire only after a spiritual contact with them repeated a thousand times over.

His examples seal the deal:

> This summer the roses are blue; the wood is of glass. The earth, draped in its verdant cloak, makes as little impression upon me as a ghost. It is living and

ceasing to live which are imaginary solutions.
Existence is elsewhere.

No, he is clearly not talking about poetic consciousness of objects. Everything is vested in words. Existence is elsewhere. This is a long and wild argument, worth looking at just for its rhetoric, its dynamism. If you read it as a "recipe," following its very specific sequence of directions for writing a poem, you will produce as surrealist composition, guaranteed. The overall point is clear. The poem starts inside, finds automatized ways, via words disconnected from objects, to get out, and then awaits, untranslatable in ordinary terms, for the analyst-writer-reader to interpret, or just experience and enjoy, its own brand of non-Platonic madness.

For the "confessional" school (an after-the-fact misnomer via M.L. Rosenthal, a literary critic) that emerged in the 1960s, the surrealistic "dream" is nightmarishly manic: objects, unmoored from any natural setting, swirl around in the dark psychic realms of the poet's mind, becoming either functional stand-ins for disturbed mental states or, more oddly, becoming "subjects" themselves haunting their disoriented subject-authors. Robert Lowell, the movement's godfather, was pretty much a late-modernist poet in every way until he was in his forties, when he wrote *Life Studies*, his attempt to come to terms with the psychological baggage of his family history (among his ancestors were James Russel Lowell and Amy Lowell, of "Amygism" fame) and his history of personal traumas. This new material begins to emerge in his strange and impertinent (for that time period) prose memoir in the middle of the book, "91 Revere Street." There he depicts his childhood growing up a household that was both highly privileged and profoundly

dysfunctional. It's really not until the last two sections of the book, though, a series of searingly private poems, that the originary moment for confessionalism arrives dramatically on the scene. The final poem in the sequence, "Skunk Hour," where Lowell announces "My mind's not right/. . . I myself am hell;/ nobody's here," is archetypical. (1959, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47694/skunk-hour).There is something scarily dystopian about this "landscape," and it arises not physically, from the outside-in (though skunks, rummaging through garbage here, have a bad rep culturally), but psychically, from inside-out, a disoriented mind cobbling together distorted perceptions to make sense of its pain, which is what confessionalism came to represent more broadly.

One of the weirdest techniques common to confessional poetry is how disturbed mental states end up inverting "things" that we "normally" consider animate with those that are inanimate, and vice-versa. Sylvia Plath, Lowell's understudy, takes this feature of postmodernist poetics to a whole other level, as in a poem like "Tulips," from her book *Ariel.* The living beings in the scene, a seemingly serene hospital setting, are dismembered, inert, their amputated parts littering the scene, subjects reduced to objects in a grotesque way. The narrator is "nobody," a "name" a "history," an "eye between two white lids," a "pebble," a "cargo boat," a "cut-paper shadow" with "no face." The nurses are "gulls," "white caps, interchangeable. Her husband and children in the bedside picture are like "smiling hooks." The setting sounds more like a charnel house or abattoir than a hospital. On the other hand, the tulips are wildly animate, they "hurt" her, they "breathe," "like an awful baby," they "watch," their "redness talks," they have "sudden tongues," they "eat [her] oxygen," "like

dangerous animals." There is an opposite-world horror to this apparently routine scene, haunted by ordinary "things" that take on a frighteningly electric vitality by contrast to the poet's inner stasis (1965, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49013/tulips-56d22ab68fdd0.)

It's possible, of course, to see all of this (and you can find the same sorts of inversions, if less densely and dramatically rendered, in all the confessional poets: Sexton, Berryman, Snodgrass, et al.) as simply the inevitable extension of the modernist nightmare of Eliot's *The Waste Land.* But I tend to see it as something new, what happens to the world of "things," of "objects," once they are fully detached from their "natural" settings and consumed by a mind in a disordered dream-state, objects-turned-subjects, nightmare qua madness. A. Alvarez's *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (1971) is a good companion piece to read with these poems, proposing that the only escape from the self-stultifying ennui induced by the post WWII 1950s is a self-absorption that prompts self-annihilation.

L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry relies on an alternative mechanism for "absorption," what Charles Bernstein ultimately calls "artifice" in a poem/paper he first published in 1987. The movement, which took its name with the publication of the first issue of *This*, in 1971, a collaborative effort between Robert Grenier (the east coast anchor) and Barrett Watson (the west coast anchor), highlighted disembodied interiority in this much "saner" way, basically by dissociating words from any inherent referential connection to embodied things. Grenier's mini-manifesto "ON SPEECH" from that issue declares the agenda succinctly and straightforwardly:

"My poems exist in my head. They need not be spoken or written."
–Randolph Dud

> It isn't the spoken any more than the written, now, that's the progression from Williams, what now I want, at least, is the word way back in the head that is the thought or feeling forming out of the 'vast' silence/noise of consciousness experiencing world *all the time*, as waking/dreaming, words occurring and *these are the words of the poems*, whether they, written or spoken or light the head in vision of the reality language wakes in dreams or anywhere, on the street in armor/clothes.. . .
> Why imitate 'speech'? **. . .** To me, all speeches say the same thing . . . I HATE SPEECH . . .
> http://eclipsearchive.org/projects/SPEECH/speech.html

"ON SPEECH" was written at almost exactly the moment that French poststructuralist theory was first finding its way, via translations, into the American academy. So I'm assuming Grenier was not familiar with those texts yet. But you can see the same ideological imperatives guiding his thinking here: the movement away from embodied language (especially speech) to scribal "discourses," which in this case, eerily, serve as reservoirs for the "'vast' silence/noise of consciousness experiencing world *all the time,* as waking/dreaming, words occurring and *these are the words of the poems,* whether they, written or spoken or light the head in vision of the reality language wakes in dreams or anywhere, on the street in armor/clothes." Those unresolved binaries that postmodernist critical systems became so adept at exploring, in this case silence/noise, waking/dreaming, armor/clothes, "are" Grenier says "the

words of the poems," as if the disturbed mind that afflicted the confessionals is projected, calmed, and (dis)stilled, into the austere waking dreams of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E.

The Freudian dream-stuff is gone. But not the dissociation. The poems become more like works of abstract art. Some of them are almost palpably sculptural, as Susan Howe's often are (she was also a sculptor). In her "Cabbage Gardens" for example there are many "things" vividly rendered—"fringe/ of trees /by a river/ bridges black /on the deep/ the heaving sea"—but they are "overtaken" by the "alien force" of "the past," which displaces things both temporally and spatially to serve a psychic function, the poet inhabiting "a forest/ of myself," "her ship moving away." In the end, "thick noises/merge . . . dissolving and defining" the scene into abstractions of "spheres/ and /snares." The severe line breaks amplify this dissociation of things from their contexts. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43253/cabbage-gardens, 1979)

Other Language poems have a poignant tenderness about them, as in these two snippets from Larry Eigner's "Six Poems," also an evocation of the past via memories of things. The hardscape of the scene—the "space along the/wall," "the cellar/full of cans and the sun," "the turf of flowers at the pane"—floats up through "the heat of absorption" still intact but distorted, as if by a thick the pane of glass that mediates sensation, in this case, again, as much a temporal as spatial effect. The only static image is the author/reader standing witness "on one foot/ like a tree," another layer of figurative displacement. (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?contentId=29605, 1964.)

All of them, though, highlight surface artifice at the expense of reference, sometimes even legible meaning, language eerily alienated from both the rational mind and the objective world, subject turned into object turned into subject via "the words of the poems."

"But there is another method," as John Berryman said, quoting Olive Schreiner in an epigraph to his *Dream Songs*. Something akin to surrealism had been afoot in Spanish poetry for some time in the early part of the 20th century, and in the 1920s there were interactions with French Surrealism. But to me at least, the poetry coming out of Spain—Juan Ramon Jimenez, Federico Garcia Lorca, Antonio Machado during this era—looks and acts differently from the French, or Pound's and Eliot's for that matter. The Spanish also use the figure of the "dream" to locate their approach, but for them the dream starts out there, in the world of things, then migrates inward, a kind of inhalation, where it is transmuted into images, not thoughts, and slowly, via some hidden alchemy, finds its way back out in words. The world is in the poem from beginning to end. And the method is not automatized in any way. It actually shares some of the meditative aspects of Wordsworth's method.

I'm going use a piece by Jose Ortega y Gasset, the great Spanish philosopher of this era, not so much because it details an alternative poetics—it is primarily a critique of Romanticism and, to some extent modernist (over)reactions to it, which he is hopeful are on the right track for what's next and new—but because it came out almost simultaneously (1925) with Breton's piece. There are moments in this long essay where what I want to get at

seems to rise up out of the mire of that critique. He says, for example:

> It is a perfectly simple matter of optics. In order to see an object we have to adjust our eyes in a certain way. If our visual accommodation is inadequate we do not see the object, or we see it imperfectly. Imagine we are looking at a garden through a window. Our eyes adjust themselves so that our glance penetrates the glass without lingering upon it, and seizes upon the flowers and foliage. As the goal of vision towards which we direct our glance is the garden, we do not see the pane of glass and our gaze passes through it. The clearer the glass, the less we see it. But later, by making an effort, we can ignore the garden, and, by retracting our focus, let it rest on the window-pane. Then the garden disappears from our eyes, and all we see of it are some confused masses of colour which seem to adhere to the glass. Thus to see the garden and to see the window-pane are two incompatible operations: the one excludes the other and they each require a different focus. (68)

He wants the glass in, but he doesn't kick the garden out entirely to get it there, it remains, "confused masses of colour."

He goes on:

> It will be said that it would be simpler to dispense altogether with those human forms – man, house, mountain – and construct utterly original figures. But this, in the first place, is impracticable. In the

> most abstract ornamental line a dormant recollection of certain 'natural' forms may linger tenaciously. In the second place – and this is more important – the art of which we are speaking is not only not human in that it does not comprise human things, but its active constituent is the very operation of dehumanizing. In his flight from the human, what matters to the artist is not so much reaching the undefined goal, as getting away from the human aspect which it is destroying. It is not a case of painting something totally distinct from a man or a house or a mountain, but of painting a man with the least possible resemblance to man; a house which conserves only what is strictly necessary to reveal its metamorphosis; a cone which has miraculously emerged from what was formerly a mountain. The aesthetic pleasure for today's artist emanates from this triumph over the human; therefore it is necessary to make the victory concrete and in each case display the victim that has been overcome. (71)

Here is the Spanish "victory," the triumph over "the human" in its demoded Romantic forms; though, as I said, Ortega y Gasset seems to see this as an interim point on the way to something else. And his examples are, tellingly, visual—looking and painting—rather than verbal (differentiating his system fundamentally from the French), oriented outward rather than inward, toward things rather than words.

The main point is this: He doesn't want things to be routinized, and that is only possible via modes of radical defamiliarization, the dreamwork of the artistic

imagination. The world is still there, it is just dramatically estranged in a way that forces us to pay attention not only to it, in its representational sense, as a scene, say, but to what it holds and withholds, its spirit, its imaginative grip on those who know it well and live in its grasp, what Lorca calls "duende," an earthy irrationality inflected with vitality, darkness and death.

A good example of this use of objects is the short surrealistic film *An Andalusian Dog* (1929), a collaboration between Salvatore Dali and Luis Buñuel. If you have seen it, you will never forget the brief scene which shows a full moon in the sky, a thin cloud moving toward and then across it, and then jump-cuts to a straight razor slicing into a pried open eyeball. It may be a clunky way of demonstrating what I'm getting at here, that movement outside-in. But it works. You remember the eyeball, but you remember even more vividly the cloud-sliced moon that invoked it. The scene starts out there and then gets estranged. Not to get you to see the eyeball in a new way, but the moon. That kind of dreamwork is neither Freudian nor Bretonian. It is something other entirely.

All of this got processed through Latin American literature, what became by the mid-50s something called "magical realism," a term first used by a German art critic, Franz Roh, also in 1925. I won't go into all of that because it pertains primarily to fiction. I want to talk instead about the subsequent transition of this mode of surrealism into American poetics by one school of poets that was called variously the American surrealists, the deep imagists, or, to use Robert Bly's term, the "leaping poets."

The deep image movement (the name I prefer) originated in the 1960s, and ran parallel with, but became more mainstream than, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry. James Wright was the originary poet, Bly the theoretician who defined the foundational feature of the method as "a long floating leap from the conscious to the unconscious and back again, a leap from the known part of the mind to the unknown part and back to the known." You can see the dynamic here: conscious (which for these poets is usually rooted in perceptions of "things") to unconscious and back again. The poem may take root out there, and the composition of it is a conscious process. But it all takes place inside a human head. That's what justifies its name as a mode of surrealism.

Bly's book *Leaping Poetry* (1972) expressly established the link to the Spanish poets I named above, one that Wright had put into practice and then made famous with his breakaway book *The Branch Will Not Break* (1963). Wright's early work, like Lowell's, was modernist looking and sounding, long lines, rhymes, formal, Frostian. After he read the Spanish and Eastern European poets that enact the sort of dream state I describe above, all that changed. See his poem "A Blessing" for a wonderful exemplar of his new inside-outside fusion. In the poem, the two ponies are there, literally not symbolically, but are deep and mysterious, having been dreamed out of and then back into themselves via the poet's "leaps." (https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46481/a-blessing).

There is a soft, dreamy "beauty" of this sort in all the poems made via this method, no matter how ugly or violent the subject matter, a tendency foreshadowed in Wright's

"Autumn Begins in Martin's Ferrry, Ohio" (1963), where high school football players "grow suicidally beautiful/ At the beginning of October/ and gallop terribly against each other's bodies." Carolyn Forche (*The Country Between Us*, 1981) writing subtly about the horrors in El Salvador and Yusef Komunyakaa (*Dien Cai Dau*,1988) writing lyrically about the horrors in Vietnam are two good examples of this method being used with that effect in book-length studies. Their subject matter is brutal. The poems are beautiful. As I said, one of the alternative names for this school was American surrealism, obviously in the Spanish rather than French tradition, which in my view makes it subject-oriented by definition.

The projectivist poets take a different tack toward the interiority of language. Their originary guru at Black Mountain College was Charles Olson, whose manifesto "Projective Verse" lays out both the ideology and the "recipe" for this mode of poetic invention. That brief essay published in 1950 transformed the Black Mountain poets into the projectivists. Here are the two most practical of his three principles for "COMPOSITION BY FIELD:"

> A poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it . . . by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader. Okay. Then the poem itself must, at all points, be a high-energy construct and, at all points, an energy-discharge. . . .
>
> ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION . . . . . perceptions . . . must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER! (16-17)

Olson was a big fan of the UPPER CASE, which tells you something about the size of his personality. BIG! As was his influence. For him the poem is a medium for transferring energy "from where the poet got it" over to the reader, directly, perception after perception moving "instanter" in sequence. A couple of pages later Olson comes to his most radical core-set of propositions for open field composition: Let me put it baldly. The two halves are:

> the HEAD, by way of the EAR, to the SYLLABLE
> the HEART, by way of the BREATH, to the LINE
> (19)

The second of these was the one that took off in relation to the mechanics of poem-making: line breaks determined by breath patterns, instead of the million other ways you can regulate temporality a poem in an OPEN FIELD once rhyme and meter are no longer in control. Poets as different-breathing as Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov took this aspect of his method as the mantra for timing their work. Each one, not surprisingly, had a unique rhythm. So projective poetry is the opposite of Language poetry in relation to speech. As Olson says:

> For the first time the poet has the stave and the bar a musician has had. For the first time he (sic) can, without the convention of rime and meter, record the listening he (sic) has done to his (sic) own speech and by that one act indicate how he (sic) would want any reader, silently or otherwise, to voice his (sic) work. (20)

(This essay, written in 1950, remains as captive to the masculine register as modernism was. Thus, all my "sics.") The most astonishing application of this resurrection of Pound's third "tenet" of imagism ("As regarding rhythm: to compose in sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of the metronome") is in Louis Zukofsky's *A* which is literally scored for musical performance, with specific instrumentation, "stave and bar" and all!

Nobody as best I could tell paid much attention to the first "half" of Olson's equation above, which is far more radical, hard even to think about let alone to do. It places the semantic center of a poem not at the level of sentence or phrase, the line or even word, all of the traditional ways of locating meaning or sense in linguistic constructs. But on the syllable, that single, distinct sound that has no intrinsic "meaning" in the conventional sense, on each little bit of noise as it gets extruded along the way. And the import of the syllable is not simply aural, physical, the vibrating wave part, as has always been the case for poetry, the interplay of sounds resonating in the ear, alliteration, assonance, those sorts of things. It is intellectual: the head, he says. This is like Language poetry taken to a surreal extreme, not words but sounds the primal material for sculpting poems.

Olson would likely be aghast to have his work associated with surrealism. He claims in fact that his project is even more radical than the "objectivism" championed by Zukofsky, inventing what he called "objectism:"

> Objectism is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the "subject" and his (sic) soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man (sic) has interposed himself (sic) between what

> he (sic) is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects. For a man (sic) is himself (sic) an object . . . (20)

This sounds on the face of it like a precursor to Object Oriented Ontology, that far ahead of its time. But I want to insist that it's not. First of all the "object" in "objectivism" refers to the poem not to what's outside it. And projectivist poetry, in the execution, the poems themselves, may be the most radically "I"-based of all the postmodernist approaches. How could a poem built around breath and simple sounds, which is intelligent noise, be otherwise? Olson's own epic, *The Maximus Poems*, opens this way, asserting its "I":

> Off-shore, by islands hidden in the blood
> jewels & miracles, I, Maximus
> a metal hot from boiling water, tell you
> what is a lance, who obeys the figures
> of the present dance

(https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47496/i-maximus-of-gloucester-to-you).

The original editions of this multivolume work were printed on oversized, cardstock thick, vellum-textured paper, each page likely handset, and unique. On one, there is only one tiny word centered. On another, the page is densely packed with words, margin to margin, some of them skewed awry, some circling the edges, almost unintelligible. Reading the book is a trip. Speaking of which, Ed Dorn's *Gunslinger* (1968-71), one of the many "long poems" that became a career-defining trope for second generation projectivists,

written mostly in the late 60s, is as wild a poetic ride as you're likely to find from that or any era. It sounds like it was written by someone who had taken acid and speed-read Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (which of course he couldn't have, unless it was in French.) It is *literally* a "trip," capturing the nervous breakdown that characterized that moment not on an individual but a cultural level, more like the sort Joan Didion describes in her essay "The White Album" than the personal ones the confessionalists specialized in, a stream-of-consciousness sort of surrealism. Here is a little snippet:

> *The Ego*
> *is costumed as the road manager*
> *of the soul . . .*
> *I got there ahead of myself*
> *I got there ahead of my I . . .*
> *This alone constitutes*
> *the reality of ghosts.*
> *Therefore I is not dead.*
> (https://gravyfromthegazebo.blog/2016/01/05/edward-dorn-gunslinger-1-2/)

It took 20 years to go from Olson/Maximus' monolithic "I" to Dorn/Gunslinger's identity fission. This multiplication and dissolution of the "I," via discourse, is, to me, one of the most scintillating motifs in a poem vexed with countless conflicting others, projectivist poetics taken to the extreme in the most riotously disorienting ways, the ultimate extension of Olson's method, and subject-oriented epistemology in general. My analysis of projectivism would, I'm sure, be considered anathema by Olson: "inexact," to borrow Eliot's term, i.e., entirely wrong in all of its elements and in it purpose. But, following my method—reading tons

of poems fast—I can come to no other conclusion. Sorry, Charlie!

A couple of profound changes, more paradigmatic than technical, were made not only possible but, I think now, inevitable by postmodernist poetics. One derives from the diversity of the various approaches, a side-effect of which was to shatter the patriarchal "glass ceiling" that defined modernist poetics. The overall aversion among the major modernists to addressing inequitable gender- and race-related power dynamics can be summed up in the New Critics' valorization of the "universality" of poetry, which if you actually read the arguments—as in that influential book I mentioned, *I'll Take My Stand*, where a contemporary ear hears the racism and sexism blaring—functions as simply a discursive proxy for White-male privilege. That's why a poet as extraordinary as H.D. was barely noticed until the 1960s!

You'll note that I've mentioned along the way a number of female poets who were early players in each of these postmodernist "schools." Since I've focused for the most part on the 1960s-1980s while they were first taking shape, the primary spokes*men* were, in fact, men. By the 90s, though, that gender-landscape had shifted tectonically, a trickle turning into a torrent. Name your favorite "major" poets of that era (1990-2010). They will be primarily women, many of them women of color, or queer, or working class, or intersectional, all demographics that modernism precluded by fiat. Each of these new approaches undermines the hegemony of that agenda in one way or another, by shifting the focus to the personal, for example, sometimes the extremely personal, including the most intimate bodily functions; or by prioritizing

ideological identity-related systems, like feminism, especially Black feminism (via figures like Audre Lorde and the amazing poet-in-spirit bell hooks), queer theory (not simply bringing alternative sexualities, i.e. NOT straight male-superior hetero-, out of the closet, but spotlighting them) and "working class" poetry (which became a genre of its own during this interim.)

The other change derives from their systemic commonalities, allowing the various modes to hybridize so generatively, which they clearly did. You can pretty much put any two of these four together, think about what kind of poetry a poetics of that sort might promote, and find it being practiced by a diverse group of poets, some famous some not-so, often unawares of one another. I have not (until right here) made this democratizing process a pivotal axis of my argument because, as an old, straight, White male I simply don't feel authorized to delineate that more recent history. Read the poets who are and did. Which is to say again: If you think poets don't change culture in dramatic ways, think again. They are in my opinion not simply avant-garde voices for their own generation but seers for the next.

And that is why I chose "subject-oriented" and "epistemology" to name the poetry of the postmodernist moment. And why I think surrealism, in one or another of its modes, is as good a portal into its mechanics, its various "recipes," as any other. I lived through that historical moment, mostly drug-free. It was still surreal; and these four modes of capturing the permutations of that state of mind are good portals for understanding what it was like to "be there."

Part 3: Post-postmodernism

That of course leaves post-postmodernism which I say will be guided by an object-orientation I describe as ontological. What does that mean? Obviously I am borrowing that terminology from the OOO movement in philosophy, not from practices I see any current poets using in common. So what I have to say will be speculative. For one thing, this new epoch has not yet fully fledged. Both modernism and postmodernism emerged quite suddenly in the aftermath of global events that effectively dismantled the ideologies—geo-political, economic, and social—that had kept their respective cultural matrices stable. WWI did it with the longstanding caste- and empire-oriented cultural systems that were the latticework organizing national identities in the 19th century. Postmodernism emerged out of the chaos the late-60s, precipitated by a similar global crisis that festered up from the war in Southeast Asia. Right now, pretty much anywhere you look, the world is at a similar tipping point. The charge is primed. All it will take is a match to light the fuse, opening a way toward what's next and new, assuming we survive the explosion. Just this week, a 60s-size demonstration at Columbia University protesting the ongoing crimes against humanity in Gaza has spread like wildfire to college campuses across the country and around the world, provoking militant police responses. Maybe that's the flashpoint. Or the war that incited those demonstrations. Maybe it will be the second Trump presidency. Maybe it will be the next pandemic (the last one seems to me to have created more chaos than transformational change.) Or maybe something somewhere we're not even thinking about today will detonate instead. In any case, since it hasn't happened yet, I have no clear

sense of how this next era will ultimately be organized. That requires a rearview mirror. When I glance to my right, "objects in the mirror are not just closer than they appear," they are still either right next to or in front of me. So I'm going to go back to my foundational principles for this portion of the essay.

First, I believe that poems come second, the poet comes first. A new kind of poetry, then, will require a new kind of poet. If I want to write that new kind of poetry, I need to become that new kind of poet, which to me means I will have to become a new kind of person. And that's what I've been trying to do since I retired six years ago and flew out west here with nothing but a carry-on bag of clothes, not in search of a new life (too old for that), but in search of the new person I hoped to become. Second, I am a poet not a philosopher. OOO may offer one template for promoting a body of poetic work fundamentally different from what the postmodernists left behind. I've read a few of the books by that school of philosophers, but nowhere near enough even to enter into their conversations let alone presume to implement their imperatives. Some of Timothy Morton's concepts, like "intimacy," "uncanniness," the "no-self," even "gooiness," sound promising to me as ways to evade the no-win binaries of the 20th century. But only if I can assimilate all of that into a whole person who can write those poems. Toward that end, most of my reading over these last six years has been of much more ancient wisdom texts.

I have no ambition to become a spokesperson for any sort of new poetic movement. Part of that has to do with what I said a few pages back: As an old, White, straight male, I am simply not authorized to play a role like that in the new

order. And part of it is temperamental, my in-built desire to live reclusively, "hidden" in a way I'll describe shortly here. Besides, the 20th century was rife with larger-than-life egos claiming to know the way, and look where it got us. I hope the next two generations will look back and say: Hey, let's not do that again!

The only way I know to make some headway against those tendencies toward self-aggrandizement, as I say in the essay this one comments on, is to realize, in every fiber of my being, that "it's not about me now, never was, never should have been," my boiled-down essence of what OOO is trying to get at. If I had to boil down the essence of Western culture over the last 1500 years, most especially the current American version of it, it would be: "It is about me, always was, always should be." Overriding that cultural imperative is like trying to resist a powerful rip current. You can't swim against it, or you'll drown. You can't swim with it, or you'll end up lost at sea. You can only swim askance to it and hope you have enough stamina to survive until you reach calmer water. That takes an enormous amount of self-discipline, patience, faith, and, yes, time, all of which are in short supply in a cultural moment like ours, rife with all the manic urgencies in our political, intellectual and spiritual arenas. And in my own lifespan! But making the effort is the only path I see toward becoming the kind of person I might admire. Which I'm hoping then will help me become the kind of poet I aspire toward. And maybe (though this is less important) write some poems that demonstrate all of that. So I swim askance and keep hoping. And writing.

In a nutshell: My personal poetic project since I retired has been animated by a desire to become comfortable enough among all those other not-me-objects-out-there, the ones I

meet on my long, daily walks, that, from time to time, they will tell me what they want to say about themselves, to become in their presence something like the "no-self" Morton describes in *Hyperobjects*. It's relatively easy, once you get a knack for it, to achieve that state of self-transcendence as a witness, always my goal when I'm out walking, head empty of words, contemplating "things." But it's really hard to render what I witness in their words instead of mine, saturated with subjectivity. That's why so many historically significant sages and gurus have contempt for language, the enemy of absence and silence, which are the ground-level conditions for genuine transcendence toward otherness, just another object among the objects we're among here. When I get into that state of mind, those other "things" sometimes (I feel) proffer a few of the words they prefer for rendering themselves visible, not so much to me as to the universe they inhabit, which is as curious as I am to come to know them. I explain what this sort of curiosity means to me in "The Curious Cosmos: Taoism and Quantum Mechanics" (in *waking up: reading wisdom texts*), which I reference below. That may sound implausible, even delusional, presuming as it does that I can somehow override my presence with absence so that things can emerge from absence into presence. But that's my plan.

The best way to delineate how that process works for me is via a pastiche of quotes from some of my recent books. It is almost comically self-contradictory, I know, to document my progress toward that no-self by writing about myself! You may be tempted to just stop reading right now, thinking, what a joke, the way I did the first time I read Whitman's "Song of Myself" as part of my schoolwork in the 10th grade, and every time thereafter I was obliged to read him in college. It took me almost a decade, and

multiple mis-readings, to realize I had gotten it all wrong. Here's how I document that reversal of thinking in *This Fall*:

> There was, for me, for years, a big snag I hit right at the second of line of "Song of Myself:" "What I assume, you shall assume." Sounds like a command to me. "Think what I think." I don't like commands. They're like advice, but harsher. They set my teeth on edge, so off-putting, this one for example, making it hard for me loosen up and love the wonderful long poem that ensued from it. I just couldn't get over that hump. Until late in my graduate studies. Then, all at once, I saw it: He didn't mean "assume" as in his assumptions, what he believed and thought, how you'd better just take all that at his word, stop thinking for yourself. No, not that at all. He meant "assume" as in "taking in," what I have taken in from the world, all of these wonderful, loving perceptions, stories, relationships, I lay them out for you, who can enlarge yourself by assuming them as well, my gift to you, the purpose of which is not to fill you to the full but to whet your appetite to go out and "assume" your own life, as lushly, as lavishly, day after day, down to the finest detail, with loving eyes. What goes into me goes out to you. He says basically that all through the poem. What could be more generous than that?
>
> Today, every day, if I am open enough, a small part of the world will take possession of me. If I can contemplate it lovingly enough, I will assume it, into myself, like [this] great poet . . . If I can carry some portion of all that into my words, you can assume it,

> too, if you want, no pressure, just there for the taking. (104)

If you've gotten this far now, maybe I've persuaded you to keep going.

Let me start with where I started when I decided, after I got here to my new home in Washington, that the key to my self-renovation was to become "smaller in all the right ways" (*First, Summer,* 73.) As I searched my books today with the keyword "small," I was stunned by how many dozens of examples I found, which is telling. Here are a couple of the most pertinent:

> These [huge, old growth] trees, not surprisingly, make me feel "small." But in all the right ways. In my last year or so in Pittsburgh, as I fantasized about a new life in a place I might make a home, one of the things I knew I wanted was to become "small."... I wanted to be just another person, not "Professor," or "Doctor," or "Poet" or "Author," just "paul" was how I named that feeling. Small p. And now I am. When I can, I even write my name with a small "p" and skip the last name entirely.
>
> . . .
>
> These trees I see are fully worthy, and they know it. When I am with them, I feel fully worthy. They could relate to me as if I were nothing, a piece of lint floating by. But they don't. Maybe they just don't live in a culture that differentiates big from small to mark hierarchy or social class. The fir and the fern are co-equal colleagues. . . . They are just as happy being exactly what they are, "fir" or "fern," as I am being

> "paul." One of these days I know I will feel quite at home among them, small in all the right ways, making friends . . . (*First, Summer*, 45-48)
>
> . . .
>
> The way I coded all of that disrobing of baggy identity markers in previous books was I would get "small, just paul, that's all." "Just a guy trying to get by" was another phrase I liked for it. I thought that process would be relatively easy, smooth, even pleasant. It wasn't.
>
> I soon realized that the process I was engaged in was not simply making someone big become small, someone arrogant become humble, a relatively straightforward transactional exchange. I became preoccupied with both the concept of and the feeling of being "nothing," which I experienced quite vividly and painfully, an absence of "I am". . . So right from the outset, "nothing" seemed to be at the core of my search for becoming something, a necessary stage along that path. I don't mean "nothingness" in any conventional philosophical or religious sense. I mean nothing in the sense of nobody. . . . Nobody. (*Living Hidden*, 89-90)

Another keyword for me was solitude, which was inevitable for me in a city where I knew no one but my daughter and her husband. This was amplified by the enforced isolation of the pandemic, which was so soothing to me, the first time in my life I felt that my inbuilt reclusive temperament was normal and healthy. I spent a lot of that time reading those ancient wisdom texts I mention to reinforce those feelings.

Here are a few passages pertinent to that theme:

> That period [the pandemic] of mandatory quietude was a joy, one I wanted to try to sustain going forward. To facilitate that I decided to read philosophical material that might translate my temporary mood into the fabric of my daily life. I chose the Stoics for that, . . . mostly Seneca and Marcus Aurelius, first and second century CE Romans. Since Seneca derives much of his inspiration . . . from Epicurus, a Greek philosopher from the 3rd century BCE . . ., I also read what I could find of his work. Seneca's style is epistolary, Aurelius' and Epicurus' aphoristic, but all are relatively plain speaking, preferring quick, pithy insights or assertions, memorizable and therefore memorable, . . . ideally suited to the sort of self-transformation I was in the midst of. (*Living Hidden*, 194)
>
> . . .
>
> One of [Epicurus'] nuggets of wisdom is ["*lathe biosas*"], which has been translated variously as "live anonymously," or "live in obscurity," or most literally, and my preferred version, "live hidden." . . . I have been living "hidden," at least in relation to my published work, for . . . years now, when I made initially, and then kept repeating, a decision to self-publish my work online for free or in print versions at cost. (*Living Hidden*,195-6)
>
> . . .
>
> [T]his passage [from Seneca] says it all in relation to my settlement.

> Retire into yourself as much as you can. . . [T]here is no reason why any pride in advertising your talents abroad should lure you forward into the public eye, inducing you to give readings of your works or deliver lectures. (Seneca, 18) . . .

And Marcus Aurelius says, similarly:

> Or is it your reputation that's bothering you? But look at how soon we're all forgotten. The abyss of endless time that swallows it all. The emptiness of those applauding hands. . . . so keep this refuge in mind: the back roads of your self. Above all, no strain or stress. (Aurelius, 38)

The abyss of time on either side of our puny lives is, of course, endless by comparison. And it swallows everything. . . [I]n the seemingly grand context of our minute here, the applause inevitably fades, including for the most famous among us, and the hands creating it at its apex are, by definition, empty, as are the promises they make. Aurelius goes on:

> Then what is to be prized? An audience clapping? No. No more than the clacking of their tongues. Which is all that public praise amounts to—a clacking of tongues. (Aurelius, 72)

Verbal praise may seem more valuable and durable than applause, especially when it's in print, the cash

register that keeps tabs on the currency of celebrity in Western culture. But that, too, is short-lived, leaving us short-changed in the end.

Along these same lines [to repeat in an earlier iteration some of the things I've already said in my "Afterthought" to "The Medium is the Hyperobject"] one of the most stunning quotes I encountered is this one from Seneca:

> Equally good is the answer given by the person, whoever it was (his identity is uncertain), who when asked what is the object of all the trouble he took over a piece of craftsmanship when it would never reach more than a few people, replied: 'A few is enough for me; so is one; so is none.' (Seneca, 19) . . .

I have said repeatedly that my primary desire for what I write is that it will find at least one reader who really needs, really loves it, and that has happened more often than not. More lately, I have come to believe that the one reader who most needs and loves what I write is actually me, the part in there that just can't seem to learn what he needs to know on his own, requires all of this additional remedial help just to keep afloat, to change himself. For real, I mean. Which gets me back to the quote above. What, anyone including me might fairly ask, is the value of a text that only the writer reads? It seems pointless. The writer must already know what is being written, so why bother writing it for no one else to read? But I have written repeatedly, and believe, that such a

characterization of the relationship between what one "knows" and what one writes is nonsense.

For me, unless I make the effort to write, I can't ever know what I end up writing. The process of composition, all this finger-flapping on the keys, is the vehicle for it to come into being. I have almost no idea what I'm about to write when I'm writing. I just start typing, and this is what comes out. It might as well be, and may well be, someone or something else entirely that tells my fingers which words to pick, I feel that far removed, consciously at least, from the transaction. Then I get to read it, just like you do here, assuming anyone else but me ever reads this. And I learn what I need to know, having been taught by a version myself "living hidden," or some other agency for which myself is the conveyance, also living hidden, what I need to know right now. That is the value of a text that "no one" ever reads. . . . I am the "no one" whom my "nobody" writes for and with. And happily so. . .

Here is a further bit of wisdom from Seneca along these lines:

> 'For whose benefit, then, did I learn it all?' If it was for your own benefit that you learnt it you have no call to fear that your trouble may have been wasted. (Seneca, 18)

No, my trouble has not been wasted, not by a longshot. (*Living Hidden,* 198-203)

. . .

My process was guided as well by a study of Taoist texts. I was particularly attracted to the belief that everyday states of mind can awaken to and then awaken the cosmos we inhabit. Here are some passages that explain this:

> One of the things I like about the Taoist tradition is the assumption that "enlightenment" is not considered a rare transcendency achieved only by an elite few via extended, arduous labor. It is everyday perception, consciousness in effect. The universe can, then, become awakened to itself via any individual life form, from the most complex to the most rudimentary, all of which establish sensory connections to their immediate surroundings, if only to nourish themselves, replicate, and stay alive. Human mind may not, in fact, be the preeminent vehicle for this awakening, simply one among many.
>
> Once, though, one considers one's presence in the world in this light, a certain kind of self-reflexive awareness begins to emerge, the sense that one's experiences of/in the cosmos are not exclusively or entirely "personal;" that one can, in fact, serve as a portal for this broader kind of awakening on behalf of the cosmos, even if that portal is very tiny, local, and momentary in its nature. When such a self-consciousness (a consciousness of this consciousness) begins to emerge, poetry becomes not only possible but, in some respect, inevitable. It is, in effect, the poetic sensibility in motion, even if/when it never culminates in the production, distribution, or reception of things we might recognize as actual poems. That part of the process is not necessarily irrelevant, but it is not essential. A poet is simply

one who chooses to use perception, and sometimes language, in some way to report, even if only to themselves, what their individual consciousness accomplishes on behalf of the cosmos' awakening. . .

Certainly, not all poets and/or poems intend to establish mutually beneficial relations with the curious cosmos. Most don't or can't. I personally write many different kinds of poems with many different kinds of ambitions, some of which have specifically to do with my "self" in its narrow worldly sense. But some do in fact invite me to diminish or abandon that self-based identity-center and its many discourses to encounter the world at large in some legitimately meditative or ecstatic (literally, a standing outside-of-myself) sense. In effect, when I approach the world this way, I begin to engage in a mirroring dialogue with what's outside of me. We begin to "see" one another through the other's eyes, in the same way that mutual self-revelation is the outcome when we have a real conversation with another person, each party not just getting to see the other, but also getting to see themselves via reflections in another pool or mirror. When I engage with what is immediately present to me from the cosmos, there is a similar sort of mutual self-learning that I feel going on, one that allows me to experience my seemingly trivial vantage point as extraordinarily valuable, and that causes the local version of my self to begin to evaporate. This is, I believe, a partial and small-scale example of the genuine transcendence that mystics and gurus experience routinely and more fully. (*waking up,* 200-3)

. . .

I also spent a lot of time reading early Christian texts, especially the "lost" gnostic gospels, all with an eye toward what Jesus actually said rather than what has been made of what he said in the meantime. In the Gospel of Thomas Jesus names four fundamental changes one must effect to enter what he calls "the Kingdom of Heaven:" become childlike, escape from binary thinking habits, override gender distinctions, and liminalize the boundaries between the inside and the outside. Here are some passages from the Gospel of Thomas pertinent to each, with brief commentaries from my book *waking up*:

(1) childlikeness:

> [Jesus said]: *"The man old in days will not hesitate to ask a small child seven days old about the place of life, and he will live. For many who are first will become last, and they will become one and the same."*

> This one concerns the need to return to the ultimate state of innocence, childlikeness, where language is no longer a factor in perception and learning, an image akin to the one Pelagius uses over and over, the child's face, to represent the radiant state of sinlessness we are born into. Here "a small child seven days old" becomes a font of wisdom for "[t]he man old in days," the stage of life I'm at now, when one begins to realize something of consequence about both wisdom and innocence: that it is a matter of what kind of eyes one looks at the world through that determines what one sees, an alternate sensory version of the "ears to hear" trope [that

Jesus uses repeatedly]. A child so new to the world clearly "knows" nothing about it and has no way to share its vision. Yet its eyes see and gather everything equitably, which is what the old man here aspires to do as well. It is at these two extremes—very old and very young—that, Jesus says, first and last (in this case, newborn and elderly) become simultaneous. (w*aking up*, 164)

(2) escaping from binary thinking habits:

[Jesus said]: "*When you make the two one, you will become the sons of man, and when you say, 'Mountain, move away,' it will move away."*

". . . and when you fashion eyes in the place of an eye, and a hand in place of a hand, and a foot in place of a foot, and a likeness in place of a likeness; then will you enter the kingdom."

This pair makes clear how the power dynamic is supposed to work: When you "make the two one" you can rebuild yourself from the ground up, replacing a culturally induced identity with a true one. "[T]hen you will enter the kingdom" which is right here, right now. (*waking up* 177-80)

(3) overriding gender distinctions:

Simon Peter said to them, "Mary should leave us, because women aren't worthy of life." Jesus said, *"Look, am I to make her a man? So that she may become a living spirt too, she's equal to you men, because every woman who makes herself manly will enter the kingdom of heaven."* .

. . [You must] "make the male and the female one and the same, so that the male not be male nor the female . . ."

Jesus is having none of Simon Peter's misogynistic bluster, rebuffing it immediately and forcefully, in what may look initially like a self-contradictory manner, by turning Mary into a man. It seems absolutely clear to me, though, that Jesus is not interested in indoctrinating Mary or his female disciples into an ideology of patriarchy, one that will permanently subordinate them to male domination. He is talking here, I believe, about a form of androgyny, one he recommends to the men among them as well, the merger of male and female identity features, such that neither dominates, both resonate companionably, leading to a transcendence of the oppressive gender binary that makes it impossible to "enter the kingdom of heaven. (*waking up*, 176-7)

(4) inside=outside:

[Jesus said]: *"If those who lead you say to you, 'See, the kingdom is in the sky,' then the birds of the sky will precede you. If they say to you, 'It is in the sea,' then the fish will precede you. Rather, the kingdom is inside of you, and it is outside of you. When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living father. But if you will not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty and it is you who are that poverty."*

I've tried repeatedly over the years to describe in my own words what it feels like when I enter one of

my ecstatic states while walking in the woods. One of the features all those descriptions have in common is the blurring of the lines between what I normally experience as my "inside," my personal identity, and the "outside," the forest around me, as if the customary boundaries between those two realms of being are fully permeable, one becoming the other and vice-versa. I describe it this way in "The Time Has Come":

> As soon as I entered the forest itself, all of that amplified considerably. Every walk in this place 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. *(waking up 168-9)*

. . .

And finally, I simply thought about how to minimize my "footprint," the way we use that term ecologically. Here's a passage from "Seeing Another Way Past Self-Extinction," focused on global warming:

> So now that this essay is awake again, it is telling me to argue fiercely that one way forward for humankind—if there is any way at all to avoid our own demise—is to change how we look at the world. Now. For real. It is not scattered around us, an array of disconnected spectacles; or outside us, a bounty of resources to consume visually or materially. It is part of us, we are part of it, in it, with it. . . [L]ose yourself—your "self," that cultural fiction invented to launch humankind "out of this world"—until you become a part of what's there and what's there becomes a part of you, no inside-outside, no top-bottom, no spirit-matter, no binaries at all, no boundaries at all, the kingdom of heaven embodied right here and now. (*waking up,* 257-8)

You might rightly ask why I am not including any of my own poems as outcome-products of this inner work. My answer is simple. Read my poems the way I read other poets' poems: If you want to adapt to my rhythms and enter my world, read a bunch of them fast, which is not a huge investment of time since I call many of them "slights" to emphasize their simple brevity. Some of them actually started out as texts to friends, that slight! Less me, more not-me, a no-self that strives to say what it hears instead of hear what it says. Simple as that. There is a volume of poems by that eponymous title on my website, poems I wrote between 2018 and 2021; or you can visit my YouTube site where I created a series of weekly mini-readings of my "tiny poems" in 2022; or you can visit my Instagram site where, for a year (2023), I paired my tiny poems with images and sounds at a two-post-a-week clip. I've also just uploaded to my website a new volume of my

most recent poems called *the other side of the light*, my paradoxical trope for the sort of identity-blurring experiences I'm striving toward.

Finally, the visual metaphor within which my primary philosophical terms are ensconced is, admittedly, tortuous. I wanted to suggest both the commonalty that modernism and post-postmodernism share via their interest in "objects" and the radically different ways they orient toward them. The discombobulation created by convex mirrors—if they could distort the perception of time instead of space, which they can't—seemed like a good vehicle to conjure that effect, an illusion further complicated by the vacuity of the subject-oriented postmodernist interlude (again, temporal rather than spatial) that separates them. "That sentence" may merit the withering critique Sam Johnson directed at 17th century "metaphysical" poetry, where, he says, "the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together." But it prompted this essay, which I enjoyed writing and, I hope, redeemed it.

So, in summary: That's why I chose each of those cryptic monikers to characterize the poetic epochs of the last century or so, as well as the figurative frame I set them in. And, more generally, that in a nutshell is what I was literally thinking when I wrote the clunky sentence that forced me to write all of this to unpack it.

Epilogue: Five Days in June

1. June 25th

> All I need is a little sun,
> some for me some for everyone.
> All I need is a little air,
> some for me some for everywhere.
>
> Jack Johnson and John Cruz

It is about eight months since I started the reading that led to this book. "Quantum Reading vs. the Rabbit Hole" will appear in the next issue of *Reader: Essays on Reader-Oriented Theory, Criticism and Pedagogy*. The book's other two essays have landed as well, forthcoming in a journal called *Intermezzo*, which specializes in essays too long for print journals and too short for books, my "goldilocks zone." This book and the new book of poems I mention above did not find amicable publishers after a couple of tries each—both "much admired" but "not the right fit." I handled those rejections, and the inordinate amount of time it took (measured by my jazzed-up inner clock) for the process to unfold, with considerable aplomb. I could have kept trying, as most authors are conditioned to do. But, honestly, I just don't care enough to do that. All I wanted to find out was whether my work still had the legs to play in the larger professional arena, and it does. Whatever else the market has to offer, status, fame, recognition, money, I simply don't need, or even want, any longer. I feel like these books have now come back home to me. We'll mutually enjoy the process of creation that will make them shareable with

people I care for. I think often of John Donne's contempt for the print marketplace, his preference for sharing his most cherished works with people he knew and respected. Ditto with me. The very fact that I was able to do all of this—persisting patiently, sloughing off, almost welcoming, rejection—so suddenly this year is stunning to me. That may seem strange to you, these things that are just routine for any writer, the sending out, the getting back, the sending out again. But it takes inner resources to do all of that well. And now know I have them. Which is what I really wanted to find out. There is nothing beyond that I feel moved to prove.

This is "Pride Week" in Olympia. The annual pride parade is on Sunday. I happened onto last year's parade by accident and was taken aback by the size and exuberance of it, many hundreds of mostly young people marching down Capital Way filled with pride just to be who they are, to make it visible, revel in it. It was exhilarating. Everyone's life presents impediments on their path to becoming more themselves. It's so important to remember that, to be generous, tolerant. We all share the same sun and air. That's what I'm trying my best to do with my own sun and air: share it. The world at large will take it or leave it. Either way, I'm proud of what I am and have done.

2. June 26th

In the cradle of the circle
all the ones that came before you,
their strength is yours now,
you're not alone.

Our Native Daughters

I was listening today to an Alexa Firmenich podcast called "Zen Buddhism and the Soul of Lifeworlding" in which she interviews Sister True Dedication and Brother Spirit at Plum Village in France, one of the network of monastic communities Thich Nat Hahn founded in 1982. I was sitting comfortably in my sunroom, glazed with late-June midday light, surrounded by plants and books, a room I reimagined last month around a dramatic vintage rug I found at a local store. It is a long podcast and I'm not the most patient sitter, but as it went on I felt more and more relaxed, at ease. Sister True Dedication has a crystalline spirit and a subtle laugh. Even just listening, you can tell she always speaks with a smile on her face. Brother Spirit has a voice that rings softly like a small bronze bell, with a tentative wisdom in it that arises, can only arise, from genuine humility. Lovely people.

As I listened, I found myself not just agreeing with everything they said but realizing that I had arrived at all the same insights about how to live a life measured by moments in this troubling world. Except I had reached my destination along a number of different paths taken simultaneously instead of one taken directly. Kind of the way I read the books I write about here: All these interests of mine happened to be on "the bedside table" in my head at the same time as far back as I can remember. So I spent my lifetime "reading" them together: quantum mechanics, poetry and poetics, critical theory, stoicism, early Greek philosophy, gnostic Christianity, forest bathing, the not-so-secret life of plants, astrophysics, pre-pharaonic Egyptian esoterica, Taoism, neurobiology, et al., all of which showed me not how they disagree with one another but what they share, paths that, over time, merged to take me here, where

I am right now, this wide greenway, writing a conclusion for my own personal "book of change."

The disadvantage of doing it my way is that it takes so much longer, and the wandering can often feel like lostness, though I can see now, looking back, that it never was. The serenity Sister True Dedication and Brother Spirit now enjoy, rooted as it is in a single economy of ideas and buttressed when necessary by trusted mentors with whom they are willing to confer, even defer, in moments of inner crisis, may be more stable than mine, with its many different facets and only myself to turn to when it falters. But there are advantages to having done it my way that are more than adequately compensatory, the main one being I am not beholden to a singular ideology, which can be risky if and when doubts about its efficacy begin to creep in, those "dark nights of the soul" that afflict so many searchers for the light. I always have a back-up plan, many back-up plans, to guide me out. And, besides, I don't much mind the dark; I believe spending time there—even lots of it, as I have—is, in the long run, good for the soul.

At one point in the podcast Brother Spirit talked about invoking his ancestors for help while he was trying futilely to write about a personal experience especially fraught with emotion. When he turned it over to them, he said, what couldn't get written got written easily and quickly, as if by someone else. Maybe my ancestors took over for me in that way, without my even asking, after my wife died. I've written ceaselessly and copiously, at an astounding rate, all without inordinate effort. As I often say, it's as if some other force within or outside me—and "ancestors" is one way to name either or both—is doing all the work. I'm just typing.

It's possible my ancestors—Irish on my mother's side, Slovenian on my father's—have been there with me, without my knowing, right from the start, as a boy in my tiny hometown inventing meditation practices to settle my innately anxious spirit, writing little poems in my head to delight myself, reading my way down all those fascinating paths, meandering every which way. Maybe they were just curious to know some of this stuff and didn't have the time while they were busy mining coal, raising big families, or selling hardware. I am, I try to remind myself, standing in the cradle of their circle as I do my highly privileged "work." I'm not sure if I've been teaching them or they have been teaching me. But today I want to believe that we all know the same thing: Our instant of time is of extraordinary import, and heaven is right here, right now. So live in it. As much and as often as you can. Yes, I think my ancestors know this as well as I do because they wrote about it with me, maybe even for me. Their strength is mine now and mine is theirs.

3. June 27th

> Do not fear the winter blowing
> in the hearts of men.
> I have seen American flowers
> and they will bloom again.
>
> Birds of Chicago

Last night was the first presidential debate for the 2024 election, a "disaster" for Joe Biden everyone is saying, even his supporters. Today while I was taking a bath I went off on a mental riff, as I often do when I'm that relaxed,

imagining how best I might cope with what looks to be an inevitably chaotic next four years, whichever way the upcoming election turns out. Earlier in the day I had seen this quote in one of the news feeds: "When people are insecure, they'd rather have someone who's strong and wrong than someone who's weak and right." Bill Clinton said that in the aftermath of the 2002 midterm elections in which his party failed to make gains against the Bush regime, echoing a trope that had been around in political circles for almost a century. This is, of course, a very succinct summary of the argument I make in "Quantum Reading vs. the Rabbit Hole," with "insecure" in place of Naomi Klein's "uncomfortable" and my "anxious."

In other words, these corruptions of the instinctive fear-response built into the survival package of all living beings—which in the human universe are insinuated from outside-in so early, so often, and so forcefully by familial, cultural, political, religious and national ideologies that they begin to feel more like eternal, natural verities than temporary aberrations—have one effect in common: They lead those so-afflicted to choose wrong over right, mistaking the appearance of "strong"—the relentless bluster of bullies that masks an even deeper fear than the one it seeks to induce in others—for actual strength. Real strength always, and I mean always, resides with what's right, sometimes appearing "weak" simply because it remains calm no matter the storms of the moment, listens carefully to the quiet voices instead of only the boisterous ones, seeks resolution, even reconciliation, in the midst of seemingly intractable discord, and has no singular preferred ideology for defining the way. Every true path will lead to right sooner or later. There is only one path to "wrong:" fear. Those who crave power—the alternative to truth—know

that fomenting it makes their path to actualizing whatever wrong they have in mind so much easier to navigate.

Four years ago, I sang a playlist of calming songs in advance of the 2020 election, one almost as fraught as this one. I shared it with family and friends and put it up on my YouTube site. Today I put it up on my website so I'd remember to listen to it often during the coming months. Each section of this conclusion begins with an epigraph from one of the songs on that playlist. Terrible things happen in this world, and they could well be once again about to. During those interims it is important not to "fear the winter blowing in the hearts of men," to have a faith that "flowers . . . will bloom again." I may or may not live to see them. All good work, though, is generational. Light wins out over darkness again and again in this universe. Sometimes it takes lifetimes to do so. The key word in my epigraph and that sentence is "again."

4. June 28th

> God bless this beautiful morning till its gone.
> God bless this beautiful morning till its gone.
> How it's gonna feel when it goes I don't know,
> but that's another song.
> God bless this beautiful morning till its gone.
>
> Birds of Chicago

Summertime in Olympia is idyllic, day after day of seamless sunlight, blue skies, endless varieties of clouds, from the wispiest cirrus, like a very thin whitewash brushed out delicately, to the most voluminous cumulous, huge

schooners, sails puffed up with soft breezes, drifting across ruffled seas. Mornings are cool, afternoons warm, both ideal for walking, with low humidity, which makes the air crystal clear, everything appearing magic mushroom vivid, down to the tiniest needles at the top of ten-story fir trees. There are birds of all kinds everywhere making their livings noisily in every possible habitat: gulls, herons, redwing blackbirds, cedar waxwings, kinglets, red headed tanagers, as stunning as the scarlet tanagers back east, wrens, including the Pacific wrens whose complex songs are mesmerizingly cheerful, woodpeckers of all kinds including the magnificent pileated ones, their red crests so regal-looking, jays, including the elegant, cerulean blue Steller's jays, sandpipers, purple martins, bald eagles and at least a dozen kinds of waterfowl. A walk anywhere here is like a trip to an aviary.

Or like a trip to a conservatory. I take about half my daily walks down to the boardwalk along Budd Bay, that last little finger of Puget Sound, lapping out just below the state capital building downtown, 190 nautical miles from the Pacific Ocean. The many gardens I pass on the way host wave after wave of the most opulent spring and summer flowers, from drifts of daffodils in February, to huge rhododendrons overwhelmed with florets in April, to roses of all colors and types in May, to the more delicate summer flowers I see now, daisies, foxglove, poppies, day lilies, petunias, and more. The mild temperatures keep them in bloom for weeks at a time as they soak up all the winter rain stored somewhere underground. As I pass them, I often reach out to a blossom or petal here and there, touch it with one finger, very lightly, a way to both experience and share physical intimacy in a life that has so little of it. And it's not just because I don't happen to have a partner

any longer. Our whole culture sometimes seems to me to dissuade us from the simple intimacies we were capable of at birth, as if these are weak and wrong instead of strong and right. So stupid.

The other half of my walks are in one or another of the "temperate rain forests" within a few miles of my house, all those moss-bearded old growth firs and hemlocks and maples hovering above endless savannas of ferns as tall as I am, the embodiment of patience that leads to wisdom, just magical. Walk a few hundred feet into any one of them and world-time stops, forest-time starts. Instead of feeling chased forward by the urgencies of the moment, I feel welcomed by a future ambling down the path toward me, inviting me in, its Sister True Dedication smile lighting my way, a Brother Spirit tintinnabulation in its voice. Almost every worthy idea I've had over the last decade has come to me in places like this, seemingly out of nowhere, like the whole organism of the forest is doing the thinking for me. Then I come home and type it up. Maybe these are the places our ancestors go to enjoy their retirement. And where I go to visit with mine. Stranger things than that have turned out to be absolutely true in this universe, as you will find out if you study quantum mechanics or astrophysics long enough. Things as fundamental to "reality" as photons on the tiny end and black holes on a grand scale can teach us everything we need to relearn about all of that. Just because you can't make sense of something in the conventional ways our culture indoctrinates us into, training our brains away from their inbuilt wisdom, doesn't mean they are not true.

5. June 29th

I'm gonna make my world a better place;
I'm gonna keep that smile on my face;
I'm gonna teach myself how to understand;
I'm gonna make myself a better man.

Keb' Mo'

Plato's *Protagoras* opens with Protagoras, the most famous sophist of his day, boasting to Socrates, who is pretending to broker a mentoring deal for young Hippocrates, that "the very day [Hippocrates] will join me, [he] will go home a better man, and the same the next day" (316). Socrates is having none of it, first asking "toward what and better at what?" (317), a question Protagoras answers vapidly. So Socrates picks away at that theme to expose what "betterment" means to Protagoras: that, under his tutelage, Hippocrates will "become a real power in the city" (317), which is not at all what Socrates means by "better," nor Keb' Mo', nor I. For one thing, we believe that making yourself a "better" person is not a job you want to turn over to some alleged expert at the local sophist factory. You need to make one of yourself, with yourself, and largely by yourself. Nor does our idea of "betterment" have anything to do with "real power in the city."

Socrates mantra is a simple one: "know thyself," and he spent a lifetime prodding others to do just that. He can be a real pain in the ass, almost comically so at times, but his relentlessness in the service of this agenda is admirable, at least to me. Today while I was walking I recalled a conversation I had with a colleague about forty years ago.

He was frustrated at my apparent lack of concern for professional advancement, "making a name" for myself is how he put it, and said, quite forcefully: "You know what's wrong with you, Paul? You don't have any ambition." I remember laughing immediately, more instinctively than intentionally, and answering, without really thinking: "I have ambition for things you can't even begin to imagine." That was it. The whole conversation. My colleague wanted me to share his ambition for real power in the city. My ambition was to know myself. And ne'er the twain shall meet.

I named its animating purpose variously along the way: wisdom, peace of mind, love, truth, and probably half a dozen other concepts that seem equally banal until you try to put them into daily practice. But I think Socrates and Keb' Mo' have it right: I wanted to "make myself a better man." That is a "you never finally get there" destination in this life, as a long, tortuous argument Socrates has with Protagoras later in this same dialogue demonstrates. There they parse out the distinction between "being" and "becoming" in the human universe, a back-and-forth that seems almost pointlessly "academic" at the outset but becomes absolutely crucial for understanding the differences between their concepts of "betterment."

Making a better world and making oneself a better person are one and the same. If you want to understand all of that, you have to teach it to yourself. And keeping that Sister True Dedication smile on your face, the one I imagine I hear in her voice as she speaks—sounding sometime wise, sometimes playful, sometimes demure, sometimes slyly ironic—helps. The player in the Socratic dialogues who has that variegated smile always on his face, at least as I read

them, is Plato. Great sense of humor that guy. And I'm wearing that same smile every time I finish reading one.

As I said, I started pursuing my ambitions as a boy. Now, these many decades later, I'm still at it, closer both to the "there" I had hoped was possible and to understanding that there is no "there" there. I never know when I finish a book whether it will be my last. It certainly always feels like that, as if my head is now fully empty of all its thoughts and words. This one is no different. I do know that I've accumulated a few books while I was working to finish it. They are scattered around my house, don't remember exactly where or what they are. One of these days I'll gather them together, stack them up on my bedside table, and start to read them, see what kind of a conversation they want to have among themselves, see what, if anything, I might have to say back to them. Maybe I'll write something I want to share, maybe not. Either way the main purpose of all that work will have been accomplished: amplifying my sense of personal agency, learning new ways to fight back.

This historical moment is the most haywire of my lifetime, and I've seen plenty of weird and stupid along the way. I will likely be gone before a better world emerges from this chaos, the way new stars begin to flicker on in the dust clouds left over when old stars explode, the way the gazillions of photons that keep us warm and fed emerge from the cauldron of our own star, taking tens or even hundreds of thousands of years to migrate out into space to start their eight minute journey to earth, time they use to transform themselves from gamma rays that will destroy us into sunlight that will sustain us.

Things fall apart so new things can come into being. The law of this universe. Simple as that. I have a faith that my children and so many of the young people I had the privilege to work with during my career will make a way better place to live in from the shambles my generation and the ones right ahead of and behind mine have left them. My strength—mostly via my work as a father and a teacher, and perhaps to some small extent as a writer—is theirs now, and theirs is mine, the cradle of the circle rising up to complete its arc on a higher plane. My time in the light is almost done. How it's gonna feel when it goes, well, that's another song. In the meantime, I'm going to take a shower, go out for a walk, and bless this beautiful morning till it's gone.

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