

## Chapter Four

# Beginning Again

### I. Chaos and Complexity Theory

I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity. (Oliver Wendell Holmes)

i accept chaos. I am not sure whether it accepts me. (Bob Dylan)

#### **i. Learning to See Chaos**

Like many non-scientists, I first learned about chaos theory — as it was widely called at the time — from James Gleick’s 1987 popularization, *Chaos: The Making of a New Science*, which led me to mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot’s classic 1977 *Fractal Geometry of Nature*.

I remember, shortly thereafter, standing on a beach in the flux of the waves. At my feet, the sinuous fingers of the sea sent smaller fingers of froth reaching up onto the sand, waves of waves, all webbed with networks of foam made up, in turn, of smaller networks of bubbles, webs of webs. Above me, cirrocumulus clouds sprawled across a blue sky, popcorn clusters of clusters and wisps of feathery wisps. Everything had become fractal, very roughly describable as pattern (often self-similar pattern, as in these cases) at multiple scales.

Learning to see chaos represented, for me, a kind of re-enchantment of the world. No doubt some version of this experience is widely shared by those in the throes of any old paradigm shift: the sense of being “present at the creation,” the

zeal of the convert. And in retrospect, gradual paradigm shifts can tend to seem more and more like acute conversion experiences. Even so, this episode of worldmaking bears some very specific historical resonances, even in my highly condensed and aestheticized version. What I saw happening to my world was stark modernist formalism being deconstructed into baroque, postmodern plenitude and excess. On a beach in Massachusetts.

Part of the conversion to chaos involves learning to see structures not as structures but as events in process, which is part of what makes chaos and complexity theory full partners with post-structuralist theory generally. Sociologist Niklas Luhmann describes society as a complex system whose basic elements are acts of communication; that is, "not stable units (like cells or atoms or individuals) but events that vanish as soon as they appear." Likewise (for example), when you deconstruct the image of a human body as a structure with a simple boundary between inside (self) and outside (nonself), you get something much more dynamic and fractal. Negotiations between self and nonself (and the continuous transformations of one into the other) happen not just at the skin but fractally and at multiple scales down to the cellular level: every cell in the body is engaged in this negotiation; in fact, every cell *is* this negotiation. If the body is a structure, it is a fractal one with all edges and no interior — a whirlpool, a burning bush.

(And by the way, as you were reading those words, did you feel your body subtly opening up, exquisitely flayed and aflame, and in the process, a new sense of being-in-the-moment? If so, you've already drunk the Koolaid and you can skip the rest of this section. Otherwise keep reading.)

These examples (of Luhmannian society and deconstructed bodies) are intimately related to poststructuralist accounts of texts not as hermetic interiors but as intertextual negotiations, and more generally to the concurrent paradigm shift in cybernetics from closed to open systems (about which, more in the

next chapter).

On the scientific side, Prigogine and Stengers' 1984 *Order Out of Chaos* and Stuart Kauffman's 1993 *The Origins of Order: Self-Organization and Selection in Evolution* were influential in developing fully temporal accounts of chaos and complexity.

Under their influence, I remember walking in the Nevada desert and noticing some of the ways that the scarcity of water shapes the plants and their interactions. I saw it in the spacing of their branches and blossoms, the shapes of their leaves and stems, their own spacing in the terrain, all selected to optimize water absorption and retention. Looking at a sagebrush bush, I saw a living algorithm in multidimensional possibility space, its form-in-process an ongoing exploration of this space.

(A bit more metacommentary: so far these little autobiographical vignettes borrow from the romanticized image of the scientist in the "eureka" moment: "his hair was a ragged mane, . . . his eyes were sudden and passionate," etc. — that was Gleick's description of physicist Mitchell Feigenbaum. But let me see if I can go on to make it even a little more uncomfortable.)

The desert ecology felt deeply strange and deeply familiar to me. What I recognized in the sagebrush was a fellow creature engaged, like me, in the question of how to find what nourishes you in the middle of a desert. "Danger makes human beings intelligent" as Anna Freud put it. If this attitude strikes you as hopeless anthropomorphization or New Age twaddle, consider the following interchange:

Chuang Tzu said, "See how the minnows come out and dart around where they please! That's what fish really enjoy!"

Hui Tzu said, "You're not a fish—how do you know what fish enjoy?"

Chuang Tzu said, "You're not I, so how do you know I don't know what fish enjoy?"

This, in any case, is also the kind of questioning, of both kinships and differences, that chaos and complexity make possible.

## ii. Complexity

Complexity and chaos both have a range of technical definitions, but both remain nonetheless profoundly ambiguous and paradoxical.

The paradox of complexity can be indicated quickly: “if what we are interested in is complexity itself, then an image that we can easily identify as complex is thereby *less* complex than one whose complexity we find difficult or impossible to ascertain.”

In the example of a social system as described by Luhmann, complexity derives from “an observer’s inability to define completely all [the] elements’ connections and interactions. . . . [T]here is no totalizing perspective or omniscient selector. Each act of observation is embedded in what it observes.” Such a definition should also be historicized: only against the *fantasy* of a disinterested, totalizing and transcendently objective perspective—a fantasy most specific to imperialist modernity—can complexity come to be defined as embeddedness, or rather, as the contradiction between transcendence and embeddedness.

Physicist Stephen Wolfram’s quick definition of complexity also coordinates an observed and an observer:

In everyday language, when we say that something seems complex what we typically mean is that we have not managed to find any simple description of it—or at least of those features in which we happen to be interested.

This notion — of the impossibility of simple description — gestures toward a range of possible philosophical commitments, from antireductionism to extreme nominalism. Wolfram (no philosopher) seems to remain committed to an extreme reductionism in which complex behavior always derives from the

iteration of simple rules. Even so, his Principle of Computational Equivalence suggests some of the more world-changing implications of complexity. Wolfram posits first “that all processes, whether they are produced by human effort or occur spontaneously in nature, can be viewed as computations,” and second, that “almost all processes that are not obviously simple can be viewed as computations of equivalent sophistication.” Recognizing a single common level of complexity (or *virtual kinship* as I have called it) radically undercuts the master narrative of growth and development as increasing complexity.

### iii. Chaos

Nailing down chaos as a concept is also difficult, first of all, since even scientists use the word in several ways. Sometimes the word is used in its popular sense as a synonym for simple disorder. In this case, the more complex and fruitful kind of disorder — the kind of disorder out of which order can emerge — tends to be identified as “the *edge* of chaos.” More often, though, *chaos* is used to mean the complex disorder itself, but to make things more confusing, it can also refer to the kind of order that *emerges* from such disorder. And here’s the punchline: this ambiguity is not so much an obstacle to be cleared away but something more like *what chaos really is*.

The word comes from ancient Greek, where it signified the primal emptiness of space, the nothing from which something emerges. As it turns out, postmodern physics has elaborated this notion nicely: time and space are “crystallized from nothingness,” and empty space, it turns out, “is not so empty — it is actually seething with activity” — the generative chaos of a “blooming, buzzing confusion” (as Victorian psychology pioneer William James famously described the perceptual world of the infant out of which, as the child learns to focus, discrete figures emerge). Physicist Frank Wilcek calls this non-empty emptiness the Grid. The Grid is reality’s substrate, built from a host of

ingredients: quantum commotion; the metric field that delineates space, time and gravity; exotic materials like the quark-antiquark condensate and the Higgs field that together transform empty space into a multilayered, multi-coloured semiconductor.

Ancient Greek cosmology, postmodern physics, Victorian psychology — why engage in a transhistorical treasure hunt for exemplars of chaos, like an old Jungian sniffing out archetypes? Well, first, because I want to offer examples that best give the feel of chaos, but also to gesture again at the questioning of kinships and differences chaos makes possible, this time by suggesting that it offers at least the possibility of tracing different constellations with past knowledges, rearranged genealogies and relationships between science and literature and religion. This is part of what I mean by *beginning again*.

#### **iv. Cooking Up Complexity**

Let me try to show you complexity stripped down to its most basic, or if you like paradoxes, simple complexity.

First step: start with several things and processes. It may seem obvious, but it's important to recognize that, whenever you have several things, it means that they *are not alike*, even if they are (for example) three hydrogen atoms. Multiplicity involves difference.

Thus physics begins with certain particles and forces; biology, with assorted chemicals and their various interactions; language, with letters and words and grammar. Notice that, while sciences may fetishize a countable set of basic elements ("simples" that cannot be divided any further), things start getting stickier when you try to nail them down. The more physics tries to identify a basic set of particles (for example), the more they seem to multiply and evaporate into probabilistic clouds. Again it seems that this difficulty is unavoidable: the discretely countable seems to emerge out of a more primal multiplicity; I've called it *someness*.

As in other recipes, after assembling the ingredients (nouns),

you need to do something with them (verbs): *start combining them*. In order to generate chaos and complexity, the process of combination has to involve nonlinearity or *recursion* — the product of a process being fed back into the process again. But note that even simple mixing is describable as recursion.

Recursion in mathematics, where the result of a function is fed back as a starting value for the next iteration, is most famously illustrated by the Mandelbrot set, an infinitely complex fractal object generated by a very simple, repeatedly iterated equation.

*Autocatalysis* is an example of recursion in chemistry. In the simplest version, one of the products of a reaction catalyzed by some particular chemical is *more of the catalyst itself*, which thus continues to catalyze more of the reaction as long as more raw materials are present. In a modestly rich chemical environment, such reactions can develop complex self-amplifying and also self-inhibiting loops: behold the emergence of *metabolism!*

There is recursion in linguistics, starting with the way grammar enables the embedding of clauses in other clauses. This has been proposed as the way that grammar, given a finite series of elements, “can produce an infinite number of sentences of unbounded length” (as I fear the reader may think is a pretty good description of this book). Even if there might be languages that lack recursion at the grammatical level (a controversial point, at this writing), recursion is nonetheless “part of how all humans think — even when it is not part of the structure of their languages.” Consciousness and language are recursive loops in an already very loopy universe.

There are also multiple forms of sociological recursion. Ian Hacking describes the process of social construction of identities as a nonlinear process of “Making Up People” in which (for example) a category like “autism” or “multiple personality disorder” co-evolves in tandem with a target group of people and with sets of social practices, institutions, specialists, and so

on. The various components are bound together by a series of recursive loops and the whole configuration emerges, changes, grows, breaks apart, dissolves, and so on.

Discursive recursion is the subject of Andrew Abbott's *Chaos of Disciplines*. Taking sociology as his main example, Abbott shows how any particular division of the field, for example into quantitative and qualitative methodologies, only generates further fractal divisions: the qualitative side itself will turn out to have a quantitative and a qualitative side, and so on. When such divisions are engaged not just as structures but as processes (versions of what is known in mathematics as *binary decomposition*), one is likely to find complex cycles of disciplinary polarizations, hybridizations, and so on.

And there are several important kinds of recursion in literature. Structuralist linguist Roman Jakobson defined *poeticity* as that aspect of a message that refers back to itself. In the most basic sense, rhyme and meter and other devices self-referentially call attention to language as language rather than — referentially — to any content. And there are multiple ways that literature works recursively to thematize its own operations, starting with plays-within-plays, metafiction, and other self-referential maneuvers.

As a somewhat random example (or see my other books for a great many more), take Alice Walker's well-known 1973 short story "Everyday Use." The story is set in the 1960s; the narrator is a tough old African-American woman who lives in the rural South with her younger daughter Maggie. She is visited by her upwardly mobile older daughter, Dee (also known as Wangero), who is returning from a northern city where she has discovered Black Power and high culture, making her painfully condescending to her family of origin. Dee/Wangero asks for a family quilt to take back with her to display but, in a sudden and almost religious inspiration, the mother gives the quilt instead to her younger daughter, even though Maggie will only put it to

“everyday use.”

Even in this thumbnail account, it's easy to guess at least one way the story is looped back around self-referentially: the story itself is an artifact rather like the quilt, part of the cultural legacy of mothers to daughters. If you wanted to shut down interpretation, you could try reducing to a slogan the reinsertion of the story into itself: stories, like quilts, are best put to use rather than aesthetically revered as art. This reading will only do the trick if you're allergic to interpretation — and to chaos and complexity. Otherwise, finding the recursivity helps you open up a set of generative contradictions at the heart of the story, such as the vexed relationship between art and utility. Even the apparently simple proposition that short stories can be understood as utilitarian objects implies a radical redefinition of utility with paradigm-shifting consequences.

Again I want to stress the experiential aspect of engaging recursive chaos and complexity, here via the reading and writing of literature. The way that a piece of literature is about itself is something that one often discovers only belatedly; it does not short-circuit interpretation but begins it anew. Likewise, in listening to poetry, the recursivity of the language need not produce an alienating art-for-art's-sake closure but can instead increase the living-thing-likeness of the language, its excessive layers of mediation working to intensify the sense of immediacy of the experience. And the act of writing in the grip of recursion is not a navel-gazing exercise but a much more dynamic process, a surfing in the recursive curl of things. Find that moment and try to sustain your balance in it.

#### **v. What It All Means**

So what does it mean that we can find chaos and complexity in what is called nature and in the works of our own hands and brains, literature in particular, especially when we weren't exactly intending to place them there? I suggest three main ways

of approaching this question.

First, it is often claimed that chaotic and complex processes are universal, so we should expect to find them everywhere — transculturally, transhistorically, and on both sides of the nature/culture divide.

For example, Oliver Sacks proposes that the often conspicuously fractal visual hallucinations experienced by many people who suffer from migraines derive from the fractal structures of the brain:

these hallucinations reflect the minute anatomical organization, the cytoarchitecture, of the primary visual cortex, including its columnar structure — and the ways in which the activity of millions of nerve cells organizes itself to produce complex and ever-changing patterns. We can actually see, through such hallucinations, something of the dynamics of a large population of living nerve cells and, in particular, the role of what mathematicians term deterministic chaos in allowing complex patterns of activity to emerge throughout the visual cortex. This activity operates at a basic cellular level, far beneath the level of personal experience. They are archetypes, in a way, universals of human experience.

The paradoxes here are compelling: apparently it takes a hallucination — seeing something not really there — to see self-referentially what really *is* there, namely, the neurological mechanism *by which* we see. And the dazzling complexity of this vision, this ethereal meta-reflection, seems to derive from how it short-circuits us back to the solid substrate, the hardware. To put it another way, the universality of chaos and complexity loops back around to complicate and paradoxify even the simple assertion of their universality.

Of course, suspicion of universalized truth claims is also a

leading operating principle of cultural theory. I'm still a card-carrying poststructuralist, which is why I will only identify this as a "leading operating principle" and not a truth claim itself (although the claim that "there are no universals" is at least interestingly contradictory). But it needs to be pointed out, too, that the *rejection* of universality claims often functions as a rear-guard action to bolster the nature/culture divide and to maintain the monopoly of humanists over the culture side. Although this maneuver may have some strategic value (for example, in trying to fend off scientists with their reductive explanations for everything), it's a rear-guard action insofar as it's driven by an exceptionalism about humans that is, as I have already argued, ultimately a *theological* position.

Universality is understood in chaos theory as the prevalence of certain mathematical processes over a range of otherwise disparate phenomena. As I have already indicated, such prevalence need not be understood as difference-effacing similarity but as a kind of *virtual kinship*, what I have also called *withness*: language resembles the world of which it is a part; it *bears withness* to its world. If you prefer to stress difference rather than resemblance, you can start by considering instead how the plurality of all that is called "language" is riven by differences as radical as those that cleave language from the world.

The charged question of universality aside, we can trace historically particular discursive forces at work whereby literature came to occupy a privileged position to engage chaos and complexity. In an emergent modern ecology of discourses in the West, coming to a head around 1800, recursion and self-reference were banished from science and became the particular province of what came to be called literature. Foucault's account is that literature emerged as

merely a manifestation of a language which has no other law than that of affirming — in opposition to all other

forms of discourse — its own precipitous existence; and so there is nothing for it to do but to curve back in a perpetual return on itself; as if its discourse could have no other content but the expression of its own form.

We can trace this legacy in literature and literary studies over the past two hundred years, from Coleridge's principle of organic form, to Aestheticism's art for art's sake, to structuralist accounts of language-as-system, to Jakobsonian poeticity, to the insistence of the so-called New Critics (in the mid-twentieth century) that literary texts and literature in general be treated as self-contained systems, and into postmodernism's anti-realisms and metafiction. And what does it mean for literature and literary studies that science now has also begun to embrace recursion and self-reference? This remains an open question. The melancholy account is that literature, the novel, poetry (and so on) are well on their way to extinction, their niche in the modern discursive ecology having been invaded and compromised from all directions. On the contrary, it seems to me more like their modern incarnations are turning out to have been just a warm-up act — stay tuned!

Finally, the argument can also be made that paradigms of chaos and complexity are in some larger and primary sense historical constructions of postmodernity and late capitalism. This can be understood as an epistemological claim that our history shapes our understanding of the world and (for whatever reasons) is now causing us to notice and to name and to know chaos and complexity in new ways. A more ontological historicist claim can also be made: that chaos and complexity are actually being more intensively produced, selected for, in the present era. In this account, capitalist modernity is often understood as an epidemic of systematicizations — proliferating systems and subsystems — amid dynamic crosscurrents of trade and migrations and exchanges whereby "all that is solid melts into air."

But we can engage chaos historically without subscribing to linear historicisms, either the kind that traces a one-way trajectory of ever-increasing complexity, or the kind that finds a one-way determinism from economic base to ideological superstructure.

Chaos-and-literature pioneer N. Katherine Hayles rejects another (related) kind of linearity:

In particular, I am not arguing that the science of chaos is the originary site from which chaotics emanates into the culture. Rather, both the literary and scientific manifestations of chaotics are involved in feedback loops with the culture. They help to create the context that energizes the questions they ask; at the same time, they also ask questions energized by the context.

You may notice that there is a rather glaring bit of question-begging or circular reasoning here (to put it in the pejorative senses reserved for it by classical logic): the description assumes the operation of feedback loops whose emergence it was meant to explain — or to put it another way, Hayles participates in the development she describes. My function here — and, I hope, yours too, dear reader — is not to straighten out this circularity but to participate in turn, to weave more loops into the fabric. Enrich the mix beyond the simple dichotomy of science and culture — add capitalism, neurology, literary theory — in any case, a bunch of things that are self-reinforcing — and perhaps ultimately self-limiting or even self-annihilating — into a complex loop, toss lightly and *there you have it*. A metabolism. A culture, describable as a more-or-less *sustainable* self-fulfilling prophecy. An ecology. A chaology.

## II. Finding Your Theme Music

Five notes, a bass line, repeated over and over, like a mantra,

from the old Van Morrison song "Into the Mystic," seem to run like an underground stream in my brain, never too far from the surface. Sometimes amid the irregular mental terrain of my perceptions and thoughts and feelings, minute by minute, the stream emerges and flows in the open air for a while before disappearing again, back into some crevasse. Those five notes, set on repeat, feel like a continually secreted hormone that orchestrates some obscure bodily processes. Sometimes it feels so solid, it seems like it should show up on an EEG. Nurse: Doctor, what's this pattern here? Neurologist: Hmm, looks like that old Van Morrison song.

Do you have theme music? I once asked a colleague of mine this question, and she admitted to me that her theme music was the Wicked Witch theme from the *Wizard of Oz*! After that, whenever I saw her walking around campus, I could hear the music — it seemed to orchestrate all of her movements, her attitude, everything.

Be careful about telling people your theme music!

When I was younger, one or more music tracks were always playing in my head, closer to the surface, amid all the other tracks of thoughts and meta-thoughts, perceptions, bodily operational decisions, and so on. I wonder if the multiple music tracks have faded as I've lost some of the excess nervous energy of youth, or is it because multiple generations of personal portable music players have externalized what used to be a brain function? Like many people, I now like walking around the city with my music via earphones. This is a way of wresting back some control over a world that is often chaotic and assaultive; it is a way of choreographing the chaos on behalf of an individualist self ("behold the Great and Powerful Oz!"). Mozart piano concerti are sometimes my feel-good drug, also good at being heard above subway noise. Hard-driving music seems to pump energy continuously to my leg muscles during aerobic exercise, but it has to be soulful. Music provides the soundtrack of who I am, keeps me smiling,

moves my legs, makes me think New York City's dancing to *my* beat.

Of course the Muzak company has been taking advantage of this since it was founded in 1935. In addition to its longstanding practice of crafting soundtracks designed to shape people's moods and make them better workers and consumers, the company now sells "audio branding," which involves using what they call the "topology" of a song — "the cultural and temporal associations that it carries with it" — to produce soundtracks for particular stores, that make customers from the target demographic sectors feel that they "belong" there. As senior vice-president Alvin Collis so sensitively puts it, "with audio branding, you're selling emotion, love, caring, feelings."

Scientists who study such things have found that music activates "similar neural systems of reward and emotion as those stimulated by food, sex and addictive drugs," according to a *New York Times* article surveying current scientific approaches to music. Apparently, "the ability to enjoy music has long puzzled biologists because it does nothing evident to help survival": Darwin said that music "must be ranked among the most mysterious" of humankind's abilities. Evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker (one of the world's leading experts in making sweepingly reductive generalizations, a *very* competitive field) calls music "auditory cheesecake." According to Pinker, music "just happens to tickle several important parts of the brain in a highly pleasurable way, as cheesecake tickles the palate. These include the language ability (with which music overlaps in several ways); the auditory cortex; the system that responds to the emotional signals in a human voice crying or cooing; and the motor control system that injects rhythm into the muscles when walking or dancing." And here's the conclusion: "But since each of these systems evolved for independent reasons, music itself is no more an evolutionary adaptation than is the ability to like dessert, which arises from intense stimulation of the taste buds

responsive to sweet and fatty substances." Basically, according to this view, music is just a meme, a fluke, a parasite, a lucky thief who guessed the combination to the safe and has been sneaking off with bits of our precious time and attention ever since.

Imagine where humanity could be now — what diseases we might have cured, what an earthly paradise we might have created — if our attention had not been hijacked by that pernicious parasite, that malicious and satanic meme, music! Presumably this is closely related to why Plato would have banished poets from his ideal republic. Needless to say, though, in such heavens we wouldn't be sitting around playing harps.

The *Times* article also mentions two competing theories, both of which suggest more specific ways that musical ability may have been fostered by natural selection. Maybe music evolved as a form of courtship display, a way that young males signal their fitness to females (soundtrack: "do you love me, now that I can dance?"). Or maybe music has been primarily a way of enacting and enhancing social cohesion, singing and dancing together constituting an extended form of social grooming, a way of asserting group identity against outsiders (soundtrack: *West Side Story*). This is very similar to the story that evolutionary psychology tells about religion.

Whatever their merits, there's a gigantic omission from all of these theories.

One clue can be found in an article that happens to appear on the following page of the *Times*: astronomers have discovered a supermassive black hole in the Perseus galaxy (about 250 million light years from Earth) that is emitting pressure waves 30,000 light years across whose oscillation period is ten million years. The lead astronomer calls this "cosmic hum in B flat" (a B flat 57 octaves lower than middle C) the "lowest note in the universe."

So here's the thing: it's music all the way down, down from culture to our neurological and metabolic rhythms, down to oscillating black holes and subatomic particles made of vibrating

strings. Whatever other factors have led to the development of our musical abilities, this has got to be some kind of bottom line. We are musical because we are creatures of a musical universe, in the same way that we are made of matter and energy. That's just what kind of a universe it is. Even the dictionary recognizes the ubiquity of music, defined as "a tone or tones having any or all of the features of rhythm, melody or consonance; melody or harmony generally, as heard in nature or in art."

Accordingly, as you'd expect, humans are not alone in our musicality. Courting pairs of yellow fever mosquitoes are able to harmonize the whine of their wings, at about 1200 hertz, a harmonic of the usual frequency of the male (about 600) and the female (about 400). And, according to one study, even lowly carp can tell the difference between baroque music and the blues, "depressing a button with their snouts to indicate which is which." Now *that* is why I want to be a biologist!

Well, not to seem crass, but so what? If music is so fundamental, or if the definition of music is so broad, does it really explain anything? Do any particular consequences follow from it? Does it favor certain kinds of theories over others?

Of course, the idea of a musical universe is an ancient one. The notion of "the music of the spheres" relates music to mathematics as "universal languages"; that is, logics that lie deeper than the cross-cultural Babel of words and categories, so deep as to constitute the grammar of things themselves, the weaver and the weave of the myriad shapes and forms of the world.

Music, in other words, has worked as a kind of master-concept. A more recent aspirant to the status of master-concept is *information*; that is, the notion that everything in the universe — even matter itself, and certainly music — can be conceptualized as information in its various permutations and transactions — sometimes (as in the work of physicist Stephen Wolfram, mentioned earlier) figured as *computations*. It would be hard to find a starker illustration of Marx's contention that ideas take

their shape from the kind of economic system in which they emerge. Is it any wonder that scientists living in what is increasingly known as an "information economy" should start seeing the universe as the same kind of economy, writ large? This is called *economic determinism*.

But my contention about music is precisely the reverse: not that the world seems musical to us because we happen to be addicted to music and our addiction colors how we see the world. Instead, I made the argument that we are musical because the world is musical.

So which is it? And by the same token, should we also say that our trade in information and the predominance of computational processes merely reflect an informational and computational universe? Or is it the other way around?

Believe it or not, I actually have an answer! Are you ready?

Well, for starters, it can't be that human practices simply reflect the musical, informational, or computational universe in which they participate. If that were the case, how come the relative importance of each of these practices—as technologies and as ways of thinking — have varied so dramatically throughout human history? You could try to explain this away by lamenting that it has always been a musical universe, but the hyperspecialization of modern science has made scientists deaf to the music of the spheres, which now only lovers and poets and madmen can hear. Or, on the other hand, you could smugly assert that it has always been an informational and computational universe, but our own science and technology and economics had to reach a certain enlightened state before we could become fully conscious of this fact. Note that these explanations depend on very specific narratives of modernity either as progress, enlightenment, and consciousness-raising — or as decline, alienation, fragmentation, and loss. Both of these kinds of narratives are heavily *teleological* (organized by the notion that history has a *direction*) and even *eschatological* (shaped by a belief

in some ultimate destiny of humankind); in other words, they are highly scripted and schematic accounts.

What happens when you try to set aside these reductive teleological and eschatological scripts?

We could start by allowing that different aspects of the universe come to seem dominant to us depending on which of them are economically, conceptually, technologically most important to us at any given point and time. The “us” needs to be used with big scare quotes, since there isn’t just one dominant paradigm or one “us” at any given time.

But it also can’t be that we simply impose these paradigms on the universe: the question would have to be, from where? Where did these practices and ideas come from? Some Platonic or other-worldly realm? We must have gotten them somehow from the world, selectively, from our worldly interactions and practices, and applied them back again to the world, again selectively. This selectivity makes us who we are, or if you want to take it out of the realm of identity (which makes it seem like a more-or-less fixed thing), this selective looping process continuously makes and remakes both us and our worlds in the process.

Might we find our way from a computational universe to some kind of a musical universe again? One can imagine that such a reconfiguration would get a boost if physicists deploying String Theory discovered that orchestrating sequences of vibrations could alter the fundamental properties of matter, or if neurologists get around to fine-tuning the mood-altering properties of music (which would lead, no doubt, to music copyrights being bought by big pharmaceutical companies), or if we discovered that we could communicate with visiting extraterrestrials using sequences of musical tones (note to self: idea for movie).

So can we find in music a genuine experience of oneness and connection with the universe? It certainly feels that way when you’re in the groove. As we’ve seen, Freud attributed the

“oceanic feeling” at the mystical heart of religious experience to the “holding environment” prior to the formation of the individual ego. Or as the British group Cornershop put it, “Everybody needs a bosom for a pillow; everybody needs a bosom; mine’s on the 45.”

From a psychological perspective, music and mysticism are metaphors for motherhood, but when you take the long view, music came long before mom.

### III. Poetics and Autopoietics

#### i. Preamble

Taking up Professor Lee’s injunction to braid the sublime back into the everyday (or to juggle anvils and ping-pong balls together), I now turn to something monstrously grandiose — namely German philosopher Martin Heidegger’s influential work *Poetry, Language, and Thought* — as a way to approaching something conspicuously pedestrian: the classic American country song “C-H-I-C-K-E-N,” where the Heideggerian poet appears in the guise of backwoods virtuoso Ragtime Joe.

If it works, the world will get turned inside-out and the dazzling grandiosity of the sublime will get redistributed and come to glow through all things. Failing that, I’ll be developing (in my usual sideways manner) the question of the continuity of our own complex systems (which here go by the name of *poetics*) with natural self-making systems (*autopoietics*).

Heidegger’s work was influential in establishing the priority of language for philosophy — and of understanding language as fundamentally poetic — at a time when poetic, self-referential and performative language tended to be marginalized or stigmatized, even by many of those who study language. Accordingly, Heidegger’s work helped spur what is often called the “linguistic turn” in philosophy and cultural theory. All these developments are part of thoroughgoing and ongoing changes in the discursive landscape. In particular, during the late 20th century (as

mentioned earlier), poetics and self-reference began becoming important to science again after being banished during its consolidation in the 18th and 19th centuries.

There is a little, um, problem with Heidegger: he was a Nazi. As I see it, even the extent to which his philosophical work is *separable* from his Nazism is a big strike against it: why should we entertain any philosophy or aesthetics that could comfortably coexist with white supremacy and genocide? (Or, not to make it too abstract, why should I read anyone who would have put my mother in a death camp?) But in any case, Heidegger's philosophy and politics were *not* separable: there are profound resonances with Nazi ideology at the core of Heidegger's thought. I have long felt that this renders his work toxic and unusable, but I also understand how this can also make the stakes very high to engage the work, to understand what is compelling about it and to see what can be disentangled from the Nazi-inflected Romanticism also rooted there. Arguably, this is exactly the work begun by the philosophical movement known as deconstruction, and the work that continues — after the linguistic turn — to focus on poetics but without the categorical privileging of language.

Long story short, Planet Heidegger seems to me very bad if you fall into its poisonous atmosphere, but still very good “to think with” — good for the kind of slingshot effect you can get from a close fly-by on your way somewhere else, which is where we're heading here.

## ii. Heidegger

In “The Thinker as Poet,” Heidegger develops two sets of distinctions, the first among *things*, *equipment*, and *works*, and the second between *earth* and *world*. At least at first, these seem to be elaborations of relatively common-sensical definitions. The thingness of things consists in their being a more or less inert substrate or foundation; they *rest* and *bear*. Equipment consists of

things made into tools, characterized by their instrumentality, their being used to perform some action, means to some end. Work is what makes of mere earth a meaningful world, meaning-making.

But such distinctions do not exist at all *until they are named* — by the heroic trio identified in Heidegger's title as *poetry, language, and thought*. More than this, "language, by naming beings for the first time, first brings beings to word and to appearance. Only this naming nominates beings *to* their being and *from out of* their being," and by this "projective saying" (exemplified by poetry) creates what Heidegger calls a *world* where there had been only an *earth*. It's easy to protest that poets don't actually create the world, but maybe the best way of getting at Heidegger's point is to say that thought and language *come fully into their own* — that they come to do the work that is most resonantly theirs — only in the work of art or poetry, just as the universe only realizes its potential as it flowers into life and then thought and language.

In one sense, then, distinctions made by thought and language are latecomers in an already-made universe. But thought and language also make for a fundamentally different universe than one in which they are absent, emerging from the material universe and muscling themselves back into it, marshaling and ordering things, breaking them apart and reassembling them. On one hand, the things existed before — for example, there were sounds in the universe before human languages organized sound into phonemes, letters and words — but language takes arbitrary differences and deploys them meaningfully, makes information from noise.

I use this terminology — information from noise — to show how the difference made by language (what I called above a *flowering*) can be understood not only as a subjective or impressionistic claim but also a demonstrable scientific fact. Likewise, when we speak of the *emergence* of language as something new

that transforms the context from which it emerges, we recognize again that the ordering principles of language cannot be entirely reduced to or derived from those of the physics and chemistry that preceded them.

Heidegger's distinction between equipment and work focuses on how they handle their materials. The better equipment is, the more it entirely subsumes the "thingness" of the material of which it is made: "the material is all the better and more suitable the less it resists perishing in the equipmental being of the equipment," and "the more handy a piece of equipment is, the more inconspicuous it remains." In contrast, the work of art *highlights* the differences among itself, pure materiality and pure instrumentality. A work of art (such as the Greek temple Heidegger uses as an example),

in setting up a world, does not cause the material to disappear, but rather causes it to come forth for the very first time and to come into the Open of the work's world. The rock comes to bear and rest and so first becomes rock; metals come to glitter and shimmer, colors to glow, tones to sing, the word to speak. All this comes forth as the work sets itself back into the massiveness and heaviness of stone, into the firmness and pliancy of wood, into the hardness and luster of metal, into the lighting and darkening of color, into the clang of tone, and into the naming power of the word.

That into which the work sets itself back and which it causes to come forth in this setting back of itself we called the earth.

The work of art — that is, the work that art *does* — to use some of Heidegger's various images, is one of *disclosure*; it creates a *rift* in reality, a *clearing*, in which "some particular entity . . . comes in the work to stand in the light of its being. The being of the being comes into the steadiness of its shining." Or as Leonard

Cohen put it, "there is a crack in everything; that's how the light gets in."

The Heideggerian work of art enacts the striving of world — which "as self-opening cannot endure anything closed" — to surmount the earth — which "as sheltering and concealing, tends always to draw the world into itself and keep it there." The striving of world against earth evokes a late nineteenth-century account of how "upwardly mobile (evolving) biological life appeared in stark relief against an irreversibly decaying thermodynamic universe," a narrative made to resonate "with the white ruling class's sense of themselves, beset inside and out by threats of devolution, degenerescence and disorder." A century later, as befits a neoliberal era, complex systems can be understood less as heroically holding their own against disorder and more as necessarily partnered with chaos, for example, just as so-called dissipative systems (like living things) surf on their own dissolution.

Accordingly, if Heideggerian categories can be deployed without the grandiosity ("under erasure," in the deconstructionist phrase), they are still useful in approaching the work of art. Artists *work their materials* — of if you want to put this in the most demystifying way possible, you could say that a painter (for example) is someone who pushes paint around on a canvas.

Once, while walking around a big show of surrealist painting in 2002, I was struck by the wisdom of this otherwise diffident formula when I began focusing on the brush strokes. A Dali painting, I noticed, had mostly been made additively, more like a collage: upon a background a figure is added — laid on top — and then additional features are added to the figure, and so on. On the other hand, Miro had used a conspicuous variety of techniques to work edges and interfaces: the brushstrokes tell you that one figure lays on top of another, like a boat cutting through water, while both the background and figure sides of another edge have been reworked with parallel brushstrokes, as if they were two equivalent kinds of entities rubbing up to each

other, while at yet another edge the background seems to be *on top* of the figure, like a wave lapping onto a beach. It seems as if, having discovered this variable, the artist — and art collectively, including the very different tack taken by the Dali paintings — is driven to explore all possible permutations, as flowing water finds all possible routes around a set of obstacles.

It is fitting that one of the common images for such a range of expressive possibilities is taken from painting: the *palette*. The image of water flowing downhill works as another antidote to Heidegger's fascist-inflected account of heroic striving and surmounting.

### iii. Ragtime Joe

Heidegger's terms will help us approach the work of the poet as practiced by the character known as Ragtime Joe in the song "C-H-I-C-K-E-N," a traditional song adapted and made popular by American country musician "Uncle Dave" Macon in the 1920s, while Heidegger was working on his own greatest hit, *Being and Time*.

The song opens with the image of a country schoolhouse — that icon of modernity establishing its dominion over nature and tradition — but even here the poet continues to reside. The children are undergoing a spelling lesson, standing in for all the literacies and technical knowledges demanded by modernity. But there is also, in the face of this demand, a collective failure that will reveal the poverty at the heart of modern knowledge, since it is in the wake of this failure that we must call again upon the poet, who jumps in where purely instrumental knowledge fears to tread:

In a little country school house where the children used to  
go,  
There lived a little fellér by the name of Ragtime Joe.  
One day the teacher called on the class to spell a certain

kind of bird,  
The kind of bird is a chicken, and they could not spell that  
word.

The teacher called on Ragtime Joe to spell that word for  
them,

He did not hesitate a bit, this is the way he began:

C - that's the way to begin

H - that's the next letter in

I - that is the third

C - season to the bird

K - filling it in

E - getting near the end

C-H-I-C-K-E-N; that is the way to spell chicken.

The success of art and virtuosity in the wake of the failure of instrumental rationality is a familiar Romantic narrative, but the song doesn't stop here. In the second verse, the schoolhouse is given back over to music and poetry, but art generally and the artist himself are also shown to fail when instrumentalized in turn as hired entertainment. As Walter Benjamin put it, "in every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it." The poet must then return to his genuine calling:

Parson Johnson gave a concert in the old school house one  
night,

He hired lots of talent that could sing and could recite;

When they pulled the curtain, everything went wrong

Until the children loudly called, "Let's hear from Ragtime  
Joe."

He sang a ragtime jukin' tune, but it did not go so well,  
He said, "I went 'cross on that, so I guess I'll have to spell,"

He told the audience he had composed this chicken song  
And when he sang these words to them, he took the house  
by storm:

[Chorus]

There is something about the spelling song that seems to tickle actual listeners, and we can imagine that this is how Ragtime Joe was able first to win the day in class and then to take the house by storm. Part of this charm must derive from Joe getting away with singing during spelling class, sneaking play back into work (as recognized in the slogan "art is whatever you can get away with"). We can also be charmed by the way the poet makes art out of the most pedestrian and unpromising materials (as in the Book of Matthew: "The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone . . . and it is wonderful in our eyes").

But the magic trick that charms us when we hear the song is less music breaking out in the middle of spelling than spelling breaking out in the middle of music. The song enacts language taking itself apart, showing us the materials of which it is made while not ceasing to function as language: it opens itself up to reveal its beating heart. The poet shows us the letters of the word, sequenced to the simple ascending notes of a musical scale, both woven into the words and music of which they are the elements. As Heidegger puts it, the poet shows us how "earth juts through the world and world grounds itself on earth."

So the heart of the song is its disclosure of its own materials, the letters of language and the scale of music. It situates itself at the hinge where *thing* is opened up into *work*, putting us in touch with its material substrate.

Equally important, it is also a *meta-song*; a song about a song. Imagine a performer on stage singing the song, which tells the story of the song's composition, and (in the second verse) features a performer on stage telling his audience the story of his

song's composition: it's a *meta-meta-song*. And by the way, Uncle Dave Macon first performed professionally, in 1921, as part of a church benefit show in a Tennessee schoolhouse.

On the one hand, we could say that the way the song conspicuously spans and loops together several levels, sub to meta (showing us *things* — being converted into *means* — to manufacture *meaning*), distinguishes it as an exemplary Heideggerian artwork. On the other hand, this spanning and looping is how we recognize its kinship with other complex, recursive systems, including language itself, and other living creatures.

Why is it important that Ragtime Joe does not "hesitate a bit" when called on? It certainly speaks to his virtuosity, but the song doesn't tell us whether the idea to sing-and-spell came suddenly upon him, like a bolt out of the blue, or whether he may have long had the idea and was merely waiting for the right opportunity to try it. In any case, the moment has something of the absoluteness of a beginning. As Heidegger puts it, "this unmediated character of a beginning, the peculiarity of a leap out of the unmediable, does not exclude but rather includes the fact that the beginning prepares itself for the longest time and wholly inconspicuously," or as Hamlet said, "readiness is all."

The humblest instance may capture it best: when you are a student called on to speak in class, you can't be absolutely sure what will come out of your mouth, or how — you just have to start talking. Rather than "finding your voice" or "expressing yourself," the challenge is to "*lose* yourself in the music, the moment" as Eminem put it. I suspect that Eminem may have been thinking of literary theorist Roland Barthes' description of the act of writing as "the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin. Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost." What is required is less inspiration and something more like courage or even *abandon*: one must simply throw oneself into

the situation, like a flash flood making its headlong path.

There is another kind of leap at the end of spelling the word. Notice that no separate account is given for the final letter — the “n” at the end of *chicken* — as is provided for each of the preceding letters. It is as if the pieces cease to be fully accountable as pieces as they come to constitute the whole, as the letters become the word. After our descent to earth, we seamlessly rejoin the world. This speaks to the relationship between means and meaning, or between becoming and being, that is also the subject of an old Yiddish joke:

A child has a pathological fear of kreplach, the dumpling that is a staple of East-European Jewish cooking. A psychologist recommends to the mother that she carefully explain the making of kreplach to the child, so that he will be able to see that his fears are groundless. She sits him down at the table and shows him each successive step: now I’m rolling out the dough, now I’m cutting it, now I’m putting in the filling, now I’m folding over the first edge, and so on. Prompted at the completion of each step, the child calmly indicates, “okay, mama,” but as she says “now I’m folding over the final edge,” the child leaps up screaming in horror, “Ach! Kreplach!”

No matter how carefully prepared in advance, the world of meaning is ultimately born or re-entered through “a leap out of the unmediable.”

One fundamental question remains: why chicken? — not in kreplach, I mean, but in the song. Why not any other kind of bird, or any other kind of word?

In addressing this question, I want to avoid the kind of “Just So Story” that Edgar Allan Poe tells in his famous essay, “The Art of Composition.” Poe seems to demonstrate that any poet — merely by using a set of objective principles to make the best

selections among an infinity of topics, techniques and forms — will inevitably come to compose the poem “The Raven.” This rather silly bit of narcissism (deployed with some irony by Poe, one suspects) serves at least to remind us that, especially in Romantic and post-Romantic poetry, birds and birdsong are commonly used reflexively to represent poets and poetry. Of course a chicken doesn’t sing but only clucks and squawks, making it all the more fitting a figure for the song’s proud humility, edging into self-mockery — a stance characteristic of much American folk music. There are also obvious resonances between chicken pecking and clucking and guitar and banjo picking and plucking. Various versions of the song make a point of exaggerating these resonances. In any case, this reflexivity — a signature feature especially of Romantic and post-Romantic poetry — must be part of the multiple factors that determine the choice of the word *chicken*.

Of course there are plenty of other spelling songs that do *not* feature the word *chicken*. I’m thinking of the sentimental 1915 song “M-O-T-H-E-R,” country-western singer Tammy Wynette’s “D-I-V-O-R-C-E,” and Van Morrison’s classic rock song “G-L-O-R-I-A.” The fact that each of these, like the chicken song, uses words of six or seven letters and two or three syllables seems to indicate that something about the standard rhythms, meters, and line lengths of American song makes these words work especially well. It is a rather obvious and uncontroversial observation: the words are sonically and otherwise well adapted to their poetic environments, in fact are *naturally selected* for this reason. What is remarkable here is that this is a serviceable definition of poetry no less than of biological evolution. This is not to say that there cannot be spelling songs based on shorter or longer words — quite the opposite: it suggests that all viable adaptational niches will tend to be explored, in poetry no less than in biology.

But there is another much more specific reason why an iconic spelling lesson might well include the word *chicken*. The funda-

mental deployment of language, in the Judeo-Christian tradition, is Adam's naming the creatures.

So here's the punchline. It seems that the first linguistic act of humankind, according to the *Book of Genesis* anyway, may well have included a word for chicken:

Out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field, and every fowl of the air, and brought them unto the man to see what he would call them, and whatsoever the man called every living creature, that was the name thereof.

God's word — *logos* — constitutes his agency in creating the world; creation is represented as a performative, projective speech act (e.g., "let there be light"). Man is created in God's image, and language, by "naming beings for the first time" (as Heidegger put it) enacts man's world-creating power. *Genesis* is very specific about the absolute performative sovereignty of language as naming: "whatsoever the man called every living creature, that was the name thereof"; the implication is that even God has to wait and see what names Adam would invent. This absoluteness characterizes what deconstruction calls *phallogocentrism*, by which patriarchal power is linked to the deification of language and the domination of humans over other creatures.

Because of the understanding of language as naming, people are much more likely to associate the first steps in teaching language (whether speaking or spelling) with nouns rather than verbs. The tendency to think of the most elemental words as nouns — including what might occur to us as a child's first words — such as *mama*, *papa*, *doggie*, etc. — is part of a general conceptual framework that situates material things as noun-like building blocks.

The poverty of this view is stunning. It is inconceivable (for example) that the word *mama*, when first uttered by a child,

could ever be a simple noun rather than some kind of action — an act of separation, a recognition, a demand for union — something with some push and pull — in what is already a complex network of directions and trajectories of desires — well *before* these come to be personified in self and other, before coalescing into a grammar divided into nouns and verbs, subjects and objects and so on.

But the performativity of language is precisely Heidegger's point: that language distinguishes itself as dynamic by thingifying things, making the earth an earth and the ground a ground by situating itself over and above them — smart words and dumb things — by pushing everything else down, claiming verbal agency by making everything else into a noun. This dialectic, the production of this hierarchized binary opposition, is wired into the core logic of capitalism and colonialism: imperial power and colony, mental and physical work, management and labor, bourgeoisie and proletariat, and later, information and industrial economy. Here in particular we can appreciate that it will not work to avoid Heidegger, since our language and thought are riddled with these polarities; hence, the ongoing necessity of deconstruction.

Notice that there is a paradox in the view that language is performative; that it works primarily to *do* something and only secondarily to *refer* to something. The paradox can be succinctly stated: the verb comes first, but only by distinguishing that which is distinguished — the noun — *as first*. The temporal paradox here can be understood as a feature of the emergence of complex systems that manufacture their own components, as languages make the phonic distinctions they use as signifying elements, and as living creatures manufacture their own cells, chemicals, genes, etc. This is the underlying meaning of *beginning again*.

Would it be egregious to point out here that we generally refer to this temporal paradox as *the chicken and egg problem*?

## Chapter Five

# Ending and Returning

### I. Road Trip With(out) Professor Lee

If we go on in this way, then even the cleverest mathematician can't tell where we'll end, much less an ordinary man. If by moving from nonbeing to being we get to three, how far will we get if we move from being to being? (Chuang Tzu)

Writing and reading and driving: the parallels are obvious. The parallels: get it? Reading and writing and driving are, in fact, parallellizing technologies; that is, *channelings*: ways of making straight lines out of the otherwise wandering and wayward activities of thought, communication, and movement through space. There can be something sinister about this—the disciplining of a jazzy dance into a military march, the impoverishment of multiple self-orchestrating dimensions into a single rigid line—but only when this mode comes to dominate. Otherwise there's a balance, an ecology: the linear does not necessarily squeeze out the nonlinear but can enable and enhance it: think of the human body and brain with their multiple channeled, linearized flows and complex, nonlinear choreographies. Did the spread of literacy exalt book-learning to the detriment of other kinds of knowledges, resulting in some general impoverishment of humanity, or did it enable the proliferation of new knowledges and ways of being and experiencing the world? Yes and yes. Do highways homogenize or diversify the world? Yes and yes again.

### **i. Triborough Bridge**

Early one morning in May, I set off from my apartment in Brooklyn on a 1200-mile road trip, alone. This is the trip that I had been planning to make with Professor Lee. Over three days, I'll drive through New York State, up and over the Great Lakes, across southern Ontario, and down through Minnesota to my old home town, Minneapolis.

But as it happens, five minutes after setting off, I'm just inching along in a traffic jam on the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. Above me — on a bridge that spans the Expressway — a stooped, white-bearded, rabbinical old man haltingly makes his way.

A few miles on, in Queens, the traffic starts speeding along again, but the road is under construction and I'm not sure which lane leads to the Triborough Bridge. This makes me anxious, and I start yelling to myself, in a series of phony accents, "Where's the Triborough Bridge? Where's the goddamn Triborough?" And then the answer: "It's right where it always was, asshole." This calms me down by throwing me into a silent meditation on the multiple meanings of the word *where*.

Crossing the bridge to the Bronx triggers two memories that wash over me in quick succession.

First I remember how, several weeks earlier, I finally found a way out of a period of insomnia that had lasted many weeks when I was stressed out at work. I was exhausted, but somehow I could never quite access the tiredness. One night, lying in bed and unable to sleep, it occurred to me that I was two people, one all jazzed up and the other dead tired. It wasn't my body that was tired and my mind that was awake, since the exhaustion had both mental and physical aspects, and so did the wakefulness. Then the phrase *I am the bridge* occurred to me as a kind of mantra, and it was like opening up a lock or a valve: I felt equilibrium being restored, like water seeking its own level, and relaxation flooding through me.

Then I am surprised by the memory of another bridge: the Mississippi River bridge from which, about ten years earlier, I had scattered my mother's ashes. It was early September. I had just finished a book manuscript and was about to send it to my publisher, also based in Minneapolis, when I got the call about my mother. I flew from New York, borrowed an old friend's van, drove to the funeral home, and sat for a while with my mother's body. The next day I delivered the book manuscript to my editor, stopping on the way to pick up my mother's ashes, then drove through my old home town, the back of the rattling old van empty except for the manuscript and the box of ashes. I dropped off the manuscript on the way to my mother's memorial service. That evening I drove to the Lake Street Bridge, parked nearby and walked to the middle of the bridge, where I stood in one of the little niches that projected out over the water. I remembered to check the wind direction, as a friend had cautioned me, before scattering the ashes. Night had just fallen. I had no prayer, not even a goodbye. So I just stood for what seemed like a respectful interval, then opened the lid and shook the ashes out over the water far below. Lit by a streetlight, the ashes began to descend, a luminous white cloud, and then, caught by some mysterious updraft, the still luminous cloud ascended, dispersing, and was gone.

These two memories, which strike me now as moments of almost miraculously being brought back to the here-and-now from far away, bring me back again to myself. It is a sunny morning in May. I am driving across the Triborough Bridge.

## **ii. Ontario**

Late in the evening, I stop at a motel west of Toronto and try to call Iona but discover that my cellphone doesn't work in Canada. I had anticipated this possibility and warned her that I might not be able to call. Even so, during the whole drive through Ontario, I'll be dogged by a low-level anxiety: off the grid!

Just after dawn the next morning, I set off from the motel. A few miles on, I notice three radio towers in a field. Two of them line up for a moment as I pass. It occurs to me that any two points can be lined up with some third point, but no perspective can be found to line up *three* points unless they're in a line already. My mind begins to squirm to find a way around this rather obvious principle. It occurs to me that they could line up if space itself were curved, as in the neighborhood of a black hole.

Much later, I will think that it must have been here, inspired in some subtle way by the radio towers, that I began to compose the poem I will keep whittling in my mind, off and on, for the whole journey. I will come to call the poem "Road Trip." Eventually it settles down to three lines of five words each, something like the old Burma Shave billboards:

Children want to stop everywhere.  
Adults want to keep driving.  
The old make wry observations.

It amuses me to characterize myself as old. It seems like a quaint affectation, even though *I really am old*. It will occur to me only long after I have returned home that the poem echoes the otherwise somewhat random observation about the radio towers. The first two lines of the poem are opposite and aligned, and the third is askew, curving back on the first two.

I'm like a field in which there are three radio towers.

Many miles beyond the towers, the highway is under construction. New lanes are being built parallel to the existing road. Immense trucks and tractors move like insects over the landscape. My journey has been so long, everything looks small to me.

Driving along Highway 17, I pass the town of Spanish and can't get it out of my head. What's so endearing about a name that's an adjective? I think of Professor Lee, whose surname is a

suffix that makes all adjectives into adverbs, and it makes me laugh. It's the first time I've thought of *professorly* as a word. It makes me laugh — a little posthumous gift from him.

After a while, I pass a big green A-frame building labeled TRADING POST and promising NATIVE CRAFTS, and a few miles farther along, a colorful billboard for BARB'S EMBROIDERY, and a few miles farther, at the entrance to a ramshackle group of trailers, a sign for LAIRD'S SIGNS. The word SIGNS is lettered in huge block capitals on its own billboard, and beneath it hangs a large banner printed with the word BANNERS. The signs and trailers are in such disrepair that it makes me wonder if the whole enterprise may have been abandoned years before.

I start imagining that I'm passing through some kind of legendary Village of Fools where everybody tries to eke out a living by bartering signs to each other. After a while I start daydreaming that Professor Lee is sitting next to me and turns to me and says, if I'm not mistaken, Watson, keep your eye out for an old man wearing a cap embroidered with the name LAIRD.

A few miles along, a sign offering MONUMENTS presides over a yard full of gravestones. Holmes, I say, cocking my head: perhaps you'll find your man over yonder.

Many miles further along, I pass a motel with a sign out front that reads

MOTEL  
BREAKFAST  
WELCOME TRAVELERS!

The desolate motel makes the welcome seem positively poignant. It may not be much, I think, but at least here's someone peddling something a little more solid than words. I imagine Barb and Laird sitting together silently over breakfast. Then I imagine an exchange with a motel clerk. Do you have internet

connections? Nope. Can I make a long-distance call? Nope. Got an ice machine? Look mister, like the sign says, we've got a motel and we've got breakfast.

At this moment, the world seems both heartbreakingly hard and exhilaratingly easy. What a hard world where this desolate outpost passes for an oasis! And what an easy world where you can make a living with just a sign, some bedrooms, and some little boxes of cereal!

Barreling along at top speed through the Teutonic forests of western Ontario, I remember the traffic jam on the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway with the rabbinical old man hobbling slowly across the bridge overhead.

Miles on, the imaginary hotel clerk is still speaking to me. Look, mister, you come through here at a hundred kilometers an hour and you think you know anything at all about us?

I imagine a town called Laconic, Ontario.

### **iii. Minnesota**

The next day is misty all along the North Shore of Lake Superior. Forests of birch in new leaf emerge from the mist, and from among them, dark and towering old Norway pines.

I wonder how I know they are Norway pines, and also, in spite of the name, that they don't grow in Norway. It occurs to me that the trees must have been named by Norwegian immigrants who recognized in them a fantasy of the Old Country.

I remember how, when growing up, I always used to think of northern Minnesota as a wilderness beyond the reaches of civilization. I remember walking — I couldn't have been more than eight at the time — with my father and Professor Lee in an old-growth pine forest on Madeleine Island, in Lake Superior, and my father quoting Longfellow: "this is the forest primeval." Remarkable that this would be one of just a handful of memories I have of my father: a little agate, plucked from the rushing stream. The elder Professor Livingston is long gone, and now

Professor Lee. Nobody reads Longfellow anymore. Not even me. In fact, I wonder how I even know that it was Longfellow my father was quoting.

In a few months, I will be older than my father ever was.

The northern forests still have some of the romance of my childhood. Their strangeness is familiar to me, but now, coming home, I feel that I have always been a stranger here.

I think of the end of the film *Alien Resurrection*. Ripley, a cloned human-alien hybrid, and a cyborg robot named Analee, have spent their entire lives off-world. As their spaceship descends into sunlit clouds and the music swells, they see Earth for the first time. It's beautiful, Analee says, then asks Ripley what to expect. I don't know, Ripley says, downbeat. I'm a stranger here myself.

I cross the border and re-enter the United States. More forests of pine and birch.

Speeding up a long hill, it suddenly seems to me that I can see every leaf and needle on every tree, like a nearsighted teenager with his first pair of glasses. Ahead, the road goes up and up and disappears into the mist.

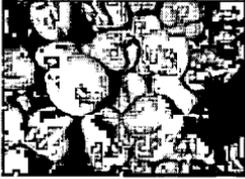
And then I find myself crying without quite knowing why, wiping away the tears, crying and driving, and then laughing and crying, and driving. And then, in the little melodrama of the moment, something else seems to be amping up the hysteria, something deeply disconcerting, like some weird hallucination of a presence with me in the car. I immediately think of Professor Lee, but then I realize that it is an actual physical sensation, a sound; next to me, in the passenger's seat, my cellphone is ringing.

## II. Waking Up In Beijing

### i.

A dream: we are dismantling an office, taking apart big old metal furniture, removing decades worth of files and accumulated

junk. I wander off in search of more cardboard boxes. Eventually I enter a grand but shabby house on top of a hill and begin talking with the owner. We have an ironic conversation in which we both know we're not really having the conversation we're pretending to have. At the same time, though, I don't know exactly what we *are* talking about. I think: this must be what is meant by *unconscious communication*.



Then I go out, walking down the hill, alongside some concrete steps that have become a stream-bed. Walking gives way to flying, and I am gliding along now, smoothly, inches above the ground, which is covered, like a baroque upholstered fabric, in what seem to be *green peppers*.

ii.

Light traffic noise, muffled bustling, and through the light fabric hung over the window, the light itself, the first light of morning, suffuses the room, giving me the sense of both immersion and removal, as if the noise and light, eddying softly around me, were cocooning me, just on the nightside of dawn and the dreamside of waking.

iii.

I remember Professor Lee speculating about what would it be to write a book in which you gave all the good lines to *others*. Not by caricaturing the narrator as an imbecile, he told me, but much more subtly, just so that, at every point where the reader might find himself nodding slowly in silent assent, in the receipt of some sublime insight, it would have been delivered by someone other than the narrator.

I said that this could only seem like a surprising perspective to a scholar used to delivering the wisdom himself, but it could hardly be news to a novelist. The Professor laughed and he

agreed but said the real insight lay in how such a third-person voice would embody one of several different ways of understanding what's going on as you read.

In the first of these, I, the reader of these lines — I mean the one who is at this very moment reading this very line — am myself the writer, or should be considered as such. I am not a mere actor reading lines that have been written for me—but then, neither is the actor, who makes the lines truly his own or else is not much of an actor! But furthermore, the book is not exactly the lines written herein, but rather the thoughts in my head as I read, the book I write as I read.

For example, this notion — that another book is being written, simultaneously, by the reader — echoes what the narrator was saying earlier about unconscious communication, something from one of his dreams (“we’re not really having the conversation we’re pretending to have”). So is it my own thought, or did some other writer plant the seed in me?

Sometimes for many lines, whole passages in fact, my thoughts seem to coincide with what is written in the book, but then I notice that another line of thought has been running alongside, and then another sprouts out at a sharp angle, and another I can’t quite make out skulks along like a shadow at some remove.

Hey, you there! Yeah, you! Are you following me? Go ahead, come out, let me see you! Come on, I know you’re there!

And it wasn’t some writer, other than myself I mean, whose magic wand stirred up these ripples in me, who peopled my mind with these jugglers and clowns. They are mine, and this is, must be, *my* book, because *all that I am capable of thinking are my own thoughts*. And because all that I am capable of thinking are my own thoughts, *these* are my own thoughts too. And when I say *I* and *me*, of course I still mean *I who am reading these lines*.

Or then again, should we say instead that a very wise man, *not me*, wrote these lines? Or at least, so I like to think. Here in

these lines I encounter another, and my reading is my engagement with this other. Perhaps the writer is not wise but merely *another*. Perhaps wisdom is merely in engaging another, and the writer is one of those who knows how to do this.

**iv.**

Back to another dream: I'm on a bus now, speeding through a city, and multiple lanes of traffic, as far as the eye can see in either direction, are speeding alongside me. But up in front, maybe a hundred yards ahead, I see perpendicular traffic speeding along, as if we were fast approaching a red light at an intersection with an equally immense mega-superhighway at rush hour. I brace for catastrophic impact. But instead of screeching to a stop and instead of crashing we continue moving through the perpendicular traffic, all the vehicles somehow — improbably — missing each other.

It occurs to me later that this is a dream version of Beijing traffic, with its cyclists and pedestrians crossing through lanes of cars at giant intersections.

**v.**

Here in Beijing fashion at the moment, Xiao Yu told me, anything goes. I have noticed teenage girls wearing t-shirts that have contrasting half-vests sewn on; to my eye it looks like fashion-victim stuff from the 1980s. Women seem to wear high heels with everything. And carry umbrellas in the hot sun. I see skirts over pants, contrasting patterns, fake tatters, tortoiseshell frames with no lenses, hot pants, couples with matching t-shirts. Then again, lots of men are wearing chinos and polo shirts, over and over, just like in the US. But some of them are also carrying what look to me like purses.

A workman, shirtless and with a rose tattooed on his upper arm, is smoking and cursing with his buddies on their break. Old men in old-school Chinese army jackets.

Contrary to the classic Western caricature of the Chinese as massively conformist, their anarchism is also a leading characteristic. Or so says Professor Lee.

**vi.**

My thoughts, all of these thoughts, it occurs to me, are like the froth and spray of waves, the dark water welling up among the craggy black rocks. The surfaces of the massive swells are scalloped, like pounded metal — tiled like a drying mud puddle into curling, tilting, pointy-cornered pieces — and where they slap up against the rocks, meringue-like bits of foam and explosions of spray, propelled irresistibly by the whole sea pushing behind them, splash up and then wash back down along the rocks, trickling back down through the clinging seaweed and barnacles and all the niches bubbling with life: “The poem of the mind in the act of finding what will suffice.”

**vii.**

And then this gloss: the narrator’s thoughts, while waking up, seem to go every which way, every way they can, like the tilting surfaces of the waves. He downplays their significance, making them out to be nothing more than ephemeral froth or spray — a very Chinese gesture, one might say. And yet they take place, with considerable drama — splashily, one might say — in some kind of interzone, between sleep and waking, a beach, a place of flux, where rock is being eroded into sand and evolving life simmers in crevasses and tide pools.

There is something poignant about the image: the sea, destined forever to strain at its edge, pulled as if by a longing that traverses its entire being (“the whole sea pushing”), flings itself against its limits, again and again and again, like a wild animal pacing in its cage. And yet, something comes of this sustained exercise in futility; it is somehow fundamentally creative, like the tides of Chinese fashion mentioned earlier,

conformity and anarchism somehow occurring together, the little tilting surfaces of the greater tilting and swelling surface, each pulled irresistibly along, each with their degrees of freedom.

“The poem of the mind in the act of finding what will suffice.” What the narrator seems to be saying, by ending with the famous first lines of the 1940 Wallace Stevens poem, “Of Modern Poetry,” is that this book — that is, the one you are reading now — is also describable as “the poem of the mind in the act of finding what will suffice.” The sentence has no verb; it functions as a complex noun, but this—along with the phrase “in the act of finding” — makes us realize that the whole phrase is a kind of gerund or participle, a verb that functions as a noun. A poem is just such a thing that is not a thing but a process.

But why “of the mind?” Is this a purely cognitive exercise? Maybe Stevens did over-emphasize the cognitive. But we may also understand something more like *mind and mindfulness as ways of being*, and even beyond this, as creative and reflexive principles that belong to the universe, not to humans alone. And perhaps we should follow the suggestion that whatever the mind would be finding would have to be something other than mind, something like the mystical “palm at the *end* of the mind, *beyond* the last thought,” about which Stevens wrote many years later.

“In the act of finding” is a perfect example of what Professor Lee means by a *stance*: not a frozen posture, but the paradox of always being in the act of finding without ever having found, again not a noun but a gerund. To find, not as if it were simply laying there to be found, but something that is both found and, simultaneously, made.

And “what *will* suffice,” anyway? Thanks, Mr. Stevens, for so pointedly *not* making the search into some kind of striving for perfection, which anyway now sounds like part of the whole corporate “search for excellence” bullshit, like something from a car commercial. What will suffice is not perfection, but something sustaining and sustainable — perhaps the act of

finding, in itself?

At every moment, by putting out feelers, by doomed and dogged and even depressive repetition, like the sea at its edge, and yet always new, always breaking through into —

viii.

Now.

And now, in the now of writing, I suddenly remember standing—in February or March of 1990, it would have been — about twenty years ago, at this writing — outside Newark, Ohio—on a low, dry-grass-covered earthen mound in the shape of a stylized bird with wings outspread. I had come to nearby Dennison University for a job interview, and someone had taken me to see the mounds. The bird had been made, my host told me, by the people known now as Hopewell, something like 2000 years earlier.

After a gauntlet of interviews, in a series of stuffy rooms, with everybody trying to sound smart and attentive, it felt like a revelation to be outside, walking and standing, mostly in silence, among the cold and windswept mounds.

I stood for a while on the back of this bird that, for 2000 years, has been flying through time.

I don't know what it looked like when it was first made. Perhaps it had a crisper outline, and more realistic details—feathers, talons, an eye — or perhaps not. It has been being made and unmade ever since. As it flies through time, it gets more and more streamlined by erosion; by the desultory forces of wind, water, worms, and walkers. It becomes more and more stylized. Its flight is a disappearance. And yet, it seems to me, it was and is and will be *perfect at every moment of its existence*. Now it is low, just a few feet high, sloping gently into the surrounding ground, and one might walk over it unknowing, without noticing, poised as it is so perfectly between culture and nature.

How would you describe its journey? As a kind of one-way

time machine, a voyaging out into the future? Or as a return, a long detour on the way home, ashes to ashes?

Does it seem poignant to you, tragic, or joyful, or calm?

**ix.**

Back on the all-day train from Shanghai to Beijing, China rolled by like a scroll, a vast and horizontal landscape of fields, villages and cities disappearing into the haze.

Two magpies, startled by the train, fly up and over the poplars that line the track, one slightly ahead of the other. Lotuses crowd at the edge of big muddy ponds, craning their necks as if at odds with their own rootedness. A goatherd walks through a field with his scrawny flock, while a train passes over them on an elevated track, each of its yellow cars marked with a death's head. Under an overpass in a gray city, amid scattered small heaps of picked-through garbage, built against the bridge supports, ramshackle lean-tos made of broken bricks and sticks and scraps so small it makes me wonder where the more privileged dump-dwellers live. At the birthplace of Confucius, a garish golden statue of the sage stands on top of a tourist center at the foot of the holy mountain, fading into the fog. The grimy backside of a carnival midway.

Small groups of workers, and some solitary workers — the rest have left for the cities — in wheat fields and rice paddies and on dirt roads and tracks, chopping with a hoe, walking with a big wooden pitchfork, harvesting wheat, stooped over and weeding, riding an old tractor, riding a bicycle, a motorcycle.

Small, scattered groups of workers toil variously in a field, while a magpie watches from an electrical line.

A shepherd rests with her flock in a small grove of trees.

At the edge of a field, just where it begins to slope down to a marshy stream alongside the tracks, at the end of long, bending bamboo poles, someone has set out two red lanterns.

### III. Still Knitting

But this has not been and still is not a *story*. It's not any kind of *narrative*.

You could try to make what I've just said into a story by saying, "he said it wasn't a story, then he said I could try to make it into a story, and then I proceeded to do just that."

Though you've parceled out the dialogue and actions to a couple of characters (a writer and a reader), and even though you've framed it as a series of events in a time sequence, it's *still* not a story, since that's not the level where the interesting things are happening, the things that make this what it is — which, as I keep telling you, is *not a story!*

Now here's some dialogue for you, dear reader: you keep saying *you, you, you*, and making out like *I'm* the one who wants to make a story out of everything, but *it ain't me, babe*: nobody's parceled out any dialogue but you, author dearest, and up till now you haven't even given me any lines! But I'll humor you for the moment: if it's not a story, what is it?

Okay, thanks for asking. Let me give you an example. Let's say the sky opens up and you see a vision of a chariot with four creatures, each with four faces — or maybe not a chariot but a kind of gyroscope, and maybe not four creatures but a three-dimensional chalkboard teeming with dancing equations — or maybe not a gyroscope and a chalkboard, but in any case, let's say that you are overwhelmed, in that moment, with the sense of the cosmic meaning of the vision, whatever it might be. Later, you try to tell a friend about it, and you try to tell it as a story: I was walking along, and then the sky opened up, and so on. But you know that the story *about* the vision doesn't even begin to capture either the experience or the meaning of the vision, which is the only thing you really want to *deliver* to your friend, as it was delivered to you. But a story *about* something, anything, is by definition *not* the thing in question. In fact, it often functions as a way of distancing one from the thing in question.

So for now, let's just say that what I'm talking about here *is* part of the thing in question, it is the delivering and the doing of the thing in question or the questioning of the thing in question. I'm *not* telling you a story about some vision I had, and it's not because there is no vision to be had: it's because this *is* the vision, this, right here and now, in my writing and your reading of these sentences — or as you would say, in *your* writing and *my* reading! *This* is what's happening, and while we can negotiate a conventional way of assigning dialogue and agree that "I" will refer to the reader and "you" to the writer (for example) — it doesn't matter, because what's really happening is in the intersubjective realm of meaning between us.

There is an official convention of using the present tense in writing about fiction. In everyday usage, we tend to mix tenses when recounting a fictional story, but the baseline is supposed to be all present. Writing about the film *Frankenstein*, for example, one might say: after the monster is brought down from the roof, he moves his hand, and Frankenstein jumps back and starts saying "it's alive; it's alive," and so on. The reason for using all present, at least as I've been told, is to distinguish the "eternal present" of fiction from the past, present, and future of real time. The original film of *Frankenstein* was made in 1931 (note the past tense *was*, since the making of the film occurred in real, historical time), but every time anyone watches it, in 1931 or 2031, the monster moves his hand and the doctor says "it's alive" in the present tense — and keeps on saying it, in fact, which is why the film *really is alive!*

William Blake gave the odd name *Golgonooza* to the timeless realm of art. As Northrop Frye described it (in *Fearful Symmetry*),

All imaginative and creative acts, being eternal, go to build up a permanent structure, which Blake calls *Golgonooza*, above time, and, when this structure is finished, nature, its scaffolding, will be knocked away and man will live in it.

Golgonooza will then be the city of God, the New Jerusalem which is the total form of all human culture and civilisation. Nothing that the heroes, martyrs, prophets and poets of the past have done for it has been wasted; no anonymous and unrecognised contribution to it has been overlooked. In it is conserved all the good man has done, and in it is completed all that he hoped and intended to do.

As you've gathered, I'm not much of a time guy either — which is why my field is poetics, not narrative. As Allen Ginsberg said, I'm one of those people "who threw their watches off the roof to cast their ballot for Eternity outside of Time, and alarm clocks fell on their heads every day for the next decade."

To put this into theoretical perspective, you have to back up a bit.

The movement known as Structuralism in cultural theory began in linguistics and anthropology about a hundred years ago but had a very wide-ranging influence over many fields. Structuralism was famously good at looking at static snapshots of the architecture of systems, such as language or culture, much less good at thinking about time and change and growth.

When structuralists think about system change beyond what can be accommodated by simple gradualism — in which the snapshots are arranged into a kind of flip-book — they often see crisis, rupture and revolution. This is why anthropologist Mary Douglas ends her classic structuralist book *Purity and Danger* with a chapter called "The System Shattered and Renewed." This is why Thomas Kuhn wrote about long periods of what he called "normal science" punctuated by revolutionary paradigm shifts. And this is why Foucault, even as he became a poststructuralist, remained committed to the notion of systemic "ruptures" in ways of thinking and knowing.

When you're focused on structure, change tends to seem like crisis — or to put it another way, when your idea of a system is

more or less a closed system, the claustrophobia or just the boredom makes you need to burn it down periodically.

Poststructuralism is a rough name for much of the cultural theory of the last third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. If structuralism is about space, poststructuralism is all about time, as suggested by the name. I say "*all* about time" for a reason. This does not mean thinking about structures as essentially spatial entities that also have a temporal dimension, as structures that change and grow and evolve and decay through time. It's more radical than that. It means learning to think of structures *as* events, of translating everything that seems like a structure into its *eventness*.

For example, to revisit the example raised earlier in this book, we often think of the human body as a kind of building, a large container with an inside and an outside, the me and the not-me, divided by a boundary at the skin, with nine or ten highly policed entrances and exits, not counting the pores of the skin and the belly-button (I'm not sure I've gotten this right — please check and see how many you have. Are you counting the eyes?). Of course the process, that is to say the *event* of play and negotiation between the me and the not-me — the making of the me from the not-me, the deterioration of the me into the not-me, the expulsion of the not-me, and so on — happens throughout the body. It happens not just via breathing and digestion and excretion but even more intimately in the immune system, spread throughout the body. The interplay of the me and the not-me goes on fractally, at all scales from the macro to the subatomic. The boundary is not at the skin. It is being negotiated everywhere, in every cell. The body *is* this event, this boundary traffic. And texts and cultures are like this too.

An open system, a self-making or autopoietic system, is a system that makes its own components. Language, made of sounds and letters and words — and living things, made of cells and DNA and so on — are obvious examples of systems that make their own components. It is language that carves out the

infinite continuum of sounds and shapes to put together the spoken and written words out of which language is made. It's a paradox: how can a system make its own components if it has to be in existence in order to make them? But how could it be in existence if it has not yet made its components?

Why do people treat as such a puzzle the question of which came first, the chicken or the egg? It is so obvious that there were eggs long before there were chickens. Thinking in an evolutionary sense closes down some questions but it opens up others.

Why do people act as if nonlinear time were some kind of groovy, new-age concept? Time is *by definition* nonlinear — a line has one dimension, a plane two and space three, but time is recognized as a fourth dimension distinct from the three dimensions of space. One does not equal four. So-called linear time is not time at all. Let me put this another way: that which can be graphed out into a trajectory is not time. A trajectory is a *structure*.

You see a story with rising action, a crisis and a climax, followed by falling action? Go away, you're a structuralist! Try to tell me instead what happens *as* the action is rising and falling — what's going on — yeah, what's going on? But, you protest, the rising and falling *is* what happens. And again I say, go away, and come back when you're ready. Time is being at risk, the moment is a window of vulnerability. It's not about the trajectory!

Here are some little stories of trajectories.

Up: laboriously we sweated and struggled to get the sofa up four twisting flights of stairs, but when we got there, it wouldn't get through the door, and we had to bring it back down again.

Down: on the other hand, I've been to some of the lower rungs of various hells. My family took me there, my colleagues took me there, Iona and I have been there, and I've been there alone, and each time I groped around and found a little door, came up the back way and emerged again to see the stars. I think some of my old colleagues are still down there.

Why do people say that what is immediate is most alive, when it is so obvious that what is most alive requires the most complex layers and loops of mediation, the exquisite rigging, the nerves and synapses?

It is only the relation of what is happening now to what has happened and what may happen — its sameness and its difference, its constellationality with other events — that is to say, its meaning — that makes it experienceable at all!

When I try to imagine a real one-off event, something unconnected to any web of meanings stretched across past and future, I picture myself in the kitchen cooking spaghetti, head bent over pots and pans, when all of a sudden with no warning, not even a whistling noise or a bright light, at least not any that I notice, immersed as I am in making the spaghetti — BLAM! A giant meteor slams into me at a million miles an hour, and the moment when the meteor becomes a meteorite, the moment of my death, which I cannot even be said fully to experience — now *that* seems like a real, immediate present moment!

Those who remain alive will have to pick up the pieces, literally and figuratively, the latter being the easier task in this case, to try to make some meaning of it, or to come to terms with its lack of meaning (also a form of meaning-making), to knit back together their worlds without me or my spaghetti. The universe will go on with its meaning-making, its constellating of events.

Still knitting!

I'm willing to admit that my allergy to stories is a defensive one. If you wanted to tell a story about it, you could say that my childhood made me allergic to stories — that I learned to take refuge in storilessness from the traumatic and tragic story of my family, lest it pull me into its vortex. I know this is right, because it feels dangerous for me to say it. It is dangerous to give up a defense on which you have depended. But it still isn't a story. My thinking it and saying it actually leverages me into a slightly different relation to stories and storilessness. I become a different

person in the process. I am reconstellated.

But, you keep repeating, isn't this a story? Isn't a story precisely a constellation and reconstellation of events? My generous answer is this: if, unlike me, you're a story person, you can keep translating everything I say into a story. But a constellation, even a constellation of events, is something more like a vision: something you see all at once, not something that unfolds in time. This is what I am going to call a *figure*.

Since I've been generous enough to allow you to re-narrativize everything if you want, are you also willing to admit, with me, that everything can just as well be cast (or miscast, if you're a glass-half-empty type) as a timeless and non-narrative figure, depending on your cognitive style?

If so, then where are we and who are we when we contemplate stories and storilessness from a third place, which is presumably neither, as we must be doing now?

Well, where are we and who are we now, when we are here together?

#### IV. Road Trip #3: An Answer For Thad

To get around this problem, physicists take a "cut-off" of the multiverse, cutting out a finite patch of space-time and counting the universes in it to get a representative sample. . . . This leads to incorrect probabilities of experimental outcomes in the multiverse — unless, Freivogel and his team argue, the mathematical cut-offs somehow have real and dire consequences for the places they intersect. Time would end there, they say, causing everything present to disappear. . . . The trouble began last year, with a thought experiment raised over breakfast at a conference . . . . (*New Scientist*)

While she poured him another glass of tea, he put on his

spectacles and re-examined with pleasure the luminous yellow, green, red little jars. His clumsy moist lips spelled out their eloquent labels: apricot, grape, beech plum, quince. He had got to crab apple, when the telephone rang again. (Vladimir Nabokov, "Symbols and Signs")

i.

At a beginning-of-the-year party, I joined a small group of faculty who were gathered around Thad Ziolkowski, the head of Pratt Institute's creative writing program. He was talking about Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung and Jung's quasi-mystical account of *synchronicity*. When I joined them, Thad was in the middle of telling how Jung had been visiting a small town where his host served him plum cake — the first time he'd ever had it — and how, twenty years later, Jung chanced to return to the same town, stopped in a café and was charmed to find plum cake on the menu. He hadn't eaten it again in the twenty-year interval, so when the waiter came over, he ordered it, but the waiter said, "I'm sorry sir; the last piece was just ordered by *this gentleman here*," and who should he point out but the very same man who had served Jung the plum cake twenty years earlier!

I told Thad it was weird that he should be telling this story, since I had just written a chapter called "Signs and Miracles," which was dedicated to figuring out the logic of exactly these kinds of uncanny incidents. Long ago I had read Jung's autobiography, and though I didn't recall the plum cake story, I did remember a similar one. After a day that included several incidents involving fish, Jung came home to find that — lo and behold — "there was fish for dinner." What struck me was the phrasing, "there was fish," as if the fish magically appeared on the table, as if the fact that his wife or his servants planned and cooked the meal were irrelevant — and it occurred to me that some of how the incident struck him must have had



to do with how thoroughly removed he was from mundane things like meal preparation.

Thad appreciated this observation but worried that maybe I was trying to reduce the mystical part of synchronicity down to some kind of misrecognition of the network of labor and gender relations from which it emerged. I assured him that the aim of my analysis was to dig deeper, through reason and demystification, and back into the miraculous again.

He put me on the spot and asked me how I would explain the plum cake incident. I said a few things, but I didn't have a satisfying answer. I knew his question would stay simmering in my brain until I got back to it.

ii.

The next day, Friday, I made the hour-and-a-half hour drive from Brooklyn to eastern Long Island to see Iona, who teaches there, at Stony Brook University, where I had also taught for seventeen years. For the last twelve of those years, I'd commuted by car from my apartment in Brooklyn, so three years before, when I started teaching at Pratt Institute — a twenty-minute walk from my apartment — I found I actually missed the commute, which had always served as a contemplative time for me; my car was a little meditation room on wheels. I had gotten so conditioned by it that sometimes I still need a long car trip to open up a space to rethink and reorient myself.

Sure enough, as soon as I got in the car and started on my way, I began to think about the plum cake incident again.

Would it matter (I wondered) if it turned out that Jung's host had plum cake every day in the same café at the same time, and that they always saved the last piece for him? After all, Jung was Swiss, wasn't he? And aren't the Swiss known for the clockwork regularity of their habits? Or what if the town was Pflaumenkuchenburg and Jung happened to visit on the final day of their annual festival, and the waiter had gone on to offer

him fresh plums, or plum ice cream, or maybe some delicious plum liqueur?

But then my brain veered off into another story, one I had heard my grandmother tell more than once. She was visiting us sometime when I was little, and my father — himself a scholar who had been deeply influenced by Jung — brought the famous Jungian thinker Joseph Campbell home for dinner. My grandmother made strawberry shortcake. It turned out to be the first time Campbell ever had it, and he loved it. Imagine, she'd say, this big-shot scholar who'd been all around the world, and he'd never had strawberry shortcake! Of course she loved the fact that she was the one who made it for him.

I started wondering if he might have been saying it was *as if* he'd never had it before — as in the Madonna song "Like a Virgin," where her lover fucks her so good it's *as if* it were the first time. Maybe that was just how good my grandmother had strawberry-shortcaked Campbell. Or maybe, since he must have gotten invited to lots of dinners on the lecture circuit, Campbell figured out that people loved it if he told them it was the first time he'd ever had a dish, and maybe this was not cynical on his part but actually served to enhance their pleasure as well as his own — after all, he was known for the slogan *follow your bliss*. Maybe there were lots of people out there who would swell with pride with the memory of how they were the first one to serve Campbell peach cobbler, or pot roast. After all, there has to be a first time for everything, and having been raised in a WASPY American household in the first half of the twentieth century, one with (no doubt) a very narrow cuisine, Campbell would have discovered all kinds of new dishes as he made his way in the world.

And herein lies the uncanny echo of the plum cake incident. Is there something about Jung and Jungians that their experience of fruit desserts is so impoverished? So when they do encounter such desserts, it's as if the experience were bathed in a miraculous glow?

## iii.

Something else about Thad's version of the plum cake story had stuck with me: the words *this gentleman here* in the waiter's comment: "I'm sorry sir; the last piece was just ordered by *this gentleman here*." As I was ruminating about my grandmother's story, I remembered why these words seemed familiar: it was one of my old favorite jokes.

In this joke, a guy is working as a clerk in the produce department of a grocery store. A customer approaches him with a grapefruit in hand and asks if he can buy half of it. The guy says he has to check with his manager, so he goes to the back room and says to the manager, "some asshole wants to buy half of this grapefruit," but then he looks and sees that the customer is standing right behind him, so he adds, "and *this gentleman here* would like to buy the other half."

After the customer leaves, the manager tells the clerk he was impressed at how he'd handled the situation — so impressed that he wants to make the clerk a manager of his own produce department. "Unfortunately," he says, "the only openings we have are in Canada." "Canada!" the clerk exclaims: "The only people in Canada are either whores or hockey players!" The manager is outraged: "I'll have you know that my *wife* happens to be Canadian!" "Oh really," responds the clerk; "which team does she play for?"

Although it was the *this gentleman here* remark that made me think of the joke, it didn't escape my notice that, as in the plum cake and the strawberry shortcake stories, fruit also makes a key appearance in the joke.

I started thinking about how it's the clerk's smart mouth that gets him into trouble — and gets him out of trouble again. I hate to ruin a joke by explanation, but there's something very deep about this. The coincidences aren't really events in themselves — the fact that the customer turns out to have followed him into the back room, or that the manager's wife happens to be Canadian.

It's the guy's smart mouth that makes them into events.

Trouble — like meaning and the miraculous — isn't just there waiting for us to step into. It's what our own intelligence compels us continually to manufacture. It's how we're wired into the world. And this doesn't deflate the sublimity — it *is* the sublimity.

iv.

Back again to trying to explain the plum cake incident, I started mapping it out in my head as I drove. I began by imagining Jung's path in space and time through the world, and his host's path. If his host spent most of his life in the small town, his path would be a straight line, staying in one place in space as it moved forward continuously in time. If you factor in the movement of the earth and the sun, it would actually be a fractal series of spirals, but let's leave that aside for the moment. Looking even more closely at the line, you'd see all the little zigzags as the guy goes back and forth, from his house to work and to the café, day after day. You'd see his path and Jung's converging, diverging for twenty years, and then converging again in the café.

Now imagine the paths of all the plum cakes over the same space and time. They'd be lots of very short lines, since each plum cake would exist for a few days at most, and they would be likely to travel only very short distances in space during their ephemeral lives.

So the whole space-time map on which Jung and his host's wandering trajectories are traced would also be covered all over with a fine, short stubble of plum cake trajectories.

And this map is just a start. Ideally, you would have to consider various branchings of all the trajectories of the men and the cakes, since at every point there are any number of likely scenarios, and only in retrospect can we reduce them to a series of lines. The so-called *many-universes interpretation* of quantum mechanics is an attempt to recognize the continual coexistence of these many possible paths, each forking path constituting an

alternate universe. If you were able to visualize the branchings, even the plum cake stubble might turn into a fractal forest or a feathered wing.

In an adjacent universe, maybe the guy serves Jung peach cobbler instead of plum cake, but everything else is the same.

In still another branching universe, maybe the guy gets waylaid on route to the café, so they think he's not coming and sell his peach cobbler to Jung, and when the guy walks in and Jung recognizes him, Jung is so surprised that he chokes and dies, but the guy goes on to write a famous account of the incident called "The Peach Cobbler Always Rings Twice."

And maybe in still another universe, it's the guy himself who is a cobbler, and Jung is not an Aryan psychoanalyst but a rabbi, and the small town is Chelm, the Village of Fools in Yiddish folktales. The rabbi leaves a pair of shoes with the cobbler to be repaired but then forgets about them until he finds the ticket in a drawer twenty years later, and when he brings the ticket into the cobbler's shop, he finds the cobbler sitting there reading the Borges short story "The Garden of Forking Paths." Whatever else happens in this timeline, you just know that cobbler will go into the back room and come back to tell the rabbi that the shoes aren't ready yet.

And maybe in still another universe, it isn't Carl Jung at all but *me*, and I'm sitting on a plane next to a German woman, and when we are served blueberry muffins, the woman eats hers with a spoon. See how we've stumbled back from the hypothetical into our actual universe again? This actually happened! And notice that again it involves someone with obviously very limited experience of certain fruit desserts. And by the way, this woman was reading not Borges but a tabloid with the headline WHITNEY'S MOM BEGS POP DIVA TO GET HELP (still several years before Whitney Houston's death at age forty-eight). She stared at the headline for something like half an hour, leading me to speculate that her English was limited and

she was laboriously trying to work out what it all meant. In any case, the proximity of the words MOM and POP in the headline might have been confusing to her.

v.

I'm now about two-thirds of the way to Stony Brook, and my alternate-universes reverie is interrupted by the realization that it is here — at this precise spot on Highway 347 but on the other side of the wide, tree-and-grass-covered median — that a strange incident occurred about five years earlier.

The political philosopher Michael Hardt — one of my old editors — had come to speak at Stony Brook, and after he had done so, I drove him to the city. Traffic slowed to a crawl, and we approached a place where a bunch of police cars were parked at various angles on the grass of the median, some with their lights flashing, and as we passed them, a cop was emphatically waving traffic along and repeating, "*Don't look at it! Just keep moving! Don't look at it!*" We couldn't even see what *it* might have been — there didn't seem to be any kind of accident. Maybe it was just the cop's way of saying *move along, nothing to see here*, but it certainly made everything seem creepy.

The following week I was talking with some graduate students about Hardt's visit and I mentioned this incident, whereupon one student told me excitedly that she had also driven into the city after class and had passed the same scene, which had led her to search the internet for some reference to this major police activity. What she found was that, apparently, someone had deposited a trunk with human body parts in it, and that it was probably connected with some serial killings on Long Island. Of course I was shocked by this, and later I searched the internet myself for any mention of the incident but couldn't find any. When I asked the student, she said she had also looked again but came up with nothing the second time around, so she could only assume that the police, not wanting to compromise an

ongoing investigation, had ensured that all leaked references to it were quickly removed.

A couple of years later, I ran into Michael at an academic conference and asked him if he remembered the incident. He didn't, but having brought it up, I felt compelled to tell him the rest of the story. Halfway through, he said "wow, that's amazing" or words to that effect, and a funny smile passed across his face.

When I'd finished telling the story, he said he'd remembered something else about our trip after all, something so compelling it must have washed away any other memories: that Iona had visited some farm on the eastern end of Long Island — an operation the workers had managed to take over and were running themselves — and that she had sent us off with a bag of just-picked peaches, and that the most ethereal aroma had filled the car all the way to Brooklyn. It had made him think of the Chinese legends of divine peaches that confer immortality, or maybe it was Iona who'd suggested this to him.

You've got to hand it to Michael: he had managed to remember the divine glow — *and* the network of labor and gender relations from which it emerged!

vi.

Wind and helmsman held us on our course,  
and I'd have reached my native land unharmed,  
but North Wind, sea currents, and the waves  
pushed me off course, as I was doubling back around . . .  
(Homer, *The Odyssey*)

I thought I'd better not show up at Iona's empty-handed, so I stopped at the Rolling Pin Bakery, and I was charmed to see that they had plum cake!

On Sunday I drove back to Brooklyn. As I approached the stretch of road where the "*Don't look at it*" incident had occurred,

I started looking for the exact spot where it had happened — the spot I had been so sure of when I had passed it going the other way. But now that I was on the side of the road where it had happened, all the scrub trees and grass looked pretty much the same, just as one line of text looks like every other. Maybe there were serial killers lurking in these suburban woods and bodies buried all over, who knows. But however many trunks full of



body parts had ever been deposited here, or whatever mystical revelations or peach-induced trances had ever been experienced by people driving by, the trees and the grass and the asphalt weren't saying.

I thought of the lines from Allen Ginsberg's poem *Howl*:

Visions! omens! hallucinations! miracles! ecstasies! gone  
down the American river!

Breakthroughs! over the river! flips and crucifixions! gone  
down the flood!

This made me want to turn to you, Thad, and to speak up in defiance of such a somber truth, as if you were somehow the one trying to rain on my parade. But even as I struggled against it, I found myself being pulled deeper. I wanted to say something about how we can be so smart and so stupid at the same time, and how, even when everything seems uneventful, as in this story, floating down a lazy river, we are getting ourselves into more trouble than we can imagine, every moment we're alive — *is that the sound of the waterfall getting louder? and now the smell of the spray?* — and how our greatest and also most lamentable achievement — and maybe the most remarkable fact of the architecture of complex systems — is that we're not consumed more quickly by the continual maelstrom of miracles and signs and synchronicities out of which our minds and our worlds are woven.

vii.

A while back, when I was looking for something on the internet, I stumbled by chance on an account of the Japanese Buddhist monks — known as *sokushinbutsu* — who cause their own deaths in such a way as to result in their mummification.

Of many hundreds who tried, mostly in previous centuries, only about twenty have been found. Here's how they did it: for a thousand days the monk would eat only nuts and seeds and follow a rigorous exercise regimen, to burn off all body fat. Then for another thousand days he would eat only bark and roots, and begin drinking poison tea made with the sap of the Urushi tree, from which lacquer is made. This purged the body of fluids and would help keep the maggots away. When the end was near, the monk would entomb himself in a tiny underground room only big enough to sit up in. An air shaft allowed him to keep breathing, and he would ring a bell periodically to indicate he was still alive. After the bell stopped, the monks would seal the air shaft and wait another thousand days before opening it to see if the mummification had worked. If it had, the monk was proclaimed a Buddha and put on view. More often than not, though, they found a decomposed body — evidence of extreme dedication, but not buddhahood.

I hate suicide. The intensity of my abhorrence comes from the fact that my own father — the Jungian scholar I mentioned earlier — killed himself when I was a child, and it still seems to me that suicide violates the social contract. Maybe someone who commits suicide is in unbearable psychological pain, but when you violate a bond so fundamental (it seems to me) you forfeit any tears of pity that might have been shed on your behalf, not to mention buddhahood. I still love my father, and his capacity for love and joy is the still-beating heart of his legacy to me. But the condemnation of suicide is still so much at the core of my personality that, when reading about the *sokushinbutsu* evoked in me something more like awe and respect, it felt disorienting, like

looking over the edge of a bottomless pit. I could feel a buzzing numbness around my face, as if I had drunk the poison tea myself.

It's true that the monks were not abandoning children, and they were acting with the encouragement of their fellows, but even more than this, there was something about the meticulous slowness of their preparation that made what they were doing something other than suicide, and that's what had gotten through my radar. Later I realized that this must be because, as I have read somewhere, suicide often comes down to more a matter of impulse control than of longterm depression, and this is why — counter to what you might expect — many people who are saved from suicide at the last moment don't go back and try again. I've heard that, in Catholicism, there can be forgiveness for suicide because there is always the possibility that, in a final moment — say, after the jump but before the rope snaps taut — there was regret and repentance: an escape hatch inside an escape hatch. You've got to admit, that's a pretty poignant piece of casuistry.

Anyway, so it happened that day, driving back from Iona's house, and after having been unable to pinpoint the place where the *don't-look-at-it* incident had happened, and thinking of all the synchronicities and miracles lost, and buried in my thoughts, I suddenly felt my car was the monk's little room only big enough to sit up in, and I felt — this time not just in my face but across the entire space-time trajectory of my life — an identification with the *sokushinbutsu*.

The writer buries himself in his text, alive for a little while, but many of those who come to the text will come after he has stopped ringing the bell, and if he's lucky, what they find will be desiccated but intact.

Just as life is sweet because touched by death, so death reverberates with echoes of life — thanks to those who carry a tinkling bell to the threshold of the void — and is claimed for life by those who sit sipping tea on its vast and melancholy shores.

viii.

When I got back to my apartment building, the lady in 5J had printed out a note and taped it to the elevator door, as she often does when things go wrong in the building. This time the note was titled "Horror of Horrors" and it told how someone had thrown something smoldering into the trash compactor, but whatever it was had been found and put out before any harm was done. On seeing this note, it struck me that the trash compactor sits in a small underground room — in the basement, connected to the upper floors via a shaft — just like a *sokushin-butsu* in his buddha-hole. What made me laugh was how the note said that "someone was a little careless in disposing of something not yet extinguished."

I took this as a sign that the reign of the Unexpected Fruits was over, and that the Self-Mummifying Monks had gained at least a temporary foothold.

ix.

Mona Lisa must have had the highway blues; you can tell by the way she smiles. (Bob Dylan)

I wrote the above account immediately upon returning to my apartment — just banged it out that evening, very unlike my usually much slower writing practice — and though I revised it repeatedly over the next few months, it didn't change much.

At one point, I added (and later removed) an Author's Note: "When I used to read this essay aloud to an audience, *when I was alive*, I rang a little bell between the sections."

This note seemed to me to enact what turns out to be a central point of the essay. Admittedly, the dead are usually not allowed to speak of themselves as dead, except in certain genres like horror movies and religion. But on the other hand, after an author dies, (1) do all the "I" statements in his writing become

false, since their referent no longer exists, or (2) is the author a kind of twilight figure in the first place, neither or both alive or dead? (Hint: *it's number two.*) In any case, my Author's Note would have been a classic instance of the rhetorical figure of speech known as *prolepsis*: "the representation or assumption of a future act or development as being presently existing or accomplished." But my friend Alex, a fiction writer, advised me to remove the note since it induced the reader to expect that the narrator would die in the course of the story to follow. Not being a fiction writer myself, I hadn't thought of that, but I had to admit she was right. The narrator wasn't going to die *in the story*. It was I who had been going to die *in real time*. (Please notice that, unless you take the last sentence to mean that I had been going to die but somehow dodged the bullet, it implies that I have since, in fact, died. So you see I snuck the prolepsis back in after all.)

I did read the piece to an audience, about a month after writing it, and I did ring a little bell between the sections: *still alive!*

About a week after performing the essay, I was again driving out to Port Jefferson to see Iona and again musing about the events of the essay and the essay itself, when something struck me about it.

When I say *struck me*, I mean *like a bolt of lightning*.

Being struck by lightning changes people. Sometimes it kills them outright. Sometimes they have to learn again to speak and walk. Sometimes they feel as if they've lost something, but they just can't put a name on it. If they could, they probably wouldn't have lost it. (I once drove past a sign that said *Hidden Driveway* and I thought: *but I don't see any hidden driveway*. And then I thought: *Exactly*.) Sometimes people who've been struck by lightning feel as if they've gained something, but they can't say what it is. Little things are different: they find themselves finishing other people's sentences, or they find themselves noticing what they do with their hands when they're nervous. If

you connect up all the little things, maybe they form a constellation, like being reborn under a new sign of the zodiac. Sometimes you change, but you don't know that you've changed. And of course you don't have to be struck by lightning to change: it can be slower, like living under a high-voltage power line; a neurological disorder no doctor can detect, because it's fifty feet overhead. But don't try telling anyone that the Consolidated Edison Company has been rewiring your brain and your voice and your hands by remote control while you sleep!

Anyway, what struck me in the car felt that melodramatic to me. It dawned on me both slowly and quickly, and when the realization washed over me, I actually had to swerve back into my lane.

Dear Reader, can you guess what it was that struck me?

You should know, since it has been staring you in the face the whole time. I might even say that, at some level anyway, *you do know*, even if you don't know that you know.

What struck me was that I had experienced the real-time events of the essay — that is, the drive to Port Jefferson and back, and all of what I had been thinking about — including all the stuff about my father, death, road trips, signs and miracles, and so on — and that I had written and later performed the essay — *all without mentioning or even thinking about Professor Lee — not even once.*

It struck me as *shame* strikes — the sudden flush that is both cold and hot: how *could* you? In the ground for so little time, and already forgotten?

Almost immediately I had a defensive reaction, which was the realization that Professor Lee had conspired to make his own effacement happen, by insisting that that I use the fake name and that no particular facts about him be mentioned — and, on top of that, just by dying (damn him!). Accordingly, I had gotten used to writing about the things we talked about without mentioning him at all — in fact, I had to go out of my way to try to recon-

struct our early conversations in the beginning of this book, avoiding anything revealing about his identity. So on one hand, there was my experience of him, full of personal data and details and memories from our time together, and on the other, the almost completely abstracted and impersonalized figure — the *cypher* — to which he had insisted I reduce him in this writing. Is it any wonder that my own otherwise replete experience of him would begin to be pulled into the orbit of the cypher?

But even as I recognized the validity of this reaction, I knew full well that what happened was *not* that I'd forgotten Professor Lee and then felt a pang of guilt about it. In any case, guilt is about things one had a choice about doing or not doing, while shame is about one's *identity* — and the commission or omission of only those actions that follow from *who one is*.

Just as finding Professor Lee again had changed me, the loss of him had left its mark too. Notice how, in the essay, everything is going along happily until the melancholy turn to all the stuff about loss, the *sokushinbutsu*, and my father. The melancholy turn seems to come from nowhere — unless you realize that it must be the marker of something unsaid, an absence that can't even be spoken but makes itself felt — a kind of ghost. No surprise that Professor Lee would haunt my meditations on the sublime, skulking at one remove from what's explicit in the text.

Isn't the idea that ghosts hang around because of some unfinished business?

I always knew that my relationship with Professor Lee was, at some level, a way for me come to terms with my father and his suicide. The Professor and I had talked about this openly. He wasn't exactly a father figure, but because he and my father had been close friends, and because (like my father) he was so kind — but (unlike my father) not wracked by self-hatred and despondency — my connection with him and even my coming to terms with his death had worked to soften the scars of that old wound. In other words, my relationship with him was a safer space for

me to replay and revise the old trauma. And behind it all — behind Professor Lee and my father and the loss of them both — lie the pangs of coming to terms with that which at some level one cannot come to terms with at all, the dark side of the sublime, the parts of our lost love objects we have incorporated into ourselves, the weave of ourselves we owe to others but could never acknowledge without unraveling, without ceasing to be ourselves.

And yet we do unravel. We are lightning-struck, and we change.

I thought of another old professor of mine from grad school, Diane Middlebrook. Occasionally, when responding to something I had written, she would use the word *wonderful*. There was such an emphatic lilt and warmth in the way she said it, but there was something distant about it too — the distance of aesthetic appreciation. I was gratified by the praise and kindness directed at me, but strange to say, I primarily identified *with her* at that moment. I can hear her saying the word and feel the resonance of it in me. I want to say that *the resonance of this one word in me was how I learned to be a teacher*, to approach my students by looking for what's alive in their writing, to be ready to be engaged by it and to engage it with them. The shorthand version is that I downloaded the core of my teaching persona from Diane. She died of cancer in 2007, at age sixty-eight.

I thought back on how Professor Lee had smiled, in our first meeting in the nursing home, and how I knew then that he was smiling at the thought that, because of his injunction against me mentioning any personal information about him, readers would always suspect that he was just an invented alter ego of mine.

As sure as I had been at the time that I recognized exactly what had made him smile, another dimension of his smile now opened up to me. No matter whether or not he knew of his terminal illness at that moment — no matter how quickly at his back he was hearing “time’s winged chariot hurrying near” — he

must also have smiled in the recognition that, if and when I wrote the book we were talking about, *he would probably be gone*, and thus would be reduced by the book to something like an alter ego of mine after all — reduced to whatever of him I would have metabolized, whatever ghost of him I had managed to download into my brain and my text.

And who knows, maybe in that moment he also saw me *not* seeing this, or imagined that I would come to understand it only later, in the wake of his death — or only, as it now has happened, in the process of my letting go of him. In any case, my new take on the moment could only happen as a result of me thinking with some new bemusement about how *my own writing would outlive me*. I had to smile this smile myself before recognizing it in him.

And that was the moment I so confidently labeled with his term *recognition to infinity!* In fact, it was a much more complicated transaction involving significant *misrecognition*, reciprocal but always asymmetrical, never finished — a strange attractor. I now understood in Professor Lee's smile something rueful or poignant — the recognition that he would be gone (and maybe even his recognition of my blithe non-recognition of this) — as well as something mischievous (his delight at conspiring in his own effacement, or just the way a master invents diabolical challenges for his disciple) and something loving (his happiness that I would go on living, and maybe that something of him would go on living in me as well).

I can't say how much of the recognitions and misrecognitions of that moment I may only have imagined, but I do know that the *circuit* of that smile between us continues to lighten and enlighten me.

*It's alive!*

Yes, the playful and the melancholic views of language are opposed, but only like muscle groups that pull in different directions to shape this smile.

I thought of that enigmatic little poem of William Blake:

There is a smile of love,  
And there is a smile of deceit,  
And there is a smile of smiles  
In which these two smiles meet.

And there is a frown of hate,  
And there is a frown of disdain,  
And there is a frown of frowns  
Which you strive to forget in vain;

For it sticks in the heart's deep core,  
And it sticks in the deep back bone.  
And no smile that ever was smil'd  
But only one smile alone,

That betwixt the cradle & grave  
It only once smil'd can be;  
But when it once is smil'd,  
There's an end to all misery.

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Contemporary culture has eliminated both the concept of the public and the figure of the intellectual. Former public spaces – both physical and cultural – are now either derelict or colonized by advertising. A cretinous anti-intellectualism presides, cheered by expensively educated hacks in the pay of multinational corporations who reassure their bored readers that there is no need to rouse themselves from their interpassive stupor. The informal censorship internalized and propagated by the cultural workers of late capitalism generates a banal conformity that the propaganda chiefs of Stalinism could only ever have dreamt of imposing. Zer0 Books knows that another kind of discourse – intellectual without being academic, popular without being populist – is not only possible: it is already flourishing, in the regions beyond the striplite malls of so-called mass media and the neurotically bureaucratic halls of the academy. Zer0 is committed to the idea of publishing as a making public of the intellectual. It is convinced that in the unthinking, blandly consensual culture in which we live, critical and engaged theoretical reflection is more important than ever before.

