

Fugitive Thoughts

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Futility and writing

As my life slowly congeals around me, past and future converging to the ineluctable present, and I grapple with the fact that I am merely going through the motions of living—consoled, faintly, by the knowledge that our predecessors have already done *that* for us!—I shall attempt to overcome the resulting *tedium vitae* through the effort of writing. Fortunately the present medium spares me the use of the cliché "putting pen to paper"! It is likely that my efforts will turn out to be just a flash in the pan, the superego's usual supererogatory impulse, so to speak. This I can readily accept; I find it harder to face up to the fact that my latest—if I'm lucky, last!—trip along the *Côtes d'Ennui* will be powered not by the expulsion of the usual volume of hot air, but rather by nothing more than the few sentences engendered through its compression. Damn it, like integration, and unlike differentiation, writing is an act of self-discipline—a moral act even—not one of self-indulgence! I want to write incompressible prose, a prose that requires no correction, one that, in the end, overcomes all doubts, especially those that are the all too evident products of my own limitations. Fat chance!

The seesaw

An antonym to "anxiety" is "repose", and to "boredom", "excitement". But since repose is quickly gives way to boredom, and excitement to anxiety, it would seem to follow that boredom and anxiety are, if not antonyms, then, at least, complementary states: to lessen the one is to increase the other. And yet the attempt to escape anxiety, or at least

to mitigate it, does not always in result in repose, or indeed in boredom. A misguided effort to relieve anxiety can amplify that very anxiety: this fact is the pivot on which the novel of suspense turns. Boredom (but not, of course, repose) can also be amplified in this way, but less quickly, in accordance with its sluggish nature. Anxiety is a sharp pain, boredom a dull ache. Compressing the endless iteration ...boredom → anxiety → boredom → anxiety ... into timelessness can be, and often is, achieved through the consumption of sufficient alcohol, or its equivalent. But since this compression is intended merely to blunt the sharp edge of consciousness, not to eliminate it altogether, the original pattern soon reappears. Thus the alcoholic or drug addict tends to transform it into the isomorphic, but—initially at any rate—more pleasurable cycle ...hangover bender hangover bender ... So from a purely formal standpoint nothing has been gained, unfortunately.

Snail, or Spider?

Today it suddenly struck me, sitting in the midst of my accretions, books, cenotaphs to lost illusions (SJP)—"I am a snail, and this is my shell", as I have occasionally remarked—that, more like a spider, I live within a web of repetition, whose intrinsic meaninglessness could, perhaps, be relieved through the vanity that one is being *studied*.

The eighth odd prime

Listening to Berg's violin concerto, an amazing work whose initial impact on me — through Isaac Stern's great recording of the 1960s—has been revived through Ivry Gitlis's miraculous recording of the 1950s, I think of the number 23, Berg's magic number. I live in a house to which has been assigned the number 529 = 23². It's too bad

that, unlike Berg, a mystic, I, a pessimist, must regard this fact as a nothing more than a happy coincidence. Still, I have later noted that Miró's "Constellation" series, which still thrills my visual self unutterably, also consists of 23 pieces.

For want of a theme

The process of writing is much more difficult than most readers realize. This is because an intending writer must have a subject, a theme—something to write *about*—which provides sufficient immediate impulse to overcome the inertia induced by passive contemplation of the flux of impressions. A theme that I have found readily available is my own negativity, my awareness of the essential pointlessness of my existence. Unfortunately, this theme induces an inertia exceeding that which was to be overcome to begin with. A good example of a self-cancelling force.

The twilight years

Having reached that dispiriting age when one's present and future appeal to one less than one's past, I'm thinking of throwing in the existential towel and taking up permanent mental residence in that past, parting ways with Magritte who, in a remark that has always impressed me, claimed to despise his own past, along with everyone else's. I, by contrast, embrace with gratitude the notion that the tedium of my declining years will be made bearable through the shuffling of old photographs, the repeating of moldy witticisms, and, most effective of all, the further extension of my personal series of glass cenotaphs to lost illusions.

Youth and age

When I first met E. H. Linfoot I must have been about 14, and so he, born in 1905 – as I later learned – was 54. At the time of writing I am 51 years old. Three more years to go! But to what? To nothing, as I seem to recall my 14 year old self feeling in some obscure way, and as my 51 year old self can confirm. Youth can grasp the pointlessness of aging, even if the concrete details are beyond it: no special capacity is required, just a certain inherent pessimism which, like one's eye colour, is a permanent feature of one's constitution. On the other hand, the fact that life furnishes no cosmic revelations, no gaudy epiphanies – the fact, in other words, that one's pessimism is finally confirmed – shows that this "pessimism" is absurd, just as a child's doubts that Santa Claus will turn up at Christmas are absurd (although unquestionably touching). To expect nothing should not lead to pessimism! In any case one can have experiences resembling epiphanies – *moments musicaux*, for instance – which, while falling short of gaudiness, at least serve to moisten the eyes. But of course these have only local significance, since, in the final analysis, locality is all.

Redemption

Can one's soul be so corrupted that redemption becomes possible only through appeal to objective reality?

Know thyself

Remark of a narcissist: "My negativity is induced by self-acquaintance, not by disappointment in anybody else."

Sisyphus 2

Burdened with insignificant memories

I tread up the stairs

Ending another day's fruitless effort

To achieve indifference to futility.

Two stratified dreams

1. I woke up one morning convinced that I had dreamt that, like Prospero, I could conjure up a storm by mere effort of will. In attempting to recapture the dream, I fancied that my oneiric self, within the dream, had come to grasp somehow that the idea that *it* was capable of creating a storm could be realized only within a dream and hence that, if a storm were to be successfully “induced”, it would become aware that this was merely the product of a dream, so short-circuiting the illusion and pitching one, as usual, into wakefulness, thereby obliterating the oneiric self. (One might ask why this should be the case. Why should one not continue to dream? It was, after all, no nightmare!) But in my (conscious self’s) effort to reconstruct the dream, I came to recall that, within the dream, my oneiric self had in “fact” succeeded in generating a storm, yet this failed to induce full awareness, leading only to a nebulous form of “wakefulness” within what seemed to be no more than a further level of the dream, in which my oneiric self continued to exist. But at this next level my oneiric self was confronted with what it took to be an “actual” storm, a storm which it was convinced it had not itself “created”. Naturally my oneiric self grasped, just as I, its conscious counterpart, would have, (indeed has), that this “fact” in the form of the sound of the “actual” storm impinging on the oneiric self served to explain the belief that within *its* dream, i.e. the dream at the level immediately below, that *it* was capable of conjuring up a storm. But then, in an instant, I genuinely awoke, and as my oneiric self dissolved into the

conscious version of myself, the sound of the oneiric storm metamorphosed smoothly into the subdued roar of the large bedroom fan my wife and I kept running all night as a source of white noise providing an indispensable substitute for earplugs. The striking thing about this is the persistence of the “storm” within three experiential levels (two oneiric, one conscious), a persistence surely induced by, or at least corresponding to, the objective fact of the fan’s running. Oneiric proof of Hermann Weyl's insight that it is through invariance that the objective is manifested within the subjective.

2. I dreamt that I was a passenger in a car with one of my colleagues at the wheel. Missing a turn, we drove into a fence and the car plunged into a ravine. Terrified, I “awoke” into what I took to be full consciousness. Seeing my colleague, I related my dream to him. To my surprise he responded that he had had an identical dream. When I remarked that this was an extraordinary coincidence, he launched into an explanation whose details I cannot recall but which, while well-intended, struck me as less than convincing. At this point I genuinely awoke, perhaps as a result of the cognitive dissonance felt by my oneiric self – who, before full awakening, naturally still believed that the dream was reality. It must have been several minutes after awakening that I suddenly realized, with a thrilling start, that I had experienced another stratified dream. I resolved to write it down. Reading this, it seems that I did so.

Two Dream-fragments

1. I dreamt that someone asked me whether I still possessed a union card, to which I responded, "I am the union, and, come to think of it, the same could be said by anybody, since each person is the union of his singleton. $\forall x . x = \cup\{x\}$."

2. I dreamt that I was a spy, assigned by my masters to identify and expose a double agent. I was dumbfounded to find that, totally unbeknownst to my oneiric self, I was the double agent.

A rare experience

Once, after a pleasant evening's conversation with a friend¹, I was suddenly suffused with a feeling of elation – short of ecstasy but stronger than euphoria – accompanied by a distinct impression of emotional liberation. I felt that somehow the normal impediments to life had fallen away, as if, while remaining conscious, I had been relieved of the burden of existence. This sensation was striking in its autonomy – in the fact that, being perfect in itself, it seemed unnecessary to ascribe it further significance. Still, recognizing the ephemeral nature of feelings of this sort, I felt impelled immediately to attempt to capture it, however inadequately, in words. Rereading my attempt soon afterwards, I yearned to rekindle the emotion which had moved me so deeply. And, as if by a miracle, my wish was granted, oneirically at least. One night some months later I dreamt that a former friend had become an enemy and for some reason had decided to sue me for the sum, as I recall, of \$3000. I was in the depths of despair. And then miraculously all was forgiven and we again became the closest of friends. In my dream I was moved to tears, but at the same time I refused to believe that such happiness could be real, remarking to my friend that we must both be caught up in a dream. He assured me that this was not the case. I responded by saying "you just wait," and at that point I awoke. But even then the spell the dream had cast was not broken, for as I emerged into consciousness I heard in my mind's ear the strains of Irving Fine's beautiful cantata "The Hourglass" – *O know to end as to begin*.

¹ The friend was Rob Clifton, whose tragic loss to cancer at the age of 38 I continue to mourn. He was a lovable man: the feelings I relate here are surely connected with that fact.

Hindemith

To overcome graphical inertia I sometimes find it helpful to immerse myself in the music of Paul Hindemith, a prolific composer whose music roars along with great *élan* and yet also possesses a remarkable intricacy. Although he was never one to wear his heart on his sleeve, his sheer command of musical form enabled him to produce passages of an extraordinary still beauty. In this respect there comes to mind the slow movement of his two-piano sonata, a wonderful canon whose pentatonic touches induce a feeling of calm similar to that which might be evoked by gazing at the lily-pads drifting idly on the surface of a Japanese ornamental pond.

Heifetz

The playing of *Jascha Heifetz*: a scalpel penetrating to the core of memory, a laser burning through pretension and corn, an absolute standard of Camusian lucidity rendering a scale of values unnecessary.

Mother and son

I must write about my mother. It is strange, in my 53rd year, to think about someone who remains permanently older, in my mind, than I am, and yet who ceased to exist (at aged 39) before achieving my trivial seniority. I shall always associate her with the piano—an instrument whose coolly rational nature, it seems to me, is in essential opposition to hers. I have long wondered, dreamt even, what it would be like for us to encounter one another as adults: fortunately for us both the disappointment that might

result is blocked on temporal grounds. Nevertheless, as her son, I hope I would continue to idealize her even if she were still alive: I have failed to do this with my father. But none of us – mother, father, offspring – should take the business of existence too seriously!

The crippled cricket

As I sat in the local park one Sunday morning, staring fixedly at the grass, reflecting on the futility of existence, a cricket lurched into view and proceeded to fall on its back, its legs (minus a crucial rear component) waving feebly. The presence of a suffering fellow-creature, evidently at the end of its tether, punctured my musings. Accordingly I felt that I was doing the poor thing a favour when I rose and crushed it underfoot, thus instantly, I hoped, putting it out of its misery. On performing this would-be act of mercy I was suddenly gripped by the absurd (and scarcely original) form of a longing for a Monty-Pythonesque foot to descend from the sky and similarly put *me* out of my misery – this despite the intactness of all my limbs! Later came the depressing realization that sensitivity to humiliation, failure, loss, and boredom *does not diminish with age* – indeed, if anything that sensitivity intensifies with age! Does the emerging recognition of this truth about (one's own) aging, if one is fortunate, concealed from one's younger self, lead to the adoption of a stoical attitude – verging, possibly, on the masochistic – on the part of one's older self? I can only attest that, as I have aged, the more the seemingly permanent sensitivities of youth have had to be concealed. This may be due to the fact that, having been (necessarily) young themselves, older people are burdened with the belief that stoicism is expected of them. This is presumably because the young associate this attribute with age, given the extreme rarity of stoical babies.

Pedagogy

What is education but the inculcation of the idea that life is a permanent examination

Creativity

Why drives one to be creative?

One, to beat boredom

Two for the soul

Three for respect

And four for the goal.

The end

Death can be accounted an evil only if the idea of having to face one's last moment exceeds in horror the prospect of remaining conscious forever.

The art of the poet

If, as Poincaré says, mathematics is the art of calling different things by the same name, then poetry is the art of calling the same thing by different names.

Conversation and Solitude

According to Gibbon,

Conversation enriches the understanding, but Solitude is the school of genius.

But for the frustrated raconteur,

Conversation enriches one's self-esteem, while Solitude is the school of masochism.

Music and mathematics

What is music but audible mathematics inducing objectless emotion?

An outwrite scandal

The trouble with writing is that, having embarked on the business, one feels outwritten every time one opens a book.

Suicide

An act of suicide has the effect of trivializing the lives of those who live on.

Snoring one's way to fame

I received in the mail a letter from a British "Who's Who" outfit to the effect that I had been named an "International Man of the Year" and that the disbursement of a mere 200 pounds sterling would ensure my immortality in the form of a plaque proclaiming the honour for all to see. (Needless to say, I failed to part with the cash.) A couple of days later my wife remarked that my incessant snoring was aggravating her chronic insomnia. I responded that she might be driven in desperation to do me in, and that I could envisage the resulting headline in the local rag:

INTERNATIONAL NONENTITY OF YEAR DECAPITATED BY WIFE IN MID-SNORE

Morality

The ethical core of a truly moral person is the rejection of the idea of inflicting pain, even in one's own imagination.

Death and mathematics

I wonder whether my psychic path to death, necessarily oscillatory, will take the form of damped or undamped oscillations. Thinking of $t = 0$ as the instant of death, and writing u for $-t$, will my route to nonexistence be traced by the function $f(u) = u \sin 1/u$, continuously extensible to 0 "death", the point at which it ceases to be defined, or will it be represented by $f(u) = \sin 1/u$, the "Dylan Thomas" function, the "Rage, rage against the dying of the light" function, its undamped oscillations marching perpetually to the final bitter discontinuity? I would expect the latter, unhappily, to be the better

representation, since in my case the tiniest stimulus has a tendency to produce the wildest oscillations.

Inadequacy

The one sure way short of suicide to assuage the pain of having to acknowledge one's limitations – the inevitable product, so says philosophy, of the projection of the soul into the realm of the material – is to *universalize* those limitations, to *absolutize* them. Refracted through the socialized ego, this amounts to *reducing* others to one's own level, since the inverse notion, that of *raising* others to one's level, is merely patronizing. I have come to realize that I believe this only because I have found it simpler, and on moral grounds preferable, if still painful, to acknowledge the existence of superiors than to admit the existence of inferiors. That very reluctance to admit the existence of inferiors is, I have ruefully come to see, the product of a typically "elitist" attitude on my part which I hope has not degenerated into snobbery. In any case, even if it has, nobody but myself would give a damn! It is the asymmetry between the ideas of superiority and inferiority, I believe, that has driven human society to evolve in such a way as to lead its members to feel that to blame others for one's misfortunes would be to blame gravity for its tendency to bring things to earth.

Atheism

When I ask myself why God fails to treat me in the same way I treat my cats, – with pleasure, devotion, yet at the same time with a certain irritation at what I see as the asymmetry of our relationship – the answer comes loud and clear: God *does not exist*, the buck, sadly, stops with me (and also with the cats). But what a dismal answer! It would be such a relief to be able to acknowledge the existence of a higher authority in precisely the same way as, when one falls asleep at night, one slides with gratitude into the embrace of Morpheus. Unfortunately, I can't do it. Not yet, anyway.

A metaphorical dream

I dreamt that I entered a lift. After the doors closed, the lift began to descend and I noticed with disquiet that it lacked the usual panel of buttons. When the lift finally came to a halt, the doors failed to open. I panicked and attempted to smash my way out. At this point I woke up, thinking how apposite the dream was as a metaphor for my life.

The Eisenhower years

To admit to remembering the 1950s is to testify to a triviality. There was nothing at that time that really engaged one's attention beyond the extravagance of the chromium plating on the cars.

The sad truth

There must always be escapes. And, in the end, escapes from the escapes.

Four Dreams from Years Past

A dream of Brahms.

I dreamt I was a passenger on a train with Brahms as engineer, resurrected somehow into the present day. It was a brilliantly sunny morning. The train left the tracks and

made its way into a field where, along with the other passengers, I got off and sat down to a picnic laid out on tables. I was surprised to find that I was seated right opposite Brahms, who had evidently abandoned his role as engineer. He looked quite avuncular, his heavy beard reinforcing his likeness in my eyes to his appearance in photographs taken in his old age. Feeling that he would naturally be disorientated by his resurrection into the 20th century (*my* epoch rather than *his*), I remarked to him by way of consolation: “Never mind, just imagine how much *more* bewildered you’d be if you were Bach: he’d find present day conditions even more bizarre!” At this point I awoke, feeling for a sublime moment that I’d actually *met* Brahms.

An “outer space” dream.

In this dream I was a space traveler with two companions. We landed on a sinister planet inhabited by a race of humanoid aliens. We were taken into a chamber, where we were met by an alien who touched one of us and caused him to vanish abruptly. I was naturally terrified, and my terror was compounded by hearing a voice, initially muted but building to a climax, saying: “which one of you is JOHN BELL?” My response was to point cravenly at my one remaining companion. At this point I woke up, deeply ashamed of the cowardice of my oneiric self.

A “Nixon” dream.

Here I dreamt that I was a messenger boy for the US Senate. I was dispatched to find the then President Nixon who was apparently absent from the White House. I wandered around what I took to be Washington D.C. in search of the man until learning that he could be found at his club. On arriving there I saw that over its entrance was the sign “Intellectuals’ Club” . As I woke up, I was amused by the

absurdity of the idea of Nixon being a member of such an institution. (Yet, given certain of Nixon's successors, need I mention who?, he's redeemed in my eyes.)

A dream of torture.

In this dream I was a resistance fighter, possibly Jewish, in Europe during World War II. Captured by the Nazis, I was taken to a *Schloss* and subjected to prolonged torture. I finally managed to get hold of the knife with which I had been lacerated and plunge it, with immense satisfaction, into my tormentor. I then threw myself over the battlement of the castle. I woke up shaken: I felt that in some sense I *knew* what it must feel like to kill one's torturer. Yet on reflection I realized that my oneiric self had not actually *experienced* pain, but had only been presented with the *idea* of pain. One's (mine, at least) oneiric self is a kind of truncated version of one's conscious self: its senses are confined to the visual and the auditory, and, occasionally the gustatory; it does not directly experience any of the tactile sensations, in particular pain.

The unity of the past

Some time ago it struck me that my life, and the character I had in youth seems to possess a unity that my present character does not. I have since come to see that this revelation admits a natural explanation, namely, that the unity of the past self arises from the fact that in principle it can be inspected in its entirety by the present self: the past self is an actuality, completed, while the present self is a potentiality, unfinished, open to the future, which cannot by its very nature possess the unity of a finished object.

The scourge of mediocrity

The fear of mediocrity drives my creative effort, such as it is. And what's wrong with that? Nothing, it just seems a trifle base. But acknowledging that fact is merely another way of overcoming the dreaded mediocrity.

Schoenberg

Schoenberg has been quoted as saying that his life experience caused him to feel as if he was—in a phrase that has long haunted me— “immersed in an ocean of boiling water”. I admire his courage since I have done little more than dangle a toe in that vast cauldron. Nevertheless, even my hesitant probings have served to confirm to me the existence of Schoenberg's ocean, along with its temperature and turbulence

The Unknown Known

The other day I felt suddenly compelled to write down the following:

I have come to acknowledge the “Unknown Known”, that is, something I inscrutably know which I also know is beyond my capacity to articulate.

Is this the first sign of the impending Belsitis I've long feared?

Escape from Trumpery

When Donald Trump was elected to the American presidency I felt that I'd been shunted into an undesirable branch of the multiverse – a comic inferno dominated by a

curious orange moron. I have come to envy my other selves who, by pure chance, occupy happier timelines spared the election of the Donald. Do I genuinely believe in the existence of these “other branches” of the multiverse within which my “other selves” dwell? Well, at least I find this conception more congenial, if, sadly more fantastic, than the idea of an afterlife in linear time offered by the traditional religion in which I seem to recall I was brought up, however briefly. That traditional religion is based on the not unreasonable idea that individual consciousness – the soul- is unitary, cannot not be split, and either ceases to exist when the body in which it was manifested in objective linear time necessarily dies or in some way survives or escapes confinement within that body. According to this doctrine, the body dies, but the soul, the unitary consciousness, continues to exist in objective linear time. Like Sisyphus eternally rolling his rock, consciousness is then still subject to the tyranny of linear time. While that tyranny may be unavoidable from an objective standpoint, consciousness is capable of overthrowing it *subjectively* through its grasp of the idea of branching time and the idea of split selves. This provides a welcome, if fantastic alternative to the depressingly Sisyphian scenario of the unitary self-condemned to continue rolling the rock of consciousness ceaselessly into the linear future. At the very least the idea of branching time troubled unitary self to avoid the anxious wait for the resolution of its difficulties, since it can grasp that some of its “other selves” occupy more congenial branches of the multiverse in which such difficulties have never arisen. The unitary self, thus liberated, does not need to wait for entry into heaven, since it can live vicariously through the happiness of its “other selves”. Is the faith in an afterlife in linear time in which all injustices are resolved in the future preferable, or more credible, than the notion that all possibilities have already been realized in an expanded, ramified present? At all events it is consoling that the majority of branches of that ramified present are not dominated by a curious orange moron.

Trump's ghostwritten "wartime president" address

Even though large tracts of Europe and many old and famous States have fallen or may fall into the grip of the odious Kung flu, we shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end. We shall fight in the New York stock market, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength on Fox News , we shall defend our country and its newly restored greatness through my inspired leadership, whatever the cost may be. We shall fight on Palm Beach, we shall fight on my far-flung golf courses, we shall fight in the sand-traps and in the fairways, we shall fight in the front nines, we shall fight in the back nines ; we shall never surrender, nor ever wear a cowardly mask.