A WEEK-LONG **ROUND TABLE ON WRITING** on **THE ENDLESS THREAD** (TET 1.0)
A WEEK-LONG **ROUNDTABLE ON WRITING on THE ENDLESS THREAD** (TET 1.0)

*August 16-August 23, 2009*

Participants (in order of appearance):

1. Nick Freilich  
2. Frances Madeson  
3. Edmond Caldwell  
4. Sean Murray  
5. Peter Murphy  
6. Baruch Gottlieb  
7. Steven Augustine (host)

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1.

Steven Augustine

August 16, 2009

Tesla, tesla…

-

2.

czarnickolas

August 16, 2009

My favorite memories are imagined afternoons with you. In them, you sit on a bench and read a magazine, occasionally looking toward me. We never touch, but that doesn’t matter. I’m better off alone, our love illusory. It never ends that way.

-

3.

Steven Augustine

August 16, 2009

Nick, are you being a crafty literate (or cineaste) (wait, spell check doesn’t recognize “cineaste”? ) and adapting a famous snatch of dialog for your comment… a snatchlet that rings enough of a bell that it drives me crazy after I’ve slept only 5 hours? Or are you touching on (cough) the homoerotic subtext in all man-to-man transactions which aren’t heavily mediated by man-against-man social postures?

My favorite imagined afternoons are the ones in which we drove down to Tijuana in a borrowed car, engaging the whores we found just meters over the border in Ionescoesque dialogues in which money was never mentioned and love was possible not despite but because it had no goal or object.
I just had a thought. I was thinking about Science Fiction because of a review of “District 9” I just read at Slate… and it came to me: given the degree to which Sci/Tech overshadows absolutely every bit of our modern lives, shouldn’t “Sci Fi” be called “Modernism” instead? Not that I’m a fanboy… I’ve relegated most of my Sci Fi crushes to the boyhood memory chest (for technical reasons I’ll get into later)... but the Literary Fiction I prefer, which is, on the whole, in my opinion, so much more well-written than Sci Fi, comes off as a pretty bucolic, pre-Industrial form. The themes/scenarios/interplay of the characters could generally be back-projected to 18th century France and still work. I’m thinking here even of DeLillo, who is so modern in his free-range “paranoia”… but does anyone in most of DeLillo’s novels need hardware of any kind to really be themselves? I love the works of P. Roth, much of Amis, much of DFW, Pynchon, Nabokov, Kundera, Bowles, Joyce, Brodkey, et al… every stripe of Modernist… but what’s “modern” about the material? Not a criticism; just think we should straighten our taxonomies out.

What we call “Modernist” I’d call “Secular Humanist”; what we call “Sci Fi” I’d call “Modernist”. Jules Verne and HG Wells were actual Sci Fi writers, in my book, because they were at it when most of the cultivated (literate) West was still essentially bucolic and pre-Tech in its experiences.

If only “Sci Fi” were as well-written as the stuff by those Luddites Roth, Joyce, Nabokov… but it isn’t. My theory being that the exquisite high-reaches of “Art” are about the immensities that are *left out* of the artifact, as opposed to all the junk thrown in. Sci Fi, being usually set in imagined worlds populated with various freaky humanoids, can’t take anything for granted enough to leave enough out to qualify as High Art: you have to hear about the jelly-computers and the robo-lizard-librarians and the Deltoid Tribunals in mystery-killing detail.

My oft-sited example being the Sam Delaney story, “Aye, and Gomorrah” [see Appendix 1, pg 121; also referred to in comment #22, pg 15] which I read as a Sci-Fi-gobbling teen. The first two-thirds were a revelation... I was disoriented/in transport... in reader heaven. The final third was Delany explaining everything... putting the Mystery to bed with milk and cookies... Sci Fi’s exposition curse... ruining it. I was so disappointed by the way that story turned out that I was actually angry. But the first two-thirds of it showed me a way to make Art.
And the difference between Art and Entertainment. Entertainers can’t afford to let the audience walk away scratching its heads.

(I just caught the typo “Entertainter”… must use that one day)

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5.

**Frances Madeson**

**August 16, 2009**

Before it all gets too, too, just want to say here’s what I’m drinking (and serving if anyone wants one). It’s called a Black Velvet—half a flute of Jerome Prévost ‘La Closerie’ Les Beguines and half a flute of Guinness. To die for with a bite of Teuscher’s Truffles I also brought (if you want to put them out now—up to you, of course). Also, I’m wearing a darling-but-daring probably-too-short-for-a-52-almost-53-year-old woman, off-the-shoulder number I bought a few years ago in a boutique on Notting Hill that I’ve never, ever had the nerve to wear before. In a certain light, it’s devastatingly elegant. The sweet little earrings are Murano glass, the choker’s Baccarat and the pumps that I’ve just kicked off (because the floor is clean and I already have a runner in my hose so what the hell) are Stuart Weitzman. And yes, that is a henna tattoo on my clavicle. And yes, it’s supposed to be a horseshoe magnet (in honor of Tesla) but the airbrush tickled and I convulsed so now it just looks like a freaky birthmark. But you gotta give the people that have nothing to say, something to talk about.

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6.

**Steven Augustine**

**August 16, 2009**

I don’t really fancy alcoholic nourishment, but I could go for a wickedly chilled pineapple/orange juice. Any thoughts on the expositional weaknesses of “Sci Fi” vs the sleeker insinuations of “Modernism”, FM? Or on my suggestion that “Sci Fi” is more aptly named “Modernism”?
7. **Frances Madeson**  
*August 16, 2009*

None whatsoever other than I wish I’d thought of the Secular Humanism line. And if Wells and Verne are sci-fi writers then I’m living a sci-fi life. But both of those comments are conversation stoppers so I’ll keep mum. I’ll be on the ottoman leafing through the art books. And I’ll see what I can do about rustling up that juice for you.

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8. **Edmond Caldwell**  
*August 16, 2009*

As chance would have it, I happen to be reading my first science fiction novel in years, Ian Watson’s “The Embedding,” originally published in 1973. I’ve read other things recently that may count as “crossovers” – J.G. Ballard’s “Atrocity Exhibition” comes to mind – but this is the first that really counts as straight-up sci fi (I mean, a frickin’ spaceship lands and an alien steps off; without getting too much into the question of generic boundaries, I’d call that science fiction). Like our august MC, I read quite a lot of sci fi as a teenager, but later stopped, probably for similar reasons. But I’m currently on a trip and ran out of things to read; my wife had the novel with her because she’d heard it had something to do with issues around her linguistics-and-developmental-psych bailiwick (which, along with aliens stepping off spaceships, it does). The cover heralds the book as “one of the 100 Best Science Fiction Novels” and it’s reprinted as part of a “Masters of Science Fiction” series (with a blurb by Ballard, in fact).

My reaction to “The Embedding” jives with your comments, Augustine. **Parts of the novel are as well-written as anything in good contemporary “literary fiction”** (and there’s even a moment that’s positively sublime), but again and again the narrative plunges into passages of wooden dialogue, mechanical scene-setting, contrived plotting, clichéd character description and other lazy short-cuts – as well as the fault that you singled out, the over-exposition. Not that instances of “literary fiction” don’t sometimes suffer from some of these (plus there’s the fact that the technically-correct “quality” prose of much lit-fi is really just schlock, workshop dull or with the deep insincerity of ersatz
“literariness”), but still those kinds of bad writing are at least recognized as flaws or shortcomings according to literary fiction’s own implied criteria, whereas in science fiction they seem to be de rigueur, or at least unobjectionable in the genre’s own terms (Frank Herbert’s Dune is undeniably a great science fiction novel, full of undeniably wooden and hackneyed prose that will forever keep it from being a great novel per se). But with Watson’s book I kept coming up against the feeling that it didn’t necessarily have to be this way; that with a little more patience and self-critical attention to form it could have escaped the worst of its flaws . . . Or am I wrong? Is there a kind of tractor-beam of badness and bathos always tugging at the writer the minute a certain generic orbital is crossed?

I think you’re right on about the “bucolic, pre-industrial” quality of so much literary fiction (a point which probably deserves further discussion), but I have trouble getting my head around the idea that science fiction is therefore more modern(ist). My reason is that it’s always still so wedded to all the formal protocols of nineteenth century realism, so that no matter how futuristic (or whatever) the upholstery is, it’s still a settee waiting for an interplanetary country parson to sit on it. I haven’t kept up, though; a lot of my students (back when I had them) used to urge me to read the newer generation of science-fictionists, China Mieville and Neal Stephenson and so forth. Maybe someone here can tell me if I’m missing anything…

Steven Augustine

August 16, 2009

EC old boy! Have a lark’s nipple on gilded cheese and nibble a bit until I can get back to you.

But, quickly: I suppose I’m awarding the Sci Fi boys Modernist points for generally acknowledging the fact that machines are more important in many people’s lives than other people are. We’ve all been effective cyborgs since the early middle of the 20th century; we can’t get along (as we are; with our personalities intact) without Gizmo Support. I suppose your question/quibble is, then: is it more “Modern” to address traditional concerns with far-out language, or to map modern consciousness with conservative narrative forms/grammar?

I mean, to hell with my new taxonomy, really. You’re probably right.
My main concern… or longing (sense of missed opportunities) is all to do with how good Sci Fi could be. And I’ve read a bit of the recommended Newer things but lots of them still suffer from being not quite as good as Nabokov in Space would be (though Ada, which really was Nabokov in Space, essentially… didn’t thrill me; I felt it collapsed under the baklava mass of the layers of its saturated manias… ahem. It’s my fucking comment thread and I’ll write things like that if I want to, dammit). I mean, is Neal Stephenson doing stuff that really improves on half the entries in the first Dangerous Visions Anthology? I just don’t feel it. And some of it goes back to my jaundiced eye towards Entertainters. I think the New Wavers in the DV anthology were freer because the audience (such as it was) trusted the writers to take them to deeply unfamiliar places. I don’t think modern professionals (esp. in Genre fiction) can afford to be so brave. Because the audience (a conservative thumbsucking fucker) shows little sign of support.

**Difference in drug cultures? (LSD vs Crack?) Possibly.**

This was supposed to be my quick version, remember.

10.

seanmurray

**August 16, 2009**

**Compression and cadence are the qualities I miss most in SF prose.** Reading it’s almost always like listening to a badly tuned-in radio broadcast of a House of Lord’s debate… hissy wee spare syllables all over the shop.

Problem is, most SF writers are wary of even middling prose production values, associating them with ‘anaemic artiness’ (or so they claim; perhaps they *simply cannot write*).

Still, the borderland between SF and lit fiction’s where much of the action is at present, I believe, partly due to that sense identified by Edmond above:

‘But with Watson’s book I kept coming up against the feeling that it didn’t necessarily have to be this way; that with a little more patience and self-critical attention to form it could have escaped the worst of its flaws’

**Aye, SF doesn’t have to be the way it is. Infinite Jest, after all, is the supreme Modernist work, in Steven’s sense.**
(I’m meant to be on an extended Lent as far as blogging’s concerned, so though I’ll be checking this site regularly I suspect I’ll seldom post. I wish the place every success, though. How the hell do you guys litblog and keep pumping out the fiction?)

11.

Steven Augustine
August 16, 2009

“How the hell do you guys litblog and keep pumping out the fiction?”

It’s all writing, though, Chum, innit? As long as we resist the urge to LOL or OMFG or STFU it’s all a down-payment on the next Opus. Or a blade-sharpener at the very least. Come back and keep posting, you bastid. A micro-short on your creation Bathsheba would be just the thing to kick the thread off with style…

“Reading it’s almost always like listening to a badly tuned-in radio broadcast of a House of Lord’s debate… hissy wee spare syllables all over the shop.”

That could be the intro of something fine right there, in fact.

12.

Steven Augustine
August 16, 2009

“I wish the place every success, though.”

Fuck “success” (which means “traffic” in bloggese). Numbers are nonsense; numbers are what turned Ed Champion’s blog into a tractor pull (unless I always over-estimated Ed’s potential to outgrow his flamboyant malapropismus and that Generation Schiz ability to play the Philistine while wanting to be taken for an intellectual). This thread will average about twenty visits a day (if that much)… I’m just hoping that ten of those visitors are interested in reading a carefully-considered conversation or two… and that five will contribute.
If I wanted “success” I’d create a Cat Blog. Or start copying out pages from the diary I kept when I was a tuxedo-wearing gigolo in Georgetown*.

*joke

13.

seanmurray

August 16, 2009

How about this as a public service, Steven (or at least a service to me)?

I’ll submit a micro piece of fiction and you set up an anonymous poll here asking simply HOW GROTESQUELY OVERWRITTEN IS THIS?

A. WAY, WAY BEYOND GROTESQUELY.
B. JUST PLAIN GROTESQUELY.
C. JUST CALM DOWN A BIT, SON.

You then publish the poll’s result and I weep and mull it over.

My fellow bloggers could then submit pieces for similar polls of their choice.

14.

Steven Augustine

August 16, 2009

Well, why the hell not? You might have to import some commenters from your own good site, but you have *my* pledge to take a feathered sledge hammer to your brainchild. If that helps.
Meanwhile, here’s a new wee film featuring Nick’s music:

fake real fake

“Or start copying out pages from the diary I kept when I was a tuxedo-wearing gigolo in Georgetown.”
Actually, I do mean (*this* should get my traffic up), at some point, to go into the time, some years ago, that I became romantically involved (unwittingly… at first) with a **prostitute**. My hand on whatever Holy Book of your choice: this really happened. A spectacular-looking Goth girl (at 23, girl she was) with the most frightening stare I’ve ever stepped into.

Tune back in, right here, in three or four weeks for that one… (Christ, the pornosearch-counter’s already surging to life)…

17.

[Image]

seanmurray

**August 16, 2009**

That film [FAKE REAL FAKE] is you & Nick’s highpoint so far, I’d say. Might I request more (a) deep house and (b) more paragraph-length inserts?

Now back to work… Goodnight all.

- Z

18.

[Image]

**Frances Madeson**

**August 16, 2009**

No actual larks nipples were hurt in the making of this blog thread.

- Z

19.

[Image]

**Steven Augustine**

**August 17, 2009**

I’m afraid our friend Mr Lark would beg to differ, FM.
It’s morning in Istanbul! We’re at one end of the Umramieh district, where it creeps up the backside of Camlica hill. From our balcony I can count the spires of seventeen distinct mosques — the muezzin’s call comes from all directions, in polyphonic, shifting layers, building, echoing, rebounding, trailing off . . . weaving a great wide carpet of sound . . . it stretches out the space of the sky around us until it’s all one great blue-tiled dome capping the mosque of the heavens!

I open up Selcuk Altun’s metafictional mystery novel “Songs My Mother Never Taught Me” and read the following: “She said she chose Camlica, which draws the morning ezan from the 3,000 city mosques like a magnet, because ‘there’s no neighborhood left that hasn’t lost it’s flavor’.” That’s it exactly, I think, this place ‘draws the ezan like a magnet’. What synchronicity, serendipity! Am I in a novel, too? Ah, the East!

And then, before I drown completely in my Orientalist orgasm, I think: What if I woke up in my apartment back in the States and heard a bunch of electronically-amplified preachers shouting from the rooftops of every church, “Remember you’re going to die! Only Jesus can save you! You’re less than dust without Jesus! Get down on your knees and thank God Jesus loves you! Jeeee-zuss!”?

Anyway, morning all.

- -

Comrade Augustine, can you give us a mini-precis of this “first Dangerous Visions Anthology” creature?
Comrade Murray, I wish could cultivate Augustine’s “it’s all writing” ethos, but in fact I’ve found it difficult to do my lit-blogging and other forms of writing at the same time, and I’ve even had to lay off the former lately with a zeal of Puritan denial to do more of the latter. I have too much of an either/or mind when it comes to writing (and so much else, I’m afraid). But I also hope that, as A. says, that there’s “blade sharpening” and cross-fertilization going on, while I tack from one thing to another (for example, I’m considering writing a purely anthropological study of 23 year old Goth girls and am therefore looking forward to comrade Augustine’s remarks & recollections on the topic…).

And yes, let’s all have a crack at that piece of micro-fiction you’ve alluded to, alrighty? And we’ll let you know how mannered and rococo and overwrought it is . . . or isn’t, because I have a feeling that some tastes here might run, like mine, to prose maximalism.

- -

Steven Augustine

August 17, 2009

Comrade Cadwell!

“And then, before I drown completely in my Orientalist orgasm, I think: What if I woke up in my apartment back in the States and heard a bunch of electronically-amplified preachers shouting from the rooftops of every church…”

The language barrier is one of Beauty’s secret weapons, eh?

Re: the Dangerous Visions anthology: it was/is a marvel. The material was largely “post modern” a decade before the most famous “post modernists” really hit, leading me to believe that the marginality of Sci Fi, back then, was a very good thing. Kubrick’s 2001 was a year away and Buck Rogers was still one of the first images that popped into one’s head when the Genre was mentioned. It was considered kid’s stuff. The Attack of the 50 Foot Woman and so forth. I think it was Star Wars that probably fucked it all up and turned Sci Fi into a billion-dollar industry in which material such as the brave stuff found in Dangerous Visions became a money-risking no-no.

Leaning on Wiki, here’s the DVI (there were two of them) table of contents:

****Illustrations by Leo and Diane Dillon accompany each short story.****
* Foreword 1 – The Second Revolution by Isaac Asimov
* Foreword 2 – Harlan and I by Isaac Asimov
* Thirty-Two Soothsayers (introduction) by Harlan Ellison

* Evensong by Lester del Rey. This is described by its author as an allegory. It details the capture of a being, identified at the end of the story as God, by Man, which has usurped God’s power.
* Flies by Robert Silverberg. It was inspired by a quote from King Lear: “As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods. They kill us for their sport.”
* The Day After the Day the Martians Came by Frederik Pohl
* Riders of the Purple Wage by Philip José Farmer (Hugo Award for best novella)
* The Malley System by Miriam Allen deFord
* A Toy for Juliette by Robert Bloch
* The Prowler in the City at the Edge of the World by Harlan Ellison
* The Night That All Time Broke Out by Brian W. Aldiss
* The Man Who Went to the Moon — Twice by Howard Rodman
* Faith of Our Fathers by Philip K. Dick
* The Jigsaw Man by Larry Niven
* Gonna Roll the Bones by Fritz Leiber (Hugo and Nebula awards for Best Novelette)
* Lord Randy, My Son by Joe L. Hensley
* Eutopia by Poul Anderson
* Incident in Moderan and The Escaping by David R. Bunch
* The Doll-House by James Cross (pseudonym)
* Sex and/or Mr. Morrison by Carol Emshwiller
* Shall the Dust Praise Thee? by Damon Knight
* If All Men Were Brothers, Would You Let One Marry Your Sister? by Theodore Sturgeon
* What Happened to Auguste Clarot? by Larry Eisenberg
* Ersatz by Henry Slesar
* Go, Go, Go, Said the Bird by Sonya Dorman
* The Happy Breed by John Sladek
* Encounter with a Hick by Jonathan Brand
* From the Government Printing Office by Kris Neville
* Land of the Great Horses by R. A. Lafferty
* The Recognition by J. G. Ballard
* Judas by John Brunner
* Test to Destruction by Keith Laumer
* Carcinoma Angels by Norman Spinrad
* Auto-da-Fé by Roger Zelazny
* Aye, and Gomorrah [see appendix, pg 130, in this document] by Samuel R. Delany (Nebula Award for best short story, 1967)*

Ellison (who suffers, as a writer, from being very popular: the “fans” and the pander-urge they can engender is something we should talk about later) was
an unsurpassed literary genius for about 5 years. His “Deathbird” is William Gass with a great sex life and a sense of humor (the two go hand in___)... or Burroughs as straight (in both senses of the term: Ellison, like me, is a Teetotalitarian).

ooops… phone ringing… back in a few…

- -

Steven Augustine
August 17, 2009

Here's the TOC for Again, Dangerous Visions:

* An Assault of New Dreamers (introduction) by Harlan Ellison
* The Counterpoint Of View by John Heidenry
* Ching Witch! by Ross Rocklynne
* The Word for World Is Forest by Ursula K. Le Guin
* For Value Received by Andrew J. Offutt
* Mathoms From the Time Closet — 1: Robot’s Story, 2: Against The Lafayette Escadrille and 3: Loco Parentis by Gene Wolfe
* Time Travel For Pedestrians by Ray Nelson
* Christ, Old Student In A New School (poem) by Ray Bradbury
* King Of The Hill by Chad Oliver
* The 10:00 Report Is Brought To You By… by Edward Bryant
* The Funeral by Kate Wilhelm
* Harry The Hare by James B. Hemesath
* When It Changed by Joanna Russ (Nebula Award for Best Short Story)
* The Big Space Fuck by Kurt Vonnegut
* Bounty by T. L. Sherred
* Still-Life by K. M. O’Donnell (Barry N. Malzberg)
* Stoned Counsel by H. H. Hollis
* With A Finger In My I by David Gerrold
* In The Barn by Piers Anthony
* Soundless Evening by Lee Hoffman
* (the title is an ink blot) by Gahan Wilson
* The Test-Tube Creature, Afterward by Joan Bernott
* And The Sea Like Mirrors by Gregory Benford
* Bed Sheets Are White by Evelyn Lief
If you have a chance to buy either of these books for a reasonable price, snap it up!

- 

Edmond Caldwell

August 18, 2009

Thank you, comrade A. They must be the size of phone books. I find that I can get reasonably priced used copies online. Expect my impressions on Vol. 1 soon.

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Steven Augustine

August 17, 2009
By the way, as a little teaser before I publish the story of the Goth prostitute I shared my bed with a couple of years before meeting the practically-perfect-woman-who-saved-me-from-further-experiences-of-that-nature-and-bore-with-me-a-girlchild-too…. here’s the email confession the Prostigoth sent me at the height of our romance (I was giving her singing lessons when we “fell in love”): I’ve blanked out one name in the confession, but the initials are the man’s actual initials:

************

Dear Steven,

Here is the mail. I’ve promised to write. For two years ago I came from Stralsund to Berlin. In Stralsund I had known a man (I have forgotten his name, I will give him the name Michael). During the time in Stralsund I get a friendship with him. Sometimes I took care of his kids, because he was working often at night. Ok so much to Michael.

Well it was the one night, which was my fate. Was in Berlin Beusselstraße (moabit). I wanted to drive with my car to Stralsund, because I had forgotten some important documents. In this street my car didn’t drive anymore. There had I met a friend from Berlin his name was Alex. He said I can get his car but he had no money to get some petrol. It was Saturday evening and my bank card was in Stralsund. Michael told me one day before that he is in Berlin at a friend of him. His friends name was (and is) J___ C____. I had taken one call to Michel if he can give me some money for getting some petrol. He said yes, I should only come to Marzahn to his friend and he would give me the money. So I drive to J___ C____. It was a house beside the forest with swimming pool and so on. There was also two woman. Both woman lived in this house with him together and both were the girlfriend of him. An relationship for three.

It’s was not my case but all were very friendly to me. After the day Michael was calling me I’m invited from J___ C____ for a dinner. I said yes why not. The next time I get one good relationship to the girls and I had a good relationship to J___ C____. After five weeks I had known they asked me if I can take care of their dog because they want to far away for few days. It was not a problem for me. We often go out, I take care of the dog it was really funny. But than came the day changing everything.

I drove with one of the girls through the city. She stopped the car and one man was waited on the street. She gave him 11.000 €. I asked her for what. Her answer: for business. Well I accepted this answer, what should I do.

One day I drove with Michael and J___ through the city. We drove to an mysterious place. It seems that in the houses around me nobody lived in. One building seems an old factory or something else. Here stopped J___ the car. Both get out and said to me, I should stay in the car. I was waiting for a long time. It was the longest 45 min I’ve waited because I had went to toilette so urgent. So I left the car to search a quiet place. During searching it I have seen that there was drugs in their live. A lot of drugs and a lot of money. The other people they met had seen me and makes a lot of trouble. Incredible trouble. After this time it was changing everything.

Up to this day they said me the truth. The both girls were working for him as prostitutes. He wanted to forced me to work for him as third girl. He was the opinion when I work for him I wouldn’t go to the police. For me it was not logic. But what is in these circles logic. As I didn’t do that what he want from me, he hurts me very bad. He had done things with
me I don’t wanna talk about it. He had broken my proud, my personality, saying shortly
he destroyed everything. As he said to me he will something do with my sister, I had
done what he wanted.

And so was the way I had to be a prostitute. I was there for five month. In these five
month it’s happened so much and I have seen so much that I can’t believe that there is
one god. In this time I had known Peter who helps me to get away and to find back to a
normal live. Yes its more than one year over I had seen J____ C____, my live normal, but
that girl who I am now that’s not me. I don’t know who I am. I will find back with the
music, that’s the cause why music is so important for me.

Please forgive for doing that.

- 

25.

seanmurray

August 17, 2009

Comrade Caldwell:

Coincidentally, here’s an email I’ve just sent regarding a similar streak of art
synchronicities I’ve been going through since April [some names blanked out]:

I hereby submit this record of The Seemingly Trivial Art Coincidences
Phenomenon (the latest was listening to Link Wray and then hearing it again the
usual 3 days later in Pulp Fiction) so that if I’m kidnapped by aliens or something
you can give it to Mulder and Scully.

The Phenomenon began in April, soon after the commencement of the Vapours
(i.e. messed-up brain chemistry following a bad drug experience and then reading
Geoff Dyer’s Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi and watching The Boat That
Rocked in the same week, respectively the worst UK novel and film I’ve ever
seen

From this point onwards I have experienced at least 70 (certainly three or four per
week) instances of the Phenomenon, most if not all of which had the following in
common:

1. Some mention of the artwork by you or XXX or YYY or ZZZ. E.g. one of
the first instances I can remember was XXX sensibly rejecting my suggestion
that you and KKK recreate the dance sequence from Bande a Part with these
words (XXX’s): ‘Sounds like something from a bad indie flick.’ Three days
later I saw a bad indie flick that replicated said dance sequence.
2. The next allusion to the work ALWAYS comes within five days of the first, Day 3 being by far the most preferred day, accounting for 80% or more of allusions, as if it were the centre of some sine wave or something.

3. NEVER is this second allusion then followed by a third — there’s only ever one follow-up allusion (so far). There have, however, been several instances of Relay Coincidences, e.g. I read in the book Flicker the line ‘Who knows what darkness lurks in the heart of men? The Shadow knows’ then ten minutes later hear the exact same line in a Link Wray song. Link Wray then features in Pulp Fiction, as mentioned above, etc.

4. NEVER has the second allusion involved an artwork I was previously familiar with, i.e. they’ve all involved works I’ve first read/seen/heard during this period.

5. That’s it, but I think that’s more than enough, eh?

Uh, Steven, the traffic for this site *is* low, right?

- -

26. seanmurray

August 17, 2009

Please forgive the grammar (and also ‘House of Lord’s further up).

- -

27. Steven Augustine

August 17, 2009

Comrade Sean-O:

What a coincidence! I was just working on a short essay about… coincidences. Called “Life in a Crystal”. Here’s part of the intro:

****My life was once plagued with coincidences.
Approaching an intersection where an Expressway’s off-ramp merged with city streets, I saw a man lean out of the passenger-side window of the car he was in to call out, to the driver of the car to his right, while waiting for the light to change, “Did you see that crash?”... half-a-second before a terrific head-on collision in the intersection.

-I was reading a book by Richard Brautigan about dynamite being used to kill coyotes and at the very moment my eyes came to the word “BOOM!” on the page a balloon in the open closet behind me exploded.

-I was walking up Grolmanstr. towards a big yellow double phone booth, the old enclosed type (in which the phones are back-to-back) and at the moment that the booth’s two users looked up to see me, in the midst of their calls, with smiles of surprised recognition, I realized they were both ex-girlfriends of mine (who did not know each other).

-I flew to London with my then-girlfriend, a girlfriend who had been pursued, in The States, by an actor (named Brian) with a major role on the hit TV show “China Beach”. Hanging out near Covent Garden I made the acquaintance of an actress who, it emerged, had made several appearances on “China Beach” (as a Vietnamese pop singer); she was Brian’s ex.

*****

What’s it all mean?

And, don’t worry: yesterday’s traffic count was 50 and today’s, thus far, is 20... your secrets are safe with us.

~ ~

28.

Steven Augustine

August 17, 2009

“4. NEVER has the second allusion involved an artwork I was previously familiar with, i.e. they’ve all involved works I’ve first read/seen/heard during this period.”

You’re either The Anointed One, or hearing explicitly about a thing sensitizes/alerts you to future mentions of it that may otherwise have been too understated/peripheral to merit conscious notice...?

~ ~
Actually, this is a good place to discuss the Meaningful Coincidence as Art attracts it. Do writing-immersed, sleep-deprived writers plug into a Universal Subconscious? I once wrote a passage about a character’s father strangling a swan in a city park… a few days later (was it 3?) I read in the newspaper about… etc.

---

Peter Murphy

August 22, 2009

From a blog post called The Spooky Art, December 08

“In everything any man wrote… is contained… the allegorical idea of his own future life, as the acorn contains the oak.” – Arthur Rimbaud

Strange but apparently true: songs can be predictive. They process the hidden impulses and undercurrents at work in a songwriter’s life, sort through the evidence, and make eerily accurate prognoses of what will come to pass. Perhaps the creative side of the brain, the night-side, knows what is before us, even as our waking consciousness cannot or will not acknowledge portents of the catastrophes ahead.

“Sometimes songs are postcards from the future,” Rosanne Cash wrote in a blog for the New York Times last May. “Often I have found that a song reveals something subtle but important about my own life that I was only vaguely aware of while writing, but that became clear as time went on. I wrote ‘Black Cadillac’ six weeks before a rash of deaths began in my family. The day I finished writing it, I played the completed song to myself, as a kind of last run-through to check for rhyme scheme errors and syllable scanning, and a tidal wave of anxiety started rising in my gut. I knew I had given myself a message.

“I don’t consider these postcard songs prescient as much as just coming from a source of creativity outside linear time. I am certainly
not the first to notice this phenomenon in creative work. Thornton Wilder, for one, wrote, “It is only in appearance that time is a river. It is rather a vast landscape and it is the eye of the beholder that moves.”

In Nick Cave's 1998 lecture The Secret Life Of The Love Song, the singer described how the writing of ‘Far From Me’ from The Boatman’s Call didn’t just document the glorious beginnings of the love affair that inspired it, but also predicted – if not orchestrated – its inglorious decline.

“As I wrote the final verse of ‘Far From Me’ it became clear that my life was being dictated by the largely destructive ordinance of the song itself, which had its own inbuilt destiny, over which I had no control,” he said. “In fact, I was an afterthought, a bit-player in its sly, mischievous and finally malicious vision of how the world should be.”

And perhaps music presages not just the personal but also the socio-political. Earlier this year we speculated that just as Nirvana’s Nevermind telegraphed the Democrats ascension to the throne, perhaps Arcade Fire’s Neon Bible might, just might, augur well for Obama.

This is not the same as prophesy, which, as Greil Marcus observed in his book The Shape Of Things To Come, is as much about the past as the future, just as most future-dystopian novels are about the time they’re written in rather than a time foreseen. No, songs are more psychological. A songwriter unwittingly composes the source code for his or her imminent future.

So mind what you write.

- –

Steven Augustine

August 22, 2009

You’ve just inspired a few impressionable readers to go and speed-type the very sort of implausible sex scenes decried down-thread

- –
Peter Murphy

August 22, 2009

If only…

- -

seanmurray

August 17, 2009

Answer to your q: Yes.

January 1999 I set off across Ireland to see a girl in a psych hospital. She’d been in deep shit for years (the latest thing was writing obsessive fan letters to the DJ Judge Jules). Before leaving I told people I was getting desperate for the coincidences to stop — I’d had dozens of the type you’ve listed above (typing sentences out and then seconds later hearing the exact same words on the radio) — all in the one bloody week. It was becoming pretty unpleasant.

I missed my train and took the bus instead. As we got off at the other end another passenger left behind a copy of Q. I stuck it in my bag.

At the hospital the girl was in quite a state (she’s far better nowadays). Why did she constantly stare in mirrors? ‘To make sure I still exist.’ My mood as I left the hospital: raw.

I met some other friends afterwards and we went to a bar. A stag party came in and began battering a bloke. We left for another bar but the stag party soon came in chucking glasses around, etc. I called it a night and went to my hostel.

I tried to sleep but two guys came in and started pishing on the beds, mine included. I went to the TV room. An episode of Cheers was on. I started to read to read the Q. Oh look: an interview with Judge Jules. Excerpted in huge letters at the top of the page:
‘There’s one girl in a mental hospital in the north of Ireland who keeps sending me letters. It’s fucking scary.’

The cast of Cheers all say the word ‘Destiny’.

I find another dorm and try to sleep. Into the dorm comes that cheery stag party. One of them grabs my shoulders and shouts in my face: ‘Man, what does it all MEAN?’

The point about the above isn’t so much the story itself. It’s that it came at the end of a week when I was already gagging for the coincidences to end.

--

seanmurray
August 17, 2009

Lest this site’s rapidly plummeting readership believe my life consists solely of coincidences and my puzzling over them: the above has never reoccurred (except for the milder version since this April).

Hey, let’s talk about something involving no patterns or meaning whatsoever. Let’s talk about Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi.

In the novel, world-historically irritating and clueless bawbag Jeff (who shares many, many characteristics with his creator, the Satanic Geoff Dyer, e.g. both make a very big deal indeed of the fact they have no mobile phone; he also shares many characteristics with Nathan Barley, Mr Bean, Charles Hawtree and then, bizarrely, Peter North) out of the blue pulls the biggest babeat the Venice Biennale, an American girl called Laura. The smartest and Wittiest too.

They go to bed, bumbling (and pished and coked-up) Jeff suddenly turns into a cross between James Bond and Peter North, giving her several orgasms and us excruciatingly detailed descriptions of Laura’s genitals as he (Jeff/Geoff) pumps away at them and then licks them out. More Laura orgasms follow.

Here’s the rub: never once in these excruciating detailed descriptions of lips, flaps, juices etc etc is any mention made of the woman’s clitoris, or anything resembling a clitoris.

Now: imagine that you, Comrade Edmond, had written a novel with a hero named Edmund, a book that contained a similarly sudden charismatic and sexual
flowering and brutally blunt gyno descriptions… minus the clit. In fact, let’s all wallow in the thought that we’d written such a book (my hero might be named Shawn, Steven’s Stephen, Nick’s Nik). We’d have to be arseholes, would we not?

I used to wonder whether any work truly deserved terms like ‘disaster’ or ‘despicable’. Not since reading **JIVDIV**.

--

**Edmond Caldwell**

**August 18, 2009**

“Now: imagine that you, Comrade Edmond, had written a novel with a hero named Edmund, a book that contained a similarly sudden charismatic and sexual flowering and brutally blunt gyno descriptions… minus the clit. In fact, let’s all wallow in the thought that we’d written such a book (my hero might be named Shawn, Steven’s Stephen, Nick’s Nik). We’d have to be arseholes, would we not?”

What do you mean “imagine, comrade Sean? How did you get a look into my files? Or is this just another and particularly distressing Art Synchronicity? But at least it’s a reminder that if I ever drag the MS out and revise it, I’ll add a clit. Maybe that’s why all the women editors passed on the book under the euphemistic rubric that they “couldn’t identify” with the protagonist.

Oh wait, I just looked it up: I had the clit covered after all. Here is the relevant passage (background note — the hero, Browne, a sort of emotional-sexual Rip Van Winkle figure, hasn’t had intercourse in 20 years):

“I thought about Brenda’s ass a lot over the ensuing days. I thought about the way those egg-shaped buttocks had rolled when she tip-toed over cool tiles from her candle-lit bedroom into the kitchen to fill up our glasses with more Rioja. I thought about the soft slopes of her tummy and how the outline of abs surfaced, taut, as she drew near orgasm, my head squeezed between her thighs like a pecan in a nutcracker. I thought about what it was like to smell and taste cunt again after nearly two decades – at once headily familiar, yet as individual to Brenda as a fingerprint: fresh mushrooms, pickle, pepper. I thought about her astonishing clit. My first-hand experience of the clitoris was limited to fewer than ten women, but I’d seen an
awful lot of split beaver during my porn-consuming years, and Brenda’s clit was simply gigantic. It would’ve given the last digit of her pinkie finger a run for its money. And the abuse it could take – no, needed to take! No subtlety, just give it a good, long, jaw-cramping or knuckle-paralyzing drubbing. But most of all I thought about her face, her young-old face.”

There, OK? Maybe I had to make it huge as an aide de memoire. Because — just in case the readership of this blog inexplicably goes up — of course it is all made up, pure fiction. (But it really was that huge).

- -

Edmond Caldwell

August 18, 2009

And if not consistently purple, at least violet-tinted, as befit a narrator (but not, I repeat, a writer!) who hadn’t, as per comrade A’s dictum, been getting any lately.

And when I say violet-tinted I’m referring of course to the prose.

- -

Steven Augustine

August 18, 2009

“I thought about Brenda’s ass a lot over the ensuing days. I thought about the way those egg-shaped buttocks had rolled when she tip-toed over cool tiles from her candle-lit bedroom into the kitchen to fill up our glasses with more Rioja. I thought about the soft slopes of her tummy and how the outline of abs surfaced, taut, as she drew near orgasm, my head squeezed between her thighs like a pecan in a nutcracker. I thought about what it was like to smell and taste cunt again after nearly two decades – at once headily familiar, yet as individual to Brenda as a fingerprint: fresh mushrooms, pickle, pepper. I thought about her astonishing clit. My first-hand
experience of the clitoris was limited to fewer than ten women, but I’d seen an awful lot of split beaver during my porn-consuming years, and Brenda’s clit was simply gigantic. It would’ve given the last digit of her pinkie finger a run for its money. And the abuse it could take – no, needed to take! No subtlety, just give it a good, long, jaw-cramping or knuckle-paralyzing drubbing. But most of all I thought about her face, her young-old face.”

This is topnotch Henry Millerish stuff, EC… the only thing I don’t like is the “pecan” in the nutcracker. Wouldn’t a mild shock be so much more delicious there? Ie, “as she drew near orgasm, my head squeezed between her thighs like an eyeball in a nutcracker.”

Come on… you know you love it! Anyway. Shit. I want to read more of that. And when I say “purple” I don’t mean “maximalist”, of course… I mean “lyrical kitsch”. And this ain’t kitsch. Maybe it’s “Clitsch”? - z

32. Steven Augustine
August 17, 2009

-So much of Life is utterly bearable failure; so many tawdry fictions are grating accounts of success.-

- z

33. Steven Augustine
August 17, 2009

Speaking of sex scenes: Paul Theroux was so *good* at them when he was young (“Later he told me he had her himself on the way home, tipped her onto her back, just like that, under a tree.” My Secret History) yet often inept at it as an oldish
man. You can tell when even a decent writer isn’t getting any: the prose grows proportionately purple.

“We communicated by touch, flesh was everything, and as though in mimicry of language we used our mouths, our lips, our teeth, kissing, licking. My mouth was all over her body, hers on mine. After days of starvation we were devouring each other in the dark.” (from The Stranger Palazzo d’Oro).

Anything Danielle Steele couldn’t have written? That’s Theroux in full-blown 60-somethingish crisis. You should masturbate immediately after writing that kind of thing and then face it, after the adjustment, on the page. With your hand still dripping, scratch the passage out. With bemused horror.

Sometime around the turn of the century I tried to make a business out of Script Doctoring (because I’d sold the option on a script for a tidy sum) and it’s impossible to calculate how many middle-aged men tossed me fancy-bound scripts across cafe tables that year, asking my opinions of derivatively-shitty tales that either opened with sex scenes or climaxed (sorry) with them… or both (scenes so often set in kitchens that I began to wonder what was wrong with mine). I kept the best (ie, worst) ones.

- -

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**czarnickolas**

**August 17, 2009**

Augustine — I was just writing a rough draft of a love poem. I had hoped it was completely original, but I’m sure that’s what the Chinese thought when they “invented” paper long after papyrus and parchments had been in use (see, e.g., Alexandria comma Library of). I suppose it suggests a sort of cinematic aesthetic, though not that of a Summer Movie. One day I will give that piece the breath it deserves, and then I’m sure I’ll track it down in some late-autumn indie film about a man who longs for a woman that he doesn’t really long for. I think that’s the idea behind the work.

Re: 4 — I agree with the notes about the modernist greats and how their characters could exist without modern equipment. I feel that way to extent about cinema, generally, too — when stories are told without the crutches of text messages, video chat, holographic bus drivers, etc., and are stories where the characters could slide through generations without losing Who They Are, the story resonates more with me. I guess that’s why I like The Squid and The Whale so much, besides the fact that it is a very simple, short feature — because it takes
place in the early 80s and is centered around a BOOK and TENNIS family that travels on SUBWAYS — all concepts that are not NEW to the 1980s — it enables the picture to transcend its opening card: “Park Slope, 1984″ and exist in a range of times and places. *** Also feel you on the “what it leaves out” idea, something that I am most in touch with through music. Too much modern popular music is about kitchen-sinking everything, and the lack of musical mystery is ultimately unsatisfying. Good call.

I’ll get to more posts later. Am working on a de-albatrossing script.

- z

Steven Augustine
August 17, 2009

Comrade Nick!

Didn’t notice your post after posting (it’s the offspring’s bath time)

- z

Steven Augustine
August 17, 2009

“Re: 4 — I agree with the notes about the modernist greats and how their characters could exist without modern equipment. I feel that way to extent about cinema, generally, too — when stories are told without the crutches of text messages, video chat, holographic bus drivers, etc., and are stories where the characters could slide through generations without losing Who They Are, the story resonates more with me.”

These “timeless” narratives resonate more with both of us, Nick, but they’re not really timeless. It’s not that “Modernist” characters could exist at *any* point in human history… and it’s not as though it bothers me to read about a “steam gondola” (19th century jet-ski?) in House of Mirth.
Edith Wharton wasn’t shy about locking Lily Bart into a very specific material era (essentially the same era in which Wharton wrote the book): Wharton had no problem with “now”; but the less my favorite authors do that (even when Roth does “now”, he reverts to earlier eras when he goes into detail, and the earlier eras are always haunted by even earlier stuff that puts us in mind of the Elizabethans and the Greeks), the better.

For some reason, we share this sensibility with most of our favorite writers: we want it to be the 18th century (with refrigerators and plumbing). We are so thoroughly plugged into technology that we might as well be on dialysis… but we’d rather not read about it, or about characters who resemble us in our utter dependence, but about characters on impossibly simple (elemental) stages wrestling with/striving for Eternal Verities that have nothing to do with hardware.

Even in the Mad-Ave-torpedo of “White Noise”, DeLillo’s characters behave like rustics coming into first contact with Television and dealing with the exposure in much the same way that frightening albino toddler with a bowl cut in Poltergeist did.

Sci Fi is unabashedly populist and *now* in its faux-futurism (why do the PC monitors in these movies always look like Sony product that’ll be big the following Xmas? Even on intergalactic galleys)… and the finest Literary Fiction is unabashedly anti-now, for the most part.

On the other hand, Sci Fi (esp. in films) has been providing the leading content of the fascist propaganda machine since… hmmm. Alien? Which is why, in part, “now” is such a touchy subject with us sensitive types…

“Too much modern popular music is about kitchen-sinking everything, and the lack of musical mystery is ultimately unsatisfying.”

That and the toxic RADs of Professional Quirk that every extremely cute post-Feist act bombards you with now… from the first moment you fall in love on YouTube (at 2am) to the last moment (five videos later; 2: 35am) you can no longer bear to hear that shit. I’m no “authenticity” freak but there’s a limit. Google Dirty Projectors + quirky.

Steven Augustine

August 17, 2009

“Too much modern popular music is about kitchen-sinking everything, and the lack of musical mystery is ultimately unsatisfying.”

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Steven Augustine
August 17, 2009

Oh… the fondue is ready in the rumpus room, all! I’m going to take a nap…
Edmond Caldwell

August 18, 2009

My favorite Art Synchronicity didn’t, unfortunately, happen to me, that is unless I was Jane Bowles in a former life. That would be tough because she died in ’73, when I was reading “Orn,” by Piers Anthony (a transitional book for me for reasons I’ll mention elsewhere, or not). Anyway as a precocious 16 or 17 year old crossing the Atlantic on a steamer, Miss Bowles was sitting in a deck chair and reading Louis-Ferdinand Celine’s Journey to the End of the Night in French. A gentleman approaches and asks how she likes the book; she praises it to the skies. After the encomium is exhausted the gentleman responds, riffing on old Flaubert, “Celine, c’est moi.”

There’s an apostolic succession for you. Let’s see, what generational benedictions do I got to put up against that? One of my fledgling poems once made Karl Shapiro yawn, twiddle his pen, and stare out of the window while it was being discussed in workshop. Later I annoyed him further by pestering him with questions about Henry Miller instead of asking about his own work, which at the time I hadn’t read and later looked at and found boring.

- -

Steven Augustine

August 18, 2009

Comrade Edmond! Great Jane Bowles story… I suppose with Janey being a Secular Jewess, Celine had less problem with her! Whenever I see a Jane Bowles mention, I can’t help thinking of her Broderick Crawford-lookalike Tangerine mistress feeding her poison-mixed-with-vadge-hair in order to zombify her. Anyone care for a brownie?

Do post more of your material here, EC. Topnotch, as I commented above in a reply to one of your replies (comment 31). Quality shizzle, as the (slightly out of date) kids would say.

Maybe I can find a sex scene of mein own to paste here. And what about you, Sean? Give us a sex scene, mon.
Steven Augustine

August 18, 2009

I just had a quick look through my fiction page and I couldn’t really *find* a sex scene (out of about 50 stories and two novels!)… I know I have a *few*. Anyway, until I dig one up, here’s a long-winded (got 15 free minutes?) passage from my novel The Bomb Collector; it’s not a sex scene, but it’s about Sex:

*****

El-Hadi has published one French novel, years ago, which he is busy translating for the English market; his second mistress has promised to show the manuscript to a publisher with whom she may or may not be having a parallel affair. The title of the French version of the book, Le Collecteur de Bombe, is from an Algerian saying that Azzedine’s father, a devout Muslim, often admonished his son with during the boy’s sex-mad adolescence: a man with too many women is like a bomb collector.

The Bomb Collector is comprised of thirteen linked short stories or vignettes on the theme of adultery; there are Moroccan, French, British and Nigerian adulterers featured in interwoven tales all set in Algiers. Cora (the second mistress, married to his colleague) has suggested that beyond translating the book, Azzedine should also include a new chapter, featuring an American, in order to increase the chances of getting the English version published. He initially resists her idea because to add a chapter would violate the numerology of the book… ‘thirteen’ is one of its ordering motifs.

“Well,” suggests Cora, “simply replace one of the existing chapters.”

“Which chapter would you suggest I replace?”

Without hesitating, Cora answers, “Love is Blind. I think it’s the least-charming chapter in the book, to be honest. It denigrates women… also men, when I think of it. The book will be better without it.”

How can Azzedine admit, then, after Cora’s judgment, that the Love is Blind chapter is his favorite… the very heart of the book?

A handsome man, an epic womanizer with philosophical inclinations, goes to his Moroccan apothecary one day and requests a philtre that will render him
blind, but only temporarily. The apothecary, a man as versed in modern pharmacology as he is in Moroccan folk medicine, mixes a concoction that will blind his client for thirteen days exactly. Take this with a glass of wine on the morning of the first day and your vision will return to you on the evening of the thirteenth. The apothecary, who knows the womanizer well (having provided the man with condoms as well as penicillin and various other salves and ointments in the past), adds, But if you don’t mind my curiosity: why?

The womanizer explains: As you know, I rarely go without extremely desirable female companionship. However, it’s often occurred to me that for every impossibly beautiful woman I allow (or cajole) to climb into bed with me, there are at least a hundred of her sisters, all too willing but, unfortunately, too ugly to meet my silly standards. I curse my good taste but, as you know, there’s nothing to do about it… the male organ can’t be reasoned with in terms of what it finds attractive or not. However, I realized, one need only sneak a lover past the sentry box of the eyes in order to…

Ah yes, says the apothecary.

Following the apothecary’s instructions, the womanizer stirs the bitter substance into a glass of wine early the next morning. It’s a brilliant day, and he doesn’t even realize, at first, that what seems to be the encroaching gloom of cloud cover in an unseasonable display of weather before lunchtime is, in fact, the drug taking effect. By dinner time he is utterly blind. After spending a few days getting used to the situation (with the help of his servant), the womanizer tests his theory that by being free of the tyranny of the aesthetic prejudices of his eyes, his lovemaking will enjoy new freedoms and varieties... new intensities. Guided to the marketplace on the arm of his servant, he says: point me in the direction of a real sow. The servant does so; the womanizer makes contact with a lady of that description and finds himself escorting her home (just as he is escorted by his servant) in no time at all. The resulting sexual encounter is the best he’s ever had.

By the time his vision fades gradually back in on the evening of the thirteenth day, the womanizer has bedded dozens of women... fat, tall, short, skinny, old, young, poorly-dressed, exquisitely-dressed, European, African and everything else... and all with the same high level of energy and pleasure. The experiment has been a success. So much so that he hurries back to the apothecary the morning after the regrettable return of his vision and asks that the prescription be refilled. As you wish, cautions the apothecary, but I must tell you that the third time you use this drug, the effects are permanent.

Another thirteen days of carnal amazements follow. At the end of this journey into the ravishingly sensual night, the womanizer opts for a third, permanent dose, reasoning that he is no longer a young man; he’s seen
enough of the world’s picture; to trade just one of his grossly limited senses for limitless pleasure would be more than worth it. With logical eloquence he persuades the apothecary to sell him the third dose.

A year goes by. The apothecary has nearly forgotten the strange case of the self-blinding womanizer when the man appears one morning at the counter on the arm of his harried-looking servant, looking pale and skinny and with his formerly distinguished head of gray hair gone white. The apothecary is filled with guilt and pity: it strikes him that the poor fellow has returned to plead for his sight back. Which is, as he was warned, impossible. As the apothecary approaches the counter with a heavy heart he is surprised to see the blind womanizer detect his presence with a cocked head and give off a sly and boyish grin.

How can I help you today, my friend? asks the non-plussed apothecary. Are all things right with your chosen life?

Righter than ever, answers the blind womanizer. I’ve broken my own previous record for number of conquests in a week several times over and show no signs of slowing down. There’s only one thing I need from you now to make my bliss complete, says the blind womanizer, lowering his voice so that the apothecary draws near.

And what would that one thing be? inquires the very curious apothecary.

A drug to render me deaf, responds the womanizer.

****

(Remember, I am *not* the characters in my fiction! Larf)

- -

Edmond Caldwell

August 18, 2009

There’s also this interruptus I’m fond of, some vintage Augustine from the Brotherland Miracles:

“Katryn rolls over on her belly as instructed, elevating her marble ass to a proper azimuth of prayer. What a marvel, the proportion of narrow waist to plump behind; the detailed articulation of ribcage flexing with life. In, out,
in, out, in, out… a mindless argument that always wins. Katryn covers an embarrassing fusillade of thrust-syncopated vadgey flatus with a passion-simulating (or mocking?) scream as the abashed Roomservice Guatamalen knocks timidly, hoping most of all not to be heard. But the pancakes are coveted and the knockings are heard. O'Sirus bounds to the door.”

Seriously, though, “elevating her marble ass to a proper azimuth of prayer” and “an embarrassing fusillade of thrust-syncopated vadgey flatus”? That shit’s sublime, and you just toss it off and post it online and move on, while I agonize about why can’t I get my far less worthy stuff into “real” i.e. officially-sanctioned publishing venues. Absolutely infuriating.

Frances Madeson
August 18, 2009

He’s the man. Or one of them.

Steven Augustine
August 18, 2009

I was NOT horny when I wrote that! I was channeling my inner-Lesbian. Btw, I lived in a household of Lesbians for about half-a-year, in the mid-90s, right after fleeing Berlin and just prior to Southern California… much better than rooming with dickhavers. Much.

Anyway, appreciate the praise… you lethally-smooth piss-takers!

Steven Augustine

39
August 18, 2009

“…while I agonize about why can’t I get my far less worthy stuff into “real” i.e. officially-sanctioned publishing venues.”

EC, *everyone’s* work is “far less worthy” to his or her self. And, Part Two: as I learned in the Pop Business: the more you want something, the less likely you are to get it. Look at the utter SHIT that gets published. Why are you even competing with all that fair-to-middling verb-recyclage out there? I’m not going to name names (yet) but an extremely prominent Lit Bloggeur with an “actual” book deal with a Major sent me an inscribed copy of his “book” (back when we were virtual pseudo-chums) and I was dumbfounded at the low level of the work. I was honestly prepared to like the thing; I wasn’t expecting Faulkner but wow. Toss four teleplays from the late-80s into a blender, sprinkle with middlebrow ambition and… Voila. Not even half as good as James Wood’s schematic reading chore (the “novel”, I mean; not the neoconlit manifestos).

Look, it’s not as though most people with publishing contracts are making any *money*. Why beat yourself up over it? Something I’ve been trying to hammer into Comrade Sean’s head, too.

- z

46.

Steven Augustine

August 18, 2009

Here are two illuminating cases. Short pieces commissioned, by the Guardian, from two very famous “writers”:

EGGERSHITE [see appendix, pg 130]

HOMESTWADDLE [see appendix, pg 132]

Can you imagine submitting anything so dull and poor? Why are they Big Time and you not? Because they were driven and/or connected in a way you can only dream of being, my friends; you waste too much of your time writing. You aren’t out there sucking enough metaphorical Coq (au vin or without), making the right moves, positioning yourself. Writing comes a distant second. You can’t be serious about fame and fortune as a writer if you’re also serious about writing. Not anymore! (Lucky Beckett; he’d be a banker in today’s market).

- z
I’ll regret following The Bomb Collector… but ach what the hell. In today’s spirit of candles ‘n’ incense sensuality, the following is from a novel that finally just wasn’t quite good enough:

The first character to appear onscreen was a handsome gent in a leotard with HOLY GHOST stenciled across the chest. He peered over a fence into a rodeo-type compound and wolf whistled loudly. Five plump middle-aged women strolled elegantly through the dust plucking at wee lyres, starkers apart from a sash that said Beauty, Justice, Love, Reason or Truth. The Holy Ghost spoke and a rumbling West Country voice silenced the bar.

‘THEE IDEARS CA’GOREE.’

Forestry Commission jeeps parked by the compound gate and gangs of naked men jumped out, necking and spraying beer and whooping at the sky. Most had erections, all had sashes with their names: the Buddha, Confucius, John the Baptist, V.I. Lenin, John Lennon, Moses, Savonarola and the like.

‘THEE THINK’RS CA’GOREE.’

The thinkers entered the compound and got stuck into the ideas/women. ‘Don’t you be considerin’ blabbin’… You thought you was dead trendy… The great part being the pliability of yer flesh…’ they remarked as they humped away, quaintly toned and phrased lines that in West Country accents suggested something halfway between innocence and jokey jokiness, the word on the tip of Kirsty’s tongue, something French that began with f…

The women left the compound and punters clinked glasses and slammed their contents down their throats. Michelle turned towards Jon, ready with a wave if he was embarrassed on her behalf, but his eyes weren’t moving from the screen. An exhalation flapped his fringe.

On the screen the Holy Ghost pranced around in jodhpurs and cracked a whip and another line of women strolled into the compound, this time much thinner and plucking mandolins, naked but for sashes: Absences Don’t Beget Anything, Dialectic Versus Repetition, The Glamour of Structure, Nothing Need Be, Opposites Exist Only in the Abstract, Something Happens So It Happens Again, and Things Are Sometimes How They Seem. Thinkers drained their cans and charged.
Punters debated which ideas had had enough and which hadn’t nearly and booted any breaks for wipes or scrubs or breath. ‘Ever had a thinker?’ Kirsty thought of poking Michelle and asking, but didn’t in case it spoiled her suspension of disbelief.

The Holy Ghost marched onscreen in a tartan bikini and held up a big card that said 3. The thin women trudged out of the compound. The next lot were anorexics with guitars. Confucius got started on Ecstatic Mutuality, Gurdjieff on History Resolves Problems By Ending Them, John the Baptist on It’s All About Prayer, V.I. Lenin on Three-quarters of Yer Time Is Spent in the Womb, John Lennon on Poetic Justice, John Milton on Umpteen — just Umpteen, just an emaciated woman with a sash with Umpteen on it — and Erwin Schrödinger on Whiling Away the Hours.

Ancient men in mortar boards and gowns sat on the compound fence, peered through pince-nez at the thinkers and started jotting notes. James Wood joined them. A tuxedoed Holy Ghost pointed a baton at them.

‘THEE EUNUCHS CA’GOREE.’

And conducted in the next group of women, all shapes and sizes, plucking unalphabetically at no instrument at all: A Good Clear Message Plus Some Illustration or Else, Magic Realism, Melted Realism, Real Realism, Hardcore and Soft, Climax and Anti, Low Production Values, Get to the Point, Truth back for more, An Inoffensive Title, A Polite Apology, A Small Prologue, Misleading Blurbs, and Bob’s Yer Uncle. The Buddha, warming to the theme now, went through them all.

Punters got to their feet and roared. Eunuchs dropped their quills and fainted. Kirsty knocked back her rum and the projector’s whirrs went plecto.

Bingo caller, lollipop lady, fat medieval pope… in guise after guise the Holy Ghost ushered more and more women into that flipping mental compound. Many of them weren’t real ideas, strictly speaking, plus they were changing so fast only a few were sinking in: Don’t Sulk If There’s Not Much Drama in Your Life, The National Assembly of the Church of Scotland, The Charge of the Light Brigade, Muddying the Waters, Ghosts Can Only Fly Along Straight Lines, Titters, Moustache = Bigot, Pamphleteering, Smoking While with Child, Word Salad, What About Christ’s Interlude in Egypt?, The Prevailing Wind, Children: Use a Pea-sized Amount for Supervised Brushing to Minimise Swallowing, a sash that went round and round a woman’s body with a ballad thinkers sang as she twirled out, then The End, and then a final group whose sashes had the credits.

Over to you, Comrade Edmond!
Edmond Caldwell

August 19, 2009

Ah, I thought I gave my bit above, in the reply to Comment 31? Just a wee paragraph, I know . . . .

But comrade Sean, I like the combination of Cold Eye and Hot Touch in this pageant-passage you’ve given us: Everything that’s disinvested from the human pursuits parodied in the orgiastic scrum of the pageant is given back in the romping, libidinal prose. The perspective is merciless but the pleasure is a gift.

And of course I confess a special fondness for this bit:

“Ancient men in mortar boards and gowns sat on the compound fence, peered through pince-nez at the thinkers and started jotting notes. James Wood joined them. A tuxedoed Holy Ghost pointed a baton at them.

‘THEE EUNUCHS CA’GOREE.’”

---

Steven Augustine

August 19, 2009

It’s very much like Bloom in the brothel, innit? A feverish read. Nightmare as witty cartoon. I want more writers to write this sort of thing (or, perhaps, I want more of the ones who are writing this way to step from behind the bushes and show themselves).

It baffles me that so few readers, these days, care to make the distinction between text as language first (writing as Art) and the sketchy naturalist teleplays that the MFAs keep cranking out to
bored acclaim. The novel as “good read” aka lunchbreak
timekiller. Blah.

So this is where I try to work out a new vocabulary of Praise. It
has to transcend (b)logrolling in order to be worth anything
(ie, meaningful as a prize and informative as a critique). And it
has to go beyond the reciprocals of virtual friendship. I don’t
like the fact that it seems *inevitable* that “we” will end up
praising each other on this thread. Not that I’m suing for
gratuitous slander. And not that I’m expecting that we’re all
such Vulcans that if we start ripping into the validity of each
other’s lifework, it won’t end up looking like Verdun (c. 1916)
around here. And: not that I’m saying that there’s anything
that deserves ripping into. I think everyone’s Shit (around
here) just happens to be grand. Which leads me right back to
the problem.

- z

48.

seanmurray

August 18, 2009

‘Something I’ve been trying to hammer into Comrade Sean’s head, too.’

I’m open to anything, min, including whatever this site may lead to. But I haven’t
given print publication a thought for 18 months.

Though to be really honest — and do forgive how very, very dull and possibly
dishonest this sounds — after a period of mild enthusiasm about developing a net
readership, I’m now back where I’m happiest, seeing this entire fucking process
as being about identifying my weaknesses and broadening my game, etc. End of
story.

Currently I’m just not that bothered by readership considerations of any kind.
Sorry!

- z

49.
Steven Augustine

August 18, 2009

Daughter’s eating noodles… I’ll be on this text with an archaeologist’s brush late tonight…

- -

seanmurray

August 18, 2009

The Bomb Collector on one side of me and one the other… ah yes, let’s have this from Bruno Schulz’s ‘Spring’:

MUSIC IS PLAYED every evening now in the municipal park, and a springtime promenade pushes along its avenues. They circle and return, pass one another by and then reunite, in continually recurring, symmetrical arabesques. The young people are wearing their new springtime hats and holding their gloves nonchalantly in their hands. The dresses of the girls on the neighbouring avenues shine between the tree-trunks and hedgerows. Those girls walk in pairs, with a swing in their hips, puffed up with a froth of eye-trim feathers and ships’ wheels. They wear that pink and white expansion like swans, those bells full of flourishing muslin, and occasionally they settle on the benches as if the empty ceremony has exhausted them — they settle that entire great rose of gauze and batiste, which splits, overflowing with petals, and then their legs are bared, produced first one and then the other, and crossed — interlocked into a white profile full of compelling suggestiveness, and young strollers passing them by are silenced and turn pale, struck by the exactness of the argument, deeply persuaded and vanquished.

A moment passes before true twilight, and the colours of the world grow beautiful. All the colours enter in buskins, become ceremonial, eager and sad. The park rapidly fills with pink varnish, a glistening lacquer that suddenly makes everything highly coloured and illuminated. But already in those colours there is some too deep azure, some too glaring and now suspect beauty. For a moment yet, the thicket of the park, twiggy and bare, sparcely covered with young greenery, also shines throughout with the pink hour of twilight, subdued by the balsam of coolness, saturated by the unutterable sadness of things forever and fatally beautiful.
Then the whole park suddenly comes to a halt, like an enormous, taciturn orchestra, solemn and poised, waiting under the conductor's upraised baton until the music within it ripens and rises; and suddenly a theatrical twilight falls over that enormous, potential and eager symphony, rapid and colourful as if under the influence of the notes swelling vehemently in all the instruments, and the young green voice of a golden oriole breaks through somewhere above, sewn into the thicket, and in the solitude and lateness it suddenly becomes ceremonial all around, like an evening forest.

A barely perceptible breeze drifts through the treetops, from which the bird cherry is strewn in a shuddering, dry deposit — unspeakable and bitter. That bitter aroma courses on high, beneath the darkening sky, and streams with the boundless sigh of death, into which the first stars let fall their tears, like lilac petals plucked from that pale and violet night. (Ah, I know: her father is a ship’s doctor and her mother was a quadroon. It is for her that the dark little riverboat with wheels on its sides waits night after night in the harbour, keeping its lanterns unlit.)

And then some strange strength and inspiration takes hold of those circling couples, those young men and girls continually rejoining in regular combinations. Each man becomes a Don Juan, fine looking and compelling; he loses his temper, proud and victorious, and attains in that look the devastating power that girlish hearts are terrified of. And the eyes of the girls deepen — inside them some deep garden with branching avenues opens up, dark and rustling labyrinths of parks. Their pupils distend with festive brightness, open without resistance and admit those conquerors into the lanes of their dark gardens, running wildly along their footpaths, manifoldly and symmetrically, like the stanzas of canzoni, to meet and rediscover one another as if in a poignant verse, on pink squares, around circular flower beds or beside fountains burning with the very late fire of sunset, only to separate again and scatter among the black bushes of the park and the ever more dense and rustling eventide thickets, where they become lost and confused among intricate coulisses, velvet door curtains and quiet alcoves. And who knows it when they creep through the coolness of those gloomier gardens, into quite forgotten, unfamiliar and secluded places, into some other, darker rustle of trees, drifting in a mournful pall where the darkness dissolves and degenerates, where the silence decomposes in the course of years of silence, and ferments fantastically as in old, forgotten wine barrels?

Stumbling thus, fumbling in the black plush of those parks, they finally congregate on a lonely glade under the last crimson of sunset, beside a pond that has been overgrown since time immemorial with a covering of black slime, on a crumbling balustrade somewhere on the outskirts of time, by the rear wicket gate of the world — they find themselves returned to some long bygone life, in a remote pre-existence, incorporated into a mysterious time. In their costumes of long bygone ages they sob endlessly over the muslin
train of someone’s dress, and — clambering toward unattainable oaths, entering on steps of remembrance — they arrive at summits and borders beyond which there is now only death and the numbness of nameless pleasure.

The rest of the story is here:

http://schulzian...

- -

Steven Augustine
August 19, 2009

From Wiki:

“The outbreak of World War II in 1939 caught Schulz living in Drohobyucz, which was occupied by the Soviet Union. There are reports that he worked on a novel called The Messiah, but no trace of this manuscript survived his death. Following the German invasion of the Soviet Union, as a Jew he was forced to live in the ghetto of Drohobyucz, but he was temporarily protected by Felix Landau, a Gestapo officer who admired his drawings. During the last weeks of his life, Schulz painted a mural in Landau’s home in Drohobyucz, in the style with which he is identified. Shortly after completing the work, Schulz was bringing home a loaf of bread when he was shot and killed by a German officer, Karl Günther, a rival of his protector (Landau had killed Günther’s “personal Jew,” a dentist). Over the years his mural was covered with paint and forgotten.”

Dueling by proxy via personal Jews: what a world.

- -

seanmurray
August 19, 2009
And Philip Roth’s Prague Orgy alludes to the search for that lost novel The Messiah (as does The Messiah of Stockholm by Cynthia Ozick), does it not?

Schulz is the only writer I know who just kept on getting better. By his second book The Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass he was, in my opinion, the all-time short story champ (only Borges comes close). He then improved *again* with his final story The Comet, the best piece of fiction I’ve ever read…

And he *then* wrote The Messiah, his only novel…. And was then shot, and the novel disappeared.

---

Christ, there must be some mechanism for highlighting these intra-comment replies… I’m afraid asides like these will be lost. I’ll have to check for a “recent comments” widget…

---

‘I’ll be on this text with an archaeologist’s brush late tonight…’

No, no, that’s old stuff, man. No need for critiquing, thanks.

---
Steven Augustine

August 18, 2009

Not for critiquing, mon… fer DIGGING it

- z

53.

Steven Augustine

August 18, 2009

My immediate delighted response, btw, is “CIRCE!”

(Okay… feed daughter… feed daughter… )

- z

54.

Frances Madeson

August 18, 2009

I think I know which Lit Bloggeur you mean. And it wasn’t just all-out shockingly bad, it was actually tree-pityingly offensive, grudge-holdingly so. Didn’t make it past Chapter One and will never click his blog again, not that I did much before.

Talk about artistic synchronicity–just a half an hour ago, I was writing (in my new fabulous novel) about an aging aesthete taking the longest, hardest (I wrote hardest but smoothest would have been better, so I’m probably changing it) piss in ages.

Someone must have double-dipped in the fondue pot–we’re all salivating on the same page.

I’m looking forward to reading all of the selections above at The Reading Hour, which comes after The Writing Hours.

- z
55. seanmurray

August 18, 2009

Any sex scenes you’d care to post, Frances?

- -

56. Frances Madeson

August 18, 2009

Thanks for asking, Sean! I’ll take a look in my first novel–Restaurant Week–and see if they are worthy. Though I recall they were exciting enough to write at the time. And the protagonist was very tall, though not Goth.
Steven Augustine

August 19, 2009

“I think I know which Lit Bloggeur you mean.” I’m sure you do, FM. He’s schmoozing his way to the upper-middle of the middle as I write this… the Duddy Kravitz of bloggivation. That’s a reference for all you Mordecai Richler fans.

Not that schmoozing is an evil up (or down) there with red hot puppy-crushing. But the ratio of genuine talent to schmoozioactivity needs to be something like 2-to-1 in order to absolve the practitioner… and Duddy’s numbers are low. I could forgive the guy for not being able to write if he hadn’t, you know, for example, uh, bashed a book by *Philip Roth* with a “review” that opens with a line I would have winced at in High School, for one thing. The list of *real writers* who have “felt” the imaginary sting of his literary disdain is longish. He’s not a sharp reader; he’s a giftless writer… and company he’s got aplenty.

When I first transferred my attentions from an un-wired word processor to a keyboard connected to the planet Earth… way back in ’98 (in an online writer’s workshop and with letters to various online Ed.s, mostly Salon.com’s)... my sense of the possible was overwhelming. It still is… on a good day. On a “bad” day (well, how “bad” can it frigging be with the woman of my dreams asleep in the next room beside the daughter of our dreams?) I look at Duddy and his Web-of-Schmooze and wonder how I could ever have been so naive as to think that people who blog about books are all driven, primarily, by very fine feelings for Literature? Now I see egomaniacs and middlebrow fetishists when I look at the blogroll on any of the blogs featured on the blogrolls to be found on those blogs. If you know what I mean.

When bloggeurs who have thumbs-downed a work by *Philip Roth* (or Jonathan Littell or Martin Amis) heap praise on a recycled sitcom pilot from Duddy Kravitz, you know the fix is in. And, honestly, my naiveté fell away like a leper’s tits in a wind tunnel (sorry) when I read the first few pages of the book that the feller in question took the trouble to inscribe and mail, overseas, to me (interesting detail: he asked me to keep the act as secret as he kept our correspondence; his fans would’ve *plotzed* to know he was chummy with the dreaded Steven Augustine). It was solidly shitty writing. But the same can be said of lots and lots of things in print and online.
And I’d feel guilty writing all this now if I thought his effort to put the book in my hands hadn’t been both ego-fueled and tactical. But I’m not that naive any more.

****

Which brings me to: let’s get the rest of the praise that we feel like heaping upon each other out of the way now (or soon)… and work out a way to talk shop, from now on, without resorting to it. Maybe I’m being hyper-vigilante or over-sensitive or too too prissy, but the last thing I want this cocktail party to devolve into… and so forth. Know what I mean?

(Orgies are fine, though. As long as we’re not all busy complimenting each other on cock size or symmetry of tits…)

- -

Steven Augustine

August 19, 2009

Comrade Sean: what do you think of posting the larger text thon tantalizing excerpt was cut from? Are you open to such a plea?

- -

Frances Madeson

August 19, 2009

Sean,

I would like to give you a rain check and hope to be able to deliver soon because there’s probably nothing I enjoy writing about more, especially when the scenes come out funny as well as sexy and I’m laughing and turned on all at the same time. However, the relevant scenes in both the first novel and in Dancing for The Godfather of Soul are seduction scenes that take their time spooling out over too many pages to post as a comment. I spent some moments this afternoon trying to craft excerpted passages into a pithy whole but it was in the end the worst of all possible worlds. Thanks again for asking, especially because it was fun looking
through manuscripts I hadn’t re-visited in some years and appreciating both the hard work of the past and the progress since those sentences were laid down.

- z

60. Steven Augustine

August 19, 2009

Time to shut off the fondue pots… night all.

- z

61. seannurray

August 19, 2009

Because such comments might be seen by any obsessive foes peeking in (hello there, Mr Wood) and give them a good old snigger? If so, why not just make the site private?

Note for obsessive foes, including, conceivably, just about, James Wood: I don’t really believe James Wood reads this site.

- z

62. Steven Augustine

August 19, 2009

Oh, fuck me, who cares if anyone sniggers? I mean I just don’t want to start a local mini schmooze-fest of our own. Something stultifying in it.

- z
Will you post the larger text, then, Comrade Sean?

- -

(shuts off fondue pots *again*… then realizes that nothing is fouler than semi-unheated-then-reheated fondue and flushes it down the bung behind the aluminum fondue assembly…. when he suddenly sees the eerie structural ’60s-based confluence between fondue, lava lamps, silly putty, Reed Richards and The Blob… but decides to go to bed instead of writing an essay…)
seanmurray

August 19, 2009

Steven: I’d rather post some of the new stuff, min. That old Kirsty book has been stripped for parts and dumped, so no point in youz wasting your faculties on it, eh?

The new WWII stuff, though, might take us back to where this thread started, as it’s vaguely slipstreamish/steampunk.

Actually, the sequence I have in mind is on the front page of my site:

http://theadorata.com/

Frances: no worries. Would be good to see your work here sometime though.

Maybe we could develop a crafty code here, whereby the more we say we hate a piece of writing the more it means we admired it., and vice versa, in either of which cases JIVDIV is my favourite novel.

=*

Steven Augustine

August 19, 2009

Fuck, mon, I can never read this passage without beshritting myself with hard laughter:

“‘One day they gather in their Olympic Stadium, them slimy Huns, them grimy Huns,’ she went on. ‘The Manny Hitler runs onto the track in raspberry-coloured tights hung with bells and his many medals, and then bolts round the track, he does, one hand saluting and one parked upon his hip. Taking each corner smoothly he approaches with his jingling choir of bells, face sweating buckets behind its wee moustache, fearsome as a fly, unbelievably purple, shooing barking dogs that winna leave the sod alone.’”
But you’ve got to do something about the font size on that page; you really can’t count on everyone having a jeweler’s loupe handy for the purpose of reading you. There’s a passage in Kingsley Amis’s The Old Devils in which a fat old man’s thick toenail clipping is imagined as being capable of bringing down a hummingbird as it rockets from the clipper and it’s just about as funny as your cited passage… but not quite*.

*I’ve just checked and it’s a sparrow, not a hummingbird

--

66.

seanmurray

August 19, 2009

Just a word about that WWII sequence: it’s been put together by taking passages from Bruno Schulz, Nathanael West and dear old Lautreamont, messing around with them A LOT (that’s for any obsessive legal foes reading) and then putting them into the Doric dialect, etc. I don’t want to be claiming it entirely as my own work (though it actually IS, of course, m’lud).

--

67.

Steven Augustine

August 19, 2009

I wouldn’t worry about the legal problems of collaging, chum… it probably falls under the fair use rubric. There’s a certain amount of word-for-wording you have to indulge in before it’s even an issue… if adapting the concept of an argument or a character or a sequence of events were plagiarism, most Genre fiction (and all of Hollywood) would be legally actionable. Do you really think that James Wood is busy poring over the Endless Thread (in its nascency), waiting for one of us to fall into a legal or ethical or aesthetic trap over which his lawyers will be texting ours?

Scottish video Artiste Douglas Gordon, btw (who attended a dinner party at my chum’s Bohemian squat and told an amusing story about a gallerist calling about an artifact of his that was cast in solid gold and asking if it didn’t make sense, in
today’s economy, to melt the artwork down, sell the gold, split the profit, and re-cast the same work in a cheaper metal?), did this to earn his breakthrough into the Big Time: slowed down the playback of a copy of Hitchcock’s Psycho to a 24-hour playing time. Fair use? I guess.

---

Steven Augustin
August 19, 2009

EC: are you still hovering in the vicinity? I’d like to hear more about your adventures in the Near East. I keep seeing you as Port in The Sheltering Sky, for some reason (but without the foreshadows of dread). And your wife as a non-neurotic Kit who resembles not Jane Bowles but the picture I had, in my mind, of Kit before I knew what Jane Bowles looked like.

---

Edmond Caldwell
August 19, 2009

Not that I have enough Schulz or West or Lautreamont (beyond the latter’s sewing machine and umbrella having motel sex on an operating table) at my fingertips to necessarily spot a lift, but the WWII-novel passage on your site reads like it was all spun out of the same fine thread, comrade Sean. Maybe for fun now you could clue us in to one or two of the detournements?

What I notice by way of contrast to the pageant-passage from the earlier novel is the gentleness and sweetness/sadness of the tone.

I’m curious to hear more about the alt-history scenario set-up behind the passage, as much or as little as you’d like to say about it. And also, what stage of composition is it in? Is this from a completed draft?
Edmond Caldwell

August 19, 2009

Funny, comrade A, I thought about Port and The Sheltering Sky during my fever last week. Port perishes of a fever out in the desert if I remember correctly, right? And Kit winds up sensually sodden in some bedouin harem?

“And that’s how they had their tea in the Sahara…” Remember that nasty sharp little inset fable in the book? That always stuck with me the most from that book, those little drifts of sand in those delicate cups. I’m always wondering what form my tea in the Sahara will take (we all get our cup sooner or later).

But I’m a lazy traveler. Yesterday we just sat around the apartment (Catherine’s not lazy, though; her sitting around is writing papers or analyzing data on her laptop instead of, like some people, surfing the web for porn). Today we had vague plans for the Bosphorus boat tour but got up too late. Maybe later I’ll stroll down to a more working-class neighborhood where I saw a lot of radical graffiti and faded torn agitprop posters and take some snaps of them. Maybe somewhere down there I’ll encounter my tea in the Sahara. Then again maybe I’ll just nap…

So, to allude to your earlier more general remarks about the endless thread getting too incestuously smhoozy, when are we going to get some more voices here? Lurkers, reveal yourselves!

- z

Steven Augustine

August 19, 2009

You’ve got the swarthy good looks to pass for a local… any hint of anti-Yankee deathrays beaming from urchin eyes?

- z
Steven Augustine
August 19, 2009

“Port perishes of a fever out in the desert if I remember correctly, right?”

He has an apocalyptidelic vision of feces and blood crashing in the center of heaven’s dome at the moment of his death; if you see large quantities of either substance flying around the vicinity, change your accommodations immediately.

- z

seanmurray
August 19, 2009

Seems I haven’t made myself clear (it happens): I really, really don’t think James Wood is reading this thread.

‘sloowed down the playback of a copy of Hitchcock’s Psycho to a 24-hour playing time. Fair use? I guess.’

Sounds encouraging, Steven. I checked this stuff out with the head of the Irish copyright body and she was emphatic that what I’m doing is illegal (but she would say that, wouldn’t she?). Anyway, I’m too far along with it to quit now.

I had no idea the font was small on my site — on this PC it actually looks bigger than this site’s. Cheers for letting me know.

Edmond: the main thing I’m doing to the sampled passages is compressing them. Schulz and Lautreamont are both pretty wordy (as are some of their translators, I sense).

Our faces blued by the glory of those nights, we wandered in the wake of heavens pulsating with explosions of distant suns, in sidereal dazzlements — human swarms drifting in a broad trail across a Milky Way spilled on to the whole sky, a human stream, with cyclists arcing above it on their spider-like apparatus. O starry arena of night, inscribed to your furthest ends by the acrobatics, spirals, loops and mysteries of those elastic rides. O cycloids and epicycloids executed inspiredly along the sky’s diagonals, losing the wire spokes, unconcerned at discarding the glimmering wheels, and now reaching — to a truly illuminating degree! — the bare, pure and singular principle of cycling. Why, a new constellation dates from those days, a thirteenth figure ranked now and forever
among the zodiacal number, resplendent in our night sky from that time onward: ‘The Cyclist.

thus becomes:

Leaning backwards they let their imaginations explore distant galaxies and claim them for His Majesty the King. Souls spray through the void reddened by supernovae and faintly blued by starlight, Britishly showering the Milky Way in diagonal formations. From tonight there dates a brand new constellation: THE UNION JACK.’

One of the main problems in my last book (the one featuring the porn sequence above) was a certain hammy coolness of tone. If the new stuff reads warmer and sadder then I’m happy with that (I want too for those tones you’ve sensed to remain associated with the balloon), though I am harking Berlinwards for the blare of Anti-Tweeness Klaxons.

For the reasons Steven’s given at the top of the thread, I don’t want the steampunk/alt-history aspects to dominate at all. I’ve had too many problems in the past creating fully 3-D characters to allow this book’s to be flattened by pointless SF shit and all the exposition it entails. The main difference from our universe is the Tausendjährigerheißluftballon and whatever follows from its splendours.

How near to finished is the section you’ve read? Perhaps you could tell me, man! (I’m guessing two more drafts).

- z

Frances Madeson

August 19, 2009

“Well, I’d seen Nell say spells wrong in her tizzies and spill her potions and stub her whirling thumbs, but I also seen her float a fork once and make a cow drop dead. And so I muttered, ‘Yes.’

The generosity of this made me cry. This was for me the “fair holy moment.”

I’ve e-mailed you the rest of my comments.

- z
Much appreciated, Frances. Boy, do I like line-by-line critiques…

---

“Anti-Tweeness Klaxons”

Is that the Greek terminology for toddler farts?

Speaking of which. In a way. As an expat who spent a grand total of perhaps a hundred dollars (in *real* money, however… not dollars) for 7 months of prenatal care (first monthly, then weekly, gyno visits; regular mid-wife check-ins and tutelage; birthing classes with a dozen couples on giant pillows in a congenial space; hi-tech stuff like three-d fetal imaging in under-crowded, muted, super-clean surroundings) a jacuzzi-birth and then a mostly solitary weekend in the hospital’s comfy recuperation suite… plus a post-natal *house call* from a fantastic doctor and a week of follow-up with the midwife… I have to laugh at the sheer stupidity of the well-trained working-class Americans who are screaming bloody murder at the hint of the shadow of the spectre of socialized health care in America.

I know that many of the shouters on-camera are ringers and shills, but, still: are these ringers and shills actual plutocrats in disguise? No, they’re fuckwit serfs whose ears perk up and tongues loll when the Masters toot the smelly black whistle.

I broke my arm while playing at an asinine sport in Southern California (during my lost period over there) and the first amazing fact I picked up was that the hospital I called the next morning (after a shit-out-of-luck night of epiphany-minting agonies) wasn’t in the business of broken arms. Much more lucrative operations (boob jobs, head transplants etc) were on the menu but, of course, you’d have to insure yourself heavily and hop on your pogo stick under an active
‘copter blade in order to pay off the resulting debt. And even for that you’d have to wait in line.

Dupes.

Steven Augustine
August 19, 2009

Comrade Sean:

My problem (I’ve said this before to you) with that particular Bruno Schultz (unfortunate initials, Bruno) story is the awfully long duodenal path one ends up being coaxed along in order to claim a relatively small pay-off. Being a Modern fellow, your skill at compression is better than Bruno’s and your remake of his enameled vignette ends up being a neater tsotchke.

Why will no one consider the fact that the Novel and the Film have been growing, symbiotically, since the advent of the previous century? Once it was standard, in visual (filmic) narrative, that if character 1 was meant to go from A to F, you’d have to show B,C,D and E between the two points (Chaplin reads the letter, crumples it in a rage, crosses the room for the door, opens the door, exits the building, crosses the street and so forth); now all that narrative connective tissue has been dispensed with for the sake of rededicating narrative energies to more important details. Movies and novels egged each other on through successive waves of development; or, put it this way: they educated the audience, as a team, in the audience’s own evolution as an audience. Not only in the field of compression.

In fact, I think the modern reading experience is less thinkable, without film history’s discreet support, than the converse (since more people watch moving pictures than read, by some astronomical ratio).

I think.
Steven Augustine
August 19, 2009

Also to Comrade Sean:

“Seems I haven’t made myself clear (it happens): I really, really don’t think James Wood is reading this thread.”

He does make an excellent Captain Hook, though. Let’s call him Captain Wood and feign terror at his mention.

- -

Steven Augustine
August 19, 2009

And for the record (before I mop the kitchen floor; always best to do that while daughter is with Mom at the playground): I’m not claiming that Sean is a better writer than Bruno Schultz… those kind of calculations are A) impossible and B) impossibility notwithstanding, fun, but not to be undertaken lightly. But on the level of comparing a passage at a time: yes, I think it can be done… or a reasonable argument can be presented for one passage over another. The trick to keeping the white noise of subjectivity low is to hold it all down to the greasy level of mechanics. Who can say which novel has a greater impact on the most, or the most important, people? But one can pretty well say which sentence suffers from owning the most dud adjectives.

In general I think it’s ridiculous (and very common) to compare one’s chums favorably to famous vintage writers. Is there anything more liberating for an Artist to proclaim than, “I’m not better than anyone but myself”?

Right. The mop…”

- -

seanmurray
August 19, 2009
Edmond: sorry, but I’ve just realised there’s been all kinds of malarkey taking place (as Replies) further up this thread.

I had a very strong deja vu as I read your superb piece of filth — not deja vu as in ‘Oh, how passe, ducky,’ but as in… well yeah, just pure deja vu. It peaked around the words ‘astonishing clit.’ Most odd.

Does our use of the Reply function mean we must re-read the entire Endless Thread every time we visit? Those branchings might help turn the thing into a nice wee artifact, true, but Jesus, it could soon become a time-consumer and a half …

Steven: Yes, Schulz’s fiction obviously has too much padding — and Maldoror is so much worse — especially in those translations on schulzian.net (Celina Wieniewska’s for Picador is tighter). Still, it’s those rolling rephrasings that give it its incantatory quality, I reckon, especially after a few pages of the stuff. Plus I believe, of course, that the pay-off is well worth it (fucken *love* ‘The Cyclist’ kicker).

Your point about old fiction’s flab is irritatingly true, however, and has in fact ruined re-readings of several former favourites!

Can I emphasise that the deja vu was very strong indeed?

---

81.

seanmurray

August 19, 2009

One of the things I’m enjoying about the sampling-Schulz/etc approach is that it’s taking much of the egomania and how-do-I-compare of out of writing for me.

I’m perfectly aware that I’m leaning heavily on these masters. The skills required to compose those WWII scenes are more like those of DJing than of playing a gig of your own material. There’s still ego present, of course, but, y’know, I ken my *place*…

---

82.
Steven Augustine
August 19, 2009

Ego is not only fine but necessary. It’s the “competition” and “ranking” memes I find absurd when it comes to Art. There again, a capitalist deformation. Not that I’m against money. But some exchanges are not transactions. And there are forms of mental pleasure that have nothing to do with Entertainment.

(The mop is broken, you see. It’s very… dry.)

- -

83.

Frances Madeson
August 19, 2009

Re lucky Number 75: You made my day! So glad to be of service. And it was my honor.

Re unlucky Number 76: I thought you made that point most brilliantly in your Aug. 6 Berlin piece on This Recording. Germany got the great health care, we in the US got the Nazi-esque ethos. I also thought your comment on Wisdom of the West about the limitations on Obama, for lack of a “natural” constituency, to demonstrate the kind of leadership Jim H was advocating were provocative and original, at least I’ve not heard anyone else make that point. I was sorry Jim didn’t engage but he is a busy man (and maybe he’s still thinking about it).

Re dismal Number 78: I think Captain is far too high a rank. I refer to him, when I think of him at all, as the VP of HR. And if you’ve ever labored in the corporate world, you know the type.

Re fascinating Number 80: Any chance it was the same woman?
Steven Augustine

August 20, 2009

FM:

“Re fascinating Number 80: Any chance it was the same woman?”

We’re still waiting for her to post a comment, in fact.

“I was sorry Jim didn’t engage…”

There are some comments I tend to repeat, across the months and years, because no one ever engages them. Just two of them: One, there’s textual evidence in Lolita that Clare Quilty is Dolly’s biological father (meaning that he has bested Humbert yet again and in the ultimate sense), Two: why is it that in the several centuries into the future that the current iteration of Star Trek is set, the Afro (as it might have appeared on Lt. Uhura’s head) still hasn’t come back into fashion?

Jim’s reasons for not responding to the comment you cite are probably honorable (because Jim is), but the resounding silence I always get in response to comment One proves that most of these Lit Bloggeurs (I love it when these guys post lists of the 500 books they’ve SKIMMED* this year, like a rustic’s display of coon tails or used condoms) haven’t a joule of genuine curiosity about original ideas. And the blank virtual faces I get in response to comment Two proves that a sense of humor is the second rarest thing in Litblogglandia (selfless curiosity being the first).

Leaving comments on my own thread, for a change, is a genuine pleasure, but I had to wait, you see, until I had gathered enough Bright Sparks and Real Talents to make it worth doing. So I did and it is.

For which I thank you, FM. You, Sean, Nick, Edmond (plus several other talented invitees who haven’t as yet manifested) and the 50 or so lurkers we’ve been getting every day (without a misdirected Porn Search among them). There’s another serious writer I know (former disciple of Lish) but he’s kind of a crank and I’m waiting awhile (until the relationships here solidify) before inviting him.

Timing is all.

*See my review of various reviews of the very slim Indignation; the reading comprehension is inexcusably low out there, folks. *Low*. INDIGNATION
Peter Murphy’s not a regular blogger but he’s said if/when he has time (he has a September deadline for submitting his next novel to Faber; bloody shattering book btw) he’d like to chip in here. I assume that’s cool, yes?

---

Would love it hugely, chum. Any chance of chapter excerpts from Pete? (of JTR or the next one?)

---

I’ll certainly ask him. He might even appreciate some input before that deadline. Bit trickier for him though, I’d guess, to post stuff online (unchuffed publishers ‘n’ that…).
August 20, 2009

I may have to recuse myself from the Indignation discussion, even though it is a book I have actually read and have some possibly profound thoughts on. But you see, Maestro Roth and I have dueling fantasies. His is The Fantasy of the Absolving Daughter and mine is The Fantasy of the Accountable Father. Could they possibly be reconciled?

More than any other woman of American letters (Jewish or not, but gimme a Yawehvian break) I can name, I, Frances Sara Madeson, say that I am Philip Roth’s literary daughter. Any other Jewesses out there write a “smart, macabre satire of the War on Terror” described as a “mixture of uninhibited comedy and vehement politics” during, I repeat, during the scary Bush/Cheney administration, and not from the safety of distance and time gone by? I further say, as much as any other work of literary fiction (how did Daniel put it?—“entertaining and thematically coherent …pitched somewhere between outright satire and what used to be called ‘black humor’”—published in these United States of America, Cooperative Village is descended from his spiritual spunk.

But where’s Daddy? Why doesn’t he claim me? I’ve been to charm school; I know how to talk to all those Yankee WASPS he lives among. I don’t slurp my soup, drink from the finger bowl, or clap between movements. It’s enough to make a girl twist her fancy French panties, snap her giddy garters, fling her belletristic brassiere into the Oedipal void, in other words, absolutely indiggidy-dog-dignant!!!

So you all go ahead without me. I’ll have another Black Velvet and calm myself.

- z

Steven Augustine

August 20, 2009

Comrade Sean:

I wouldn’t suggest any “input” on Pete’s hypothetical chapter… I just want it here to add even more glamor to the thread.

Comrade Frances:

“But where’s Daddy? Why doesn’t he claim me?”
Other than his support of the Eastern European fabulists, has Roth done much mentoring that we know of? I think a blurb is the most anyone could expect from him in the past thirty years and you should blame your publishers if they couldn’t score a blurb from Roth! Larf. Not that I’m an expert on Philip Roth’s literary fathering habits. For all I know he could have been mentoring J.T. Leroy.

Btw, FM, did you catch any flack for that book… end up on a “No Fly” list or anything? I wouldn’t be so surprised. **But it’s my theory that they only really fuck with you* (or send you on eternity’s Grand Tour) if you have the attention of the massive male blue collar vote and you’re too spicy on top of it (ie, a threat to Demublicans and Repumocrats both). Which is why they let Chomsky live; Chomsky only really reaches other intellectuals and the disaffected fringe. Slavoj Zizek will clearly make it to a grand old age if the diet doesn’t pull his silvery chord out the socket first. John Lennon, on the other hand…

*Let me amend that theory; sometimes they fuck with you just for fun.

---

90.

Steven Augustine

*August 20, 2009*

(Please note the time-stamp on the previous comment)

---

91.

seanmurray

*August 20, 2009*

And more than any other man of Scottish letters (Jewish or not, but gimme a Yawehvian break) I can name, I, Sean Murray, say that I am not Philip Roth’s literary son. But that’s perhaps for another day, eh?

Frances: I’ve incorporated 60% of your suggestions (yeah, wtf were those ‘unkissed pigs’?) which is a good 30% higher than my normal rate. Thanks again for that.
Steven: where’s my battering re those pages’ tweeness/cutesiness/sentimentality?


seanmurray

August 20, 2009

Fuck Schulz, how about this piece of satirical genius from the Guardian’s Not the Booker thread?:

lohanp
20 Aug 09, 8:49am (about 6 hours ago)

I have worked with James Palumbo the author of Tomas for ten years and held back from joining in the debate to avoid accusations of partisanship. Im also happy for my vote for him to be discounted.

It’s now been two months since the book was launched and there’s been a firestorm of polarizing opinions. Some are horrified and see the book as the juvenile and grotesque ramblings of a delinquent; others attest to its originality, humour and brilliance. Overall the satirical and fantastical images of trolley wheeling breasts, phallus armies and islands flying in the sky have served to confuse the debate. Love it or hate it this is what most people remember and comment upon.

For me this misses the point. Tomas is, in fact, a self help book in its simplest form and its audience should be anyone striving to achieve something, particularly in business.

Early in the book Tomas ruminates on a drug served compulsorily once a year to everyone in the world inducing a this is the last night of your life feeling. When people wake up they realise they are not going to die but can remember precisely how they felt when they thought they were. All sorts of trivialities and stuff they felt important falls away. If you realise that you only live once, then it follows that you might as well live life to the full. In business this means taking risks.

Napoleons subsequent discourse on risk and failure should be required reading for anyone striking out in business. It is a million miles away from the tired clichés about striving for excellence, setting goals and hiring the best you find in most business self help books. Hanks subsequent Q&A session with his banking colleagues is a brilliant precise of the principal dos
and don'ts in any business. Finally, the battle scene at the end of the book sees Tomas in the arena covered in blood, sweat and dirt, practicing these lessons.

Most see the book as a savage attack on football culture, the abuse of oligarchs, society's mad worship of money. Read deeper and the more memorable scenes cover philosophical issues connected to risk and failure. Tommass sermon about kitchens on the inverted Eiffel Tower is an undisguised assault on mediocrity and people's preoccupation with irrelevant things. Napoleon subsequently makes a speech about fence sitters, mediocrities and people who strive for nothing in life. Indeed, the question ‘how to be more than a great nothing in life?’ is posed on the first page of the book; for me the entire book is preoccupied with answering this question. If you allow yourself not to be distracted by the killer marsupial, detachable stomach and giant finger playing Venices palazzi in concert, this is the best reason for reading the book.

---

Steven Augustine

August 20, 2009

Yeah, I saw that. The publisher should be ashamed of itself. Still, what did we expect? A fair-and-square pre-hyper-capitalist gentleman/woman’s-style contest a la 1890?

---

Frances Madeson

August 20, 2009

I feel remarkably refreshed this morning. Something about removing the top portion of one’s skull and letting the pressure out, no doubt.

“did you catch any flack for that book… end up on a “No Fly” list or anything?”

If I did receive flack for my book it didn’t come in the usual ways. One of the themes in the book is privacy, or lack thereof, and I did experience many bizarre
intrusions that cumulatively did start to feel like maybe someone out there was messing with me, especially this past winter just as we were concluding the Bush administration.

For instance, one night I was at home giving myself an elaborate lap dance. Good Girl Gone Bad was playing, if memory serves. The lights were out in my apartment and just at the moment I had closed my um-um-um-brellah, the lights in my front hall turned on and flashed steadily for about 20 seconds as if in (appreciative) applause.

Two days before inauguration I received, along with millions of others, a video e-mail from Obama in which he spoke of his hopes and expectations. But mine came with a bonus track. Music was playing in the background and when I turned the volume all the way up, it was Nat King Cole singing The Sand and the Sea.

Also around this time, one night I was coming back from walking the beach in Staten Island and was waiting in the terminal for the ferry to arrive. A playful purple light beam (Tinkerbell?) danced around my feet and followed me wherever I went in the terminal. Naturally, I tried to identify its source but to no avail.

None of these seem like particularly Rovian tactics, but there have been numerable instances of this sort of thing, and I did get to experience first hand a kind of terror in the fun house.

- –

Steven Augustine

August 20, 2009

Comrade Frances:

Sometimes I think you project your own lyricism on our foes; surely the hairy-toed vulgarians could never in a million years have thought up a playful purple light? I suspect a flirtatious TA with a laser pointer.

- –

Frances Madeson
August 20, 2009

I suspect you’re right, Steven. A Young Republican though.

- z

Steven Augustine

August 20, 2009

Comrade Sean:

“Steven: where’s my battering re those pages’
tweeness/cutesiness/sentimentality?”

Was I meant to batter ‘em? I had/have nothing but praise for them (therefore the comparison to Bloom in the brothel).

But I’ve figured out how to circumvent the dreary doldrums of the lurkers having to read us circle-jerk each other off until the thread collapses into sated inanition (or the converse: hard feelings amidst Mutually Assured Destruction): rather than “critique” each other, I’d find it lots more interesting/instructive if each writer posted a largely self-contained passage of X-length (short or long) and then went into his/her origin myths, strategies, intimate cryptographies, goals and problems regarding said text.

Why don’t you start? In detail, I mean. Explain your writerly mission, mon! Make a case in front of the Eternal Shade Tribunal of Talented Deadfuk Writers we’ve never heard of muttering “why should you be any different?” with bitter admiration.

- z

Random Notes Installation #1

1. Teach your subconscious to type.
2. Entertainment is the friend who always tells you what you want to hear; Art is the friend who doesn’t.

3. A writer is a spy with artistic pretensions.

4. The flipside of the separate-but-equal fallacy is the special-but-not-other paradox.

5. The carbon footprint of Bergen-Belsen.

6. To be young is to believe in the significance of coincidences.

7. Lish was Carver’s AutoTune.

8. Knowledge is power to the extent that it’s withheld.

9. They the people.

10. Every man carries within him the image of the fantasy woman he’ll never criticize.

- -

sean murray

August 20, 2009

But I want battered.

**I can take *anything* thrown at my fiction.** If I was ever going to take lit huffs it would’ve been when I was seeing the blonde assassin featured in these clips, who hated very word I wrote:

http://www.rte.ie/tv/theview/archive/20061219.html
I'll assume any absence of fluffing is for all the good reasons already mentioned above.

The reason I want critiqued is not due to any teen me-me-me-ism but simply because I would like this site’s collective firepower directed at my writing, if only to see what still remains standing. I am here to learn.

Now, hit me!

- 

Steven Augustine
August 20, 2009

I wonder why this was in “Spam”?

- 

sean murray
August 20, 2009

Third time trying to post this.

Here’s the short version: I’m here for a battering.

- 

Steven Augustine
August 20, 2009

Hmmm… if anyone else is having trouble posting, please let me know. Nothing deliberate, I assure you.
Deeper response to your plea for a beating later, Comrade Sean.

- -

Steven Augustine
August 20, 2009

So. Grab your ankles and clench your teeth, chum.

Erm… it’s my belief that above a certain technical level that advertises itself in cadence, compression, word choice, vitality of metaphoric invention, persistence of wit and subtlety of thematic integration… all you can really say in response to a text as a Literary Artifact is either A) I like it or B) it’s not my cup of salsa. I mean, you can flesh out either response, and the flesh can run to a fat more capacious than the original text (see the libraries of Hackademia)... but it’s all subjective, not “useful” in the way that, say, chemotherapy or a tire iron can be and highly fucking suspect. Especially if you want feedback on a work in progress. I just don’t believe in it. I esp. don’t believe in groups of helpful opinionators telling you how they would have written it. Only *you* know how every actual sentence measures up against the ghost that preceded it onto the page… or how far you’ve veered off your own path.

Unless, of course, what you want is feedback on how to make a text *sellable*… which probably can help if sellable is what you want. But I’m the last guy to ask. I just don’t looking know… it’s not in my toolkit. I thought “Yellow Dog” would be Amis’s breakthrough.

(joking)

- -

seanmurray
August 20, 2009

No problem, man.
Thing is, my mode of composition IS all about tussling with others’ feedback. I really enjoy it and it also helps drag my writing away from the solipsism it tends to seek (even when it’s arguing against solipsism).

I usually incorporate a third of others’ ideas straight away, reject a third, and then battle with the final third, which is where the sparks fly, I find. This is why I was so pleased with Frances’ email. 60% is almost unheard-of — ask Friar Murphy or the blonde assassin in these clips:

http://www.rte.ie/tv/theview/archive/20061219.html

an ex who loathed every word I wrote (and therefore really helped me improve).

Solipsism is the modern plague, I submit, and writers bear a fair degree of responsibility for this. (My years working in the psych hospital stripped me of any remaining patience with the mythology of the solo artistic/intellectual adventurer. I’ll leave that Muddy Boots shit to the 3 A.M. brigade. Death to Hip). Anything that makes writing — or existence, not excluding the internet — less solipsistic/egomnical I’m all for, including leaning on Schulz, etc. Hence my inability to stay away from sites like this and hence my paltry frigging fiction output.

There’s a credo for ye. Not quite what you had in mind, perhaps!

- -

Steven Augustine

August 20, 2009

Re: the Nadine clip: give us something on YouTube… this one is a problem on my browser

- -

101.

Steven Augustine

August 20, 2009
Comrade Sean is having his comments blocked by a sinister Word.Press force (behind which I detect the shadow of either Bill Clinton or the Spitting Image puppet of Phil Collins)... down to the boiler room I go with my sack of tools...

- 

Steven Augustine
August 20, 2009

Lost comments were all retrieved from Spam. This could be exhausting in the long run. Comrade Sean, please stop writing Spamistically. Thanks.

- 

seanmurray
August 20, 2009

I wonder if it was posting a link made my dear friend wordpress see me as a spammer.

- 

Steven Augustine
August 20, 2009

No, I’ve okayed 9-link comment posts!
Steven Augustine
August 20, 2009

“Solipsism is the modern plague…”

No, *talentless* solipsism is the modern plague. Art is the one chance solipsism has of doing good in this world: don’t take that away from it.

- -

103.

seanmurray
August 20, 2009

Oh, I think artistic solipsism will survive Sean Murray’s ire alright!

- -

104.

Steven Augustine
August 20, 2009

I just don’t want you discouraging any self-involved young geniuses who happen to have tuned in. Between your Goodness and Captain Wood’s Rectitude, where’s a larval textual Onaniste to turn? Twitter?

- -

105.

Steven Augustine
August 21, 2009

On tomorrow’s episode (I’m turning the fondue pots off early tonight and getting some sleep): my account of the time Suzanne Verdal (eponym of the famous song by Leonard Cohen) attempted to seduce me as twisted thanks for a thirty-dollar
loan. I was 21 and rather pretty. And Suzanne: ah! A year of foreign films in one patchouli’d glance…

- 2
DAY 7 -
Frances Madeson  
August 21, 2009  

Steven,  
If you don’t mind, I’m looking through some recipe books for some festive non-fondue options. I’ll keep your Slavoj Zizek remark in mind, so I won’t go vegan. I’d do *Solopsism Joe’s* but I don’t handle meat. Some middle ground.  

Also, I neglected to thank you for my icon. I love everything about it—the magenta, the jazzy pattern, the way it looks like one of those Perception exercises they post on 3QD. I couldn’t be happier with it.  

I checked in on Mr. Lark over at County General and they stitched him right up. He was grooving on the Laudanum pump and not feeling the slightest bit litigious. He’s a bit cloudy under the influence so his mood might darken when he realizes there will be scarring. We’ll have to cross that bridge when the bandages come off.  

He did ask that next time you be more specific on the invitation with a Bring Your Own Nipple proviso before the RSVP. I have to say I don’t think he’s wrong. In fact, it’s a reasonable request. In a show of good faith and karmic re-balancing for the Pagoda I donated a pint of blood while I was over there (so I’m glad the festivities are ending a bit earlier). They asked for a kidney while I was in the giving mood but I finessed it.  

Oh! And Lark asked me to ask Edmond how it tasted, the nipple that is; but that could have been the hospital drugs talking.  

- z  

barry  
August 21, 2009  

halo all,  

steven asked me personally to infuse some of my special nutrient into your IV drip here… so, as a starter, re a few early touches above on the interchangeability
of epithets “modernism” and “secular humanism”, how about Habermas’ shocker 1999 after meeting then Cardinal Ratzinger

“Universalistic egalitarianism, from which sprang the ideals of freedom and a collective life in solidarity, the autonomous conduct of life and emancipation, the individual morality of conscience, human rights and democracy, is the direct legacy of the Judaic ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love. This legacy, substantially unchanged, has been the object of a continual critical reappropriation and reinterpretation. Up to this very day there is no alternative to it. And in light of the current challenges of a post-national constellation, we must draw sustenance now, as in the past, from this substance. Everything else is idle postmodern talk.”

I.e. onward Christian soldier?

--

Steven Augustine

August 21, 2009

Comrade Frances, re: Solopsism Joe’s: I like it.

Comrade Barry: contextualize for us! What’s your larger argument (for or against Habermas’ argument)? I’ll say already that if there’s one Hackademic tendency that deserves a spankin’, it’s Post Hoc, Ergo Propter Hoc’ing everything on Gawd’s green Earth. Ie, throwing the covers back on some teen beating le boeuf and proclaiming that what the kid is doing is “the direct legacy” of Onan in the book of Genesis.

But, speaking of onward Christian soldier, I was watching a clip from Robert Downey Jr.’s Iron Man on some feller’s blog last night. There’s the bit where billionaire cool guy chic-magnet WEAPONS MERCHANT Tony Stark is captured by Araboid terrorists, thrown in an ad hoc desert weapons lab and told to make a missile for them. If he fails to they will cut of his head, prolly. The voice over reflects on the fact that he could have been killed during the kidnapping (I’m piecing this together from the clip)… the fact that he *wasn’t* killed means that he was “put on this Earth for a reason”. He then very cleverly builds the first crude version of his Iron Man suit instead of a bespoke missile and, surprise, kills the terrorists (who never bothered to ask him why he was forging an iron codpiece instead of a tail fin) who captured him. But rewind a little: he was “put on this Earth for a reason”. By whom? Clearly not just Stan Lee but, you know, GAWD. And not the Araboid Gawd, either (let them come up with their own comix).
My point being that these Super Hero movies (a broad media category which includes the Gulf War 1 thermal imaging sequences of smart bombs obliterating Araboid shit) are breeding a new, much stealthier, much “sexier” and seductive Secular Christianity. Even before Batman/Iron Man/Transformers, however, Christmas was the first Secular Christian event… people who consider themselves not even slightly “religious” celebrate the birth of Jesus. Even those who consider themselves religious, but not Christian, do Christmas and therefore celebrate the birth of Jesus (we can follow this argument to its logical conclusion of Secular Christianity fusing with Power in the body of Corporatism, which uses Christmas as a major source of funding) . This is either a brilliant, modern, PR-based Crusader tactic, or more evidence of Meaning Creep.

To make this comment even longer, here’s a good example of what I mean by Meaning Creep; spot the word “Feminist” in the following passage:

“I’ve been trying to find words to describe just why it’s so exciting, and, despite writing daily, I find it a challenge. If you’re not into any type of BDSM, I doubt you can understand the thrill, but I’ll try. You know how sometimes your mind drifts off during sex? (And please don’t tell me it’s never happened!) Even if the sex is good, sometimes your mind just goes somewhere else. Well, when someone is slapping your face or choking you, that doesn’t happen.”

It’s not only that it keeps me firmly rooted in the present, nor is it only psychological, though that’s a big factor. It’s physical; the minute he starts to get rough with me, I get wet, excited, ready. My body responds just as much, if not more so, as my mind. The same way kissing might pull the trigger for some women, choking does for me—or rather, getting choked by him. I know for sure that there are plenty of past lovers who’d have been booted out of bed for trying it with me; that just wasn’t what we were about. But with this guy, it’s all about adrenaline.”

Is it scary? Not in the sense that I think I’m going to get hurt, but sometimes the depths of my reactions do unnerve me. I also think there’s a cultural sense in which women, especially feminists, aren’t supposed to say they like rough sex like this, lest it be equated with violence against women, so let me be clear: I’m not condoning violence or non-consensual activity in any way.”


- z

Edmond Caldwell
“Solipsism is the modern plague…”

I agree but see it as the collective solipsism of a certain social-cultural caste organized around the production (writers, MFA workshops, etc), propagation (publishers, publicists, critics) and consumption (“readers,” so called) of Literary Fiction, whose main ideology is a narcissistic humanism meant to make them feel good about themselves (conferral of “distinction,” cultural capital, etc) and that they somehow “transcend” the squalid swinish marketplace (cf. comrade Sean’s wonderfully depicted pageant scrum) that is their real alpha and omega. I’m for any fiction that cuts against the grain of this knot of social practices, by any and all artistic means available (i.e. a more or less “realist” novel by Russell Banks like Continental Drift can do it just as much as an “anti-realist” novel like something by Handke, etc).

I think it’s possible to give (and benefit from) critique-type feedback because I think it’s possible (and in fact central to the enjoyment of any particular book) to achieve some kind of sympathy with and understanding of what an artist is trying to do, and therefore it’s also possible to articulate the ways in which they might be more effective or less effective in their deployment of artistic means to reach their ends. Comrade Sean’s WWII piece for example relies heavily on voice, and I admired the fine line he walked in keeping that voice afloat in an imaginative space of its own that evoked or alluded to a time and a place (the past, history) without being journalistically “historical” (one of the banes of boring “historical fiction”) or too kitschy-cutely clotted (the “twee factor”?) with dialect, on the one hand, but without seeming too contemporary on the other. That’s my articulation, in other words, of his artistic means and goal — I could be wrong, obviously, or I could be putting it in quite a different way than comrade Sean would put it to himself etc etc, which is all for him to decide, of course. And once I’ve made that articulation, I’d be able to add that while he was for the most part successful at walking that fine line throughout the excerpt, there were a few places where I felt he slipped off in one direction (too contemporary sounding) or the other (too twee with the dialect). He might disagree entirely, or he might agree in principle but disagree with the particular examples I adduce, etc etc, but it’s possible that such an exchange might be helpful to him (as they are sometimes to me) in getting him to re-focus on the draft and see it freshly.

Now, I have to apologize, because I don’t actually have the particular examples at my fingertips. I remember that there were only a very few, and I’ll go back and find them and I can give them to comrade Sean either in the Endless Thread or in a separate email if he’s even interested. But right now I’m going to gird my loins and so forth and go out and do tourist stuff. We’ve only got a few days left here and so I’m in that phase of, “Oh but I haven’t seen X, yet! I haven’t seen Y!” as if seeing them and ratifying the visit with a few snaps were the only way of ratifying that you were actually “in” a place: all the alienated vacuity of “tourism” that is so hard to escape.
Steven Augustine

August 21, 2009

“I’ll go back and find them and I can give them to comrade Sean either in the Endless Thread or in a separate email, if he’s even interested.”

Comrade Edmond, post them in the Endless Thread, of course, please.

(Also, thank Gawd we’re all, to a degree, disagreeing with one another on this! This may be a circle jerk, but at least we’re wearing steel wool mitts)

(Or no, really, everyone else is disagreeing with ME. YOU’RE wearing the steel wool mitts, you bastards)

But then:

“I think it’s possible to give (and benefit from) critique-type feedback because I think it’s possible (and in fact central to the enjoyment of any particular book) to achieve some kind of sympathy with and understanding of what an artist is trying to do…”

My take on this being that since the artist happens to be right “here”, isn’t it even better to simply *ask him* what he’s trying to do?

- -

Steven Augustine

August 21, 2009

Comrade Frances:

“…the way it looks like one of those Perception exercises they post on 3QD.”
I developed a problem with 3QD after the otherwise-very-smart Abbas posted that Michael Jackson tribute. Jackson’s death was an opportunity (not to praise a Global Vacuity put to examine it) but the Web missed it entirely.

**Kong of Pap [see appendix 2 pg 139]**

- 

- 

Frances Madeson

**August 21, 2009**

Once again, I find I must congratulate myself on my Selective Attention Deficit Order. I avoided all of the Michael Jackson posts there and pretty much everywhere else. I’m at 3QD daily for Jim Culleny’s poetry selections, which have brought me, and I expect will continue to bring, much pleasure.

- 

Frances Madeson

**August 21, 2009**

**Kong of Pap [see appendix 2 pg 139]**

I always pick C and that method works perfectly here. Both are True.
Coming back to the essay questions after coffee.

- 

Steven Augustine

**August 21, 2009**
Yeah, that’s the structural flaw with satirical tests/questionnaires as a form… the punchline is necessarily the last in the series of multiple-choices (but I tried to make the non-punchline material incisive as well)

- -

112.

Steven Augustine

August 21, 2009

Btw, Comrade Edmond:

Please please take tons of digital snaps of Istanbul that I can massage into a narrative and put into a video-film (and combine with Comrade Nick’s music). It’ll be something like La Jetée without the sound effects. Fully credited, of course!

- -

Edmond Caldwell

August 21, 2009

Oh but comrade they’re such boring tourist-type snaps! Look, here’s Catherine in front of the Blue Mosque! Here’s Catherine in the courtyard of the Blue Mosque! Here’s Catherine in front of an old wooden Ottoman-style house! Here we are on the Bosphorus ferry! (See, there’s the Blue Mosque in the background!!!!).

They’re not boring to me, of course, because they all have Catherine in them, and she’s smokin’ hot. But you know what I mean….
Or you could make it a study in uxoriousness…

- - 

Steven Augustine

August 21, 2009

Can’t you do a series of some dude in a fez? Here’s the dude haggling over eggplants… here’s the dude shooing a waif… here’s the dude with a hookah…

- - 

Frances Madeson

August 21, 2009

“because they all have Catherine in them, and she’s smokin’ hot”

It really is a delight to hear you and Steven enjoying and appreciating your spouses so much. Lucky men. Good for you.

- - 

Steven Augustine

August 21, 2009

Frances, I happen to be obsessed with my Beloved… it’s extremely convenient.
Edmond Caldwell

August 21, 2009

Damn, I was almost out the door. OK let me get my steel-wool gloves back on…

Comrade A: ‘My take on this being that since the artist happens to be right “here”, isn’t it even better to simply *ask him* what he’s trying to do?’

I’d say no, not in the first instance, because the artist isn’t going to be available as the *ultimate* condition of the work, and I want to see if I can formulate the work’s logic (not the best word, but you know what I mean) to myself. Another way to put it is: While from a personal standpoint I’m interested in what Sean might have to say, from a critical standpoint I’m not interested in Sean’s goals *apart* from the work itself. I don’t necessarily want my view (or my early views) colored by a prior statement of intentions, etc.

I should also add, I’m not saying all this as a statement of principle that all should abide by or something like that, but rather this is the way I go about it, that makes sense to me, that pleases me and so forth. It’s also perfectly selfish: a mode of approaching the work of others that helps me, I think (I hope), when it comes to my own process. But I also want to add that this is also just “initially” or in the first instance: Generally I just want to talk shop and hear anything a writer whose work I admire has to say about it.

--

Steven Augustine

August 21, 2009

( But does this mean I can’t get you to do a point-blank exegesis of your own private writerly mission…?)
114.

Steven Augustine

August 21, 2009

Comrade Edmond!

Well-put.

“I should also add, I’m not saying all this as a statement of principle that all should abide by or something like that…”

Ditto on my anti-workshop statement.

- -

115.

Steven Augustine

August 21, 2009

I’m formulating something on my Secular Christianity riff (Comment #108). First off, I’m sleeking the term into “Secular Christianism”. My Suzanne Verdal mini-memoir may have to wait…

- -

116.

Steven Augustine

August 21, 2009

So: one of the long-standing problems of Christianity, for its practitioners (the ones with enough of an education to be aware of the following fact) is that Jesus was a Jew. Right? Few Christians will face or discuss this in enough detail to expose the contradictions, but for the “white” Christian American notionally-dominant subculture that thinks of itself as the inevitable, triumphantly-modern extension of Western Europe (and defines itself, metaphysically, in stark *opposition* to Muslims and Jews), Jesus-the-Jew is a fly in the cosmic ointment.
Secular Christianism: in which Xmas (I think that “X” takes on a special significance in this reading) assumes a pivotal role in rehabilitating Christianity. Because it introduces a wonderfully Eurocentric deity: Santa.

Some of Santa’s many advantages over Jesus:

1. Santa is a wise old fellow of CEO-ish age… versus the terrorist-young Jesus.
2. Santa has a neat white beard and a comfortably padded (and ALWAYS clothed) belly… versus Jesus and his wild, Middle-Eastern-black hair and beard (they tried Scandinavianising Jesus but even the die-hards found it tough to reconcile those blond good looks with a desert origin) and his disturbing nude worker-flat tummy (exposing a missing navel) on the cross.
3. Santa runs a factory and is the mayor (or King) of the North Pole… versus Jesus Christ’s disturbing state of no-fixed-abode.
4. Santa commands a cheerful race of delightfully unheard-from slaves (elves)... versus Jesus and his proto-Communist, neurotic, scheming, babbling apparatchik/disciples.
5. Santa is on the winking look-out for “naughtiness” (no big deal: you just won’t get the toy you asked for)... versus Jesus and his Jewishly neurotic obsession with “sins” (very big deal: lake of fire etc).
7. Santa and his festive, sexy “Tannenbaum”... versus Jesus and his creepy cross.
8. Santa and his Currier and Ives snow... versus Jesus and his Iraq-like sand.
9. Santa and his very palpable toys... versus Jesus and his blah-blah-blah (the ultimately con-mannish, “you’ll-believe-it-when-you-see-it” *promise* of “eternal life”... tellingly reminiscent of a “promise” of 72 posthumous virgins).
10. Santa and his great music... versus Jesus and his dirges (but even the dirges are European; the original Jesus Christ soundtrack must have been rather like the call of the Muezzin).
11. Santa never dies, is never wounded nor even freaks out... versus Jesus and his Thieves-in-the-Temple freak out (among others) and his messy torture-death and that scandalous vagina-like wound in his side (all very ethnic and steerage).

Secular Christianism is American Corporatism plus the Nazi Aesthetic (the image-supremacy of the Northern European look) and Santa is its Odin, I’d say. I’m speaking largely of its pure, original form (c. 1940s, with the advent of the corporate cola campaign that created this Deity), of course. The original Christian Ur-Texts took a couple of millennia for followers to misinterpret and water-down and this iteration took perhaps forty years to mutate (things change faster now).
The modern Video-Goodbooks and their version of all this (our Zeitgeist is Anal
Sex and Decapitation, remember) is darker. Cue: Iron Man, Batman, etc. But
Santa is still the newborn King of the Corporate Kingdom. Which is Heaven on
Earth.

We just have to wait another three generations until Jesus is totally OUT and
Santa can take on the task of subjugating Gog and Magog without Jewish help.

...-

its all about appearances isn’t it?
yesterday I was watching the World Championship of Athletics at my
Senegalese friend’s house. ( With two days to go, Jamaica is atop the
medal standings, for those of you who wish to raise an eyebrow),
http://berlin.iaaf.org/index.html
and, having recently seen about half of “Spirit of Money” by Yorick Niess
(sorry only a German Amazon link: http://www.amazon.de/Geist-Geldes-
Yorick-Niess/dp/B00118Q9EG) it became quite clear what a sham
nationality is and ever was.

The Czech athlete Svoboda (which means freedom) lifts the words ‘Czech
Republic printed on his tricot up into the frame and points to it. And the
nobles and semi-deities who have played X-man against Jew against
Araba against Boo throughout history are all nudging eachother up in the
boxes with warm snifters of amazon infant’s blood.

Bush cartel and Yo ho ho Rummy and all that legion firmly believe Israel
is the promised land and therefore must be protected. They believe in the
divine pedigree of their actions on earth. They provide the Sturm and
Drang under the cover of which the corporate armies advance. Even
domestically, Nationalisms are nothing but cynical old brands, only really
still functional in 2nd rate backwaters.

Car racing is the model for the ‘international athletics of the future’ where
the competitor is festooned not with national colors but in the corporate
markings of his/her prostheses, internal and external.
Has anyone done a nazi santa before? I have admired those tropical colonies which dutifully assimilate themselves by making some lowly under-caste-ites sweat out long December days in bulky santa suits.

- -

Steven Augustine

August 21, 2009

“Bush cartel and Yo ho ho Rummy and all that legion firmly believe Israel is the promised land and therefore must be protected.”

Dunno. Isn’t the first tenet of efficient drug-dealing never using the merchandise oneself? Do you think Rummy believes all that shit? (I’m sure GW does, but that’s what he was there for). Isn’t the whole “Israel” schtick an oil-related tactical move in the second phase of the Cold War (this time involving China)?

- -

117.

Steven Augustine

August 21, 2009

Comrade Barry, tell us about your current project(s), mon. No, first, I want to hear about your exposure to Zizek. How he smelled (surprisingly good? persuasively human? goat-foot-ish?), what he said, how it felt to feel him glower at you.

- -

S -

Steven Augustine

August 21, 2009
(Ps are we on for today? It’s all a blur)

- -

Steven Augustine

August 21, 2009

(one phone call later and it turns out we’re *not* on)

(this is a multiple-platform discussion, you see)

- -

118.

Steven Augustine

August 21, 2009

Christ. Slightly related. I just got this in the mail from Comrade X:

“Dear Friends

First let me start by apologizing. I’m horrible at keeping in touch during the best of times and, when things get difficult, I tend to shut myself off even more.

What has shaken me out of those doldrums and back into writing is that I need a job. September will mark the one year anniversary of unemployment for me and I’m hoping that you might know someone who could use an employee with my talents.

During the past twelve months I have sent out hundreds of resumes but so far with no luck. Now I’ve decided to send a copy of it to you in hopes that you might pass it on to someone you know..

I’m sorry if this sounds like a form letter, but after a year of inactivity I really am looking for anyway to break the cycle. Job location is not a problem, I will figure out a way to get there.

Thank you and I swear I’ll try to be better keeping in touch in the future.”
Dunno about a circle jerk (yet) but this kind of thing certainly gets me *hot*:

‘while he was for the most part successful at walking that fine line throughout the excerpt, there were a few places where I felt he slipped off in one direction (too contemporary sounding) or the other (too twee with the dialect). He might disagree entirely, or he might agree in principle but disagree with the particular examples I adduce, etc etc, but it’s possible that such an exchange might be helpful to him (as they are sometimes to me) in getting him to re-focus on the draft and see it freshly.’

Amen to that. Specific instances would of course be cool but I can also now hunt for them myself (chances are — I haven’t looked yet — they’d been niggling away at me anyway, if only in my dreams). Thanks for that, Edmond. Enjoy the rest of your time in Istanbul.

The last few couple of years I’ve been injecting my writing with something I don’t really have a name for but if I did it would be something like Frayedness. Lo-Fi. Rope-a-Dope. Something like that. It involves fannying about with multiple tones — fuck equitone — and playing the narrative bumpkin and mangling the grammar and deliberately lowering production values all over the shop.

The aim is hard to explain (and this is the first time I’ve tried to). I’m sure you’ve all had those moments when your fondness for your girl/boy rockets *because* her/his new hairdo is EXCRUCIATINGLY BAD. That’s roughly what I’m aiming for from the reader, I think. It’s one of the reasons I keep foaming online about Alan Warner’s The Man Who Walks. I achieve the effect I’m describing a few times a chapter at most. He does it every bloody sentence. Hoban’s Riddley Walker is also a model. I find the mixture of polish and facility with this kind of frayedness and mangledness really fucking beautiful.

My background is in DJing, especially house music, which was wrecked by a misguided fixation on constantly raising production values. Getting better doesn’t always mean getting better. (The trick, of course, is to make sure your audience knows you’re doing all this deliberately).
Now, I believe that this approach is highly compatible with heavy input from others, which is why I said the sparks fly for me when I’m grappling with others’ suggestions. Does this make my work less pure than it would otherwise have been? Absolutely, but so would leaving Schulz etc alone. Chums chipping in give the work a somewhat messy richness that I want. Plus as I’ve said above, I *like* admiring good shit in my writing and remembering that I wasn’t responsible for it.

Hello to Barry!

- z

120.

seanmurray

August 21, 2009

Am I swearing too much?

- z

Steven Augustine

August 21, 2009

Not enough, I’d have said. FOOK decorum.

- z

121.

Steven Augustine

August 21, 2009

“I’m sure you’ve all had those moments when your fondness for your girl/boy rockets *because* her/his new hairdo is EXCRUCIATINGLY BAD.”

Never.
seanmurray

August 21, 2009

Her new skirt or dress then? Shoes?

She’s looking pretty rough the morning after, maybe. Her breath’s not too great…

--

Edmond Caldwell

August 21, 2009

My wife sometimes gets food all over her face when she eats. Like a four year old. That gets me going. (Er, not that four year olds get me going…).

--

Steven Augustine

August 21, 2009

She’s not, erm, actually reading this thread, is she, Comrade Edmond…?

--

Frances Madeson
August 22, 2009

I wish the wives would! And occasionally comment. Not that I want the spirit here to be domesticated in any way, which the marital relation can and often does do, but for purposes of contextualization.

- 

123.

Steven Augustine

August 21, 2009

“The last few couple of years I’ve been injecting my writing with something I don’t really have a name for but if I did it would be something like Frayedness. Lo-Fi.”

There’s a very old term for it. Personality. The very thing that gets a Big Mac kicked off the assembly line.

- 

124.

Frances Madeson

August 21, 2009

Hunger’s in the air, so here’s today’s gastro-contribution. When all was said and done it was just too damned hot to spend terribly much time in the kitchen today, so I whipped up some Poppycock. I made a ton, so happy chewing.

- 

Steven Augustine

August 21, 2009
I’ve just done a quick etymology check on “Poppycock” (been meaning to for about 42 years). Not as nice as we’d hope… (wasn’t there a snackfood of that name in the 1970s? Similar to Fiddle Faddle?)

- -

Frances Madeson
August 21, 2009

Poppycock and Fiddle Faddle are both still around, produced by ConAgra. I imagine they use genetically-engineered mutant corn, which is why I popped organic kernels, shucked the almonds myself, etc. I sincerely hope you haven’t ruined it for everyone with your unquenchable knowledge-questing. This might better have been a terrific example of Comment 95, Line 8, but I can’t slip anything past you.

- -

125.

seanmurray
August 21, 2009

Peter will be chipping in here soon but in the meantime this is a fitting moment to post with his permission the following, which I’m titling for this thread Get It Right Fucken Up Ye, Solipsism:

GET IT RIGHT FUCKEN UP YE, SOLIPSISM

The history of drugs in the arts can be read as the story of impressionable middle-class romantics’ fascination with the forbidden; the desire to slum it in the underworld, hoping some of that transgressive chic will rub off. Add a dash of homoerotic fixation on the criminal class bit o’ rough, and you get one of the most enduring fallacies of 20th century counterculture: the myth of narcotic use and abuse as a tattoo of outlaw cool.

It’s an enduring illusion that originated with the Romantics and Decadents, persisted through the jazz age and the Beat Generation, and continued to enthral
pill-popping rockabilly pioneers, hippies, dreadlocked Rastas and white punks on
dope, coked-up disco-goers, Ecstasy-addled ravers, the self immolating grunge set
and the blunt-sucking suburban hip hop whiteys of the ’90s. Consider the
etymological roots of the term ‘hip’, as outlined by Nick Tosches in his 2000
Vanity Fair essay ‘The Last Opium Den’:

“The word ‘hip’, whose currency was common enough for it to have appeared in
print by 1904 – around the time, coincidentally, that the first opium song, ‘Willie
the Weeper’, seems to have originated – may have derived from the classic, age-
old, pelvic-centred, side-lying opium-smoking position, and may have been used
originally as a sign of mutual recognition and reference by those who were in the
know about the big sweet smoke.”

Tosches identified the patrons of early 20th century opium dens as “gangsters, the
demimonde, and the slumming vampires of Broadway and high society.” In other
words, rich folks beset by the urge to get down and dirty. Many of the avatars of
post-war narcotic cool were from surprisingly comfortable backgrounds. Miles
Davis, the very embodiment of black radical smack-addict elegance, was from an
affluent Illinois family. William Burroughs was a trust fund brat. Jack Kerouac
was a high school football star who entered Columbia University on a scholarship
and died an embittered alcoholic still tethered to his mother’s apron strings. Iggy
Pop was the son of a former high school teacher and basketball coach.

With the occasional exception (Billie Holiday, Marianne Faithfull, Amy
Winehouse), it’s a boys’ club. From Thomas De Quincey to Pete Doherty, urchin
junkie glamour is a seductive myth that persuades suggestible Orpheuses to
descend into the shades, lured by the siren cry of an illusory Eurydice. Gifted and
often introspective types with too much time and money on their hands, plagued
by boredom, ennui and the Western metropolitan affliction that a friend calls First
World Problems. Charlie Parker, Chet Baker, Miles, Coltrane, Lenny Bruce,
Hendrix, Jim Morrison, Roky Erickson, Tim Hardin, Syd Barrett, Brian Jones,
Keith Richards, Tim Buckley, Danny Whitten, Iggy, Bowie, Jim Carroll, Johnny
Thunders, Sid Vicious, Nick Kent, Philip Lynott, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Peter
Perrett, Kurt Cobain, Dee Dee Ramone, Pete Doherty.

The lucky ones die young and pretty. We envy these poor delicates their youth
and beauty, their exquisiteness, their damnable skininess, but still secretly gloat
to see them brought low by inglorious decay, hair thinning, skull-faced, teeth
rotted from speed, swollen-liveried, aced from smack, wheezing from nicotine
emphysema, girding up for one last heart bypass. It’s not true to say there are no
old junkies; you just don’t see them out much because they don’t venture too far
from the toilet bowl on account of having lost control of their basic functions.

When did this whole tortured artist/degenerate chic shuck-and jive begin?
Probably when the first biped ingested a fistful of the wrong fungus, felt a bit
funny and was inspired to inscribe fractal patterns on the wall of his cave. From
there it was a short leap to Shamanism, peyote cults, yage visionaries and sweat lodgers. Homer praised opium and wine in the Odyssey. Even the good book itself bore the mark of psychotropics. Could Revelation’s phantasmagorical images have been inspired by John’s exile on Patmos, starving and reduced to eating wild herbs? It says it right there in scripture: the angel gave him the parchment and John ate of it.

In The Sacred Mushroom And The Cross (1970), a book much favoured by Philip K Dick, scholar John M Allegro proposes that Christianity, as well as Judaism and other religions of the Near and Middle East, was a cover story concocted by a mushroom-munching fertility cult persecuted by the Romans for their dissipated ways. Around about the same time as Allegro’s book became required freak reading, Faber & Faber published Alethea Hayter’s Opium & The Romantic Imagination, which served to indicate in a timely fashion just how much the ’60s bohemian set were influenced by poppy-eyed necromancers and poetic champions such as Poe, Coleridge and Keats.

The template of the solipsistic, androgynous, eyelinered recluse (as played to great effect by Mick Jagger in Cammell and Roeg’s Performance) was directly inherited from the Romantics and their successors the Decadents – Stoker, Wilde, James Clarence Mangan (the laudanum drinking poet adored by Shane MacGowan), Charles Baudelaire (author of a little treatise entitled ‘On Wine and Hashish’), outlaw artists like the enfants terrible Rimbaud and Jean Genet, Jean Cocteau (Opium) and JK Huysmans, whose Á Rebours (Against Nature) was a masterpiece of splendid isolation much beloved by Richard Hell and Lester Bangs. Indeed, there’s a strong correlation between the Stones ‘Dead Flowers’ (“I’ll be in my basement room/With a needle and a spoon”), or Spiritualized’s smacked out foxhole prayers, and that fantastical tale of Des Esseintes sequestered in his ivory tower of synthetic, synaesthetic sensations, a world so hermetically sealed that its inhabitant died from being literally poisoned by fresh air.

But then, the ’60s bohemians could claim consciousness expansion and spiritual inquiry because the drugs were better. Acid was Owsley’s, coke was pure as the driven snow and the grass was all green around here when I were a lad. But by the grim and gruesome early ’70s, the black-economisation of narcotics was big business. Narcotics ceased to be regarded as creative laxatives or Shamanic aids in the accessing of other realities, and were now an underground leisure industry. Drug ‘experimentation’ gave way to recreational use. Rimbaudian Dylan’s motorcycle crash and Bowie’s coke crack-ups were totemic, bookending the Big Comedown of ’67-’75. The former retreated to bucolic upstate New York while the latter abscended to Berlin with Iggy to get clean and pray his muse could function post cold turkey.

Which brings us to the contentious question: do drugs allow the artist access to inner reservoirs of creativity that couldn’t otherwise be achieved through
meditation, lucid dreaming, or good old fashioned graft? And if so, at what price? A cursory glance at any library of rock biogs reveals the same old story: a fast and furious courtship followed by a disastrous marriage; a big downpayment with steadily diminishing returns – and a terminal interest rate.

When one hears fabled stories of Coleridge transcribing ‘Kubla Khan’ from an opium dream, or Ginsberg banging out Howl on a three-day amphetamine binge, or Dick typing 1000-page exegeses and countless novels while speeding out of his brain, one is reminded of the ageing and sickly Sir Laurence Olivier’s query about Dustin Hoffman’s torturous method process on the set of Marathon Man: “Why doesn’t he just act?” In this case, one might reasonably ask, why don’t they just make this shit up? Humans were born with imaginative faculties installed in their hard drives, not narcotics. Jefferson Airplane’s ‘White Rabbit’ works just as well as fairy tale or dream allegory as it does acid anthem.

Emmanuel Carrere’s brilliant psycho-biography I Am Alive And You Are Dead: A Journey Into The Mind Of Philip K Dick, suggests the visionary writer’s phenomenal profligacy (often, it must be said, at the expense of craft and content) bespeaks a man in the grip of hypomania, aggravated rather than inspired by amphetamines.

This is not to say there’s never been a great book written about, or under the influence of drugs, especially when the writer understands that in order to convey the karmaceutical experience, one need not abandon punctuation, syntax and scansion in favour of first or even second-person present-tense stream of consciousness (a la Bret Easton Ellis’s early fiction). It is to be expected that some of the best books about the subject have been scholarly works of hard journalism (Robert Sabbag’s Snowblind) or autobiographical accounts in which the author doubled as lab rat (De Quincey’s The Confessions Of An English Opium Eater, which, far from being the undisciplined bilge of a dope fiend, groans with beautiful, elaborately sculpted sentences, while Aldous Huxley’s experiments with mescaline in The Doors Of Perception were recounted with the dry precision of a pharmacist’s report).

Hunter S Thompson’s Fear & Loathing In Las Vegas may be justly renowned for a tour de force hallucinatory opening sequence, but it’s the real mark of the Doc’s journalistic rigour that he would and could catalogue the contents of his trunk in Wolfian detail:
“We had two bags of grass, seventy-five pellets of mescaline, five sheets of high-powered blotter acid, a salt-shaker half full of cocaine, and a whole galaxy of multi-coloured uppers, downers, screamers, laughers… and also a quart of tequila, a quart of rum, a case of Budweiser, a pint of raw ether and two dozen amyls.”

Similarly, Burroughs’ memoir Junky, rather than seeking to describe the author’s journeys through the land of nod in abstract prose, is rendered in crisp, spare language somewhere between the bitten-off cadences of crime noir and
dispassionate reportage. Even Naked Lunch (like Dick’s A Scanner Darkly, ostensibly a book about addiction as a system of social control) was, between the talking asshole stand-up routines and auto-erotic interludes, written with a scientist’s scepticism. Nelson Algren’s 1949 novel The Man With The Golden Arm, later adapted into a film that featured Frank Sinatra’s remarkable portrayal of a morphine addict, was written from the point of view of the observer, not the participant.

Its logical successor, Irvine Welsh’s Trainspotting, was not a book about heroin, but a cross section of a substrata of non-working-class Glasgow, a book that owed more to Kelman than Burroughs. Indeed, the so-called Ecstasy Generation of Scottish ‘90s writers didn’t write about drugs per se but chronicled the social set who used them, and in this regard seemed as realist and revolutionary as Dickens or Zola, because they were documenting lives considered invalid fodder for fiction by the musty middlebrow dead poets society of Tory Britain. In the US, Denis Johnson’s 1991 masterpiece Jesus’ Son was sometimes impressionistic and poetic, but always painfully lucid in its rendering of the grime and poverty of life on junk.

By the same token, the best rock ‘n’ roll drug songs apply dirty realist principles, reporting on the squalor of the junkie’s lot rather than attempting to evoke the rush (although, it must be said, the Velvets’ ‘Heroin’ comes close to doing both). This is exemplified by a positively Shakespearian couplet from Johnny Thunders and Dee Dee Ramone: “I’m livin’ on a Chinese Rock/All my best stuff is in hock.” Or Warren Zevon’s ‘Carmelita’, the tale of a strung-out writer stranded in a bordertown. Or ‘Waiting For The Man’, with its clear delineation of the dealer-buyer hierarchy: “No point being early/He’s always late/First thing you learn is that/You always gotta wait”.

Perhaps the most unflinching comment about addiction comes from John Prine, told from the point of view of those closest to the damage: “There’s a hole in daddy’s arm where all the money goes.” Give me that over Clapton’s dopey rendition of JJ Cale’s ‘Cocaine’ anyday.

But while the ’50s Beatniks and ’60s libertines were getting their kicks using the drugs of choice of the black underclass and white negroes, jazzbos and Harlem shufflers – namely hard liquor and reefer and smack – The Man was also getting in the act. The CIA’s use of LSD as part of their psy-ops MK Ultra mind control experiments in the early ’60s has become the stuff of Manchurian Candidate legend, and it’s no longer considered conspiracy theory that governmental agencies used heroin as a means of scuppering the black revolutionary movement.

In a recent interview on the Henry Rollins show, actor Samuel L Jackson, a former black radical who served as an usher at MLK’s funeral, and whose breakthrough role as a crack-addict in Spike Lee’s Jungle Fever came directly after a stint in rehab to cure his long term addiction, spoke of how in the summer
of 1969 all marijuana and hallucinogens disappeared from the Atlanta streets, and the only available drug was heroin, resulting in widespread dope dependency and overdoses among young black males. Forget about the War on Drugs, this was the Drugs on War. “That was the most effective defuser of the revolution that they came up with,” Jackson said. “And it worked.”

Sly Stone’s 1970 classic There’s A Riot Goin’ On album serves as a musical metaphor for the pacifying effects of drugs on the black power bloc. Rather than a call to arms, it sounds like the least seditionist record ever made, the quintessential solipsistic coke artefact, the song of a made man come down from his castle swaddled in furs and shades to survey the mean streets of the old hood from the back seat of a tinted-windowed cadillac. Contrast this with The Dramatics’ bristling Stax classic ‘The Devil Is Dope’. Small wonder that blaxploitation scorers like Curtis Mayfield and Isaac Hayes found their politics compatible with, and wrote soundtracks to, films featuring vigilante Stagger Lees like Shaft, black Dirty Harrys who liked nothing better than to bust the heads of pimps and pushermen.

The film industry has always had an ambiguous relationship with drugs, simultaneously spinning morality parables while capitalising on the live-fast-die-young flash of its principle actors. The Hays code (effectively enforced from 1934 until 1967), Hooverism and the influence of politically connected pressure groups, meant Hollywood always had to police its content as well as reprimand (and even blackball) bad boys like Robert Mitchum, Dennis Hopper and more recently Robert Downey Jr – as much for insurance as PR purposes.

Consequently, big screen drug stories are either shrill warning klaxons (wonderfully titled 1930s and 40s artefacts like Cocaine Fiends, Reefer Madness, She Shoulda Said No! or Marijuana: Weed With Its Roots In Hell), gritty crime dramas (The French Connection, Traffic, Narc) or Icarus myths that chart the heady rise but inevitable and eventual comeuppance of their hubristic subject (Lenny, The Doors, Velvet Goldmine, Blow, Walk The Line).

The only unabashedly hedonistic tales that make the cut are sweetened with stoner comedy: Cheech & Chong’s Up In Smoke, Fast Times At Ridgemount High, or kitsch acid fantasies rescued from the censor’s office (1968’s The Trip). The rest are tales of fallen innocents or lapsed professionals (Lost Weekend, Christiane F, Bright Lights Big City, Permanent Midnight, Sid And Nancy, The Basketball Diaries, Leaving Las Vegas, Boogie Nights) or psychotropic horrorshows (Altered States, Jacob’s Ladder, Naked Lunch, Requiem For A Dream, Shrooms).

Even the indie drug movies that revel in proud outsider cred – from Easy Rider to Drugstore Cowboy and Trainspotting – are capped with ambiguous or downbeat denouments that parallel the real life falls from grace of actors like John Belushi, Midnight Express star Brad Davis or River Phoenix. As I write, news has just come over the wires that 28-year-old Perth born actor Heath Ledger was found
dead of a drugs overdose in his New York home on January 22. Ledger had just made the transition from matinee idol to critically acclaimed actor on the back of a succession of substantial roles in Monsters’ Ball, Brokeback Mountain, I’m Not There, and a hotly anticipated turn as The Joker in Christopher Nolan’s The Dark Knight. In the words of the late, great Ian Dury, what a waste.

Jim Morrison was fond of quoting Blake’s proverb, “The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom” as a means of justifying his booze and drug gluttony. Much as I admire Morrison’s talents as a singer, performer and songwriter (but not, I hasten to add, poet) I think he got it wrong. Blake never specified excess of what: he might well have been referring to excess of thought, of work, of love, even excess of moderation.

Each generation revolts against its predecessor. Some of the foremost artists of the ’90s grunge and hardcore scenes – Henry Rollins, Eddie Vedder, Courtney Love, Dave Grohl – were Ritalin kids, representatives of the Ice Storm age, caught in the pincers of baby boomer parents dizzy with new permissive mores, and pharmaceutical companies aggressively marketing wonder drugs to obliterate the often dubiously diagnosed ADD of kids who ran wild for want of commonsensical parenting. Cue Jonathan Richman’s seminal straight edge ditty: “I’m certainly not stoned/Like hippy Jawwny/I’m straight/And I want/To take his place…I’M STRAIGHT!!!’

The drugs only work until they stop working. William Burroughs was a functioning addict to the end, but until Last Words had been living on past glories for decades, a Mr Burns-like narcissosis poster OAP who eked out his third act as a speaking engagement personality available for bar mitzvahs and weddings thrown by punk rubbernecks. Hunter S still had lead in his pencil until his suicide in 2005, but Generation Of Swine and Kingdom Of Fear couldn’t compare with Hells Angels or the Fear & Loathing years. Many so-called survivors – The Stones, Aerosmith, Guns N’ Roses, Shaun Ryder, Shane MacGowan – are now all but creatively burned out, their best work far behind them.

Only those with enough grit and discipline to replace addiction with art before the onset of middle age have produced superior work in their autumn years: Tom Waits, Lou Reed, Nick Cave, John Cale, Steve Earle, Leonard Cohen, Marianne Faithfull, Johnny Cash. In the long run, narcotics render the artist self-conscious, isolated and narcissistic. They encourage him or her to play to type. They frustrate the muse, tire the mind and exhaust the body.

In other words, fuck the glamourous junkie myth, and fuck sentimental death chic. Fuck cool. Fuck drugs. Fuck rock ‘n’ roll. Give me Neil Young over Kurt Cobain. Fuck those suburban white boys and their inferiority complexes. AD 2008, drugs are just another capitalist product designed to satiate and distract. And in a rabidly consumerist age, the greatest act of rebellion is to create.
Great anti-Drug screed, chum (incidentally, I’ve never had more than a sip of alcohol, never, therefore, been drunk, never smoked tobacco or weed or anything else, never sniffed coke or injected things… I *have*, ahem… cough… I must confess, experimented… with LSD about 36 times). But what’s it have to do with why you like workshopping yer fiction?

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Incidentally, Peter forgot to mention the most pervasive and socially, spiritually and intellectually destructive Drug of the post-War era. It turns brains to mush and wills to dust and eats up all your time. It replaces your own life with phantoms and creates absurdly destructive longings that lead to psychosis. You know what I’m talking about, of course.

(Pass the munchies and the remote, pal…)

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Part 2, The Glass Teat, a work in progress. Back in 12 months…
Steven Augustine

August 22, 2009

Comrade Murphy! Grab some fondue on the way up the rumpus room stairs, man. I received the package today, btw. Brillious!

- - -

Frances Madeson

August 22, 2009

Steven,
Have you ever written about your official hallucinations?

- - -

Steven Augustine

August 22, 2009

Not in any detail, really, Comrade Frances; only this bit:

“I took LSD and tried eating five hot dogs and this didn’t work. My then-girlfriend, looking exactly like a big aqua-and-white butterfly, straddled me after I spit the mulched quasimeat into a fern and drew my fluorescing seed into her anus.” (ART ANNOYS)

- - -
Frances Madeson
August 22, 2009
Definitive, as usual. Proud of you!

- -

Steven Augustine
August 22, 2009
The key is being a total asshole and knowing it and getting it all down on paper! Larf. Think I could start a lucrative workshop with a tag line like that?

- -

Frances Madeson
August 22, 2009
No. The key is the key. That you know there’s a lock.

- -

August 22, 2009
Nice koan!
More later but a quick note on this now:

“The last few couple of years I’ve been injecting my writing with something I don’t really have a name for but if I did it would be something like Frayedness. Lo-Fi. Rope-a-Dope. Something like that. It involves fannying about with multiple tones — fuck equitone — and playing the narrative bumpkin and mangling the grammar and deliberately lowering production values all over the shop.”

What I dig about this is how anti the whole MFA-workshop ethos of “craft” it is.

Will have to read the Warner & Hoban.…

--

Frances Madeson

August 22, 2009

Edmond,
For those of us who’ve not been MFAyed, could you kindly explain their ethos of craft?

--

Edmond Caldwell

August 23, 2009
A sterile formal cleanness and correctness with all the “aberrant” life and personality knackered out of it. Think of the French Academy in the mid-C19 and then think of the scruffy, rough-and-ready genius of the rising-up realists (my man Courbet) and after them the Impressionists (before it became difficult to see them as more than postcard-pretty and a new academic standard in their own right). But instead of the heroic mythological historical and religious canvasses of the C19 academy, the prevailing MFA mode is domestic realism, close third person perspective, “psychological” revelation in the form of epiphanies, blah blah blah, in clean, careful, “crafted” sentences. It’s not really craft, it’s a Taylorized production line (I spent a little time on the killing floor myself…).

- -

Steven Augustine
August 22, 2009

Autumnal rant.

Yesterday, my daughter was painting something on a large new notepad as I sat beside her, humming (possibly an old Stones tune like Angie which I will tend to hum late in the year when the summer gutters out for a moment and intimations of autumn flicker on; what is it about autumn?) and she said, in a cheerful tone, without looking up, “Don’t sing that, Daddy, it’s irritating.” Verbatim. I wasn’t hurt; I was delighted. She’s three and a half and she knows what she likes. And the painting was marvelous.

If anyone reading this decides to reproduce, one day, or is pregnant now: silently promise the kid five solid years. Five solid years of intense attention before you kick it out of the house. If there are two of you parents and you both have careers and you can’t really take the time off to give her/him five years and you were planning on bringing in a nanny and/or daycare before the child has even gotten used to your smell: don’t reproduce. Do not.

Because what you’ll be doing is bringing yet another lost soul into this world. Another de-contextualized consciousness that won’t know where it belongs or who to turn to and who will learn to substitute stimuli for feelings, objects for attachments and power for love. I will get very few nods of approval for this little essay because the Truth of it applies to the great majority of the so-called Developed World and the Truth isn’t pretty.
I’m old enough to have been raised in a household with a stay-at-home housewife and though I’m therefore better off than most of the kids who were passed around between various strangers (starting before they could even say da-da), I spent all my adolescence and half my adult life trying to find in others what my childhood lacked. My mother was there but we didn’t interact. Up until the birth of my daughter I would tend to see those sepiatone memory-images of my mother emblazoned with the same caption: THE CLEANEST WOMAN ON EARTH. But now I realize that cooking and cleaning were her excuses; her alibi. It’s not as though we were a family of ten. My only sibling was my brother and the homestead was not so vast. She was simply avoiding us, scrubbing and swabbing all day.

My father, of course, was in a league of his own when it came to avoiding us. His unit of communication was the allowance. Fifty cents a week for being his sons, which seemed good enough at the time, and a bonus trip to the Science Museum if he had a mistress in the neighborhood. He moved to another continent in 1980 (I hadn’t seen him since five years before that) and passed through the U.S. a few years later, ringing me up to meet him at a certain corner. I showed, he rounded the corner in a gigantic, adventure-scarred all-terrain vehicle, and when I jumped in the side-door I saw that the vehicle was full of Liberian students.

It’s assumed, somehow, that humans come into this world with a built-in knowledge of the fundamental concepts, and that this knowledge comes packed in a broader sense of the absolute markers of Right and Wrong. But we don’t and it doesn’t. We come to the show knowing fuck-all. We come to the show knowing nothing.

The ones who bring about our existence are supposed to teach us. The teaching is a long, grueling, and mutually-uplifting process because, as it turns out, *making a person* does not involve a cock in a cunt and some funny noises; it starts about nine months after that, and doesn’t really stop until the original cock-and-cunt are long-dead (knock on wood). But the heaviest lifting takes place in the first few years. It’s crucial.

Here’s your proof: look at the world as it is.

If your parents aren’t really there to shape your soul for you, other forces flow in. The results are often less Connected Person than Selfish Consumer. How many dozens have I seen make that serious fucking commitment to getting a higher degree after x-number of years of school, sacrificing everything to the goal? Yet these same PhD’s would consider dedicating five solid years to the exclusive purpose of shaping a soul they’ve invited to this party excessive. Five years for the sake of a human soul is nothing. Five years is a bargain.

My daughter is deep in the phase of the telescoping “Why’s?” (in her case it’s a bi-lingual process) and it’s not unusual to have the chain of Q-and-A be ten to
twenty units long. When we don’t have a proper answer for her, we just make one up. The point, in the end, is talking to her. She won’t even remember the answers but she will remember us.

- -

Edmond Caldwell

August 23, 2009

Wow. There is — or rather there may be — a weird kisemt in your posting of that, comrade. We should know tomorrow. Fingers crossed.

- -

Steven Augustine

August 23, 2009

A) Good Gawd, Comrade Edmond, are you insinuating what I think you’re insinuating?

B) I see you have a new story up (as linked on your site)… will get to it post haste (and don’t be shy about posting links to yer stuff on this thread)

- -

Steven Augustine

August 23, 2009

“The forensics team gets here at 7:00 sharp but then we have to wait for the body…”
I wonder how many readers will have to read this story twice before it dawns that the thing *started* strange? As you probably know, I like the Unflagged Surrealism best. It’s sneakier, innit? Good job fellow!

---

seanmurray

August 23, 2009

Edmond: sounds like you may have more pressing matters at hand, but anyway, I really enjoyed this story. As mentioned above, my obsessions are cadence and compression and it nails them both (740 words… lovely).

I really mean obsession, though, so I did finding myself reaching out for the dial so that

and from out of the tight line of her mouth bloom these two big red gorgeous lips,

is retuned to

and from her mouth’s tight line bloom big red gorgeous lips,

I also have a real thing about avoiding *any remote possibility* of unwanted chimes like
donuts like a bunch of assholes

especially in writing like yours where the *intentional* inner chimes are so important.

Powerful work, though, and bloody funny too. Indeed, do please let us know when you’ve new work online.

---

128.
Steven Augustine
August 22, 2009

JOKEY-ABRASIVE COMMENT OF THE DAY

I forgot I left this comment on a Film Blog last week; I like it:

“Wrong for all the right reasons… except when you’re dead-on (Hartley, Jarmusch, Maddin). Add some Alan Rudolph, Henry Jaglom, Vincent Gallo and (wait for it)… Robert Altman… to this pot of poison chili and you’ll soon realize how tasty late Godard really is. Anyway, what’s a cinephile but a fatass shut-in dreaming of banging dead French chicks…? If it’s Art it ain’t entertaining and vice-versa.”

(CHUNKLET)

Frances Madeson
August 22, 2009

“If it’s Art it ain’t entertaining and vice-versa.”

I agree, but only if you mean entertaining in the sense of diversion. It also means “to admit into or hold in the mind; consider; to give admittance or reception to; receive.”

seanmurray
August 22, 2009

Yeah, I’d like to know Steven’s definition of entertainment.
Edmond Caldwell

August 23, 2009

“Anyway, what’s a cinephile but a fatass shut-in dreaming of banging dead French chicks… ?”

You mean Anne Wiazemsky is dead? Oh my god . . .

Steven Augustine

August 22, 2009

I go with Comrade Frances’s first definition. When talking about professional big-time mass-media “entertainment”, I’ll throw lots of “pandering” and “venality” into the meme pot… even some Machiavelli, depending on my mood or the context. When I’m sitting in a state of absolute transport listening to a little well-
performed Satie or some John Coltrane soloing, I ain’t being “entertained”. Ditto when I’m standing in front of some Egon Schiele or Lucian Freud artifact. “Entertainment” not only won’t cover it; it’s nearly the opposite effect. If sex is the most fun you can have without laughing (as Woody put it), Art is the most fun you can have without crying. Dying?

For the one word the image I receive is the surface of a skating rink… the other (Art) a kind of grotto. Entertainment has its place, don’t get me wrong: I like listening to Gnarls Barkley or Radiohead as much as the next entity (in fact, check out the cover of Radiohead’s ‘Reckoner’, executed by GB, on YouTube: ’tis weekid). What I object to is the frigging ubiquity of Diversion in this Huxley-nightmare of 24-Hour woof-bang-sparkle.

I was in a “Literary” comment thread, once, with a fairly well-educated young person who threw up her figurative hands (weird image there but forge on), late in the discussion, with an exasperated “It’s all just entertainment, after all!”

No, it’s not.

- -

Steven Augustine
August 22, 2009

However: Comrades: toss up some examples of Entertainment you consider Art (and vice versa) and let’s see if our heads butt.

Btw: before somebody gets out the “Elitist” revolver, it’s my belief that the “Elitism” you’re rightfully abhorring is all about who gets to go where; my “Elitism” is about *what*, not who. I don’t see why some blood-poor kid from a North American ghetto, say, can’t have total access to the fruits of the “Western” cultural tradition he/she was born into… and beyond. Poverty should have nothing to do with whether or not some kid is allowed to groove to Satie or Simone or Bach. As opposed to the empty calories of shiny shit that only exists to push product.

I was poor as a kid. The library was free.
APPENDIX

1. Aye, and Gomorrah by Samuel R. Delaney

And came down in Paris:

Where we raced along the Rue de Médicis with Bo and Lou and Muse inside the fence, Kelly and me outside, making faces through the bars, making noise, making the Luxembourg Gardens roar at two in the morning. Then climbed out, and down to the square in front of St. Sulpice where Bo tried to knock me into the fountain.

At which point Kelly noticed what was going on around us, got an ashcan cover, and ran into the pissoir, banging the walls. Five guys scooted out; even a big pissoir only holds four.

A very blond young man put his hand on my arm and smiled. "Don't you think, Spacer, that you ... people should leave?"

I looked at his hand on my blue uniform. "Est-ce que tu es un frelk?"

His eyebrows rose, then he shook his head. "Une frelk," he corrected. "No. I am not. Sadly for me. You look as though you may once have been a man. But now ..." He smiled. "You have nothing for me now. The police." He nodded across the street where I noticed the gendarmerie for the first time. "They don't bother us. You are strangers, though ..."

But Muse was already yelling, "Hey, come on! Let's get out of here, huh?" And left. And went up again.

And came down in Houston:

"God damn!" Muse said. "Gemini Flight Control—you mean this is where it all started? Let's get out of here, please!"

So took a bus out through Pasadena, then the monoline to Galveston, and were going to take it down the Gulf, but Lou found a couple with a pickup truck—

"Glad to give you a ride, Spacers. You people up there on them planets and things, doing all that good work for the government."

—who were going south, them and the baby, so we rode in the back for two hundred and fifty miles of sun and wind.

"You think they're frelks?" Lou asked, elbowing me. "I bet they're frelks. They're just waiting for us give 'em the come-on."

"Cut it out. They're a nice, stupid pair of country kids."

"That don't mean they ain't frelks!"

"You don't trust anybody, do you?"
"No."

And finally a bus again that rattled us through Brownsville and across the border into Matamoros where we staggered down the steps into the dust and the scorched evening with a lot of Mexicans and chickens and Texas Gulf shrimp fishermen—who smelled worst—and we shouted the loudest. Forty-three whores—I counted—had turned out for the shrimp fishermen, and by the time we had broken two of the windows in the bus station they were all laughing. The shrimp fishermen said they wouldn't buy us no food but would get us drunk if we wanted, 'cause that was the custom with shrimp fishermen. But we yelled, broke another window; then, while I was lying on my back on the telegraph office steps, singing, a woman with dark lips bent over and put her hands on my cheeks. "You are very sweet." Her rough hair fell forward. "But the men, they are standing around and watching you. And that is taking up time. Sadly, their time is our money. Spacer, do you not think you ... people should leave?"

I grabbed her wrist. "¡Usted!" I whispered. "¿Usted es una frelka?"

"Frelko en español." She smiled and patted the sunburst that hung from my belt buckle. "Sorry. But you have nothing that ... would be useful to me. It is too bad, for you look like you were once a woman, no? And I like women, too ..."

I rolled off the porch.

"Is this a drag, or is this a drag!" Muse was shouting. "Come on! Let's go!"

We managed to get back to Houston before dawn, somehow. And went up.

And came down in Istanbul:

That morning it rained in Istanbul.

At the commissary we drank our tea from pear-shaped glasses, looking out across the Bosphorus. The Princess Islands lay like trash heaps before the prickly city.

"Who knows their way in this town?" Kelly asked.

"Aren't we going around together?" Muse demanded. "I thought we were going around together."

"They held up my check at the purser's office," Kelly explained. "I'm flat broke. I think the purser's got it in for me," and shrugged. "Don't want to, but I'm gong to have to hunt up a rich frelk and come on friendly," went back to the tea; then noticed how heavy the silence had become. "Aw, come on now! You gape at me like that and I'll bust every bone in that carefully-conditioned-from-puberty body of yours. Hey you!" meaning me. "Don't give me that holier-than-thou gawk like you never went with no frelk!"

It was starting.

"I'm not gawking," I said and got quietly mad.

The longing, the old longing.

Bo laughed to break tensions. "Say, last time I was in Istanbul—about a year before I joined up with this platoon—I remember we were coming out of Taksim Square down Istiqal. Just past all the
cheap movies we found a little passage lined with flowers. Ahead of us were two other spacers. It's a market in there, and farther down they got fish, and then a courtyard with oranges and candy and sea urchins and cabbage. But flowers in front. Anyway, we noticed something funny about the spacers. It wasn't their uniforms; they were perfect. The haircuts: fine. It wasn't till we heard them talking—they were a man and woman dressed up like spacers, trying to pick up frelks! Imagine, queer for frelks!"

"Yeah," Lou said. "I seen that before. There were a lot of them in Rio."

"We beat hell out of them two," Bo concluded. "We got them in a side street and went to town!"

Muse's tea glass clicked on the counter. "From Taksim down Istiqlal till you get to the flowers? Now why didn't you say that's where the frelks were, huh?" A smile on Kelly's face would have made that okay. There was no smile.

"Hell," Lou said, "nobody ever had to tell me where to look. I go out in the street and frelks smell me coming. I can spot 'em halfway along Piccadilly. Don't they have nothing but tea in this place? Where can you get a drink?"

Bo grinned. "Moslem country, remember? But down at the end of the Flower Passage there're a lot of little bars with green doors and marble counters where you can get a liter of beer for about fifteen cents in lira. And they're all these stands selling deep-fat-fried bugs and pig's gut sandwiches—"

"You ever notice how frelks can put it away? I mean liquor, not … pig's guts."

And launched off into a lot of appeasing stories. We ended with the one about the frelk some spacer tried to roll who announced: "There are two things I go for. One is spacers; the other is a good fight …"

But they only allay. They cure nothing. Even Muse knew we would spend the day apart, now.

The rain had stopped, so we took the ferry up the Golden Horn. Kelly straight off asked for Taksim Square and Istiqlal and was directed to a dolmush, which we discovered was a taxicab, only it just goes one place and picks up lots and lots of people on the way. And it's cheap.

Lou headed off over Ataturk Bridge to see the sights of New City. Bo decided to find out what the Dolma Boche really was; and when Muse discovered you could go to Asia for fifteen cents—one lira and fifty krush—well, Muse decided to go to Asia.

I turned through the confusion of traffic at the head of the bridge and up past the gray, dripping walls of Old City, beneath the trolley wires. There are times when yelling and helling won't fill the lack. There are times when you must walk by yourself because it hurts so much to be alone.

I walked up a lot of little streets with wet donkeys and wet camels and women in veils; and down a lot of big streets with buses and trash baskets and men in business suits.

Some people stare at spacers; some people don't. Some people stare or don't stare in a way a spacer gets to recognize within a week after coming out of training school at sixteen. I was walking in the park when I caught her watching. She saw me see and looked away.

I ambled down the wet asphalt. She was standing under the arch of a small, empty mosque shell. As I passed she walked out into the courtyard among the cannons.
"Excuse me."

I stopped.

"Do you know whether or not this is the shrine of St. Irene?" Her English was charmingly accented. "I've left my guidebook home."

"Sorry. I'm a tourist too."

"Oh." She smiled. "I am Greek. I thought you might be Turkish because you are so dark."

"American red Indian." I nodded. Her turn to curtsy.

"I see. I have just started at the university here in Istanbul. Your uniform, it tells me that you are"—and in the pause, all speculations resolved—"a spacer."

I was uncomfortable. "Yeah." I put my hands in my pockets, moved my feet around on the soles of my boots, licked my third from the rear left molar—did all the things you do when you're uncomfortable. You're so exciting when you look like that, a frelk told me once. "Yeah, I am." I said it too sharply, too loudly, and she jumped a little.

So now she knew I knew she knew I knew, and I wondered how we would play out the Proust bit.

"I'm Turkish," she said. "I'm not Greek. I'm not just starting. I'm a graduate in art history here at the university. These little lies one makes for strangers to protect one's ego … why? Sometimes I think my ego is very small."

That's one strategy.

"How far away do you live?" I asked. "And what's the going rate in Turkish lira?" That's another.

"I can't pay you." She pulled her raincoat around her hips. She was very pretty. "I would like to." She shrugged and smiled. "But I am … a poor student. Not a rich one. If you want to turn around and walk away, there will be no hard feelings. I shall be sad though."

I stayed on the path. I thought she'd suggest a price after a little while. She didn't.

And that's another.

I was asking myself, What do you want the damn money for anyway? when a breeze upset water from one of the park's great cypresses.

"I think the whole business is sad." She wiped drops from her face. There had been a break in her voice, and for a moment I looked too closely at the water streaks. "I think it's sad that they have to alter you to make you a spacer. If they hadn't, then we … If spacers had never been, then we could not be … the way we are. Did you start out male or female?"

Another shower. I was looking at the ground and droplets went down my collar.

"Male," I said. "It doesn't matter."

"How old are you? Twenty-three, twenty-four?"
"Twenty-three," I lied. It's reflex. I'm twenty-five, but the younger they think you are, the more they pay you. But I didn't want her damn money—

"I guessed right then." She nodded. "Most of us are experts on spacers. Do you find that? I suppose we have to be." She looked at me with wide black eyes. At the end of the stare, she blinked rapidly. "You would have been a fine man. But now you are a spacer, building water-conservation units on Mars, programing mining computers on Ganymede, servicing communication relay towers on the moon. The alteration …" Frelks are the only people I've ever heard say "the alteration" with so much fascination and regret. "You'd think they'd have found some other solution. They could have found another way than neutering you, turning you into creatures not even androgynous; things that are—"

I put my hand on her shoulder, and she stopped like I'd hit her. She looked to see if anyone was near. Lightly, so lightly then, she raised her hand to mine.

I pulled my hand away. "That are what?"

"They could have found another way." Both hands in her pockets now.

"They could have. Yes. Up beyond the ionosphere, baby, there's too much radiation for those precious gonads to work right anywhere you might want to do something that would keep you there over twenty-four hours, like the moon, or Mars, or the satellites of Jupiter—"

"They could have made protective shields. They could have done more research into biological adjustment—"

"Population Explosion time," I said. "No, they were hunting for any excuse to cut down kids back then—especially deformed ones."

"Ah, yes." She nodded. "We're still fighting our way up from the neo-puritan reaction to the sex freedom of the twentieth century."

"It was a fine solution." I grinned and hung my hand over my crotch. "I'm happy with it." I've never known why that's so much more obscene when a spacer does it.

"Stop it," she snapped, moving away.

"What's the matter?"

"Stop it," she repeated. "Don't do that! You're a child."

"But they choose us from children whose sexual responses are hopelessly retarded at puberty."

"And your childish, violent substitutes for love? I suppose that's one of the things that's attractive. Yes, I know you're a child."

"Yeah? What about frelks?"

She thought awhile. "I think they are the sexually retarded ones they miss. Perhaps it was the right solution. You really don't regret you have no sex?"

"We've got you," I said.
"Yes." She looked down. I glanced to see the expression she was hiding. It was a smile. "You have your glorious, soaring life, and you have us." Her face came up. She glowed. "You spin in the sky, the world spins under you, and you step from land to land, while we..." She turned her head right, left, and her black hair curled and uncurled on the shoulder of her coat. "We have our dull, circled lives, bound in gravity, worshiping you!"

She looked back at me. "Perverted, yes? In love with a bunch of corpses in free fall!" She suddenly hunched her shoulders. "I don't like having a free-fall-sexual-displacement complex."

"That always sounded like too much to say."

She looked away. "I don't like being a frelk. Better?"

"I wouldn't like it either. Be something else."

"You don't choose your perversions. You have no perversions at all. You're free of the whole business. I love you for that, spacer. My love starts with the fear of love. Isn't that beautiful? A pervert substitutes something unattainable for 'normal' love: the homosexual, a mirror; the fetishist, a shoe or a watch or a girdle. Those with free-fall-sexual-dis—"

"Frelks."

"Frelks substitute"—she looked at me sharply again—"loose, swinging meat."

"That doesn't offend me."

"I wanted it to."

"Why?"

"You don't have desires. You wouldn't understand."

"Go on."

"I want you because you can't want me. That's the pleasure. If someone really had a sexual reaction to... us, we'd be scared away. I wonder how many people there were before there were you, waiting for your creation. We're necrophiles. I'm sure grave-robbing has fallen off since you started going up. But you don't understand..." She paused. "If you did, then I wouldn't be scuffing leaves now and trying to think from whom I could borrow sixty lira." She stepped over the knuckles of a root that had cracked the pavement. "And that, incidentally, is the going rate in Istanbul."

I calculated. "Things still get cheaper as you go east."

"You know," and she let her raincoat fall open, "you're different from the others. You at least want to know—"

I said, "If I spat on you for every time you'd said that to a spacer, you'd drown."

"Go back to the moon, loose meat." She closed her eyes. "Swing on up to Mars. There are satellites around Jupiter where you might do some good. Go up and come down in some other city."

"Where do you live?"
"You want to come with me?"

"Give me something," I said. "Give me something—it doesn't have to be worth sixty lira. Give me something you like, anything of yours that means something to you."

"No!"

"Why not?"

"Because I—"

"—don't want to give up part of that small ego. None of you frelks do!"

"You really don't understand I just don't want to buy you?"

"You have nothing to buy me with."

"You are a child," she said. "I love you."

We reached the gate of the park. She stopped, and we stood time enough for a breeze to rise and die in the grass. "I ..." she offered tentatively, pointing without taking her hand from her coat pocket. "I live right down there."

"All right," I said. "Let's go."

.....

A gas main had once exploded along this street, she explained to me, a gushing road of fire as far as the docks, overhot and overquick. It had been put out within minutes, no building had fallen, but the charred fascias glittered. "This is sort of an artist and student quarter." We crossed the cobbles. "Yuri Pasha, number fourteen. In case you're ever in Istanbul again." Her door was covered with black scales, the gutter was thick with garbage.

"A lot of artists and professional people are frelks," I said, trying to be inane.

"So are lots of other people." She walked inside and held the door. "We're just more flamboyant about it."

On the landing there was a portrait of Ataturk. Her room was on the second floor. "Just a moment while I get my key—"

Marsscapes! Moonscapes! On her easel was a six-foot canvas showing the sunrise flaring on a crater's rim! There were copies of the original Observer pictures of the moon pinned to the wall, and pictures of every smooth-faced general in the International Spacer Corps.

On one corner of her desk was a pile of those photo magazines about spacers that you can find in most kiosks all over the world: I've seriously heard people say they were printed for adventurous-minded high school children. They've never seen the Danish ones. She had a few of those too. There was a shelf of art books, art history texts. Above them were six feet of cheap paper-covered space operas: Sin on Space Station #12, Rocket Rake, Savage Orbit.
"Arrack?" she asked. "Ouzo or Pernod? You've got your choice. But I may pour them all from the same bottle." She set out glasses on the desk, then opened a waist-high cabinet that turned out to be an icebox. She stood up with a tray of lovelies: fruit puddings, Turkish delight, braised meats.

"What's this?"

"Dolmades. Grape leaves filled with rice and pignoli."

"Say it again?"

"Dolmades. Comes from the same Turkish word as 'dolmush.' They both mean 'stuffed.'" She put the tray beside the glasses. "Sit down."

I sat on the studio-couch-that-becomes-bed. Under the brocade I felt the deep, fluid resilience of a glycogel mattress. They've got the idea that it approximates the feeling of free fall. "Comfortable? Would you excuse me for a moment? I have some friends down the hall. I want to see them for a moment." She winked. "They like spacers."

"Are you going to take up a collection for me?" I asked. "Or do you want them to line up outside the door and wait their turn?"

She sucked a breath. "Actually I was going to suggest both." Suddenly she shook her head. "Oh, what do you want!"

"What will you give me? I want something," I said. "That's why I came. I'm lonely. Maybe I want to find out how far it goes. I don't know yet."

"It goes as far as you will. Me? I study, I read, paint, talk with my friends"—she came over to the bed, sat down on the floor—"go to the theater, look at spacers who pass me on the street, till one looks back; I am lonely too." She put her head on my knee. "I want something. But," and after a minute neither of us had moved, "you are not the one who will give it to me."

"You're not going to pay me for it," I countered. "You're not, are you?"

On my knee her head shook. After a while she said, all breath and no voice, "Don't you think you should leave?"

"Okay," I said, and stood up.

She sat back on the hem of her coat. She hadn't taken it off yet.

I went to the door.

"Incidentally." She folded her hands in her lap. "There is a place in New City you might find what you're looking for, called the Flower Passage—"

I turned toward her, angry. "The frelk hangout? Look, I don't need money! I said anything would do! I don't want—"

She had begun to shake her head, laughing quietly. Now she lay her cheek on the wrinkled place where I had sat. "Do you persist in misunderstanding? It is a spacer hangout. When you leave, I am
going to visit my friends and talk about … ah, yes, the beautiful one that got away. I thought you might find … perhaps someone you know."

With anger, it ended.

"Oh," I said. "Oh, it's a spacer hangout. Yeah. Well, thanks."

And went out. And found the Flower Passage, and Kelly and Lou and Bo and Muse. Kelly was buying beer, so we all got drunk, and ate fried fish and fried clams and fried sausage, and Kelly was waving the money around, saying, "You should have seen him! The changes I put that frelk through, you should have seen him! Eighty lira is the going rate here, and he gave me a hundred and fifty!"

and drank more beer.

And went up.

The End

—Milford
September 1966
Edward has long been a successful man, a gentle and happy man liked by most everyone, but now he has a fork in his pocket. Blessed by good health and vast family, married 40 years, with five children, 11 grandchildren, two great-great-grandchildren on the way, Edward has considered himself lucky to be enjoying his retirement and twilight years without care or controversy. But now he is at a wedding reception, and he has a fork in his pocket, and this is threatening to undo everything. He first noticed it a second ago, when he put his hands in his pockets, looking for a mint, and instead found the sharp prongs of the fork. He quickly pulled his hand away, smarting from the pain. And then it dawned on him: there was a fork in his pocket. Had he stolen it from the silverware at dinner? He'd never done anything like that in his life, and didn't need to. He has his own silverware at home. But what if he had taken it, bowing to some long-latent kleptomaniacal urges? And what if someone had seen him? What would become of this wedding and Edward if it was known that a 70-year-old guest was stealing flatware? While pretending to be watching the dancefloor, he sneaks a peek into his pocket, and notes, with great relief, that the fork is not from the wedding. With its pattern-etched handle, it's clearly one of his own, from the set he and his wife were given at their own wedding. So he didn't steal it. Rather, in his pocket is a fork from home. And this, Edward realises, is no less troubling. He is standing at the wedding, near the dancefloor, watching the bride and groom's first dance, and is now greatly concerned. He had no reason to have brought a fork along to this event, a wedding that he could have been reasonably sure would be providing its own silverware. So what could this mean, that he left the house with a fork from his own kitchen? The implications are many, and all are troubling. He cannot remember thinking about forks that morning, and cannot remember taking the fork from a drawer and putting it in his pocket. And thus memory loss could be at play. Could it be that finally he's succumbing to Alzheimer's or some equivalent? He was so proud to have retained into his 60s and 70s a well-organised and seldom-failing memory, and now, just when he would hope to think back on his life with total recall, it's slipping away. Could it be? Could this be the beginning of an irreversible slide? Not now, no. His wife is trying to pull him to the dancefloor. But he can't. If he tries to dance, he will be discovered. Who can dance effectively with a fork in his pocket? She will see it. She will pull him close and feel it. And then she will know about the fork, and she will ask about the fork, and because he will have no answers, she will want him to go in for tests. She will begin planning for a life with a husband on the decline mentally and otherwise. They will see more doctors. They will look at assisted-living centres. Could he tell her he brought it on purpose? "Everything tastes better with this fork! I love this fork!" he could say. No, that's worse. She'd have him committed. He plumbs his brain for options. Options, options. Could he stab her with it? Hm. That way the only one who would know he'd brought a fork from home would be dead. Not bad... But surely that would attract some attention at a wedding. Would it? Of course it would. And besides, he loves his wife, and does not want to stab her, no matter how tidy the solution her death would provide. He waves her off. No, he can't dance with her now (she goes off to dance with the father of the bride, an enormous man with a woman's hips), no, not until he gets rid of the fork. But how? Anyone who spots him removing a fork from his pocket – a fork from home! – will consider him nuts. Can he go to the bathroom and get rid of it? No, there were attendants in the restrooms when he went there earlier, and anyway, the fork is part of a beloved set, and his wife would be troubled if it went missing. He can't throw it away. No, he must find a way to hide the fork for the duration of the wedding, and somehow get it home afterward. And then, once it's home and he's safely home, too – it will be so nice to be home! – he can examine just how the fork got into his pocket, and how he made it all the way to the wedding without noticing he had a kitchen utensil – a heavy one, at that – in his right front pocket. Jesus, he is losing his mind. Only a madman would have brought a fork here. Maybe he is crazy. Yes. He is. It's happened, it's official. He's senile, he's bonkers, undebatably so. So what does he have to lose? Maybe the fork is an opportunity. Maybe this is God's way of showing him the door to a new life. Yes. That's it. That's the only answer. It was divine intervention that brought the fork to the lining of his trousers, and now he must seize the opportunity. With the fork, he will break free of the bonds of all this family, all this happiness and
contentment – and all that is staid and complacent! Yes, he will free himself, and fly into a world of excitement and chaos, really the only way to leave this world. He will stand on a chair, fork raised high, and declare himself King of the Tri-Pronged Utensils! Yes! Or maybe not. Maybe there is a more immediate problem. Maybe suddenly there are a hundred or so wedding guests staring at him. Maybe there are a hundred or so wedding guests staring at him, and the band, which is no longer playing, is also staring at him, at this septuagenarian named Edward, who is standing on the edge of the dancefloor, with one hand in his pocket, furiously exploring the contents of that pocket. Maybe this man Edward has been furiously exploring his pocket for many minutes now, his eyes fixed in concentration, and maybe for those minutes, as he has been forging deeper into concentration, more and more guests have begun to notice this man, standing at the edge of the dancefloor stock-still but for his very active right hand. And maybe by the time Edward notices this, that he has been so noticed, the problem of the fork is the least of his problems.

As I responded on the Guardian’s blog:

AugustineSteven

1 August 2009 03:55PM

"Can he go to the bathroom and get rid of it?"

Yes, but then the "story" would be over a mercifully-mere three-fifths of the way through, wouldn't it?
She rushes in shaking the deluge from her jacket and her umbrella, quick to be rid of it. The maitre d' takes
the umbrella, lowers it with a swift shake and slips it into a stand, where other more relaxed umbrellas arealready waiting.

"Your coat," he says.

"Please." She turns, spinning her coat off in a practised twist.

"How are we this afternoon?" he asks.

"We are as expected," she says. "Take a look outside."

"It's good to see you again."

"You've become a habit," she says. "Best be careful, certain habits are often to be gotten rid of. Apologies," she says, as she approaches the table where Genevieve is waiting. "I'm drenched." She sits and uses her napkin to blot her face.

"It seems like it's getting worse," Genevieve, says, glancing up from her mobile.

"Of course it is. Would you expect otherwise?"

"One can hope," Genevieve says, and for a moment is all thumbs as she finishes a text; hits send and then slips the device into her purse.

"In these times the only way to remain optimistic is to side with the darkness and then be pleasantly surprised," she says.

"I suppose."

"Oh, we're not having one of those woe is me lunches are we? I was looking forward to a good time. I've had a week of a juice fast and I'm desperate for food."

"Pig's bladder chicken?" Genevieve perks up.

"Perfect. I'd make it at home or at least try but I have no idea where you get a pig's bladder."

"Perhaps a butcher?" Genevieve suggests.

"And then how do you get the chicken into the bladder?"

"You just put your lips together and blow."

"Touché." Sarah glances at the menu. "You know, I may just have the salad, rocket and parmesan. So, tell me everything," Sarah says. "And quick."

"The big news; after a thousand nights alone, I'm finally seeing somebody."

"I know," she says. "We all know. But no one ever sees you with him."

"We're very private."
"Are you enjoying yourself?"

"I think so."

"What happened to your idea of going gay?"

"I suspended it."

"Water?" the waiter asks.

"Yes."

"Still or with gas?" the waiter wants to know.

"Still," they say.

"You don't want to go out? Make the scene? See and be seen? He is after all somebody, you'd get points for that."

"Points for what?"

"Points to use the next time around."

"As what, the former shag of somebody?"

"So, you're keeping your love a semi-secret."

"Oh I wouldn't call it a love."

"Wouldn't you?"

"Not so much, he's much, much older."

"Yes, I know. You act as if no one knows who he is; there's an enormous exhibition of his work at the museum."

"Yes," she says. "He took me to see it."

"So if it's not love, what do you call it?"

"An experience," Genevieve says.

"Ah," Sarah says. "And what is the experience like?"

"His hands are exceptionally strong, the hands of a worker, rough, calloused, but the interior is like an avocado, ripe, soft, untouched."

"How could he be so untouched?"

Genevieve shrugs.

"Do you feel you're getting to know him, isn't that the big complaint, they all had him but they never knew him?"
"I'm not sure what knowing means. Perhaps, if you give up needing to know it becomes less of an issue."

"Clearly he's already had an impact," she says, somewhat snidely.

"He says the other women have wanted more than there is."

"It's possible," she says. "He may be right, we all want more than there is."

"Bread?" The waiter asks.

"No."

"Yes."

"Yes or no?"

"No."

She leans forward as though forced intimacy, if only spatial, will squeeze out the truth. "Does he appreciate you?"

"I think so."

"Is his skin falling off the bones like an old turkey?" She pulls back, laughing at her own joke, which isn't funny. "Do you think he loves you?"

"Do you want me to be honest?"

"It's friends lunch. Yes, be honest?"

"I try not to think about love."

"And for lunch," the waiter needs to know.

"We'll have the bird, the pig's bladder chicken, a side of spinach, some mashed, and what else?" Sarah asks Genevieve.

"Glass of wine?" the waiter suggests

"Yes, a red, something full but nice."

"The cabernet sauvignon."

"I've been wondering about you," she says, "about you and him. I've been trying to imagine it."

"Do you know something?" Genevieve says. "Is there something you know? You always know something so if there's something you know why don't you just go ahead and tell me."

"I don't know anything," Sarah says and this is true.

The still water is poured. There is something between them that is brittle, tense. It's been that way since they met, as children, so the tension, the crisp, is familiar but over time one would have hoped for a certain elasticity, a kind of give that has never emerged.
"You act like you know something, you act like you know all the intimate details, the unsaid of everyone else's life."

"I don't think of myself as acting. And if we're being honest..."

"We are."

"I know one small thing," she pauses. "I'm a little jealous."

"A taste from the kitchen," the waiter says, setting small plates in front of them. "House-made salami, a pocket of olive juice, and that's a mustard ginger foam on the top."

"What about you? Are things better?"

"Sadly, I've never really recovered," Sarah says.

"It's been a while," Genevieve says.

"I'm slow to adjust," Sarah says.

"Better not to adjust, to adjust means you think it will then remain as it is, it will stay the same."

Sarah nods. "You're quite right, don't adjust, simply carry on."

"Push forward," Genevieve says.

"Onward Christian Soldiers, Forward Through The Ages and all that." She sips her wine.

"How long do you maintain a grudge?" Genevieve asks.

"How long do you hold a crush?" Sarah retorts. "Time is irrelevant – what happened to me should never happen to anyone, it was one of those life-changing events. The worst part, I didn't see it coming, I didn't have a chance to prepare, to brace myself, to think, here it comes, and watch my life flash before my eyes. It was late afternoon, I was home alone."

"Having a moment to yourself," Genevieve says.

"I was having a sit down, a moment, a cup of tea. I was trying to read a book that I'd been trying to read for months. The phone rang. It was him."

"Hugo," Genevieve says.

Sarah nods. "Where are you? I ask, wondering, why aren't you home? I'm at a friend's house he says."

"Who?" Genevieve says.

"You don't know her. He says. Look he said I've got some news for you."

"News?" Genevieve says.

"I don't like you he says. He pauses. Actually, it's worse than that, loathe you. Our marriage is a sham, an ugly, disgusting excuse of a relationship. Are you high? I ask."

"No," Genevieve says.
"Drunk?" Sarah asks.

"Maybe a little," Genevieve says.

"But that's not the point. The point is I don't love you. And maybe worse, I hate our whole life, your friends, so clever, so self-satisfied, so fucking spoiled. I take a deep breath."

"Hugo, you can't mean it," Genevieve says.

"I do mean it all this and more. He says. Your tits are hard, they're like rocks. But, you bought me my tits. I say. They were an anniversary gift. It was you who wanted me to have bigger, firmer tits after the children were born, you said, you missed my breasts, that mine hung like empty sacks low and flat on my chest. Well, I was wrong. Your old tits were better. Why would a woman get new tits just because her husband said so?"

"You don't expect me to answer that," Genevieve says.

"There are sounds in the background," Sarah says. "Where are you?"

"I told you, he insists, at a friend's house," Genevieve says.

"And are you sleeping with this friend?" I must ask.

"Yes." Genevieve says.

"Since when?" Sarah asks. "Ten days, two weeks, something like that."

"Where did you meet her?" Genevieve asks.

"In the park. Is she there now? I ask. There is no answer. I raise my voice.

"Did she tell you to call your wife and tell her you're leaving? Did she say, no tickie no washie? Did she put you up to this? He says nothing. Is she listening to our conversation? Still nothing. I get up from my chair. I go to the window. I open it. I think of jumping. I am overwhelmed, sickened. I look out, the streets are wet, the evening rain has just stopped, the city is wet, shining, kind of romantic and there's Hugo on the phone telling me how disgusting my tits are and that my ass has gone flat. I remind him that he never had an ass."

"Men don't need one," Genevieve says.

"That's not true, it's a misconception; women like to hold on to something to give a little squeeze. Where are you Hugo, are you in the city, are you right out there, somewhere, are you on the payphone at the corner – someone is. Is that you Hugo?"

"I told you," Genevieve says. "I'm at a friend's house, I'm not where you can see me."

At the table Sarah's eyes begin to water. "I am sobbing. I hear myself say, well, I've got some news for you too; I put up with you for a long time, despite your comments about my tits, despite the fact that whenever you're supposed to show, you vanish. I got you through. Remember the cokehead episode, remember when you sold your father's watch, when you bankrupted us, including the money my grandmother left for the children to be educated. I could have dropped you a thousand times, but did I Hugo? Did I leave you or did I get down on my knees, down to where you are, and tell you, 'Don't worry bumpy, it'll be better soon, it won't happen again, things like this they happen once in a lifetime and it's over now – all gone. I held you Hugo, I talked you down, and this is what you're doing, this is my thanks?"
"I'm calling to say it's over," Genevieve says.

"Hugo, this is low, this is mean, it's lousy, after 26 years of marriage and four children, you call me from some chick's house to say you're getting head and our marriage is over. There is no response," Sarah says. "What is she like Hugo, is she that good? Does she do it some way I should know about, something special, a little trick in the finish?"

"I'm going now, he says," Genevieve says.

"Yes," she says.

There is a distraction as their main course is whisked out of the kitchen and to the table, the pig bladder blown up like a balloon, a thin fleshy globe. All eyes are on their table as the waiter pops the bladder with a carving knife and reveals the chicken, which appears naked, as if uncooked. "It doesn't brown in the bladder," the waiter says. "That's what keeps it so tender." He deftly takes the skin off the chicken and carves the bird as the patrons at other tables ask, what did they order?

"I was left without words," she says.

"He called two weeks later," Genevieve says. "Not exactly contrite."

"No, more like it was all a misunderstanding. It was a big nothing he said. No big deal. I was taken for a ride. She dumped you, I said. Yes. But not before she got 10,000 bucks outta me. For what? Everything? When we last spoke it sounded like you were getting something out of it."

"Did you tell the kids yet?" Genevieve says.

"No."

"Why not?"

"I didn't know what to say."

"You have to believe me," Genevieve says.

"I do believe you, I believed you for 25 years and I believed you two weeks ago, it's right now that's up in the air. What about the sham the ugly disgusting poor excuse for a relationship what about my hard tits."

"I was under the influence. Maybe we could get your tits redone, softened up a bit, put back where they were originally," Genevieve says.

"Maybe these are my tits now and that's just the way they're going to be."

"Maybe," Genevieve says.

"Come home, I say," Sarah says.

"And what did you tell the children?" Genevieve asks.

"We had to tell them something," Sarah says.

"What were they thinking? Did they wonder where he had gone?"
"We sat them down and said that we hadn't meant to frighten them, we're sorry for the delay, we weren't intending to keep them in the dark but wanted to wait until there was news, until there was something to say."

"And what did you say?"

"We said that Daddy had been kidnapped but now was back safe and sound."

"Kidnapped by who?"

"Whom."

"Terrorists of course our older boy said. And we just nodded. How awful, our daughter said. Yes, we said. But there is good news."

"What?" Genevieve asks.

"Once this has happened it will never happen again, you don't get kidnapped by terrorists twice."

"And did the children believe you, did they believe that he was kidnapped by terrorists?"

"Yes," Sarah says. "And oddly he believes it too." She finishes her wine. "I think it would have been better if he'd been killed. If the terrorists had finished him off, if when I looked out the window and saw someone at the phone booth, it had been him and then a big truck, a newspaper delivery truck, would have skipped the light, skipped the curb and flattened him – mid-sentence. That would have been good. It would be easier, would make this constant sensation of having been in some kind of accident more logical, or if not logical perhaps more natural. It would have been a more natural end for him to have been killed than for us to simply go on as though nothing has changed."

"And what for desert?" the waiter asks. "A sweet? A pudding?"

"Tea," Sarah says.

"What kind of tea? Black, herbal, green?" the waiter asks.

"What have we come to that one can't simply order a cup of tea without it turning into 20 questions?"

"We'll have the Chocolate Mousse At Your Discretion."

"What does that mean, at your discretion?" Sarah wants to know.

The waiter brings an enormous crockery bowl of chocolate mousse and leaves it on the table. He brings two smaller bowls and two spoons. "At your discretion," he says.

"You take as much as you want?" Genevieve asks.

"Or as little," Sarah says.

"Fantastic," Genevieve says, heavily serving herself. "This is so good it's almost chewy." They take what they like and then they want more but their spoons are no longer clean. "Use your butter knife," Genevieve urges her. "Your butter knife is clean." The tension is broken; they giggle over bad behaviour, gluttony and a bowl of chocolate mousse.

"After a week of vegetable juices, a life of deprivation this pudding is a drug. I am getting high just eating it," Sarah says. "So, what about you, what are your plans for the summer?"
"Off to Corsica. He has a place there."

"Have you ever been?"

"No. It's a first for him as well; he's always gone alone. You?" Genevieve asks.

"Here," Sarah says. "I am staying right here." She gestures to the rain that never stops. "Look at it out there. I can't go out there." She pulls the enormous bowl of pudding closer. People can't help but stare.

As I responded on the Guardian's blog:

AugustineSteven

1 August 2009 04:41PM

In. term. in. able.

Random example:

***"There is a distraction as their main course is whisked out of the kitchen and to the table, the pig bladder blown up like a balloon, a thin fleshy globe."***

"There is a distraction" refers to the bladder being whisked, or another event in parallel, such as a Duke's assassination? Ambig.

"Whisked"— tried and true, yes. But ghastly. "Accompanied" would have been funnier, "hustled" less twee, "spirited" more euphonious (against the next near-rhyme of "kitchen", certainly) and "smuggled" would have nudged the tone away from pots-clanging Fielding (Helen, not ___) farce.

"the pig bladder blown up like a balloon"— how about, "the pig bladder a balloon" for the sake of concision?

"a thin fleshy globe"— a "thin" globe? How would that look? How about: "a thin-skinned globe"?

Having gone that far...

***"It doesn't brown in the bladder," the waiter says. "That's what keeps it so tender." He deftly takes the skin off the chicken and carves the bird as the patrons at other tables ask, what did they order?***

Do we need the second (needlessly expository) sentence of these three? How about "says the waiter" instead of "(noun)-says", for a change? Do we need "deftly" (more of a story there if "clumsily" were the adverb choice, innit?)? How about "skins" instead of that awkward "takes the skin off"? How about: "He skins the bird and carves it as others ask what they ordered."

The average reader won't give a damn. But the "amateur" contestant, Lisa Blowers, avoided these kind of traps so fastidiously that it's obvious that she is aware of them as a category. Is Holmes?
APPENDIX 2

KONG of PAP

by Steven Augustine
KONG of PAP

-a concrete poem
-a critique
-a test

*on the death of a famous*

*something in*

2009
Multiple Choice

1. Is the overwhelming over-production of cookie-cutter encomia in the wake of a famous song-and-dance man’s death a sure sign of:
   -a. the triviality of encomia
   -b. the triviality of life
   -c. the power of consumerist brainwashing

2. If The Subject (in his quasi-military uniforms, aviator sunglasses, security phalanxes and exotic-animal-stocked mega-compound of remorselessly bad taste) effectively impersonated the African “strong man” dictator archetype, why? Because:
   -a. the African “strong man” dictator archetype meme is ever-present
   -b. the African “strong man” dictator archetype meme is a racist stereotype best confronted via infiltration, co-optation and subversion
   -c. he who can, will

3. Would The Subject’s apparent thing for little boys have been marginally less cringe-worthy if:
   -a. society were more tolerant of alternative lifestyles
   -b. The Subject’s affectation of pre-adolescent enthusiasms didn’t read like a blatant trap
   -c. at least some of the little boys had been black

4. Which motto would best sum up the oxymoronic core of The Subject’s presentation?
-a. inspiration by intimidation

-b. protective predation

-c. the red-herring of so-called blackness

**True or False**

1. Ludwig van Beethoven was a genius = John Lennon was too intelligent to be a genius = The Subject was too talented to be intelligent. **T/F**

2. Paradox: after 50 years of being saturated in Mass Media’s radiation, the populace is not *less* naive/credulous about its machinations but infinitely more so. **T/F**

**Essay Questions**

Is it cheaper to bleach black skin or remove it?

A: _______________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________

Can we pity what we envy?

A: _______________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________

Are the popular prodigies the easiest type of prodigy to come by? (ie, a child who can do surprisingly well what many adults can do considerably better; eg, a four-year-old who
can perform rudimentary algebraic proofs, impressing the masses as being a manifestation of genius on a par with Einstein’s, though the four-year-old’s work, submitted anonymously to an over-worked junior high school teacher with credit problems, might earn an unceremonious “B”

A: ________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________

Did Rock-n-Roll itself morph from being a gifted black youngster to a banal white hag in roughly the same amount of time it took The Subject to make the journey?

A: ________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________

Kong of Pap: 2

of eerie confluence
Folks, I'm goin' down to St. James Infirmary,
See my baby there;
She's stretched out on a long, white table,
She's so sweet, so cold, so fair.
When I went down to Old Joe’s barroom
On the corner by the Square
The drinks we all served as usual
And the usual crowd was there

Up to the bar I saw Big Joe beginning
With these eyes bloodshoting red
Gather round and now all you seen us
I’m gonna tell you just what Big Joe said
Now, when I die, bury me in my straight-leg britches,
Put on a box-back coat and a stetson hat,
Put a twenty-dollar gold piece on my watch chain,
So you can let all the boys know I died standing pat.
An' give me six crap shooting pall bearers,
Let a chorus girl sing me a song.
Put a red hot jazz band at the top of my head
So we can raise Hallelujah as we go along.
Folks, now that you have heard my story,
Say, boy, hand me another shot of that booze;
If anyone should ask you,
Tell 'em I've got those St. James Infirmary blues.
Well, on my left stood Joe McKennedy
And his eyes were bloodshot red.
When he told me that sad story,
These were the words he said:
I went down to the St. James infirmary,
I saw my baby there,
She was stretched out on a long white table,
So cold, and fine, and fair.
Go ahead!
Yes, sixteen coal black horses
To pull that rubber tied hack.
Well, it’s seventeen miles to the graveyard
But my baby’s never comin’ back.
And if anybody should ask you who’s been singing
If anybody should wanna know who wrote this song
Just tell him Big Joe was here this morning
And he was here this morning, yeah, but now he’s gone
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