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THE CONSPIRACY AGAINST THE HUMAN RACE

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THE CONSPIRACY AGAINST THE HUMAN RACE

A Short Life of Horror

Thomas Ligotti

Durtro
MMVII

“I have to admit that the results of these considerations won’t amount to anything for anyone who ‘stands in life still fresh and gay,’ as the songs says.”

—Jean Améry, On Suicide: A Discourse on Voluntary Death

Look at your body—
A painted puppet, a poor toy
Of jointed parts ready to collapse,
A diseased and suffering thing
With a head full of false imaginings.

—The Dhammapada

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Preface

In his study The Nature of Evil (1931), Radoslav A. Tsanoff cites a terse reflection set down by the German philosopher Julius Bahnsen in 1847, when he was seventeen years old. “Man is a self-conscious Nothing,” declared the young man. Bahnsen was not, of course, the first to arrive at a dour appraisal of his own kind. For millennia, humanity has been the butt of epigrams and tantrums that do not portray it with favor. Nevertheless, the reigning sentiment expressed on the subject more often ranges from qualified approval to loud-mouthed braggadocio. In general, we have given ourselves rather high marks as a form of life and are not chagrined by flattery, especially if it is cleverly devised to forefend our blushing with pride for being the standout guinea pigs in nature’s laboratory. Anyone pursuing an audience, or even a place in society, might profit from the following motto: “If you can’t say something positive about our species, then say something equivocal.” These facts, in themselves, are neither cause to ridicule the judgment of the majority nor grounds for conforming to it uncritically. Tending toward the negativity of the latter mind-set, Bahnsen went too far, as if to assure himself a lasting obscurity.

While Bahnsen does not figure in the following pages, I should say that his negative spirit is nonetheless present in this work, the brunt of which is concerned with how blind we are to the horrors of our existence as well as how adept we have become at sloughing them off. In short, my foregone conclusion is that our positive estimate of ourselves and our lives is all in our heads. As with many propositions that shoot for loftiness (“To be or not to be”), this one may be mulled over but not usefully argued. The few who have gone to the pains of doing so might as well have not existed. History proves that people will change their minds about almost anything, from which god they worship to how they style their hair. An exception to this rule, probably the only one, is that humanity has never seriously doubted its good opinion of itself or the value of its existence. Should demurral to the self-contentment of the masses then be renounced? That would be the brilliant decision. To be silent when no one is listening should be the first rule of dissenters, with special reference to those who are not giddy about being members of the human race. The second rule should be: if you must open your mouth, steer away from argumentation. Money and love may make the world go round, but logical disputation with that world cannot get it to budge. In the words of British author and Christian apologist G. K. Chesterton, “You can only find truth with logic if you have already found truth without it.” (Example: every debate over the existence of God is won by His defenders.) And if your truth is not the same as that of Chesterton and his like, you might as well pack it up and go home. It will blow up in your face the second it is heard by those who have already found a truth that is not yours, which in my case will be all but a few fellow miserablismers. Still, for those who would lob a bomb at received illusions, logical or quasi-logical arguments are lusciously alluring. As far as the tedium and inutility of argumentation goes, it may be alleviated by gut-level revilements, personal idolatries, peevish blow-ups, rampant pontifications, and tons of pretension. To organize this unruly fusion of the rational and the irrational, I will borrow heavily from a

prefabricated thesis of another foreign philosopher, one who anticipated my complaints before I was born . . . and wished I had not been. For the time being, I would like return to the above-cited obloquy from a teenage Bahnsen.

“Man is a self-conscious Nothing.” Taken at face value, this statement is a paradox and a horror. Being self-conscious and being nothing should rule out each other. Instead they are coupled to suggest an unreal monstrosity, an existential chimera on the order of the “undead.” The greater community of self-conscious mortals will tell you they are something, not nothing. The suicidal will tell you they are something but wish they were nothing. What almost no one will tell you is that they “know” they are nothing—living puppets helpless to act except as bidden by powers unseen—but, being self-conscious, suffer the illusion that they are something. They believe this is how it is with everyone—that all of us are living the same paradox, the same horror. They also believe we will do anything to keep this knowledge out of our heads because if we did not, how could we go on living? And why would we replenish the world with more self-conscious nothings, more puppets?

Take a moment to consider the puppet. It is an object made somewhat in our image that does not know what we know . . . or believe ourselves to know, which amounts to the same thing. Undeniably, our minds have wanton moments when a puppet seems as if it can come to life, hop up like a human being, know things that we know and perhaps other things that we do not. Then an insoluble psychological conflict erupts, a dissonance of perception that sends a tremor of supernatural horror through our being. (Anthropomorphobia is the term for the anxiety evoked when inanimate forms begin to disport human qualities.) Whether we believe or suspend belief in supernatural manifestations, they terrorize us because by habit we think of ourselves as natural beings living in a natural world, which is why we tend to equate the supernatural with horror. A puppet exists, but it cannot know how or why it exists. It is a know-nothing. And still it may have something to tell us about the natural and the supernatural.

Effigies of ourselves made by our own hands and minds, puppets were created to be actors in a world of their own, one that exists inside of ours and reflects back upon it. What do we see in that reflection? Only what we want to see, what we can stand to see. Through the prophylactic of self-illusion, we hide from what we fear to let into our heads. But puppets have nothing to hide. They are more than willing to betray a secret too terrible for us to know. Our lives are full of baffling questions that virtuosos of speculation trifle with and the rest of us forget about. Naked apes or embodied angels we perhaps may be, but not self-conscious nothings. We are somebodies who move freely about and think what we choose. Puppets are not like that. They have nothing in their heads. They are unreal. When they are in motion, we know they are moved by an outside force. When they speak, their voices come from elsewhere. Their orders come from somewhere behind and beyond them. And were they ever to become aware of that fact, they would collapse at the horror of it all, as would we.

When we are through playing with puppets, we put them away. They are only objects—like a corpse in a casket. The dead do not return except in horror stories and nightmares.

Ghosts and such are faulty transmissions from haunted minds. If they were not, our world would be a paradox and a horror in which no one could be certain of anything, not even of whether we were just puppets whose orders came from somewhere behind and beyond us. All supernatural horror depends on a confusion of what we believe should be and should not be. As scientists, philosophers, and spiritual figures have attested, our heads are full of illusions; things, including human things, are frequently not what they seem. Nevertheless, one thing we know for sure: the difference between what is natural and what is not. Another thing we know is that nature makes no mistakes so untoward as to allow things, including human things, to swerve into the supernatural. Were it to make such a mistake, we would do everything to keep this knowledge out of our heads. But to all appearances, thank God and nature, there is nothing to worry about. Almost everyone believes we are natural beings whose lives have an inborn value. No one can prove that our existence is a paradox and a horror. Everything is all right with the world.

THINKING HORROR

BEGINNINGS

For ages they had been without heads. Headless they lived, and headless they died. How long they had thus flourished none of them knew. Then something began to change. It happened over unremembered generations. The signs of a transfiguring were being writ ever more deeply into them. As their breed moved forward, they began crossing boundaries whose very existence they never suspected . . . and they trembled. Some of them eyed their surroundings as they would a strange land into which they had wandered, even though their kind had trod the same earth for countless seasons. And during idle moments after dark, they looked up at a sky filled with stars and felt themselves small and fragile in the vastness. More and more, they came to know a new way of being. It was as if the objects around them were one thing and they were another. The world was moving farther and farther away, and they were at the center of this movement. Another world was forming inside the heads they now had. Each of them, in time, became frightened in a way they had never known. In former days, they were frightened only by sights and sounds in the moments they saw or heard them. Now they were frightened by things that were not present to their senses. They were also frightened by visions that came not from outside them but from within them. Everything had changed for their kind, and they could never return to what they once had been. The epoch had passed when they and the rest of creation were one and the same. They were beginning to know a world that did not know them. This is what they thought, and they thought it was not right. Something which should not be . . . had become. And something had to be done if they were to flourish as they had before, if the very ground beneath their feet were not to fall away from under them. They could do nothing about the world which was moving farther and farther away from them and which knew them not. So they would have to do something about their heads.¹

CONSCIOUSNESS

The phenomenon known as consciousness is not a mainstream obsession. Most live and die without considering it, and who can say they are poorer for their neglect of this matter? A few have made its study into a line of work, one that has yielded as many theories of consciousness as it has books on the subject. Psychologists, cognitive neuroscientists, philosophers of mind, and other interested parties may intransigently espouse whatever conclusions seem most probable to their heads as they butt up against the heads of their colleagues. Consciousness: what is it, how does it work, and why has no other species of organic life been so honored with its peculiarities as we have? Although no solid answers seem impending on the broader questions presented by consciousness, there is general assent on its main effect: to make human beings the only creatures who know they are alive and know they will die. From this knowledge, everything that separates us from other life-forms derives.

For the rest of the earth's organisms, existence is relatively uncomplicated. They live—they reproduce—they stop living. For humans, things are more intricate, given that we know we are alive and know we will die. We also know we will suffer at intervals throughout our lives and then suffer—slowly or quickly and with pain—at the point of death. This is the knowledge which we “enjoy” as the highest beings in the animated diorama known as nature. United by such knowledge, we are also divided by it. For example, a debate has been going on among us for some years, a shadowy polemic that periodically attracts public notice. The issue: what do various people think about being alive in this world? Overwhelmingly, the average person will say, “Being alive is all right.” More thoughtful respondents will add, “Especially when you consider the alternative,” betraying a jocularly that is as logically puzzling as it is macabre. These speakers weigh down one side of the survey. On the other side is a small sample in disagreement with the majority. Their response to the question of what they think about being alive in this world will be a negative one. They may even fulminate that being alive is objectionable and useless on principle. Now both of these groups exhibit consciousness in its widely accepted sense. Why, then, are their responses so lopsided? For one thing, most people do not experience being alive as all that terrible. And even those who are statistically ill-favored do not generalize their experience into a principle, nor does their consciousness accentuate those things that are unquestionably awful about being alive. They go about their business as best they can for as long as they can.

Nobody's welfare, not even those who think and feel that being alive is objectionable and useless, is served by immolation in a calculus of the worst . . . if they can help it. But we do not control what we think or feel about being alive, or about anything else. If we did have this degree of mastery over our internal lives, then we would be spared an assortment of sufferings. Psychiatrists would be out of a job as depressives chose to stop being depressed and schizophrenics chose to silence unwanted voices in their heads. Those who believe they can choose their thoughts and feelings are nevertheless disabled from choosing what they choose to think and feel. Should they still believe themselves in control of what they choose to choose to think and feel, they still could not choose to choose . . . and so on?² Were there any choice on our part about what we think and feel, it would not be adventurous to conjecture that we would think only as needed and choose to feel good as appropriate. Some might choose to live in a permanent state of intense euphoria. With godlike power over your thoughts and moods, why hold back? Such control would permit us, by fiat of self-addlement, to be careless of every hideous fact that our consciousness may impart about life and death. What is more, those who say that being alive is all right and those who aver the opposite would become united rather divided: we all do what we can to lock out what being alive implies, whichever side of the issue we may be on. And since we have no power of veto over our birth, we could choose to be ecstatic about it rather than negative. We would all be on the same side if we had absolute control over any lethal knowledge that might come into our heads. But the best we can do is this: stay as stupid as we can for as long as we can. And some people can stay just so stupid for just so long.

Of course, it could be argued—and probably has—that our “knowledge” that we are alive and will die is only a compound of flabby abstractions that coincide with no definite or

uniform experience in human life. Practically speaking, this does seem be the way it is. “Being alive” encompasses such an abounding medley of feelings and sensations that it means nothing to say one knows anything about it. We may think of ourselves as “being alive” in moments of exhilaration or well being, yet we have no smaller portion of life in us when we are depressed or are suffering in some other style. And if we are not suffering at present—or at least not suffering noticeably—it is insurmountably difficult to know what suffering is like, or what it was once like for us in the past as well as what it will be like in the future. As for knowing that we will die, our ignorance is absolute, now and forever. We can only fear death without knowing anything about what we fear. Some people can short-circuit their jitters about public speaking by exposing themselves to it repeatedly. But no mortal can overcome the fear of death with practice. You can only put it out of your mind for the nonce, pathetically non-victorious over your fear and still unwitting of the feared inevitability. Therefore, we can have no conscious knowledge that we are alive and will die. This logic correlates to Zeno’s “proof” that nothing can move from one point to another because the distance between one point and another comprises an infinite number of incremental steps that in theory can never be completed. But just as things do in fact move from one point to another, so do we in fact have conscious knowledge that we are alive and will die. Everyone knows it, if only in a far off way. And the farther off it is, the more fluidly we can stay in motion and not lose our heads. Because even if we have conscious knowledge that we are alive and will die, the less we are conscious of this knowledge, the more we can keep doing what we do and keep being as we are, all things being equal. Luckily for us, or most of us, bringing to bear our consciousness on the subjects here under discussion is an uphill battle. Our brains do not seem to focus on these things very well or for very long. And should we manage to meditate on them for more than a few minutes, there really seems nothing to get excited about. “Yes, we are alive and will one day die. What of it? Pass those potato jobbies over to this side of the table, if you wouldn’t mind.” When the theme of life and death arises, that old warhorse, our minds go blank . . . unless we are philosophers who earn a living thinking about these things. Judging by the number of works they have produced, they know plenty about life and death, although not everything about them and perhaps not what is most interesting about them. The rest of us, or most us, only know that being alive is all right—“What a feast, and those potatoes”—especially when you consider the alternative.

PHILOSOPHY

If the brainiest among us are sometimes dubious about the value of existence, when push comes to shove they respond in the same way as the man in the street, declaiming, in more erudite terms, “Being alive is all right, etc.” The butcher, the baker, and the crushing majority of philosophers all agree on one thing: human life is splendidly justified, and its continuance by means of biological reproduction should be forever in vogue. To tout the opposing side is asking for trouble vis-à-vis a world in which all commerce depends on handshakes and smiles. But some people are born to bellyache that being alive is not all right. Should they vent this unpopular view in philosophical or literary works, they may do so without apprehension that their efforts will have an excess of admirers. Among such efforts is a treatise whose title has been rendered into English as On the Tragic (1941). Written by the Norwegian philosopher and man of letters Peter

Wessel Zapffe (1899-1990), On the Tragic has not appeared in any major language at the time of this writing. By some fluke or fortune, however, Zapffe's essay "The Last Messiah" (1933), which broadly sketches the principles of his masterwork, has been twice been translated into English.³

The aforementioned translations of "The Last Messiah" have been received as a belated gift by English-language readers who treasure philosophical and literary works of a pessimistic, nihilistic, or defeatist nature as indispensable to their existence, hyperbolically speaking. A good number of such readers naturally died before this gift could be placed in their hands, and more will die before On the Tragic is translated into their language. But these readers know better than to think that something indispensable to their existence, hyperbolically or literally speaking, must be received by them before their demise. They do not think that anything indispensable to one's existence is a natural birthright. Strictly speaking, nothing may be claimed as a natural birthright, since—to digress for a moment—every birthright is a fiction, something we dreamed after straying from a factual world into one fabricated by our heads. For those keeping track, the only rights we have are these: to seek the survival of our individual bodies, to create more bodies like our own, and to know that everyone's body will perish through a process of corruption or mortal trauma. (This is presuming that one has been brought to term and has survived to a certain age, neither being a natural birthright. Rigorously considered, our only natural birthright is to die.) No other rights have been allocated to us except, to repeat with emphasis, as fabrications.⁴ The divine right of kings may now be acknowledged as such a fabrication—a falsified permit for prideful dementia and arbitrary mayhem. The unalienable rights of certain people, however, seemingly remain current: whether observed or violated, somehow we believe they are not fabrications because an old document says they are real. Miserly or munificent as a given right may appear, it denotes no more than the right of way warranted by a traffic light, which does not mean you have the right to drive free of vehicular mishaps. Ask any paramedic.

The want of any natural rights on earth is not a matter of tragedy but one of truth. In Zapffe's estimation, tragedy entered the human scene only after our wayward heads began to gyrate with consciousness and self-consciousness: "I think, therefore I am and will one day die," as René Descartes' formulation might have read if he had gone the whole mile with it. They, our heads, then began turning traitor on us, dredging up enough why's and what's and how's to make us drop to the ground in paroxysms of bewilderment, threatening to crucify us with consciousness. This potentiality necessitated that certain defense mechanisms be exercised to keep us balanced on the knife-edge of vitality as a species. While consciousness may have had survivalist properties during an immemorial chapter of our evolution, it seems more lately to have become maladaptive, turning our self-awareness into a seditious agent working against us. As the Norwegian philosopher concluded, along with others before and after him, we must preclude consciousness for all we are worth from imposing upon us a too clear vision of the brute facts relevant to the "great matter of birth and death," to borrow from the jargon of Zen Buddhism. We are the species that knows too much to content ourselves with merely surviving, reproducing, dying—and nothing else. We want there to be more to it than that, or to think there is. This is the tragedy: consciousness has forced us into the

paradoxical position of uselessly striving to be something other than what we are—hunks of spoiling flesh on crumbling bones. (This fortuity is rather the best we can hope for, given the array of disasters that are superadded by consciousness to those for which we are naturally destined.) For other organisms, bumbling along from here to nowhere is well managed. For us, it is a messy business and often intolerably horrific. To end all this paradox and horror, as per Zapffe, we must cease reproducing. Nothing less will do.

Perhaps it is precisely because On the Tragic is not globally accessible that “The Last Messiah” seems precious as a terse and limpid epitome of Zapffe’s thought. This short essay has no drawn-out and obfuscating elaborations, no detours into the kind of metaphysical song and dance that makes, for example, The World as Will and Representation (two volumes, 1819 and 1844) by the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer so wearing on those of us who have no head for such things. Zapffe’s thesis is crystalline, uncluttered by metaphysical gibberish and worked through to its ineluctably dismal conclusion. With minimal novelty of thought, “The Last Messiah” succinctly codifies ideas that, in view of the works of his philosophical predecessors, were already well covered. The real thrust of his message does not emanate from insights that are as astonishing as they are irrelevant to anyone who is not a career academic or is fooling himself about the consolations of philosophy. For Zapffe, as for all pessimists, insistence on what is commonplace but taboo is his stock in trade. The expression of outlawed truisms, however, is unfailingly obscured by philosophy’s arcane brain-twisters, which are supposed to “teach us how to think” as we amble toward the grave. Thinking and living are irreconcilable. If we must think, it should be done only in circles, outside of which lies the unthinkable.

The Norwegian’s two central propositions as adumbrated above are as follows. The first is that consciousness, that glory of awareness and self-awareness unique to our species, makes our lives miserable, and thus we thwart it in four principle ways: (1) by isolation of the dire facts of existence from our minds, denying both to ourselves and to others (in a conspiracy of silence) that our condition is inherently disconcerting and problematic; (2) by anchoring our lives in metaphysical and institutional “verities”—God, Country, Family, Laws—based on charters issued by an enforcing authority (in the same way as a hunting license), imbuing us with a sense of being official, authentic, and guarded while shunting aside the feeling that these documents are not worth the paper they are written on (in the same way as a passport establishes one’s identity even though it may be forged); (3) by distraction, a widespread conspiracy in which everyone keeps their eyes on the ball—or a television screen or fireworks display—and their heads placidly unreflective; (4) by sublimation, the process by which thinkers and artistic types recycle the most demoralizing and unnerving aspects of life as works in which the worst fortunes of humanity are represented in a stylized and removed manner for the purposes of edification and entertainment, forming the conspiracy of creating and consuming products that provide an escape from our suffering in the guise of a false confrontation with it—a tragic drama or philosophical woolgathering, for instance. (Zapffe uses himself as an example that one’s awareness of writing about actual horror does not raise the resulting opus above the status of copy, just as a movie whose centerpiece is the romance of two young people, one of whom dies of leukemia, cannot rend its audience with the

throes of the real thing, albeit it may produce an award-winning tearjerker, as in the case of the 1971 film adaptation of Erich Segal's 1970 bestselling novel Love Story.) These tactics keep our imaginations from scrutinizing too closely the smorgasbord of pains and death-agonies laid out for us. Alongside these corporeal unpleasanties is the abstract abashment some persons suffer because, at the end of the day, they feel their lives are destitute of any meaning or purpose.⁵

While every other creature in the world is insensate when it comes to meaning and purpose, those of us on the high ground of evolution are full of this enigmatic hankering, a preoccupation that any comprehensive encyclopedia of philosophy treats under the heading LIFE, THE MEANING OF. This is why Zapffe inferred that beings with consciousness are a mistake in the world of nature. We have a need that is not natural, one that can never be satisfied no matter how many big lies we swallow. Our unparalleled craving may be appeased—like the yen of a dope fiend—but we are deceived if we think it is ever gone for good. Years may pass during which we are unmolested by LIFE, THE MEANING OF. Gratification of this want in our lives can come from anywhere or from nowhere. Some days we wake up and say, “It’s good to be alive.” If everyone were in such high spirits all the time, the topic of LIFE, THE MEANING OF would never rise up in our heads or our conversations. No one is nagged by the meaning of a life that is affluent with ease. But this ungrounded jubilation soon runs out of steam. Our consciousness, having snoozed awhile in the garden of incuriosity, is pricked by some thorn or other, perhaps DEATH, THE MEANING OF. Then the hunger returns for LIFE, THE MEANING OF, the emptiness must be filled again, the pursuit is resumed. And we will persist in chasing the impossible until we are no more. This is the tragedy that we do our best to cover up in order to brave an existence that holds terrors for us at every turn, with little but blind faith and habit to keep us on the move.

As posited above, consciousness may have facilitated our species’ survival in the hard times of prehistory, but as it became evermore acute it evolved the potential to ruin everything if not held firmly in check. Therefore, we must either outsmart consciousness or drown in its vortex of doleful factuality. Given this premise, Zapffe makes his second proposition, which is that the sensible thing to do would be to call off all procreative activities, thereby stamping out what has often been called the “curse of consciousness.” Not only would it be the sensible thing to do, but it would also be the most human, even the only human, gesture available to us.⁶ Questions now arise: is the condition of being human what we think it is? And what do we think it is to be human? Nowhere in philosophy or the arts are there answers on which we can all agree. Science has us down as a species of organic life. But whatever it means to be human, we can at least say that we have consciousness.

To repeat: we can tolerate existence only if we believe—in accord with a complex of illusions, a legerdmain of impenetrable deception—that we are not what we are. We are creatures with consciousness, but we must suppress that consciousness lest it break us with a sense of being in a universe without direction or foundation. In plain language, we cannot live with ourselves except as impostors. As Zapffe points out in “The Last Messiah,” this is the paradox of the human: the impossibility of not lying to ourselves

about ourselves and about our no-win situation in this world. Thus, we are zealots of the four strategies delineated above: isolation (“Being alive is all right”), anchoring (“One Nation under God with Families and Laws for all”), distraction (“Better to kill time than kill oneself”), and sublimation (“I am writing a book titled The Conspiracy against the Human Race”). To the mass of us mortals, these practices make us what we are, namely, beings with a nimble intellect who can deceive themselves for their own good. Isolation, anchoring, distraction, and sublimation are the wiles we use to keep our heads from dispelling every illusion that keeps us up and running. (“We think, therefore we know we are alive and will one day die; so we had better stop thinking, except in circles.”) Without this cognitive double-dealing, being alive would bare itself as a sordid burlesque and not the fabulous thing we thought it was. Maybe then we would know what it is to be human instead of just puppets beating the boards and one another. But that would stop the show that we like to think will run forever.

Being royally conscious of the solemn precincts in which we exist, of the savage wasteland that lies beneath all the piddling nonsense, would turn our world in on its head. For those who care about such things, it could also abolish the bestial world-policies of dog-eat-dog, big ones eating the little ones, and every swine for himself. Saddled with self-knowledge, however, we thrive only insofar as we vigilantly obfuscate our heads with every baseless belief or frivolous diversion at our disposal. But as much as our heads are inclined to clog themselves with such trash, a full-scale blockage is impossible. This impossibility makes us heirs to a legacy of discontent.⁷ Those who treasure philosophical and literary works of a pessimistic, nihilistic, or defeatist nature as indispensable to their existence are hopelessly frustrated with living in a world on autopilot when they would like to switch it over to manual consciousness just long enough for humanity to crash and burn. Most can live with discontent because it is concomitant with their hope that humanity will forever “survive” (Middle English by way of Middle French from the Latin supervivere—to outlive or live beyond). Reality bulletin: we, as a subcategory of the *mélange* of earth’s organisms, may outlive other species, but we will not live beyond our own time of extinction, as over ninety-nine percent of preceding life forms on this planet have not lived beyond theirs. We can pretend this will not happen, fantasizing super-scientific eternities, but in good time we will be taken out of the scene. This turn of events will be the defeat of Project Immortality, which has been in the works for millennia.

Our success as a species is calculated in the number of years we have extended our lives, with the reduction of suffering being only incidental to longevity. The lifespan of domesticated and non-domesticated animals has never changed, while ours has overtaken that of all other mammals. What a coup for us. Unaware of the length of their stay on earth, other warm-blooded life forms are sluggards by comparison. Without consciousness of death, we would not frantically disquiet ourselves to lengthen our mortal tenure. And how we have cashed in on our efforts: no need to cram our lives into three decades now that we can cram them into seven, eight, nine, or more. Time runs out for us as it does for all creatures, sure, but we can at least dream of a day when we choose our own deadline. Then everyone will die of the same thing: satiation with a durability that is **MALIGNANTLY USELESS**.⁸ Without a terminus imposed on our lifetimes, their

uselessness would become excruciatingly overt. Knowing ourselves to be on a collision course with the Wall of Death may be a horror, but it is the only thing that makes it possible to value that which comes before. While this quid pro quo may be a bad value, without it there is no value, for those who care. The eternal afterlife awaiting some of us on the other side of the wall is, quite naturally, only another end-of-the-line established to make this life valuable . . . or at least livable, which amounts to the same thing. Immortality in either this world or the next is an endgame that goes on forever: perpetual life in name only, it is, like death, the end of anything we can know. Rather than pushing us through the unknown, it pulls us right up to its threshold and leaves us there. From where we stand, immortality and death are synonymous: a two-headed monster of semantics. Having no value for us except as “endness,” they generate value backwards into life. This value may be unevenly distributed among the living, and for some it is nonexistent. Others must be satisfied with mere dribbles of value that stream thinly back from a terminal point in death or immortality. These are enough to seduce them into putting up with the present and looking to the future. But not until the future is behind us can there be any peace on this earth or in our heads. Then we may finish this long and arduous voyage without a thirst for the value that trickles into our lives from their certain end. If we could get over that nonsense, Zapffe’s prospectus for our self-extermination would be a walk in the park.

Neither of Zapffe’s main propositions—the mistake of consciousness or the corrective of shutting down the assembly line of reproduction—is exclusive to his philosophy. Buddhism has long preached that ordinary consciousness is the greatest roadblock to the deliverance of human beings from the crucible of existence. In his Tragic Sense of Life in Men and Nations (1913), the Spanish writer Miguel de Unamuno speaks of consciousness as a disease bred by a conflict between the rational and the irrational. The irrational represents all that is vital in humanity, including a universal desire for immortality. The rational is identified with the conclusions of consciousness, primarily that we will all die. The coexistence of the rational and the irrational turns the human experience into a wrangle of contradictions to which we can submit with a suicidal resignation or obstinately defy as heroes of futility. (Unamuno’s penchant is for heroic course with the implied precondition that one has the physical and psychological spunk for the fight: “I think, therefore I will die; but I cannot let that keep me from acting as if I did not think.”) The contradiction between the rational and the irrational in Unamuno’s Tragic Sense of Life is echoed by French existentialist superstar Albert Camus as the “absurd” (see footnote number seven to this chapter). On the scientific side there is mismatch theory. This subsidiary concept of evolutionary psychology studies characteristics of our species that were once adaptive but have since become inimical to surviving in the environment we have made for ourselves. The same idea was cited by Theodore Kaczynski (a.k.a. The Unabomber) as a rationalization for the mayhem he committed in his one-man war on technological “advancement.” The combination of our species’ aggressive nature with its relatively recent leap in consciousness and intellect was incarnated by Kaczynski himself, whose sophisticated brain and violent actions fit like a velvet glove in a chain mail gauntlet. Another luminary of “civilization,” the British physicist Stephen Hawking, has also alleged that our vigorous exercise of conscious thought without a counterbalancing diminution of aggression is a formula for

disaster. In the immemorial past, the cocktail of intelligence and ferocity gave us a leg up on the predatory competition, but it has since become a real powder keg of perils, not to mention being the nucleus of those psychological discontents popularized by Sigmund Freud.⁹

In his 1910 doctoral dissertation, published in English as Persuasion and Rhetoric (2004), the twenty-three-year-old Italian philosopher Carlo Michelstaedter vehemently critiqued, very much in same terms as Zapffe, the maneuvers by which we falsify the realities of human existence in exchange for a speciously comforting view of our lives.

Michelstaedter's biographers and critics have speculated that his hopelessness regarding any person's ability to break through their web of illusions was the cause of his suicide (two bullets from a gun) the day after he finished his dissertation. Other examples could be offered of serious philosophers and intellectuals who have observed that, while officially we crow about our brain-to-body ratio, much of our time is spent trying to keep that beast in our skulls well sedated. Few thinkers—by definition, one would have to say—have been untroubled by our self-awareness. Specialists in self-awareness revel in its mysteries as if they could crack this conundrum by immersing themselves in it (sublimation). Finaglers by profession, they are able to bail themselves out of any cognitive fix and sneak away with their old ideals and psychic infrastructure intact. They are also content with the stellar fact of human life that Michelstaedter could not accept: no one has control over how they will be in this world, a truth that eradicates all hope if how you want to be is immutably self-possessed (persuaded) and without subjection to a world that would fit you within the limits of its illusions and unrealities (rhetoric). But individuals are defined by their limitations; without them, they fall outside the barrier of identifiable units, functionaries in the big show of collective existence, attachés to the human species. The farther you proceed toward a vision of humankind under the aspect of eternity, the farther you drift from what makes you a person among persons in this world. In the observance of Zapffe, an overactive consciousness endangers the approving way in which we define ourselves and our lives. It does this by threatening our self-limited perception of who we are and what it means to know we are alive and will die. A person's demarcations as a being, not how far he trespasses those limits, create his identity and preserve his illusion of being someone. Transcending all illusions and their emergent activities would untether us from ourselves and license the freedom to be no one. In that event, we would lose our allegiance to our species, stop reproducing, and quietly bring about our own end. The lesson: "Let us love our limitations, for without them nobody would be left to be somebody."

Concerning the doctrine that our species should refrain from reproduction, a familiar cast of characters comes to mind. The Gnostic sect of the Cathari in twelfth-century France were so tenacious in believing the world to be an evil place engendered by an evil deity that its members were offered a dual ultimatum: sexual abstinence or sodomy. (A similar sect in Bulgaria, the Bogomils, became the etymological source of the term "bugger" for their adherence to the latter practice.) While mandated abstinence for clerics was around the same time embedded in the doctrines of the Catholic Church, even though they betimes give in to sexual quickening, its *raison d'être* was said to be the attainment of grace (and in legend was a requisite for those in search of the Holy Grail) rather than to

speed the extinction of humanity. Lusting to empower itself, the Church slacked off from the example of its ascetic founder in order to breed a copious body of followers and rule as much of the earth as it could. In another orbit altogether from the theologies of either Gnosticism or Catholicism, the German philosopher who wrote under the name Philipp Mainländer advocated chastity as the very axis for a blueprint for salvation. The target point of his redemptive plan was the summoning within ourselves of a “Will-to-die.” This brainstorm, along with others as gripping, was advanced by Mainländer in a treatise whose title has been translated as The Philosophy of Redemption (1876). Unsurprisingly, the work itself has not been translated into English. Perhaps the author might have known greater celebrity if, like the Austrian philosopher Otto Weininger in his popular study translated as Sex and Character (1903), he had ruminated more about the psychodynamics deriving from the venereal goad rather against it altogether.¹⁰ He also made the cardinal error of pressing his readers to work for such ends as justice and charity for all. Mainländer was an unbridled visionary, although not of the inspirational sort that receives a charitable hearing from posterity. He shot himself in the foot every chance he got before aiming the gun a little higher and ending his life. The act was consummated the day of the publication of The Philosophy of Redemption. The author, who avouched his personal sense of well being and proposed universal suicide for a most peculiar reason (see footnote thirteen to this section), may have killed himself to plead his sincerity. But it is not possible for anyone to seal definitively their subjective bona fides by an objective gesture. We are too estranged from one another’s inner worlds for any such measures to be convincing unless we are predisposed, for whatever reason, to be convinced. Had Mainländer lived longer, he might have taken lessons from Friedrich Nietzsche on how to be irrational and still influence people.¹¹

In “The Last Messiah,” Zapffe betrays no illusions about the possibility of defeating consciousness in the manner of Buddhism, nor is he so unworldly as to beseech a communal solution to snuff out the race as did the Cathari or the Bogomils. (He does critique the barbarism of social or religious maledictions in reference to suicide, but he is not a standard-bearer for this form of personal salvation.) His thought is a late addendum to that of various sects and individuals who have found human existence to be so untenable that extinction is preferable to survival. It also has the value of advancing a new answer to the old question: “Why should generations unborn be spared entry into the human threshers?” But what might be called “Zapffe’s Paradox,” in the tradition of eponymous formulations that saturate primers of philosophy, is as useless as the propositions of any other thinker who is pro-life or anti-life or is only juggling concepts to clinch “what is reality?” in part or in whole. Having said as much, we can continue as if it had not been said. The value of a philosopher’s thought is not in its answers—no philosopher has any that are more helpful than saying nothing at all—but in how well they speak to the prejudgments of their consumers. Such is the importance—and the nullity—of rhetoric. Ask any hard-line pessimist, but do not expect him to expect you to take his words seriously.

SOLUTIONS

Thinkers who agitate for pessimism are often dismissed with the riposte that their griping solves none of humanity’s chronic ills, all of which may be subsumed under the main

head of SUFFERING. It goes without saying, or should go without saying, that no one has any solutions for suffering, only stopgaps. But Zapffe does offer a “solution,” one that obviates all others—a solution to solutions. It may not be a realistic solution for a stopgap world, or even a novel solution, but it is one that would end all human suffering, should we ever care to do so. The pessimist’s credo, or one of them, is that nonexistence never hurt anyone and that conscious existence hurts everyone. Consciousness is an existential liability, as every pessimist agrees. It is also a mistake that has taken humankind down a black hole of logic, according to Zapffe’s Paradox. To correct this mistake, we should desist from procreating. What could be more judicious or more urgent? At the very least, we might give some regard to this theory of the mistake as a “thought experiment.” All galaxies grow cold and ghostly with the dying of their suns. All species die out. All civilizations become defunct. There is even an expiration date on the universe itself. We have already spoken of individuals, who are born with a ticking clock within them. Human beings would certainly not be the first phenomenon to go belly up. But we could be the first to spot our design-flaw, that absent-minded engineering of nature called consciousness, and do something about it. And if we are mistaken about consciousness being a mistake, our self-removal from this planet would still be a magnificent move on our part, the most laudable masterstroke of our existence . . . and the only one.

“Fluke” or “mutation,” rather than “mistake,” would be more accurate designations, since it is not in the nature of Nature to make mistakes—it just makes what it makes. “Mistake” has been used for its pejorative connotation in Zapffe’s “The Last Messiah” and in the works of other writers discussed herein. The American writer H. P. Lovecraft attributed the existence of humanity to a mistake or a joke on the part of the Old Ones, the prehistoric parents of our species.¹² Schopenhauer, once he drafted his theory that everything in the universe is energized by a Will-to-live, paints a picture of a humanity inattentive to the possibility that its life is a concatenation of snafus: “Many millions, united into nations, strive for the common good, each individual for his own sake; but many thousands fall sacrifice to it. Now senseless delusion, now intriguing politics, incite them to wars with one another; then the sweat and blood of the multitude must flow, to carry through the ideas of individuals, or to atone for their shortcomings. In peace, industry and trade are active, inventions work miracles, seas are navigated, delicacies are collected from all the ends of the earth; the waves engulf thousands. All push and drive, some plotting and planning, others acting; the tumult is indescribable. But what is the ultimate aim of it all? To sustain ephemeral and harassed individuals through a short span of time, in the most fortunate cases with endurable want and comparative painlessness (though boredom is at once on the lookout for this), and then the propagation of this race and of its activities. With this evident want of proportion between the effort and the reward, the will-to-live, taken objectively, appears to us from this point of view as a folly, or taken subjectively, as a delusion. Seized by this, every living thing works with the utmost exertion of its strength for something that has no value. But on closer consideration, we shall find here also that it is rather a blind urge, an impulse wholly without ground and motive.” After toiling to explain in circuitous and abstract terms why the universe is the way it is, Schopenhauer is straightforward here in limning his awareness that, for human beings, being alive is an exercise in “folly” and “delusion.” He

also noted elsewhere in his work that consciousness is “an accident of life,” an epiphenomenon of a world composed chiefly of inanimate things and not of organisms.

Just as important, Schopenhauer anticipated Zapffe when he wrote: “Let us for a moment imagine that the act of procreation were not a necessity or accompanied by intense pleasure, but a matter of pure rational deliberation; could then the human race really continue to exist? Would not everyone rather feel so much sympathy for the coming generation that he would prefer to spare it the burden of existence, or at any rate would not like to assume in cold blood the responsibility of imposing on it such a burden?” This was an understandable miscall by a nineteenth-century thinker. In his day, children were, as he says, a “necessity” to make a household into a going concern. He could not foresee what use hopeful couples would make of modern technologies which, while offering no intense pleasure, deliver babies to those who—as their first choice—want their own genetic material perpetuated; in others words, progeny in a proper sense rather than the adopted output of anonymous parentage. People get the biggest kick out of seeing the features of their faces plastered together onto one head.

Schopenhauer’s is a great pessimism, but it is not the last word. Lamentably, as noted above, his insights are yoked to a philosophical superstructure centered on the Will, or the Will-to-live, a blind, deaf, and dumb force that surfaced for reasons unknown, assembled a universe, and, once human bodies had shot up within it, irresistibly mobilized them to their detriment.¹³ This theory, while breathtakingly thought out, is ultimately unpersuasive and detracts from Schopenhauer’s commonsense pessimism. As a forefather of Zapffe, his defamations of human life as “some kind of mistake” or “a business that does not cover its costs” has brought satisfaction to millions who have figured out as much on their own but did not have the authoritative erudition and command of language to speak in public. That is all that any career pessimist can hope for—to put on show the horrors he has seen with his naked eye and the pain he has felt with his frail body. Constructing a quasi-logical basis for why this is the worst of all possible worlds is superfluous: neither this basis nor the terrible conclusion drawn from it can wring consent from those whose heads tilt in another direction. The question also arises as to whether a philosopher’s pessimism arises from his system or his system was retrofitted from his pessimism to give it a semblance of believability. The same may be said of any philosophy in which values—optimistic, pessimistic, or somewhere in between—are involved. Like so many other philosophical systems, Schopenhauer’s seems better suited to function symbolically in a work of fiction than to serve as an all-purpose explanation of the universe and human life.

Skipping the edifice of metaphysical theory that Schopenhauer erected, Zapffe explicates the gruesome rigmarole of all entity from an unqualified human angle and makes his point in language we can all understand without too much intellectual strain. He does not even ask us to evaluate what Schopenhauer called a “want of proportion between the effort and the reward” in our lives. That sort of rhetoric does not reach into the marrow of a people whose ever-advancing technology ushers them toward longer and faster lives. Schopenhauer’s evaluation of a “want of proportion, etc.” may or may not be right. Either way, we are unmoved. The disproportion between effort and reward is a non-factor in our

existence. The only factor is our survival as fruitful and multiplying individuals, expendable modules that further the survival of our species. Any other accounting of cost in human life, of a disparity between “the effort and the reward,” is damnably hedonistic. The twentieth-century Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once said or wrote, “I don’t know why we are here, but I’m pretty sure it is not in order to enjoy ourselves.” Wittgenstein may or may not have been right. Either way his opinion does not go to the core of human life. Hedonism will not wash as a justification for our existence. No price is too high for our creaturely reward of just being here and knowing that others will be here after us. This is our “pleasure,” and no pain will lead our species to question it. If this pleasure began in biology, it now stems primarily from psychological satisfactions. The survival of a family has long been an indulgence, not a necessity; a satisfaction of the ego, not of the body. Children are not insurance for one lone family but guarantors of a species-wide posterity undreamed before the silicon chip. And the one thing between us and that survival is consciousness—invader of our homes, intruder into our heads. We have more hours in a day to fixate on our mortality than did our antecedents. How many have not found their minds chasing off thoughts of death, or even of life in its more grisly phases, because they could not abide this consciousness (isolation)? How many have not felt themselves nestled in their church, country, or family bosom because they could not abide this consciousness (anchoring)? How many have not sought to divert their minds from any thought whatever because they could not abide this consciousness (distraction)? And how many have deterred their minds from real torture by derealizing it in paintings, music, or words because they could not abide this consciousness (sublimation)? Zapffe’s achievement as a pessimist treads beyond Schopenhauerian complaints of how painful life can be. We—as an abstract mass—have no problem with pain. The problem for us—as concrete individuals—is the pyrotechnics of cogitation that issue from our consciousness of pain, of death, of life as a dance macabre into which we are always pulling new partners and lying to them as we lie to ourselves. Our problem is that we have to watch ourselves as we go through the motions; our problem is that we know too much that we are alive and will die. And our solution is in the turns we take in a world where we live as puppets and not as people.

Despite Zapffe’s work as a philosopher, although not in an occupational capacity (he earned his living by publishing poems, stories, and humorous pieces), he is nonetheless better known as an early ecologist who coined the term “biosophy” to name a discipline that would conjoin all future philosophy with the probing of biology. (Besides “The Last Messiah,” the only other translations of Zapffe as of this writing take up a few pages in a book on Norwegian ecologists (as cited in footnote number three to this section), even fewer pages in an interdisciplinary journal commingling literary and environmental issues, and some space on a Weblog.) Thereupon, he serves as an inspiration to the environmentalist agenda, the politics of the health of the earth. Here, too, we catch the human creature—and Zapffe himself, as he affirmed—in the act of conspiring to build barricades against the odious facts of life by isolation, anchoring, distraction, and sublimation as it engages in an activity (in this case the cause of environmentalism) that is irrelevant to the perennial issue. Destruction of the environment is but a sidebar to humanity’s refusal to look its fate in the face. We live in a habitat of unrealities—not of earth, air, water, and wildlife—and cuddly illusion trumps grim logic every time. Some

of the more militant environmentalists, however, have concurred with Zapffe that we should retire from existence, although their advocacy of abstinence and universal suicide to save the earth from a death-pillage by human beings is not exactly what the philosopher had in mind. While a worldwide suicide pact is highly appealing, what romantic fabrications would cause one to take part in it solely to conserve this planet? The earth is not our home. We came from nothing, and to that condition our nostalgia should turn. Why would anyone care about this dim bulb in the blackness of space? The earth produced us, or at least subsidized our evolution. Is it really entitled to receive a pardon, let alone the sacrifice of human lives, for this original sin—a capital crime in reverse (very much in the same way that reproduction makes one an accessory before the fact to an individual's death)? Someone once said that nature abhors a vacuum. This is precisely why nature should be abhorred. Instead, the nonhuman environment is simultaneously extolled and ravaged by a company of poor players who can no longer act naturally. It is one thing for the flora and fauna to feed and fight and breed in an unthinking continuance of their existence. It is quite another for us to do so in defiance of our own minds, which over and over again pose the same question: "What are we still doing in this horrible place?"

There is a theory that the creation of the human species is nature's roundabout way of cutting into its veins and bleeding out.¹⁴ A strange idea, no protesting that, but not the strangest we have ever heard or lived by. We could at least assume the theory and see where it leads. If it is false, then where is the harm? But until it is proven so, we must let ourselves be drawn along by nature, as we always have, if only by twiddling our thumbs and letting its suicidal course continue without interference. From a human vantage, would this not be a just self-punishment by nature for fashioning a world in which pain is essential, a world that could not exist without pain, a world where pain is the guiding principle of all organisms, which are relentlessly pushed by pain throughout their lives to do that which will improve their chances of surviving long enough to create more of themselves? Left unchecked, this process will last as long as a single cell is left quivering in this cesspool of the solar system, this toilet of the galaxy. So why not lend a hand in nature's eradication, in case it has second thoughts? For want of a deity, let the earth take the blame for our troubles. What else is it good for? Let it save itself if it can—the condemned are known for the acrobatics they will perform to wriggle out of their sentences—but if it cannot destroy what it has made, then may it perish along with every other living thing it has brought forth in pain. While pain is not a problem for a species, even a hyper-sophisticated hive of creatures such as human beings, it is not a phenomenon whose praises are often sung.

As "pain" signifies imperfection in the world of lived experience, more often the word "evil" is used to connote a disruption within the religious systems that have been ingrained for millennia into the psyche of our species. The impellent for favoring the latter term, with its dual overtones of both the moral and the metaphysical, is not only to bolster the credibility of another world, one that is "better" than this one, but also to create a distance between the condition of being and the condition of suffering. This ploy is more arresting in Western than in Eastern religions. The purpose of distancing the condition of being from that of suffering is to salvage the world as a terrain of action

where there is something of worth to be fought over rather than dismissing it as a material hell where to be born is a curse and to breed others in our image is an act of criminal insanity. Such is the function of the concept of evil—to give glamour, in both meanings of the word, to our lives. Pain, on the other hand, is an unglamorous fact of life and cannot be raised or lowered to the status of a concept, either moral or metaphysical, and compresses the distance between the condition of being and the condition of suffering. In pain, the two are one. For a Western religion such as Christianity, evil can be brushed aside as being “in the world” but not identical with it, offering believers the possibility of atoning for their divagations from the straight and narrow, and, if all goes well, securing their eternal salvation. Ask Gilles de Rais, who confessed to the sexually motivated disfigurement and murder of scores and perhaps hundreds of children, then was executed in good odor with the Church for his spoken repentance and therewith reserved a place for himself in God’s heaven. For those who play by the rules of the Catholic religion, there is no sound argument against Rais’ salvation. Neither is there a case on behalf of any of his victims who might have died in a damning state of sin as laid out in the Bible or in the Byzantine theology of various propagandists for the Almighty—ask St. Augustine. Any other interpretation of these technicalities is born of an effete sense of justice divorced from the order of the Creation. A sense of irony is not an attribute of the Lord . . . or of the moral statutes, natural or divine, that we trust to save our world from anarchy and chaos. Irony is as caustic as doubt, including the doubt that being alive is all right. Believe it or not, as you choose.

DISILLUSIONMENT

“Depressing” is the adjective that ordinary persons affix to the life-perspectives expressed by men such as Zapffe, Schopenhauer, and Lovecraft. The doctrines of any world-class religion, dolorous as some of them are, will never be similarly defamed. The world dotes on its lunatics, whether saintly or sadistic, and commemorates their careers. Psychopaths make terrific material for news agencies and movie studios; their exploits always draw a crowd. But the moment a discouraging word is spoken, some depressing knowledge, that crowd either disperses or goes on the attack. It is depression not madness that cows us, demoralization not insanity that we dread, disillusionment of the mind not its derangement that imperils our culture of hope. Salvation by immortality—that keystone of every religious schema except Buddhism—has meaning only for those who have been bred to be normal psychotics. An epidemic of depression would stultify the disembodied voice of hope, stopping life dead in its tracks. Irrationality heightened into rampaging delusion provides our species with the morale to forge ahead and to keep making more of ourselves, which is to say that it obliges us with a rationale for bragging about what we are biologically and socially bidden to do anyway.

Zapffe, Schopenhauer, and Lovecraft were men of sound mind who subsisted nicely without the grand designs of religion that are handed out on every street corner . . . and that they handed back. This is a risky thing for anyone to do, but it is even more touchy for writers because anti-spiritual convictions will demote their work to a lower archive than that of wordsmiths who capitulate to what “the heart knows” . . . or at least follow the maxim of being equivocal on the subject of our species. Readers—and this includes even the highest brows—do not want to be told that their lives came about by an

evolutionary contingency and that meaning is not even in play as an issue in human existence, at least not against a cosmic and eternal background.¹⁵ Wherefore Schopenhauer's failure to loom as large as Nietzsche in the museum of modern thought. Schopenhauer promises nothing but extinction for the individual, or, more specifically, the postmortem recall of his "true nature" as a tiny parcel of the personless and ever-roiling Will. ("The Will does not think and cannot die. I am just a thinking puppet of the Will and will stop thinking when my body is dead.") Nietzsche borrows from religion and preaches that, although we will not be delivered into the afterlives of his ecclesiastic models, we must be willing in spirit to reprise this life again and again to its tiniest detail for all eternity.¹⁶ As unappealing as the prospect of repeating our lives even once may seem to some of us, we are not the ones who make a writer's reputation. This is the bailiwick of the philosophical trendsetters among us, who eventually discovered Nietzsche to be the most spellbinding conundrum in the history of the mind. All the better for the perseverance of his corpus, which has supplied his exegetes with lifetimes of interpretation, argumentation, and general schismatic disharmony—all the purposeful activities that any religionist, with or without a deity, goes for.

Among other things, Nietzsche is of legendary repute as a go-getter for personal and species-wide survival, making an exception for weaklings and anti-lifers whom a strong society must be rid of. As with other isolated eruptions from this all-affirming, all-loving philosopher, Nietzsche's abhorrence of the weak and life-denying is deliciously tricky for his interpreters to reconcile within the totality of his works. Some are able to do so to their satisfaction and some are not. Thinkers great and not so great have their internal conflicts, but Nietzsche is philosophy's toughest knot to untie, which has worked out swimmingly for his fame. Not so for Schopenhauer, who is philosophy's red-headed stepchild because he is clearly on record as having said that being alive is not all right. Even his most admiring commentators, who do not find the bulk of his output to be off-putting, pull up when he waxes pessimistic, which is well beyond queer when one considers that comparatively few pages of the thousands that Schopenhauer wrote openly harp on the forlorn nature of existence and few who analyze his work have much to say about this side of what he wrote. (In Patrick Gardiner's seminal English-language study Schopenhauer (1963), the term "pessimism" does not appear in the index nor is it subject of discussion in the book itself.) And yet his stock is rather low compared to other major thinkers, as is that of all philosophers who have unconcealed leanings against life. It would be naïve to bemoan the fact that pessimistic writers do not rate and may be denounced in both good conscience and good company. This judgment makes every kind of sense in a world of card-carrying or crypto-optimists. Once you understand that, you can spare yourself from suffering inordinately at the hands of "normal people," a debatable confederation of creatures but an insidious one. In concert, they are more a force of nature than a group of individuals who keep the conspiracy going by echoing the same banalities and watchwords.

Integral to the normal world's network of cloying essentials—purpose, patriotism, home cooking—is the conviction that all of us are (or have like an extra internal organ) a so-called self (often capitalized). No quibbling, everyone shares the same conviction, even those who, like the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher David Hume, have done a

good job of logically arguing against the existence of a self. But logic cannot exorcise that “I” which stares back at you in the mirror. When people say they have not been feeling their old self, our thoughts turn to psychology not metaphysics. To reason or to hold as an article of faith that the self is an illusion may help us to step around the worst pitfalls of the ego, but mitigation is light years from liberation. And like the soul, or angels, the self is a blank slate on which so many people have written so many things. Yet even if there is something like a self living invisibly inside us, who is to say—except anyone who wants to—that it is not toyed with in the same way as the visible matter encasing it? Why should not every self come with its own strings attached? Some believe that a Big Self enfolds all of our little selves. Can little selves have littler selves? Can a Big Self have bigger selves? As above, so below . . . as the saying goes. That said, some of us are more sure than others of our selves, whether they are lastingly modeled at the self factory or cut to be altered like a suit of clothes. And how many of us want nothing so bad as to be somebody?

Without a whole-hearted belief in the self, the person, our world is kaput. Were a personal god to be excluded from everyone’s universe, persons would still retain their status. Otherwise, everything we know would be a no-go. Why bother to succeed as individuals or to progress as societies once we have identified ourselves as only a crisscrossing mesh of stuttering memories, sensations, and impulses? Because these events occur inside the same sack of skin, we suppose an enduring, continuous personality—something to be exalted or condemned either in the mass or as separate units, something that serves as the substructure for war, romance, and every other genre of human activity. In the hierarchy of our most puissant fictions—Homeland, God, Family—the Person is at the pinnacle.

We cannot corroborate the reality of ourselves any more than that of our gods. And still we are suckered into posing under a false identity, inducted into a secret agency that seems to us the most real thing going. How does this occur? So far, the best theory we have is that the person is made possible by consciousness, which divides one head from another and from the world around it, giving the creature that carries around that head the sense of being somebody, specifically a human somebody. No creature caged in a zoo knows what kind of thing it is, let alone makes a stink about being superior to another kind of thing, whether animal, vegetable, or mineral. As for us humans, we thoroughly reek of our sense of being special. For millennia, those hailed as the most conscious among us—the ones who are needful of the most refined type of brainwashing—have made investigations into what it means to be human. Their disparate ramblings on this subject keep our brains buzzing while our bodies go the way of surviving, reproducing, and dying. Meanwhile, speculation continues apace on the subject of our humanness, our selves, our personhood. When you start with a premise that is imprudently unfounded, only insanity and nightmare can follow—the prima materia of what fascinates us when presented in the form of histories, biographies, celebrity gossip, clinical studies, and news reports.

Even though both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche spoke only to an audience of atheists, Schopenhauer erred—from a public relations standpoint—by not according human

beings any special status among the world of things organic and inorganic or trucking in an overblown meaning to our existence. Contra Schopenhauer, Nietzsche not only took religious readings of life seriously enough to deprecate them at great length, but was hell-bent on replacing them with a grander scheme of goal-oriented values and a sense of purpose that, in the main, even nonbelievers seem to thirst for—some bombastic project in which persons, whom he also took seriously, could lose (or find) themselves. Key to Nietzsche’s popular success with atheist-amoralist folk is his materialistic mysticism, a sleight of mind that makes the world’s meaninglessness into something meaningful and transmogrifies fate into freedom before our eyes. As for Schopenhauer’s truly fatalistic puppetry, in which an unknowable phenomenon (the Will) pulls all the strings—that had to go. If none but Schopenhauer have conceived of the Will as an actual phenomenon—one that has as much going for it as any god, which is not saying much—it still has the power to be depressing, for it reduces persons to masks. But Nietzsche needed persons, not masks, for his philosophy. Specifically, the Nietzschean love of fate (amor fati) works only insofar as a person, a self, is real enough to give this love a meaning—not something unreal, not a self-conscious nothing, not anything whose orders come from somewhere behind and beyond it. In confederacy with those whom he believed himself to have surpassed in the race toward an undefined destiny, Nietzsche did what he could to keep the human pageant strolling toward . . . wherever. (“We think, therefore we will die; so we had better learn to love dying, as well as any other ‘terrible and questionable’ thing we can think of.”) Even though he had the clarity of mind to recognize that values did not grow on trees nor were writ on stone tablets, he duped himself into thinking that it was possible to create them, although how and what would be created he could not say. Tough-minded enough to demolish the life-rejecting faith of the Crucified, Nietzsche was also fated to perpetuate His tripe with the Anti-christ-like impostures of Zarathustra, who was groomed to take over Christianity’s administration of the Western world and keep it afloat with counterfeit funds.

Why did this no-saying yes-man believe it was so important to keep up our esprit de corps by fending off the crisis of nihilism that he predicted as forthcoming? Nietzsche could not have thought that at some point people were going to turn their heads to the wall due to a paucity of values, which may run low sometimes but will never run out, and, after all, regulate only how one lives, not if one keeps living. Those who were supposed to be among the suicidally affected have survived fine and dandy: whichever side of the nihilistic coin happened to come up for them, they still carried home an armful of affirmations. To publish or perish is not a question that professional thinkers have to think about for long. And whatever crisis there may still be ahead will have to take place in a post-nihilistic environment. As a bad name for some people to call others, as well as a general orientation of mind, “nihilist” will live on. But as a threat to the human head, the nihilist, if such a being ever really existed, is as dead as God and Dillinger. (See James E. Edwards’ The Plain Sense of Things: The Fate of Religion in the Age of Normal Nihilism, 1997.) To make a clean sweep of one’s values is rather impossible—an ideal to be imagined till one is overtaken by a natural end. Schopenhauer, the maestro of life’s devaluation, knew as much. But Nietzsche fretted about those unborn values which he imagined his work needed to inspire, worrying over them as would an expectant parent concerned that his name, his blood, and his codes both moral and genetic be

bodied forth by generations fading over the hills of time. Leaving no values that posterity could not fabricate on its own, Nietzsche was all the same a magnificent opponent of enslaving values from the past. In their place, he left nothing. And for that we should thank him.

After Nietzsche, pessimism was revaluated by some, rejuvenated by others, and still rebuffed as depressing by ordinary persons, who went on yammering about their most activating illusion: “Today is better than yesterday and tomorrow will be better still.” While being alive may be all right for the moment, the future is really the place for a person to be, at least as far as we care to see into it. Lovecraft is a figure of exceeding intrigue here because much of his fiction is based on a clutch of godlike beings whose very presence in the universe degrades the idea of betterment in human life into a cosmic miscalculation. Azathoth the Blind Idiot God, Nyarlathotep the Crawling Chaos, and those monstrous researchers of the Great Race who pass the eons by traveling through time and the galaxies to record miscellaneous data and lore to fill their library: these entities symbolize the Lovecraftian universe as a place without unconditional sense, meaning, or value. This perspective is memorably expressed in Lovecraft’s poem “Nemesis”:

I have seen the dark universe yawning
Where the black planets roll without aim,
Where they roll in their horror unheeded,
Without knowledge or lustre or name.¹⁷

This is not what fans of a better future wish to hear. Even highbrow readers—perhaps because they tend to be immoderately stricken with consciousness, which is always a stickler if you want to keep your spirits from flagging into depression—will deny the validity of such a vision or treat it as only a literary diversion, which in effect is all that it is . . . along with every glyph and scribble ever made or tale told since Gilgamesh sojourned in the land of the dead. These same readers have been seen in public lapping up such drivel as Theosophy, Anthroposophy, Transcendental Meditation, Paganism and Neopaganism, Pantheism, Gnosticism, and the preaching of New Age sects.¹⁸

As a rule, though, most prefer old and reputable belief systems and their sectarian outgrowths. So they trust in the deity of the Old Testament, an incontinent putz who soiled Himself and the universe with His corruption, a born screw-up whose seedy creation led the Gnostics to conceive of this genetic force as a factory-second, low-budget divinity pretending to be the genuine article. They trust in Jesus Christ, a historical cipher cobbled together like Frankenstein’s monster out of parts robbed from the graves of messiahs dead and buried—a savior on a stick. They trust in Allah and his mouthpiece Mohammed, a prophet-come-lately who pioneered a new genus of humbuggery for an emerging market of believers that was not being adequately served by existing religious products. They trust in anything that verifies their importance as persons, tribes, societies, and particularly as a species that will endure in this world and perhaps in an afterworld that may be uncertain, unclear, or an out-and-out nightmare, but which sates their appetite for values not of this earth—that depressing, meaningless place they know so well and

want nothing more than to obliterate from their consciousness.¹⁹ Sure enough, then, writers such as Zapffe, Schopenhauer, and Lovecraft only write their ticket to marginality when they fail to affirm the worth and wonder of humanity, the validity of its values (whether eternal or provisional), and, naturally, a world without end, or at least one that continues into the foreseeable future. Anything else is too depressing to be countenanced.

Phobic to any somber cast of thought, humankind has nonetheless imbibed ever-increasing disillusionments throughout its history. The biblical Genesis, and all other fables of origination, has been reduced to a mythic analogue of the big bang theory and the primordial soup. Pantheon after pantheon has been belittled into “things people used to believe.” Petitions for divine interventionism are murmured only inside the tents of religious fanatics and faith-healers. And things have not been the same since the earth began revolving around the sun rather than the other way around. In the past century or so, disillusionments of this kind have become the province of specialists in the various sciences, so they are not well understood by, if known to, those who go to church on Sunday and read the astrology column in the newspaper the rest of the week. Generalists of disillusionment broadcast on a wider frequency. Yet their message, a repetitive dirge that has been rehearsed for thousands of years, is received only by epicures of pessimism, cognitive mavericks who have impetuously circled the field in the race to the finish line. Contemporaneous with every generation, disillusionment must proceed surreptitiously. Anyone caught trying to accelerate its progression will be reprimanded and told to sit in the corner. While the Church has lost its clout to kill or torture dissenters such as Zapffe, Schopenhauer, and Lovecraft, they are still closely watched by the guard dogs of consciousness both sacred and secular. A sign of progress, some would say. But sufferance of such minds should not lead us into premature self-congratulation. The speed at which our kind moves toward an ultimate disillusionment is geologically slow, and humanity can be cocksure of kicking the bucket by natural causes or an “act of God” before it travels very far toward that glittering day when with one voice it might cry out, “Enough of this error of conscious life. It shall be passed down no longer to those innocents unborn.”²⁰

NOTES

1. The nativity of human consciousness as depicted in this paragraph may be seen as (1) a fable of humanity's "loss of innocence" and estrangement from a "natural" way of being in the world, an opening gambit borrowed from Peter Wessel Zapffe's "The Last Messiah," which, absurd as it may seem to some readers, is the backbone of the present work; (2) a speculative moment with a loose footing in evolutionary neuroscience. Those acquainted with D. E. Harding's On Having No Head (1961) should note that the metaphor of "headlessness" is borrowed from this work but does not signify an endorsement of it.
2. This train of thought synthesizes a brand of metaphysical and psychological determinism according to which human beings cannot either defy accepted workings of reality or manipulate the origination of a state of mind and emotion. Naturally, all forms of determinism court the incredulity of the most sizeable portion of thinkers and non-thinkers alike. Anyone who subscribes to one or more of the arguments for an absolute or qualified free will may choose to disregard this passage. (The futility of all argument has already been stipulated in the preface to this work.) Arguments against free will are the most vilified in human thought, far more than arguments against the existence of gods. Even leading atheists draw the line whenever someone argues that, logically speaking, we are not in control of our thoughts and behavior. As materialists, they deny that moral "laws" have been crafted in a world unperceived by our senses; as tax-paying citizens, they still need to live in this one. And to disallow moral agency and responsibility would overturn every authorized ruling that makes the world work, if deficiently. Without the assumption of morality and responsibility, no one could be held accountable for crimes against life and property. In principle, it is irrational to bring before a bar of justice some skin-suited automaton whose behavior is out of alignment with the herky-jerky machinery in which it is supposed to function. But not to do so would be destructive of the sociopolitical status quo, which must be preserved if people are to be protected from sinking into a funk of foundationlessness. Newsflash: anyone who must receive instruction in morality will not benefit from it. Those concerned with morality are not the ones who need concern themselves with morality. The ones who need to be concerned with morality are those who will never be concerned with morality. Ask any sociopath, whose deficit of fellow-feeling is evened out by others with a hyper-developed, unhealthy sense of moral responsibility. The latter group will take on the guilt from which the remorseless are spared, blaming themselves for tragedies they cannot lawfully or logically be connected with. One is as helpless as the other to be anything but what they are, morally speaking. Everyone in between these groups will go with the wind. The majority cannot be taught how to feel about their behavior, only bludgeoned or cajoled into doing one thing or another. Rewards and punishments may be effective, but there can never be a mathematics of morality. Either the chemistry and neurology are there or they are not. Every day it is proven that not even deities that hand down codes of conduct can enforce them among their believers. For a god to publish the warning "Do this and do not do that . . . or else" is the moral equivalent of a highway speed trap. What a racket is right and wrong, and what a joke is justice or injustice: concepts thought up by parties with a vested interest in them. They hold nothing together that is not already held together by forces outside any law or moral system. But for a sensitive consciousness, this is something too terrible to know. Among those who back determinism in theory, none lobby for major renovations of

their society's justice system as its wheels grind slow but exceedingly fine. The determinist is not about to derail what he himself regards as illusions, which may be rough on bad-mannered or ill-designed automata but serve the social machine acceptably well. The determinist is also aware that if our illusions fall apart on paper, they are intractable in our lives. They have such a lock upon us that even the desire to escape from them is nearly impossible. To hate our illusions or hold them dear only attaches us to them all the more. We cannot stand up to them without our world falling apart, for those who care. While determinists stick to their logic, they are satisfied to let their philosophical opponents run the puppet show. What choice do they have? Yet how much slack do you give to what you believe is a lie, even a lie that holds steady the social order and braces up everything you have become accustomed to—your most cherished image of yourself, your country, your loved ones, and the value you place on your work, your hobbies, your possessions, your “way of life”? How much slack do you give to what you believe to be a lie before you say you have had it with lies, before you forsake everything to live with what you really think and feel about the way things are? How much slack? Answer: all the slack in the world.

3. Although the translation of “The Last Messiah” in the March-April 2004 number of the British journal Philosophy Now is annotated as the first appearance of this essay in English, it was previously included in an anthology of English translations of the works of Norwegian writers entitled Wisdom in the Open Air: The Norwegian Roots of Deep Ecology (1993), eds. Peter Reed and David Rothenberg (translation of “The Last Messiah” by Sigmund Kvaløy with Peter Reed). Zapffe's writings have not been translated into English except stingily and posthumously. This is not a queer happenstance for writers whose humor is unfriendly to the status quo. Until they have been long under the ground, if then, their works are kept on life support by an underground readership. Those among the resurrected include H. P. Lovecraft, whose horror fiction and varied nonfiction writings waited decades before they were made fairly accessible even to readers in his native country, where writers of a negative persuasion—whether homegrown or foreign—are relegated to the lower echelons of the cult figure until they are trusted to appear on the shelves of better bookstores or from the presses of major publishers.
4. While philosophers and other thinkers have often deliberated upon the fabricated nature of our lives (example: P. L. Berger and T. Luckman, The Social Construction of Reality, 1966), mass audiences are not often regaled with the practical import of this idea. But sometimes they are, if only momentarily and deceptively. In the 1976 film Network, a news anchorman, Howard Beale, breaks the following story to his viewers: “Today is Wednesday, September the 24th, and this is my last broadcast. Yesterday I announced on this program that I was going to commit public suicide, admittedly an act of madness. Well, I'll tell you what happened: I just ran out of bullshit. Am I still on the air? I really don't know any other way to say it other than I just ran out of bullshit. Bullshit is all the reasons we give for living. And if we can't think up any reasons of our own, we always have the God bullshit. We don't know why we're going through all this pointless pain, humiliation, decays, so there better be someone somewhere who does know. That's the God bullshit. And then there's the noble man bullshit; that man is a noble creature that can order his own world; who needs God? Well, if there's anybody out there that can look around this demented slaughterhouse of a world we live in and tell me that man is a noble creature, believe me: That man is full of bullshit. I don't have anything going for me. I haven't got any kids. And I was married for forty-three years of shrill, shrieking fraud. So I don't have any bullshit left. I just ran out of it, you see.” Later in the film,

Howard Beale excavates a new load of bullshit during the course of a rant in which he reinstates his previous denial that “man is a noble creature.” He does this by enjoining his viewers to seize upon the following words: “You’ve got to say, ‘I’m a HUMAN BEING, Goddamnit! My life has VALUE!’” This leads into the signature quote from Network (“I’m as mad as hell, and I’m not going to take this anymore”), which refers to life in modern Western society, a jump backwards from the wider existential perspective that characterized the anchorman’s “bullshit” monologue. This newfound bullshit, fresh from the bottomless pit of fabrications, is then devoured by a large viewership that doltishly responds to Beale’s slogan and sends his ratings skyward, turning him into just another celebrity with a pathetic catch-phrase. Similarly, the film degenerates from a critique of life itself into a send-up of television, careerism, corporatism, and other narrow topics. The second instance in cinema where fabrication (bullshit) is admitted as the cornerstone of our lives occurs at the end of Hero (1992), when the character referred to in the title, Bernard LePlant, passes on some words of wisdom to his previously estranged son. “You remember where I said I was going to explain about life, buddy?” he says. “Well, the thing about life is, it gets weird. People are always talking to you about truth, everybody always knows what the truth is, like it was toilet paper or something and they got a supply in the closet. But what you learn as you get older is, there ain’t no truth. All there is, is bullshit. Pardon my vulgarity here. Layers of it. One layer of bullshit on top of another. And what you do in life, like when you get older, is—you pick the layer of bullshit you prefer, and that’s your bullshit, so to speak. You got that?” Despite the cynicism of LePlant’s words, the object of his fatherly lesson is to create a bond between him and his son. (Hollywood movies are heavily dependent on plotlines in which a broken family comes together again.) This bond is reliant on the exposure of life as bullshit and is itself bullshit—bullshit to the second power—which makes LePlant’s case without his being aware of his own bullshit, which is how bullshit works. But this is not the message the moviegoer is meant to take away from the mass-audience philosophizing of Hero. That would be to break a tacit social contract, which may be stated: “Leave me to my bullshit, and I will leave you to yours.” Like every other social contract, it is “more honoured in the breach than in the observance,” as one writer quipped, touching off a scholarly debate as to whether the meaning of this statement is (1) that rules of decency and civility are routinely broken or (2) it is morally incumbent upon us to break certain rules rather than observe them. This squabble depends on which word one believes should be emphasized, “honoured” or “breach.” Emphasis on the first word turns the statement into praise for those whose actions display higher moral standards than those set by law or social custom; emphasis on the second word gives us a mordant observance that people flout whatever does not further their selfish aims, morality be damned. As often happens, the writer quoted here either expressed himself poorly or has been willfully misunderstood by those who emphasize the word “honoured” to further an optimistic view of human behavior. This gives us leave to choose our own bullshit, much in the way afforded by religious scriptures such as the Judeo-Christian Bible, the Koran, Buddhist texts, and all other works in this or any other genre (codes of law, for example).

5. The sense that one’s life has meaning and purpose is sometimes declared to be a necessary condition for acquiring or maintaining a state of good feeling. This is horrifying news considering the mind-boggling number of books and therapies for a market of discontented individuals who are short on a sense of meaning and purpose, either in a limited and localized variant (“I received an ‘A’ on my calculus exam”) or one that is macrocosmic in scope (“There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his prophet”). Those who are euphoric, or even moderately content, are not parched for

meaning and purpose. Relatively speaking, feeling good is its own justification. As long as such states last, why spoil a good thing with self-searching interrogations in re: meaning and purpose? But a high tone of elation could also be a sign of psychopathology, as it is for individuals who have been diagnosed with bipolar affective disorder. Such persons should be treated by mental health professionals, although their therapeutics often mires a patient in the ravings of therapists who are modern-day incarnations of “positive thinking” preachers such as Norman Vincent Peale. No one ever bought a copy of The Power of Positive Thinking (1952) who was not unsatisfied with his or her life. This dissatisfaction is precisely the quality that the great pessimists—Buddha, Schopenhauer, Freud—saw as definitive of the human packing plant. Millions of copies Peale’s book and its spawn, including Martin Seligman’s Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment (2002), have been sold . . . and they were not purchased by readers who were madly content with their lives. They may have attracted people who wished to potentiate their “subjective well being,” in the terminology of positive psychology researchers. But those who are on that road may nevertheless be considered at least relatively unsatisfied with how they feel and are playing a perilous game in trying to upgrade their emotional tone to a height from which they may have a very unhappy fall. Ask any major drug user.

6. Zapffe’s solution to nature’s sportive minting of the human race may seem the last checkpoint of despair. In his Philosophy of The Unconscious (1869), the German philosopher Eduard von Hartmann thinks farther ahead: “What would it avail, e.g., if all mankind should die out by sexual continence? The world as such would continue to exist.” This endurance of the organic would allow the restive forces of life to set up “a new man or similar type, and the whole misery would begin over again” (emphasis not added). For Hartmann, the struggle for deliverance is not between humanity and nature, but between the affirmation of all phenomena by their continuance in any form and the negation of same by the evolution of a super-developed form of being that could exterminate every scintilla of existence at the very source of creation. While Hartmann’s vision is rather lunatic, its goal is actually more realistic than Zapffe’s. It is uproariously implausible that humankind will ever leave off breeding. But we can imagine that someday we will be able to suffocate every cell on earth with reasonable certainty using a destructive mechanism not yet devised, since nuclear or biological weapons would probably leave simpler organisms unharmed and spoiling for a new evolution. This planetary doomsday would not depend on the assent of billions (a huddle of holdouts could foil Zapffe’s solution for the disappearance of all humans and quasi-humans) but could occur either accidentally or by the initiative of a few messianic individuals.
7. In his study Suicide (1897), the French sociologist Emile Durkheim contended that “one does not advance when one proceeds toward no goal, or—which is the same thing—when the goal is infinity. To pursue a goal which is by definition unattainable is to condemn oneself to a state of perpetual unhappiness.” Who can gainsay that the goal of our race has no visible horizon and therefore, in Durkheim’s view, we are doomed to, as the French thinker rather euphemistically put it, “a state of perpetual unhappiness”? To counter this glum assessment of things, the world’s religions all offer goals that they say are very much attainable, if only in the afterlife or the next life. More down to earth, but no more realistically, Camus’ essay The Myth of Sisyphus (1942) represents the unattainable goal of the title figure as an apologetic for going on with life rather than ending it. As Camus insisted in his discussion of this gruesome parable, “We must imagine Sisyphus as happy.” The credo of the Church Father Tertullian, “I believe

because it is absurd,” might as rightly be attributed to Camus. Caught between the fabrications of the latter and the rationalizations of the former, Zapffe’s proposal that we put out the light of the human race extends a solution to our troubles that is as satisfying as that of either Tertullian or his modern avatar Camus, who considered suicide as a philosophical issue for the individual but overlooked—not unreasonably for a writer seeking an audience at the start of his career—the advantages of an all-out attrition of the species. Aside from a repertoire of tricks we can do that other animals cannot, the truest indicator of a human being is unhappiness. The main fount of that unhappiness, as Zapffe and others have written, is our consciousness. And the more dilated consciousness becomes, the more unhappy the human. All other portrayals of what we are conceive of nothing but a troupe of puppets made to prance through our lives by forces beyond our control or comprehension. In the end, Camus’ injunction that we must imagine Sisyphus as happy is as typical as it is feculent. On the subject of whether or not life is worth the trouble, the answer must always be unambivalent . . . and positive. To teeter the least bit into the negative is tantamount to outright despair. If you value your values, no doubts about this matter can be raised, unless they occur as a lead-up to some ultimate affirmation. In the products of high or low culture, philosophical disquisitions, and arid chitchat, the anthem of life must forever roar above the squeaks of dissent. We were all born into a rollicking game that has been too long in progress to allow a substantive change in the rules. Should the incessant fanfare that meets your ears day in and day out sound out of tune and horribly inappropriate, you will be branded persona non grata. Welcome wagons will not stop at your door—not while world-renowned authorities are telling you from on high that Sisyphus must be imagined as happy or that you must love your fate, no matter how terrible and questionable it is (Nietzsche). If such dictatorial statements genuinely reflected the facts of life, they would not need to be repeated like a course of subliminal conditioning. And this is exactly how such “good news” is delivered to us—without pause and without appreciable contradiction. Ergo, we must recognize that Zapffe’s proposal for the salvation-by-extinction of the human race is not a solution to the absurdity of life.

8. “Worthless” rather than “useless” is the more familiar epithet in this context. The motive for using “useless” in place of “worthless” in this histrionically capitalized phrase is that the former term is linked to the concepts of desirability and value and by their depreciation introduces them into the mix. “Useless,” on the other hand, is not so inviting of these concepts. Elsewhere in this work, “worthless” and its associated forms serviceably connect with the language of pessimism and do their damage sufficiently. But the devil of it is that “worthless” really does not go far enough when speaking of the overarching character of existence. Too many times the question “Is life worth living?” has been asked. This usage of “worth” excites impressions of a fair lot of experiences that are arguably desirable and valuable and that follow upon one another in such a way as to suggest that human life is not worthless overall, or not so worthless that a case could not be made for its worth. With “useless,” the spirits of desirability and value do not readily rear their heads. What does arise is a note of futility. It is this condition of a vertiginous pointlessness untainted by implications of desirability or value that is brought to mind more quickly and emphatically by “useless” than by “worthless.” Because of this direct line to what is futile, “useless” is more negative, outstripping a bellicose pessimism and entering the airless spaces of nothingness. Naturally, the uselessness of existence may be repudiated as well or badly as its worthlessness. For this reason, the adverb “malignantly” has been annexed to “useless” to give it a little more semantic stretch, although not enough to shoo away any rebutters among the opposition. But to express with any adequacy the sucking emptiness within everything a

nonlinguistic modality would be requisite, some delirious effusion out of a dream that coalesced every nuance of the useless and wordlessly transmitted into our heads the vacuity of a clockwork universe. Indigent of such means of communication, the uselessness of all that breathes and breeds must be spoken with a poor potency.

9. One case of such discontent is that of the early nineteenth-century French Catholic writer Petrus Borel (a.k.a. “The Lycanthrope”), who asserted that he was a papist only because he could not be a cannibal. While Catholicism has since lost much of its bestial appeal in a literal sense, it continues to bleed whomever it can both psychologically and financially.
10. It was also no impediment to Weininger’s posthumous reputation—after killing himself by gunshot at the age of twenty-three—that he was an anti-Semitic Jew who converted to Christianity, a life-path that has always looked good on the resume of a citizen of Adolph Hitler’s homeland. In regard to the Führer’s own reputation, at least he was a bungler whose genocidal proclivities did not cause the way of life of his target group to falter. This is quite in contrast to the U.S. government’s successes with the aboriginal occupants of its particular land mass. What they were is gone forever. The intent here is not to romanticize any particular people but only to draw attention to historical facts that live most vividly in the memory of their victims and must be repressed in the conscience of their perpetrators if the latter are to retain a good opinion of themselves, their god, their nation, their families, and the human race in general. Such facts of life and death are just that—facts. To the extent they are submitted as an indictment of humanity or the natural world that spit us out, a mistake has been made, irrational emotions have been awarded a priority they do not merit. What has been called “man’s inhumanity to man” should not be an enticement for our species to end it all. That deduction is another mistake, as much as it would be a mistake to tub-thump for our survival based on the real abundance of what is valued as “humane” behavior. Both the “inhuman” and the “humane” movements of our race do have a passing relevance, no carping about that. But we are not at the helm of either of these movements. We believe ourselves to be in control—that is the mistake. We believe ourselves to be something we are not—that is the mistake and that is the superstition. To perpetuate the belief in these superstitions, to conspire in the suffering of future generations is the only misconduct to be expiated. To collaborate in our own suffering and that of human posterity is the mistake. Ask Adam and Eve, symbols of the most deleterious mistake in the world, one which we reenact every day.
11. A more respectable figure than Mainländer, the twentieth-century Austrian-born philosopher of science Karl Popper pointed his readers in much the same direction as his less honored predecessor, although he was not as intellectually reckless in his methods. In his book The Open Society and Its Enemies (1945), Popper expressed deep concern with the reduction of human suffering. To this purpose, he revamped the Utilitarianism of the nineteenth-century British philosopher John Stuart Mill, who wrote, “Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong at they tend to promote the reverse of happiness.” Popper remolded this muddled, if sonorous, summation of a positive Utilitarianism into a negative Utilitarianism whose position he handily stated as follows: “It adds to clarity in the fields of ethics, if we formulate our demands negatively, i.e. if we demand the elimination of suffering rather than the promotion of happiness.” Taken to its logical and most humanitarian conclusion, Popper’s demand can have as its only end the elimination of those who suffer and the stifling of future generations that will keep suffering with absolute surety if our species does not hold off

incarnating itself. What else could the elimination of suffering mean if not to diminish it to the zero point? Naturally, Popper held his horses well before suggesting that to eliminate suffering would demand that we as a species be eliminated. Even so, the Austrian-born philosopher inseminated others with the basics for a Negative Utilitarianism, a marginal school of thought that has made a world-mission of the yearning to “eliminate” pain in human life. Other interesting movements of a similar type are Painism and Algonomy.

12. When Lovecraft wrote that the human race was created as a “joke or mistake” by extraterrestrial beings who inhabited this world in the distant past, he was saying something new, or at least saying it in a way that was new as regards the place of humankind in the universe, which is rather humble. He might have been complimentary, or equivocal, when speaking of our universal stature, and he might have tried to pass off what he was saying as true. If he had hyped it as true and had been complimentary, or equivocal, he could have died a rich man because people will always spend their money on intriguing falsehoods. In 1968, Erich von Däniken published Chariots of the Gods, a book in which he dramatized how extraterrestrials had intervened in human life, just as Lovecraft did in such works as At the Mountains of Madness (1931) and “The Shadow out of Time” (1934). Before he started making millions with this crackpot fakery, Von Däniken had a rap sheet of criminal convictions that included theft, fraud, embezzlement, and tax evasion. He also forged evidence to bolster belief in the bestselling Chariots of the Gods. But Lovecraft’s mission was not to deceive; it was to express a negative attitude to oppose the dominant positive attitude with respect to the “highest species” active on this little planet. Humanity had already uplifted itself to the status of beings created by a purposeful and good-willed god. Lovecraft turned the customary concept of the biblical god upside down by having the human race descend by mishap from a race of monsters, however technologically advanced they may have been. He wanted to put humanity in the place he thought it deserved to be as the offspring of these monsters in whose footsteps, incidentally, we have been following on the technological front.
13. Schopenhauer lived at a time when philosophers had to be ablaze with immodesty if they were to grab the world with the truth of their ideas and only their ideas. They had to reveal things as they really are in a big way or join the no-accounts and footnotes in their field. Not until science took the reins in the twentieth century did philosophers begin to take their cues wholly from empiricism rather than from self-enclosed logic based on shaky premises. Human destiny now took a back seat to provable or falsifiable data in physics, biology, astrophysics, chemistry, theoretical physics, geology, nuclear physics, mathematical physics, and so on. Reality specialists who trafficked in human experience could go talk among themselves if they did not disturb the grown-ups while they figured out genetic codes and the location of black holes. To the fullest extent possible, specialists in human reality have attempted to merge their speculations with science. Along with their more technical and abstract brethren, their findings have been enunciated by and addressed to a group of people who already share a sense of what it is to be in the world, given their similitude in intellect, income, social status, and psychological fitness, as well as their generally appearing and behaving like one another. What friction exists among them is usually confined to certain theoretical details expounded in their works. Each of them has his own answer to some piece of the puzzle of things as they really are . . . for human beings, that is. These specialists in human reality eventually die and others fill their positions. The friction goes on, no great progress is made, and everyone can feel safe that the puzzle will never be put together.

This insures job security for every sort of reality specialist. Should the puzzle ever be put together, it would be the greatest disaster in human history. To piece together a picture of things as they really are in both the human and nonhuman world is not what anyone wants, for it would be the end of us. If reality specialists had the chance to know everything—not just a Theory of Everything (TOE)—they would probably be unable to say no, not after millennia of pretending that this is what they have been working toward. But would they not also quake in their boots at this unprecedented ascension? We aspire to omniscience, but should we ever actually become omniscient what would be the point in continuing to exist? The game would be over and done. No mystery would be left to lend our lives a mystique, and without this mystique everything we do would be reduced to numbers we could look up in a computer file and have no need to puzzle over. We would be victorious . . . and bored to death. Everything having to do with humanity and nonhumanity would hit a wall and come to a stop. We seem to have set out on an expedition whose success would be our ruin. The only way out, perhaps, would be to fashion creatures less knowing than ourselves and exist through them. What humiliation, what pathos that we should ever end up as gods. Is there nothing that can bring us into reconciliation with the cancer of existence?

14. This idea parallels Mainländer's fantasy in which the Will-to-die that should inhere in humanity is only a reflection of a suicidal God who, in the beginning, masterminded His own quietus. His plan to commit deicide could not work, though, while he existed as a unified entity outside of space-time and matter. Seeking to annul His oneness, he divided Himself into the time-bound fragments of the universe, which included organic life forms. Through this method, He successfully excluded Himself from existence. "God is dead," wrote Mainländer, "and His death was the life of the world." Once the great individuation had been accomplished, the momentum of its creator's self-annihilation would continue in a piecemeal fashion until nothing remained standing. And those who committed suicide, as did Mainländer, would only be following God's example. Furthermore, the Will-to-live that Schopenhauer argued activates the world—a concept logically developed but only within a mythological framework—was revised by his disciple Mainländer as evidence not of a movement of a tortured life within beings, but as a deceptive cover for an underlying death wish in all things to burn themselves out as hastily as possible in the fires of becoming . . . or begoing, as it were. In this light, the raging of human progress is thus shown to be a mightily apparent symptom of a downfall into extinction that has just gotten underway. (See Bill Joy's essay "Why the future doesn't need us," in which the co-founder of a computer vendor and IT services provider speculates how technology may someday save—that is, kill—us all.) Similarly, the wisdom of religions such as Christianity and Buddhism is all for leaving this world behind for a destination unknown and impossible to conceive. One day, however, the will to survive in this life or any other will be universally extinguished by a conscious will to die and stay dead. In Mainländer's philosophy, Zapffe's Last Messiah is not a sage who will be unwelcome but a force that has been in the works since God took his own life. Rather than resist our end, as Mainländer concludes, we will come to see that "the knowledge that life is worthless is the flower of all human wisdom." Elsewhere the philosopher states, "Life is hell, and the sweet still night of absolute death is the annihilation of hell." (Sayings of this sort are what make Schopenhauer worth the trouble of reading, and neither his heady mythology nor that of Mainländer strengthens their case.) In the more brutish terms of modern wiseguyism—as seen on coffee mugs, T-shirts, and bumper stickers—"Life's a bitch and then you die." Other cultures have their own versions of this covert commonplace, as in the Italian proverb "You live with little and die with nothing." Such words would no doubt have comforted Mainländer as

indicative that a clandestine sapience among our species was proceeding on its course. Mainländer's cosmic scenario, though coherent on its own terms and rather sublime, is likely to give pause to those accustomed to more widely spread, though no less bizarre, religious ideations. But consider this: if God exists, or once existed, what would He not be capable of doing? Why should God not want to be done with Himself as a reaction to His suffering the sickness and pain now reflected in His creation? Why should He not have kicked off a universe that was one great puppet show destined to be crunched or scattered until an absolute nothingness had been established? These questions and the answers Mainländer "revealed" are in fact odd, but no more so than the beliefs of, let us say, Islam or Hinduism . . . or any other major or minor religion for that matter. For a rebuttal of Mainländer's thought, see H. P. Blavatsky's "The Origin of Evil," which first appeared in the journal Lucifer (October 1897). This article is also available through an Internet search at the time of this writing. For rebuttals of all other religious interpretations of the universe and our place in it, see the vast library of materials written to this purpose. (The above precis of Mainländer's philosophy is sourced primarily in T. Whittaker's review of Die philosophie der Erlösung and Die philosophie der Erlösung. Zwölf philosophische Essays in Mind, July, 1886.)

15. "Meaning" figures as an autonomic system, something that is noticed when it goes on the fritz but not when it is in working order. It is part of the cog-and-wheel functioning of the physical and psychological machinery that motivates an individual to go about his business. While it routinely hums softly in the background of a person's life, a meaning system will often come to the fore when it is threatened. After the threat is dealt with, this system once again returns to its autonomic functioning. Only in a small percentage of humans is meaning a component of being on which they consciously and voluntarily fixate without external provocation. If for most of our race, meaning comes straight from a handbook that may be referenced by page and paragraph, chapter and verse—"God exists," "I have a Self," "My country is the best in the world"—for this small percentage meaning originates from only one source—a sense of mystery. In his essay "The Wall and the Book," The twentieth-century Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges writes: "Music, states of happiness, mythology, faces belabored by time, certain twilights and certain places try to tell us something, or have said something we should not have missed, or are about to say something; this imminence of a revelation which does not occur is, perhaps, the aesthetic phenomenon" (emphasis added). Lovecraft's "Notes on the Writing of Weird Fiction" opens with this sentence: "My reason for writing stories is to give myself the satisfaction of visualising more clearly and detailedly and stably the vague, elusive, fragmentary impressions of wonder, beauty, and adventurous expectancy which are conveyed to me by certain sights (scenic, architectural, atmospheric, etc.), ideas, occurrences, and images encountered in art and literature" (emphasis added). This sense of mystery that is never dissipated by express knowledge but is forever an imminence or expectancy explains much of the attraction of the best supernatural stories (Algernon Blackwood's "The Willows," Lovecraft's "The Colour out of Space, Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," Borges's "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius"), which have at their center an abyss of the unknown, with perhaps a miasma of death floating about its edges. Only when we feel that something great is about to be revealed does anything seem to mean something. And this experience, as the preceding quotes from Borges and Lovecraft concur, is stirred by works of art or by an aesthetic vision of things in the world. Meaning arises on the brink of knowing and topples with the incursions of scriptures, doctrines, and narratives that specify the mysterious as an object, a datum. In themselves, all objects and data in existence are

meaningless. To wail adamantly that a god exists is to kill that god or turn it into a plastic idol. To say that a god might exist is to vivify it with the meaning of mystery.

16. Borges's essay "The Doctrine of Cycles" both cites and conceives several refutations catastrophic for the ancient concept of the eternal return, which posits the unending and identical recurrence of all beings and events. In the words of the bookish Argentine, the "eternal return of the same" is "the most horrible idea in the universe." To Borges, this idea was a nightmare born of bad philosophy; to Nietzsche, it was a nightmare fathered by his need to be joyful, or to believe he would be joyful no matter what horror befell him. In Nietzsche's world, coming to terms with this idea as a reality was a must for affirming one's life and life itself, thus recalculating the horrors of existence into a fate, or an unceasing series of fates, that would somehow inspire love rather than alarm. Given the antimony on this issue between Borges and Nietzsche, should one writer be heralded over the other as genuine, authentic, or whatever term of approval one cares to wield? The question is moot to the highest possible or impossible power. Each man was handling the stress of a hyper-diligent consciousness in his own style and not in one pressed upon him by cognitive meddlers.
17. Lovecraft is perhaps the most felicitous example of someone who knew ravishments that in another context would be deemed "spiritual" or "religious." Yet from childhood, he was undeterred from a precocious atheistic materialism (or nihilism, pessimism, cosmic indifferentism). In his lectures collected as The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902), William James offers an individual's sense of "ontological wonder" and "cosmic emotion" to argue for the legitimacy of religious faith. As sincere and existentially well grounded as any philosopher or psychologist who ever lived, James believed that overstepping logic was all right if there was a practical "cash value" return on one's intellectual gerrymandering. This belief is perceptibly valuable for those who will suck upon anything to nurture their oneiric belief in a universe that has an overarching purpose or meaning of a religious nature. In both his creative writings and his letters, Lovecraft's expression of precisely the feelings James describes cancels out the philosopher-psychologist's argument. (Such an impeachment of James's defense of the faithful must naturally been met with a counterpoint. See "William James on Cognitivity of Feelings, Religious Pessimism, and the Meaning of Life" by Ellen Kappy Suckiel in The Journal of Speculative Philosophy, 2004.) For Lovecraft, the experience of cosmic wonder, even as it partook of a sense of horror, was elemental to his interest in remaining alive. He saw the universe as nothingness in motion and lived to tell about it. Sublimating this awareness into works such as the poem "Nemesis," cited in the main text of this work, he also mitigated the boredom that plagued his life by distracting himself with the thrills of "cosmic horror." On the other side is a famous utterance by the seventeenth-century scientist and Christian philosopher Blaise Pascal concerning his sense of being "engulfed in the infinite immensity of spaces whereof I know nothing, and which know nothing of me; I am terrified. The eternal silence of these infinite spaces fills me with dread" (Pensées, 1670). A man of tender sensibilities, Lovecraft was almost certainly filled with a similar dread, the difference between him and Pascal being that he also beheld the dreadfulness of his place in the universe with fascination. (See the discussion of Rudolph Otto in the section "Creating Horror.") This is not an unnatural response to what most would consider a discomfiting situation, if they ever consider it in the first place and are not happy with revealed truths right off the rack.
18. To this shortlist of hokum should be added one of the wilder prognostications of "futures studies." According to one gang of futurists, a breakthrough event pompously

ennobled as the “the Singularity” will occur. What the fallout of the Singularity might be is unknown. It could begin a dynamic new chapter in human evolution . . . or it could trumpet the end of the world. The prophesized leap will be jumpstarted by computer gadgetry and somehow will involve artificial intelligence, nanotechnology, genetic engineering, and other habiliments of high technology. According to another gang of futurists, the Singularity will not happen: we will go on with our lives as stumblebums of the same old story, puppets of a script we did not write and cannot read.

Understandably, the former view is more exciting than the latter, the more so in that an apocalypse has been inserted as a wild card. In this sense, the Singularity is the secular counterpart of the Christian rapture, and its true believers foresee it as happening within the lifetime of many who are alive today, as the earliest Christians, not to mention those of subsequent ages, believed in the imminence of Judgment Day. Whether heaven or hell awaits us, the critical aspect of the Singularity is that it provides a diversion for those among the technological elite who are ever on the lookout for twinkling baubles to replace the ones with which they have grown bored. The Singularity encapsulates a perennial error among the headliners of science: that there has never been nor will ever be the least qualitative difference between the earliest single-celled organisms and any human or machine conceivable or not conceivable in a world whose future is without a destination. That we are going nowhere is not a curable fate; that we must go nowhere at the fastest possible velocity just might be curable, although probably not. Either way, it makes no difference. (Zapffe deplored technological advancements and the discoveries to which they led, since those interested in such things would be cheated of the distraction of finding them out for themselves. Every human activity is a tack for killing time, and it seemed criminal to him that people should have their time already killed for them by explorers, inventors, and innovators of every stripe. Zapffe reserved his leisure hours for the most evidently purposive waste of time—mountain climbing.) Like Scientology, the Singularity was conceived by someone who wrote science fiction. One of its big-name proponents, the American inventor Raymond Kurzweil, established a regimen of taking 250 nutritional supplements per day in hopes of living long enough to reap the benefits of the Singularity, which may include an interminable life-span among its other effects. It is as easy to make fun of religious or scientific visionaries as it is to idolize them. Which attitude is adopted depends on whether or not they tell you what you want to hear. Given the excitements promised by the Singularity, odds are that it will collect a clientele of hopefuls who want to get a foot in the future, for nobody doubts that tomorrow will be better than today. More and more it becomes clear that if indeed human consciousness is a mistake, it is the most farcical one this planet has ever seen.

19. When gods and their true believers come into the picture, the rhetoric of insolence is an unsatisfactory exercise in self-gratification for an infidel, much as the sarcasms of a literary critic are thrown away on a book that everyone agrees is a bad job. Only the blasphemies of the faithful who feel themselves ill-used by their deity carry the music of hatred that the unbeliever attempts in vain. Take the Book of Job. Were its protagonist an actual man and not a lesson in fearful obeisance, or whatever his story is supposed to convey, the Old Testament might contain a symphony of rancor greater than any this world has known. But Job turns legalistic rather than abusive; he wants to argue why he should be spared his hellish trials. No good can come of that. Any argument can go on interminably . . . or until one party gives in, which is what Job does for no intelligible reason. One thing that Job’s tale has conferred upon worshipers down through the ages is a work out in rationalization, a front-row seat at a seminar in masochistic logic—the whole bag of theodicy, the defense of God’s ways. Job’s taste for consistency and

coherence in his god could have been easily put to rest by affirming that neither justice nor any other kind of worldly order is the birthright of humanity.

20. In Zapffe's "The Last Messiah," the titular figure appears at the end and makes the quasi-Delphic, biblically parodic pronouncement, "Know yourselves—be infertile and let the earth be silent after ye" (emphasis not added). As Zapffe pictures the scene, the Last Messiah's words are not well received: "And when he has spoken, they will pour themselves over him, led by the pacifier makers and the midwives, and bury him in their fingernails." Technically speaking, he is not a messiah, since he saves no living soul and will be erased from memory by a vigilante group whose kingpins are "the pacifier makers and the midwives." Zapffe elucidated why humanity should not further tarry on earth, but he had no illusions that his insights would be welcome by others. Due to the note of hopelessness in the coda to Zapffe's essay, we are discouraged from imagining a world in which the self-liquidation of humanity could ever be put into effect. The Norwegian himself did not take the trouble to do so. No reason he should, since first he would have to imagine a new humanity, which is not ordinarily done outside of fiction, a medium of realism but not of reality. Conscious that this assignment is impossible and thankless, nothing prohibits us from attempting it. Perhaps the new humanity would be a race in which everyone is a becalmed visionary who has recognized an unwavering retreat from the worldly scene as a benevolent proceeding. This task, as Zapffe indicates, need take only a nicely limited number of generations to complete. While their numbers tapered off, these dead-enders would be the most fortunate in the history of our species. Rightly pleased with themselves as the unsurpassed conquerors of human suffering, the last survivors could universally share material comforts previously held in trust for the well-born or money-getting classes of world history. With ample food and housing already at hand for this short but decisive epoch, the nature of labor could radically change. Since mere survival or personal economic gain would be passé as motives for the new humanity, there would be only one defensible impetus to work: to see one another through to the finish. Euthanasia would be offered to all without being imposed on any. What a relief, what an unburdening to have closed the book on humankind. Yet it would not need to be slammed shut. As long as we progressed toward a thinning of the herd, couples could still have children and new faces could be brought into the fold as billions became millions and then thousands. New generations would learn about the past, and, like those before them, be glad they never lived in those days, although they might play at cowboys and Indians, cops and robbers, management and labor. The last of us could be the very best of us who ever roamed the earth, the great exemplars of a humanity we used to dream of becoming before we got wise to the reality that we would never make it as a mob always on the make for new recruits. Quite naturally, this depiction of an end times by a collective suicide pact will seem abhorrent to those now living in hope of a progressively better future, one that will exculpate them from a depraved indifference to the suffering predestined for their young. It may also seem a romanticized utopia, if not a front for a tyrannical oligarchy run by fanatics of extinction rather than anything like a social and psychological sanctuary for a species harboring the shared goal of delimiting its stay on earth. If Zapffe had uselessly exerted himself by formulating the theses of "The Last Messiah," he was astute in giving it a hopeless finale. Without an iota of uncertainty, humankind is and will always be unsuited to engineer its own deliverance. The delusional will forever be with us—they will forever be us—thereby making pain, fear, and abnegation of what is right in front of our face the preferred style of living and the one that will be passed on to countless generations. There is nothing remarkable about people wanting to continue into perpetuity in this way and to shrug off anyone who is in noncompliance. A minuscule

exemplum of this bias is the fact that a book like Michelstadter's Persuasion and Rhetoric took almost a century to be translated into English. Contrarily, Emile Coué's Self Mastery Through Conscious Autosuggestion (1920) was translated into English in 1920, which apparently preceded its publication in French. Chiefly an advocate of self-hypnosis who had a philanthropic desire to help others lead more wholesome lives, Coué is best known for urging believers in his method to repeat the following sentence: "Day by day, in every way, I am getting better and better," a string of syllables so fantastically trite that in all probability their sentiment of pushing oneself forth in life ante-dates language itself. On his lecture tours, Coué was greeted by celebrities and dignitaries around the world. Hordes turned out for his funeral in 1926. Schopenhauer could not fill a classroom with students who wanted to hear his lectures. By these occurrences, we are again reminded that humankind has always displayed a vigorous immunity to the morally injurious disillusionment that attends new ideas. As Lovecraft justly observed in the first paragraph of his story "The Call of Cthulhu," science (knowledge) has never posed a serious imperilment to humanity's concept of itself, a post-Darwinian insight that is as true in the twenty-first century as when Lovecraft penned it in 1926. All revisions of our "place in the universe" have served only as a partial antidote for religion, everyday superstition, and certain schools of philosophy. Scientists do not set out to shake up the status quo. Their purview is that of trifling matters relating to the physical workings of the world. They also seek payment and maybe notoriety for their work. What prods a scientific head does not affect ordinary people, who by and large take their marching orders from their social environment and their bodies rather than from a compulsive desire for "truth" in a material, which is so often immaterial, sense. Knowledge of the origins and ornamentations of the universe, including those of organic life, changes nothing about how we live and how we die. Buddha was purportedly incurious about how or why the universe and its inhabitants came to be. What possible difference could such information make to someone who had consecrated himself to a single end: to become liberated from the illusions that held his head to the grindstone of existence? In a very real sense, Buddhism was the prototype for the field of neuroscience, which may yet deliver a blow from which the self-image of humankind will not soon recover. What remains to be seen is this: will neuroscientists substantively modify our concepts about who we are and where we stand or merely cause our heads to make some pettifogging modifications. The reception of the research of a Canadian scientist name Michael Persinger may be a predictor of humanity's genius for keeping its head locked into the old ways. In the 1980s, Persinger modified a motorcycle helmet to affect the magnetic fields of the brain of its wearer, inducing a variety of strange sensations. These included experiences in which subjects temporarily felt themselves proximate to supernatural phenomena that included ghosts and gods. Atheists have used Persinger's studies to nail close their argument for the subjectivity of anyone's sense of the supernatural, while believers have written books contending that the magnetic-field-emitting motorcycle helmet proves the existence of a god who has "hard-wired" itself into our brain. A field of study called neurotheology grew up around this and other laboratory experiments. Even if you can substantiate a scientific find with a cudgel of data that should render the holy opposition unconscious, they will be at the ready to discredit you—imprisonment, torture, and public execution having gone the way of chastity belts. The bonus of this deadlock for writers of supernatural horror is that it ensures the larger part of humanity will remain in a state of fear, because no one can ever be certain of either his own ontological status or that of gods, demons, alien invaders, and sundry other bugbears. A Buddhist would advise that we forget about whether or not the bogeymen we have invented or divined are real. The big question is this: are we real? This query may yet be taken out of the hands of enlightenment

religions such as Buddhism and turned over to neuroscience and its satellite disciplines. But none should hold their breath for a verdict in this case, which will be in deliberation until the day that human beings cease to walk the earth, although not because they listened to the Last Messiah.

FACING HORROR

ENLIGHTENMENT

Like any system of thought that goes against the grain of regurgitated wisdom, Buddhism has enticed legions of the world's choicest heads, or at least those in the cognitive vanguard. Aside from its lack of a god-figure, it sits atop two courageous and cogent observations, numbers one and two of the Four Noble Truths. The first is the equation between life and suffering. The second is that a craving for life is the provenance of suffering, which is useless and without value. (Pace C. S. Lewis [The Problem of Pain, 1940], whose apologetics are applauded by Christians for giving them ammo against logicians who cannot square an all-loving, all-knowing, and all-powerful God with the demonic sadism of His world. Theodicy notwithstanding, what more could a believer ask for than a chance to clean up in the afterlife by wagering their pains in this one?) These Two Noble Truths lead off a philosophy of hopelessness that might have amounted to something if prescriptions for salvation had not followed, as they did with the Third Noble Truth: that there is a way out of suffering. Now everything was up for grabs. How tragic that Buddha, or the committee that wrote under his pseudonym, did not stop with the first two of the Four Noble Truths but wandered into preaching a way that individuals—and ultimately all of humanity—may be released from the shackles of suffering. That way is through the Noble Eightfold Path that leads to enlightenment and Nirvana. (Please note that the foregoing sentence does not apply to all sects of Buddhism. As with other belief systems, Buddhism is a compilation of do-it-yourself projects, and some of them are unlike the faith herein encapsulated. This principle has its parallel in every philosophy, ideology, and bag of myths that has ever been presented to the world: because no two heads are contoured the same, no one system or collocation of systems will ever be an immaculate fit. If truth about yourself is what you seek, then the examined life will only take you on a long ride to the limits of solitude. The Buddhists have made a stand on this point by attacking the thought process itself. But this kind of headwork is grueling and about as viable as Wilhelm Reich's orgone accumulators, leaving followers of Buddhism with the same basket of empty promises as its cohorts in salvation.) With its dual objectives of enlightenment and cutting oneself loose from rebirth, Buddhism early on joined all other religions in pitching a brighter future for believers and their deliverance from the woes of this world. These wares may be had during an individual's lifetime or could be delayed for a reincarnated shot at the bull's-eye of karma, a hit-or-miss doctrine that Buddhists bummed from Hinduism. Leaving aside reincarnation and the mental gymnastics this hypothesis foists upon the believer—ask Stephen Batchelor, author of Buddhism Without Beliefs (1998)—the state or non-state of Nirvana, which dangles in the future like a numinous carrot in the darkness of life's suffering, has nothing on Christianity's heaven or the Vikings' Valhalla. It seems to be a superior conception—or non-conception, if you prefer—to the ethereal theme parks of other religions on this basis: one is not asked to believe that something is true because a dogmatic authority says it is true; instead, one is invited to see the truth for oneself once maximum enlightenment kicks in, an invitation we are forewarned is extended only to those who do not doubt the truth in advance of lolling restfully in it. G. K. Chesterton would have condoned Buddhism on this point.

In the marketplace of salvation, enlightenment is categorically the best buy ever offered (so say its ad-men). Rather than floundering in a world that seems to be nothing but smoke and mirrors, you may sign up to attain a conclusive vision of what's what and what's not. Roughly speaking, enlightenment is the correction of our consciousness and the establishment of a state of being in which muddy illusion is washed away and a diamond of understanding shines through. This is the supreme payoff . . . if it may be had, if it has any reality outside the pat or cryptic locutions that allude to it. Millions of people have spent their lives, and some have even lost their minds, trying to win it without ever comprehending, as they sucked their last breath, what it was they had gambled to get. Had they indeed attained enlightenment without being aware of having done so? Were there stages of enlightenment and, if so, how far had they gotten? But enlightenment seems to be a well-defended redoubt whose location cannot be triangulated by speech, the only rule being that if you have to ask yourself if you have arrived, then it is certain you have not.

Nevertheless, it does seem that a charmed circle of individuals have reached a state that corresponds to that of enlightenment as delineated—vaguely or rapturously—in scads of scriptures, diaries, copyrighted publications, and public depositions. And they appear to have come to it unwarned, sometimes as a result of physical trauma or a Near-Death Experience. Perhaps the capital instance of enlightenment by accident is that of U. G. Krishnamurti, who claims to have experienced clinical death and then returned to life as the kind of being glorified in the literature of enlightenment, although it should be added that U. G. never gave the least credence to any doctrine of awakening and blasted all religions as well as spirituality itself. (Contrary to the popular holy man Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi, who at the age of sixteen reported his death and enlightenment, then spent the rest of his life as a chain-smoking guru. U. G. once met with Ramana Maharshi and was not impressed.) Through his clinical death, which he called a “calamity” due to the pain and confusion he felt during this process, U. G. became a puppet of nature. To his good fortune, he had no problem with his new way of functioning. He did not need to accept it since by his account he had lost all sense of having an ego that needed to accept or reject anything. How could someone who had ceased to partake in the commerce of selves, who had discarded his personhood, believe or not believe in anything so outlandish as enlightenment . . . or any other vendibles of the seeker's scene, none of which are hugely evident and all of which are as outmoded as the gods of antiquity or tribal deities with names that sound comical to believers in “real” religions?¹

Some would interpret U. G.'s disrespect for spiritual beliefs to be in happy accord with the nature of enlightenment, which they have been taught cannot be pinned down by particulars of any kind. Others would deny this assertion, perhaps because they have been indoctrinated to believe that both irreverence and deference are off the mark once one has “awakened.” Neither side of this controversy would have tempted U. G. What he repeatedly exclaimed in interviews is the impossibility of human beings, except perhaps one in a billion, to keep their heads from overlaying teachings of any kind on their lives as animals who are born only to survive and reproduce, not to build either cultures or castles in the air. Mental activity beyond the basic programs of our animalism leads only

to suffering, confusion, and self-deception. U. G never spoke of a solution for what our heads have made of our lives. We are captured by our illusions and there is no way out. That U. G. came upon a way out, as he told his countless interrogators, was nothing but luck, nothing that he knew anything about or could pass on to others. Why bother, then, to tell people that there is no such thing as wisdom and that they are doomed to live and die helpless among the slagheap of their illusions. Why? Because these people came to him and asked for his help. To their pleas he immediately replied that he could not help them, nor could they help themselves. No help could be had from any sector in which they searched. They could seek all their lives and still make it to their deathbeds with nothing but the same useless questions and useless answers with which they began. U. G. had his, but they would never get theirs. So why should they go on living? Naturally, no one explicitly posed this question to U. G. But they had his answer: there is no “you” that lives, only a body going about its only order of business—that of being alive and obeying biology. Whatever else people did with themselves was no concern of his, as he tirelessly reiterated to those who engaged him in conversation. He did not see his place to be a savior of humanity. That was something for the mountebanks of salvation who infested the world with this or that sect, each with its teeth bared to defend its trademarked trumpery. While he saw our race as hopelessly at loggerheads with itself, U. G. would not have backed Zapffe’s conclusion that we must put an end to ourselves. He was just not caught up in human life as a tragedy. That way of thinking was for those poor apes impossibly aspiring to be something other than what they are. The protocol that Zapffe advocated is no less hopeless than U. G.’s insouciant acceptance of things as they are. But it has the bonus that it would write finis to the great paradox that has bedeviled our species rather than shrugging it off as irrelevant. It would also quiet every one of those interest groups born of consciousness—with religions at the top of the list—that U. G. so disdained. Even a rational exchange of views is only a façade hiding irrational passions immune to all pretensions to “agree to disagree,” which is what people say when their attempt to crush you has failed, something they hope to set right at a later date.

Leaving aside such an extraordinary specimen as U. G. Krishnamurti, humanity suffers from the conflicted state that consciousness has brought upon it and that is only intensified with each new eruption from philosophy, science, religion, or city hall. There is no reason to believe that the future will diverge from the past in this regard, although neither is there any reason to believe that it will not. The future is strategic ground for feuds both well-mannered and lavishly sanguinary. Disputes great and small are often protracted well past the lifetimes of those who inaugurate them, leaving subsequent generations to carry on the good fight. As U. G. repeated to his interlocutors, “I am not interested in changing the world.” And if you are not a combatant, you must resign yourself to being no one.

Of a sort with U. G. is the Australian physicist John Wren-Lewis, a nonreligious scientist who nearly died of poisoning and woke up in a hospital in a state of enlightenment he never requested or pained himself to earn. Both U. G. and Wren-Lewis have publicly emphasized the fortuitous nature of their unsought illumination.² Both also warn against gurus with recipes for enlightenment. In talks with interviewers, U. G., who did not write books (nor are the published interviews with him copyrighted), lambasted as frauds every

spiritual figure known to humanity, including Buddha and Christ. Wren-Lewis has been more consumed by the connection between enlightenment phenomena and Near-Death Experience (NDE). His hypothesis, for what it might be worth, parallels Zapffe's in that it explains ordinary consciousness as a "basic malfunction" that "is some kind of inflation or hyperactivity of the psychological survival-system."³ He derives hope that this malfunction may be repaired from the fact that some NDE-ers are relieved of their anxiety for survival by having their egoistic consciousness commuted into an "impersonal consciousness" of an enlightened sort.

Because they have not gone off the deep end of religiosity, U. G. and Wren-Lewis are rarities among those who have known ego-death, a state that has nothing but anecdotal evidence to support it, which puts this phenomenon in a class with mystical experiences and revealed religions. As one might imagine, ego-death is laden with about as much mass appeal as physical death. It has been eyed as an ideal only by a small fraction of our species. To everyone else, death is death. In a normal head, impersonal survival does not sit well. It would negate all that we are, for what are we but beings anxious to survive? Yet there are some desperados among us who are not overjoyed to be anxious all their days. Some would say that if human beings must exist, the condition in which U. G. and Wren-Lewis are living is the optimum model, one in which everyone's ego has been annulled and our consciousness of ourselves as individuals entirely disappears. We would still function as beings that needed the basics—food, shelter, and clothing—but life would not be any more than that. It would not need to be. We would be content with whatever we had, a change of habit enormously diametric to our customary ways. We always want something else, something more. And when we get it, we still want something else, something more. No time or place of satisfaction awaits us. We live and die with deficiency and privation gnawing our guts. Life is not perfect, as any rube will accede, but for human beings it is a bloody shambles. We do not even dream of wanting something less by current standards of measurement. Inattentive to where the road to more and more leads, we just keep shuffling down that lane like zombies. If "less is more," then nothingness would be the most an ego, a self, could want.

As the ego-dead, our existence would be even more dissimilar than it already is from that of most mammals. They feed on one another without the etiquette of the slaughterhouse, and the fed-upon, one imagines, suffer more pain and anxiety than they would from a businesslike execution before the meal begins. Naturally, we would still have to feed, but we would not be omnivorous gourmands who eat for amusement, gobbling everything in nature and turning to the laboratory for more. Like other animals, we would continue to suffer pain in one form or another—that is the essence of existence—but we would not be cozened by our egos to take it personally, an attitude that escalates natural pain into unsustainable horror. To most people, this kind of world might seem drab—no competition, no art, no entertainment because all of these things are based on conflict, and in the world of the ego-dead there would be no conflict of the kind that fills stadiums and battlegrounds. There would also be no ego-boosting activities such as those which derive from working and acquiring more money than one needs, no scientific activity because we would not be driven to improve the world or know much about anything in it or outside it, no religious beliefs because those emerge from desperations and illusions

from which we would no longer suffer. Our sights would be set no further than our natural needs, for the tastes and habits of our own invention only subjugate us to a life made unimaginable without them. (Ask any tobacco addict who goes into mourning the day he must choose between smoking and breathing.) Best of all, after becoming so excellently revised as human beings, we would never again have to “agree to disagree.”

For onlookers interested in the future of enlightenment, the field of neuroscience has made unmistakable headway. In Being No One (2003), the German neurophilosopher Thomas Metzinger provides a theoretical model of how the brain manufactures the subjective sense of our existence as discrete “selves,” even though, as Metzinger explains, we would be more rigorously specified as information-processing systems for which it is expedient to create the illusion of “being someone.” This is precisely the crux of Buddhist enlightenment—the realization that we are not what we think we are. More honest and skeptical than Buddhist gurus, Metzinger concludes that it is practically impossible for us to attain willed realization of our unreality due to inbuilt manacles of human perception that keep our minds in a state of dream and delusion.⁴ But perhaps Metzinger never heard of U. G. and Wren-Lewis, both of whom speculate that scientists at any time could stumble upon a technique for disabusing us of our selves. U. G.’s prediction is that, should such a technique come to gestation in a lab somewhere, it will probably be used by governments as a means of controlling their populations or by corporations to buck up their quarterly earnings, legitimate science being on record as serving the powers that be or those that finance it. Political and commercial bodies are not known for ignoring whatever they may turn to their advantage, and that includes meditation, yoga, and similar techniques of “realization” whose physiological effects are observable in the laboratory.

Research has been mounting that spiritual seekers measurably diddle with the way their brains, neurological circuitry, and other bodily systems function, with the pursuit of deliverance from or in the phenomenal or non-phenomenal world triggering their efforts while not being essential to the results. Anyone without deliverance aforethought could do the same and chart as well on a scientist’s monitors. This suggests to the doubting mind that the whole business of enlightenment, as Asian Buddhists have insisted, is “nothing special” and at a future date may be folded into our accustomed feelings and perceptions, including the jumble of emotional highs and lows to which we as a species are susceptible. In the meantime, people will knock on your door, eager to hawk some gimmick that will get you into their heaven. Naturally, these godly salesmen do not have a clue regarding what things are like in heaven. Are there levels of heaven? Could someone be in heaven and not know it? And how often have we heard that many who are alive today will not suffer physical death but instead will proceed directly to paradise when the rapture is upon us? This means that millions have already dropped dead with the unfulfilled hope of not having to suffer the agony of dying the same death as the unsaved. What disillusionment must have incommoded them while they lay in extremis. Death would not be so bad if we could just push a button and disappear into it. But even those who expect the doors of heaven will open for them would prefer not to make their entrance after the physical trials of fighting for the life that God gave them. For the rest of us, the carousel of consciousness spins round and round, enlightening us only to the

bloodcurdling probability that the worst will be saved for last. Not graced with impunity from the personal pains of living and the personal fear of dying, as luck-outs such as U. G. and Wren-Lewis got without trying, we grow dizzy and nauseated trying to hang on and get off at the same time. What kind of beings would “choose” such a fate for themselves? Answer: the same kind who chose it for you.

INTOLERANCE

Due to our consciousness of being alive and destined for death, some of us not only invent schemes for blocking out this knowledge but also burn to discredit, or murder, anyone who would controvert our patented certitudes. (“We think, therefore we should make everyone think what we think.”) The consequence of having a crush of competing creeds is that every person and group must brook the intolerance, whether maniac or controlled, of those who do not share their customized fanaticism. Such intolerance is often a petty affair of taste. Someone unyieldingly swears that everything which gives him pleasure, bringing momentary relief from the pain of consciousness, is superior to what is pleasurable to someone else. “My music is better than your music. My music is an outpouring of genius, while your music is lackluster and couldn’t possibly give pleasure (relief) to anyone who knows anything about good music.” My music. My movies. My distractions. (The ante may be upped to “My nationality. My race. My self.”) A further example of this situation: horror writers have been recurrently asked, “Why would anyone want to supplement the horrors of this world by writing horror stories?” Too witless to deserve an answer apposite to horror stories, the question rightly spotlights that the world is indeed well-stocked with horror, which means only one thing: death and everything that culminates in death. Perhaps the world should keep this kind of thing to a minimum. But this is not the way it is with us. Instead, we augment every horror that crosses our path. Human beings seem all too ready to cover up a lesser horror by contriving a greater one. (It is a straight shot from the spear to the atomic bomb.) For sure, we cannot see all the ramifications of the things we do, but even if we could we would do them anyway. Any “advancement” seems like a good idea at the time and will be put to use. And if it should become a tool for unrelenting horror, we just mutter “Oh well” and move on to our next boner. That is what we call “being human.” Animals have lived by the same instincts for millions of years; we extemporize, instinctually superposing new horrors over the old, positioning them tier upon tier, as if we were building a pyramid never to be capped with a peak. Then we ask ourselves and our gods how everything got to be such a mess.

People who live with horror every day are going to want answers pertaining to how they sunk into this quagmire. This is one of the drawbacks of being creatures with consciousness. Our brains are a breeding ground for questions as a swamp is for insects. They also incubate answers regarding our lot on this rotating compost heap we call home, with a preference for those answers that bloviate about spirituality. Although this is practically a universal impulse, it seems that not all have been ensnared by it. As Yi-Fu Tuan documents in his Landscapes of Fear (1979), certain primitive social groups, more prevalent during the “ascent” of humanity than in its latter days, have had no use for the spiritual. Interestingly, these people’s lives have also been more comfortable than most—hunter-gatherer tribes with ready access food and drink, no enemies, good weather, and

not much in the way of curiosity or ambition. But this idyllic lifestyle, perhaps too frequently romanticized in comparison with those of succeeding ages, is not how things have been for our species generally speaking.

Overall, people have not been safe and comfortable. They have been fearful and pained and badly accommodated by the world around them . . . and they wanted answers to why they have been so abused, why they should be subject to an epic hose job. They wanted the meanness of their lives to mean something. They always have, which is why at any stage in world history we will be harried by far-fetched theologies hatched in antiquity. At least they would seem far-fetched if we were normal by an absolute paradigm rather than normal by consensus. (Does belief in a god really make a believer's life more "meaningful," by any definition, than that of an unbeliever? That would seem to depend on the individual rather than the god.) Not taking part in those ancient cults—whatever modern mask they wear—not sharing in their madness, makes it a real chore to have a good-faith tolerance of them. The difficulty in tolerating religions is not that they are groundwork of so many cruel laws, so many cruel and unusual mores, and so much of the cruel but entirely usual violence that magnifies the natural suffering of our lives. Human beings are most proficient at cooking up reasons for their cruelty without the persuasions of religion. If all religious faith were bled out of us, nothing would change, cruelty-wise. What makes an unbeliever's skin crawl is the voodoo-like horror that religions inject into our lives. Bad enough to be in a tight existential spot such as a foxhole during a battle, but what an addition of insult to injury (or death) to have long-abandoned prayers well up inside us at these times of crisis. How much more preferable it is to cry for one's mother as a conditioned response to being in terror for one's life. For the fear that religion has sown in the human race, there can be no forgiveness and no tolerance. That horror aside, it is also embarrassing to be in the company of the religious when they are most earnestly devout. One would like to apologize to the universe for them and scuttle off, red-faced, into some hole in the ground. The conundrum for unbelievers is that virtually all of them have loved ones who follow some religious faith. So what are the faithless to do—dump infinite derision on their blood relations and others they favor with fondness and respect? No philosophic principle has ever deserved such fidelity.

Fortunately, only a fraction of those who call themselves believers are peremptorily religious. Sometimes it even seems that scarcely anyone is a full-out religioso—they are simply keeping up the appearances of their culture, which cannot be detested out of hand without impugning the conduct of everyone. Does belief in a god really take the sting out of death for run-of-the-mill churchgoers? They seem to think it will, but they cannot be sure until the time comes. Luckily, the depth of any mortal's religious faith cannot be measured, nor would it be if it could. Social and economic powers would never allow it. The stock market would plunge, the Bible would fall from the bestseller list, and calendars would have to be amended to delete major holidays. These may seem small sacrifices to those ardent to drain the earth of its oceans of pious sputum. But the loss would still be felt in some circles, and that is quite a responsibility to take upon oneself. So why not be tolerant? What if religious hotheads are abominable . . . if no deity ever weighed in the scales has been found worthy of either belief or disbelief, not to speak of devotion and prayers . . . and if every house of worship is an emporium run by cretins and

criminals with one hand on their heart and the other in your purse? The culpability is not the believer's but the very air that the believer breathes. Indeed, the unbeliever would not be off-track to be tolerant, if only to effectuate comity with the well-armed forces of organized religion. Beyond cavil, the world is glutted with horror, but banning religion, or horror stories, would not ameliorate our condition one whit. Something will always be there to beat us down with its tonnage of terrors. As granted above, a world without religion would be as cruel and unusual as any other, for those who care. Excuses to massacre or anathematize one another have never been scarce. They are, indeed, a fatality.

Aside from such persons as Nietzsche and such parties as Pan-Aryanists, Ayn Randian Objectivists, extremist Libertarians, and other cheerleaders for the survival of the "fittest," most people like to think they would stand up for the weak against the persecution and plundering of the strong. God helps those who help themselves, but sometimes the strong go overboard in helping themselves at the expense of the weak. When this occurs, a humane intervention just seems like the thing to do . . . and let the "good fight" begin. The problem is that to beat the strong, one must be—or become—relatively stronger. As everyone knows, the strong are not necessarily better than the weak, nor are they necessarily worse. They are only stronger. Prevailing over an adversary, though that adversary may have committed some atrocious acts, does not mean the victors are more virtuous—except perhaps in their own eyes. And those eyes are now going to cast about for other fights, ones that seem good to them . . . or to their self-interest, which amounts to the same thing. The stronger powers, which seem to be getting stronger all the time, will always believe they are in the right. Whether or not they are fighting a good fight, they will be convinced that they are fighting the best fight they can drum up. Ultimately, the strongest of the strong will fight for the sake of remaining strong and becoming stronger. Deprived of a method for determining what is better or worse in a world of no stupendous meaning, the might of the strong will have to suffice as our standard. As for the weak, they will take it out on their one-time persecutors and plunderers when the time is right. No one can elude the fatalism of horror, whatever they believe or do not believe.

We do not have the power to make our lives monumentally better, only monumentally worse. The reform-minded, particularly if they are adherents of a hazy utopia, are always saying, "We would be so much better off if only it weren't for this institution or that, this government or that, or if we had no civilization at all, no economy, no barricades between us and greater satisfactions of the human body, mind, and heart. If only . . ." Then there are the missionaries and cultists of one faith or another, pondering to themselves and anyone else who will listen, "If only everyone could cling to that which I cling, everything would be so much better. If only everyone were like me. If only. . ." And the politicians, professional or armchair, chime in with their disbelief that anyone could possibly hold an opinion obdurate to their own. "If only my enemies could see as I see. If only they weren't so benighted by lusts and longings that do not affect me, everything would be so much better. If only. . ." Even level-headed realists cannot help thinking that things would be so much better if only more stopgaps were in effect, more bandages to patch up the world one square inch at a time. But no "if only" can cut it even as a

palliative for what ails us. Nothing will ever be so much better. There will always be horror pumped up to us from its limitless source—conscious and self-conscious life, the Big Mistake. And nothing keeps this horror going like unfounded beliefs and their emetic symbols: the stake, the lynch rope, the ovens, the car bomb. . . . To tolerate belief or to spit on it? The dilemma is nothing new. Perhaps it is only as a form of therapy or distraction that leads one to review matters that are so well worn, depressingly well worn, maddeningly well worn. (“If only people would stop making more people—then nothing would need to be so much better. If only. . .”) All said, a dissembled tolerance is another one of those things that make the world go round. And few of us—infidels and fideists alike—find the way of the hypocrite to be unduly challenging.

HYPOCRISY

Consciousness is the headwater of all deception and self-deception. To be conscious is inevitably to be a hypocrite. We can stomach our own kind, or just enough of them who either prove useful to us or are not handily destructible, only by the terms of the following contract: we will eat some of the other fellow’s excrement if he will eat some of ours. This is the ecumenical way, and the hypocritical one. Being a grossly transparent hypocrite is de rigueur for making it in this life. Try going through a single day in which you tell those around you what you really think: you will lose everything—your job, your family, your friends. Even more ruinous would be to act on your feelings, whether they are deeply held or fleeting. You would be dead or in prison in no time. Some speak of our hypocrisies as “useful fictions” and ballyhoo them as staples for both the individual and society. Others are more skeptical.

In Vital Lies, Simple Truths: The Psychology of Self-Deception (1996), Daniel Goleman studies how people and groups play along with factitious designs to forestall the animus and anxiety that would be loosed if a code of honesty were somehow enforced. Noam Chomsky published a book called Necessary Illusions: Thought Control in Democratic Societies (1989) in which he argues that the master class of a nation such as the United States of America could not hold up without lying to its citizenry and, more importantly, getting them to lie to themselves. With Zapffe, one could contend that nothing would hold up in this world without a scaffolding of hypocrisies and lies. This is the stuff of which civilizations are made—fabricated realities, not those stark necessities we have so bedecked with bells and whistles that we cannot recognize what is underneath. As noted above, the latter are simple: food, shelter, and clothing. Anything beyond these necessities for subsistence is fabricated reality, and all of us are scalp-deep in its countless accretions and extensions, its vast architecture of fervid dreams over the past five thousand years or so. In the genre of science fiction, narratives set in a post-holocaust society often accentuate its lunacy, tyranny, and conflict, which is to say that the gravest possible lesson will leave humanity unchanged. As if nothing happened, the characters living in these blasted environments immediately set about rebuilding fabricated realities from the remnants of the ones that are in ruins.

While some have had expressed momentous reservations about this edifice of claptrap known as civilization, this colossally garish spectacle of bad taste, we do not often pass up an opportunity to commend ourselves for erecting it. We grovel at the memorials of

some author, artist, inventor, or national leader who lived before us. We gape in wonder at the base of an Egyptian pyramid or an Aztec pyramid or any other pyramid we come across. Without question, we are cuckoo for pyramids. How stupefying that these mounds of rocks should be seen as showpieces of an ancient grandeur rather than as tombs of our sanity. And still we go at it full force. Is there any doubt that everyone will be suppurating with vainglory when the first pyramid, in the guise of a splendid installation decreed by civilization's potentates, is built on Mars?

Arrogance goes hand-in-hand with hypocrisy. Worm-ridden with self-assurance, it flicks sanity into the gutter and inflates the fault-ridden into the meritorious. The mind boggles that hypocrisy ever got a bad name, since it is but a by-product of consciousness itself, which motored us in style past all the other beasts of the earth. The ability to act in conflict with ourselves, to say we believe something is true that we know is not, has been a prerequisite for our survival. Without it, we would be compelled to wrestle with that most secret of lies: our integrity as persons, our wholeness as selves. Hypocrisy—in other words, the practice of lying about lying—shields us from seeing ourselves as we are: a collocation of fragments that fit together as a biological unit but not as anything else, not as that ghost which has been called a self, a phantasm whose ecotoplastic unreality we can never see through. By staying true to the lie of the self, the ego, we can hold onto the illusion that we will be who we are all our lives and not see our selves die a thousand times before our death. While some have dedicated themselves to getting to the bottom of how these parts create the illusion of a whole, this is not how pyramids are built. To get a pyramid off the ground takes a lot of ego—the base material of those stacks of stones that tourists visit while on vacation. Of course, a pyramid is actually a polyhedron, that is, a mathematical conception which pyramids in the physical world resemble . . . at least from a distance. The nearer one gets to a pyramid, the more it reveals itself to be what it is: a roughly pyramidal conglomeration of bricks, a composition of fragments that is not what it seems to be. This is also how it works with humans. The world around us encourages the build up of our egos—those pyramids of self-esteem—as if we needed such encouragement. Although everyone is affected by this pyramid scheme, some participate in it more than others: they are observably more full of themselves and tend to their egos as they would exotic plants in a hothouse. It helps if they can wear down the self-esteem of others, or simply witness this erosion. As the American novelist and essayist Gore Vidal said famously and often: “It is not enough to succeed. Others must fail.” None of this could work without the distance we put between what we are and what we think we are. Then we may appear to exist apart from our constituent elements. Self-esteem would evaporate without a self to esteem. As with pyramids, it is only at a distance that this illusion can be pulled off. Hypocrisy is that distance.⁵

WORLDVIEWS

Incongruities in how people believe things to be, or how they should be, are the stuff of “worldviews.” Elaborate or simpleminded, these agglomerations of judgment and hooley spice up our lives, which might be banefully boring without them. On the level of worldviews, minds great and small, not to forget armies, may contest the issues which inflame them. This is the surface level of sanctimony, folly, and cant. It also happens to be where most of us spend our time as we sleepwalk through existence, fighting for dear

life to blockade what consciousness would allow into our heads: pain and the anticipation of pain, decay and the only end of decay. Such is the sanatorium to which we have committed ourselves, and it just aggrandizes our insanity to place special import on the opinions, mythologies, religions, philosophies, or cultural products of any given people in any given geographical region or historical period. We are all in the same stewpot, as is any other species. But we are unaffected by this fact, and it is the differences among us, not the likenesses, which prompt almost all our behavior. And if those differences are not visible enough in broadcast media or on placards of protest, then we should more sedulously inspect the heads around us.

Human beings are born into a certain society, and they tend to follow that society's crazed precepts to stay in the good graces of those who authorize cognitively prudent conduct. In medieval Europe, for example, atheists were not as profuse as they have since become. Too successful in eradicating godlessness, the Church had to make do with heretics, those who deviated from its dogma in an ostentatious way. So it was with Marguerite Porete, who wrote a book wherein she recorded a mystic vision of the afterlife that disagreed with the tenets of ecclesiastic officials. It was her belief that qualified individuals would posthumously dissipate into a unity with the divine. (This metaphysical fabulation, in an atheist-pessimist format, would later be revived by Schopenhauer; see earlier references to the Will.) In its broad strokes, Marguerite's afterlife is all right. It sure beats the Church's massively stomach-turning congregation of God, Jesus, Mary, the angels, the saints, and other celestial VIPs. More imaginative and inspired, but not as catchy, as that of the Church, Marguerite's heaven got her burned at the stake. Her punishment by incineration must have lent spice to a time and place of mesmerizing congruousness.

In later centuries, a potpourri of Western worldviews emerged, but the principles of the Middle Ages remained the rage: if you bought the same cultural wares as your neighbors, the authorities would let you in the gate; if you did not buy them, you were shown the door. Then you could go live in the woods or the desert or the jungle with the lower animals. When you are alone in the wilderness, opinions or beliefs of any kind are dropped as the absurd accoutrements they are. But after being in the wilderness for a while, you may come around to feeling sociable. Maybe you could try living in a community of "like-minded" social deviants. However, they had better be so alike that they are clones of one another or the day will come when someone steps over the line and factions begin to teem. Our brains will always discriminate—that is their nature. They fix on superficial differences we spy in one another, redundantly speaking, since all differences among us are superficial. Whether they are excoriated as bigotry or dignified as worldviews, our differences are only heretical subtleties that in past centuries would have gotten one tortured or killed or both.

Is there any cause for us to speak of whims as worldviews? Are they more than just frippery we show off to disguise the fact that we have only one suit in our closet . . . and it is made of tissue and bones? Answers: of course there is and of course they are. If we do not take ourselves with dead seriousness, then we might as well cut our throats. Not to do so—take ourselves seriously, not cut our throats—would bring the roof down on our heads, which need to think that something of moment is going on in this world,

something to make it worth living in and reproducing in. The most dangerous idea is that we should all be free to do as we like as long as what we do hurts no one else. Those suggesting this idea will get nowhere or dead, based on the social and political atmosphere in which they live. We can rest easy, though, as this idea would be impossible to bring into our lives, and not only because free will is a lie.⁶ In both the natural and the human worlds, nothing can survive without hurting something else, thus savaging that most dangerous of all ideas. This is no news; it is just the way it is. And we are not blazingly bright enough to go against that way. Some schools of Buddhism admonish those with an itch to liberate themselves from their conditioned existence to leave their homes and their lives behind. To become liberated is to die to the cares of life, one of them being that we will die. Until we relinquish everything, we are lost. Can this recommendation be classified as a worldview? If so, then it will be kicked it aside as nihilistic, pessimistic, anti-social, or just plain goofy. It will not receive government or corporate funding. Conclusion: there is no greatness in humankind, only the voracity for infantile skirmishes in a sandbox. How better to conceal our quandaries? How better to keep our heads out of the know?

PESSIMISM

Rulers in society are not heroically consumed by interests other than their own. They say they are, but they are not. A spectacularly tiresome historical motif is the use of the Many to procure wealth and power for the Few. (This apprehension may also be laid at the doorstep of Hume, who specialized in detaining his readers with obvious but unspoken realities.) From time to time, those among the Many wonder why persons of wealth and power do not willingly take it easy at some juncture in their lives rather than straining to pursue as much wealth and power as they possibly can. Rulers of such entities as corporations, countries, and religious denominations seem loath to decelerate their acquisitiveness for wealth and power below full throttle. The only constraints on those trying to increase their wealth and power are others who are doing the same. And none of them will ever take a break from their covetous ways, not willingly. They will never take it easy. They do not know how. They only know that if their entities of wealth and power do not grow bigger and bigger, they will die. And they will. Everything and everyone else does. But rulers in society do not like to think about that. They want their entities to exist for all time. They want them to be undead.

During much of the twentieth century, social thinkers worried about technology becoming so efficient that human beings would be freed from devoting the plurality of their time to labor, which includes those hours spent preparing for labor and recovering from labor, leaving workers with a surplus of leisure and not enough distractions to fill their days. Attuned to auguries of a palmy future, these observers had qualms that this boom of idleness would trigger an existential meltdown, one characterized by the perturbations of those who were unused to contending with a surfeit of uncommitted hours. As usual, the predicted apocalypse did not arrive. Workers never quaked in horror before leisure's abyss or recoiled at the thought of having too much time on their hands. Theoretically, a life of leisure for all is possible. But the Few will always want to procure

more and more wealth and power. And for this they need workers willing to spend the plurality of their time working.

Some speculative minds have faith that we are en route to a utopia where people are not mainly absorbed in a job that is killing them or despondent because they do not have a killing job. They do not know what the specs for this utopia could be, as believers cannot conceive of heaven. Are their speculations, then, any less pitiful than those about the Kingdom of God? Pessimist answer: no. Pessimist reason: utopias are ersatz heavens unsupported by any knowledge, logic, or portents we have or can ever have. Life is suffering and the promise of a future of non-killing jobs or a jobless leisure is but an inveiglement to keep us turning on this infernal Ferris wheel of life, a booby prize when set beside nonexistence. Pessimist conclusion: at all levels, the systems of life—from sociopolitical systems to solar systems—are repugnant and should be negated as **MALIGNANTLY USELESS**.

Having a pessimist view of things is a fluke of temperament, a slippery word whose synonyms all mean the same fantastical thing: a steadfast quality of mind and emotion. (Like pyramids, temperaments are best seen as a long-distance illusion.) Made from the same dross as every other mortal, the pessimist tends to cleave to whatever validates the temper of his thoughts and emotions. Denied contentment with the world, he can only publicize his discontent. He does this for the amusement of his kindred malcontents and perhaps to put his disputants on the defensive about the bilge they have been swilling all their lives. Everyone not only wants to think they are right but to have others unwaveringly affirm their least notion as unassailable. Pessimists are no exception. But they are few and do not show up on the radar of our race. Immune to the blandishments of religions, countries, families, and whatever else that—with a smattering of emotive images and strains of maudlin music—can move the average citizen to tears or violence, the pessimist is invisible in both history books and the media. Without belief in gods or ghosts, unmotivated by a comprehensive delusion, he could never plant a bomb, plan a revolution, or shed blood for a cause. Pessimists are indeed lackadaisical as partisans in the human drama.

The Gnostic sects of the early Christian era negated what everyone else believed. Naturally, the pezzonovanti of the Church (as Godfather Vito Corleone would say) not only murdered their bodies but did what it could to murder their ideals. For an atheist living in a religious society, a befitting pose would be to start praying if you want to win friends and influence people of wealth and power. This fact is most patent in what Americans hallow as the greatest country that history has ever excreted. No mistake: those who negate what the throngs about them affirm are not worldly wise. Thoroughgoing pessimists do not even deign to talk about wisdom except perhaps to indicate that it is just another spook of our consciousness. We may possess cleverness and cunning and savoir-faire. We may know how to maneuver our way through life and filch what we can from the limited store of goods that fortune holds. But are these talents what people mean by wisdom? If not, then what can it be said to be? Answer: it can be anything that a guru or a salesman says it is. Words that have no meaning are high-margin merchandise. Ask any wise guy.

Pessimist thinkers often exhort inaction and avoidance of society, although few of them have actually done either. The Romanian-born French writer E. M. Cioran—whose philosophical essays are an assault on the unmitigated crumminess of all creation, a position that has led some commentators to pigeonhole him as a latter-day Gnostic, minus the god-figure—wrote that manual labor in a monastery is the closest thing to a solution for the madness and pain of existence . . . yet he himself was a literary man about town who would never have been elected to a monastic hall of fame. Obsessed with suicide, he showered laurels upon Heinrich von Kleist and others who themselves assigned the hour and the manner of their dying. But Cioran clung to existence until he was finally taken down while in the stupor of Alzheimer’s disease, doomed like Harry Haller in Hermann Hesse’s novel Steppenwolf to be a suicide without portfolio. And Schopenhauer, while arguing that life is a bootless venture that pays us off with pain, was always ready to throw himself into the fray with opponents dead or alive but did not throw in the towel on his own long life due to an anti-suicide clause in his philosophy. One might also fairly opine that he was never pained enough, as was Nietzsche, to consider suicide as a fall-back position should his miseries become too much for him to bear. Compassion for the ailing of others Schopenhauer had in abundance, but what most cowed his imagination was boredom, a pestilence that cannot be calculated among the worst in the world. How blessed by chance he must have been. To add to the diversions with which Schopenhauer’s life was rich, he also played the flute. Nietzsche claimed that, because he occupied himself in this way, Schopenhauer could not have been a true pessimist. This slur might be considered in light of the fact that the later philosopher, who turned pessimism into affirmation like water into wine, was a piano player and songwriter. But this fact does not make Nietzsche wrong. Schopenhauer styled himself a pessimist, an unexampled and true pessimist, which does not mean that he was one. Nothing can prove that, or anything else that Schopenhauer or Nietzsche or anyone has to say about matters of real weight. Flute-playing is not an avocation that one associates with someone who preached self-denial in all aspects of one’s life as a means to a life-negating salvation. But if Schopenhauer practiced the flute rather than what he preached, does that disqualify him from being a pessimist, one who wrote with wearying prolixity that all life was pain and nothing else? Probably not. It does cause a person to wonder about Schopenhauer, though, and by extension to wonder about the words and ways of anyone who would cut a figure as a pessimist. And what a pestering wonder it is when some mortal decries the very world in which he prospers. Late in his lifework as the premier pessimist of the twentieth century, Cioran jotted the following note: “At Saint-Séverin, listening to the organist play the Art of the Fugue, I kept saying to myself, over and over, ‘There is the refutation of all my anathemas.’” Does this passing thought reduce Cioran’s writings to a hoax on himself and as well as those who treasure philosophical and literary works of a pessimistic, nihilistic, or defeatist nature as indispensable to their existence? Again, probably not. But the fact that he was never disabused of the value of music does undercut his integrity, as if the nonexistence of integrity in us all were not one of the leading themes of pessimism. It does seem, however, that there is nothing one can speak or stunt one can perform to make an impeccable outward show of execration that any speck of the organic has arisen within this universe . . . or any other universe that might

have existed before the creation known to us or that may come after it, as well as all universes in theoretical coexistence with ours.

Certain philosophers of Greek antiquity—homeless intellectuals hanging around the edges of the agora—based their lives on the principle of doing as little as possible and doing it alone. If wisdom is to be had, this may be the course to take—at least for pessimists. Sun Tzu’s Art of War (c. sixth century B.C.E.) or Niccolò Machiavelli’s early sixteenth-century handbook for those running a state were not written for pessimists, who tend to be wash-outs in world affairs. Nor were the maxims of Balthasar Gracian’s Art of Worldly Wisdom (1637), number thirty-seven of which proffers the following advice for those who by constitution are intemperate in their worldly aspirations: “Keep a store of sarcasms and know how to use them. This is the point of greatest tact in human intercourse. Such sarcasms are often thrown out to test people’s moods, and by their means one often obtains the most subtle and penetrating touchstone of the heart. Other sarcasms are malicious, insolent, poisoned by envy or envenomed by passion, unexpected flashes that destroy at once all favor and esteem. Struck by the slightest word of this kind, many fall away from the closest intimacy with superiors or inferiors that would not have been the slightest shaken by a whole conspiracy of popular insinuation or private malevolence. Other sarcasms work favorably, confirming and assisting one’s reputation. But the greater the skill with which they are launched, the greater the caution with which they should be anticipated and received. For here a knowledge of malice is in itself a means of defense, and a shot foreseen always misses its mark.” The managers of the earth would not be ill advised to memorize all 300 of Gracian’s maxims. One never knows when they might come in handy in dealing with our kind.⁷

All counsels of “wisdom” are a sorry tradeoff for the simplistic defeatism built into the pessimist way of looking at things, which has nothing to do with getting on in the world and seeks only to forfeit the game. Pessimists’ defenses against despair are rather expeditiously eroded, while the major part of the species seems able to undergo any trauma without significantly reexamining its execrable mantras, including “everything happens for a reason,” “life goes on,” “accept the things you cannot change,” “whatever will be, will be,” and any other old saw to get people to keep their chins up. One can either sign on to this program or suffer the consequences. Pessimists, on the other hand, construe the Creation to be objectionable and useless on principle—the worst possible dispatch of bad news.⁸ It seems so bad, so wrong, that, should such authority be unwisely placed into their hands, they would make it a prosecutable malfeasance to produce a being who might turn out to be a pessimist. Disenfranchised by nature, however, their kind is impressed into this world by the reproductive liberty of positive thinkers who are ever-thoughtful of the future. Pessimists also look to the future—that madhouse that is always under construction—but with a well-founded disregard rather than a groundless hope. Retrospectively, how could anyone who once looked to the future with hope not wish to reconsider? Then again, they might stand firm in their hope for the future’s future. At whatever point in time one is situated, the world seems to have a superabundance of future. And unless you are a pessimist, the future always looks better than the past or present.

HAPPINESS

Counter to our every intuition, quasi-scientific studies affirm the following: the breaks we get in this life, whether wondrously favorable or unrectifiably calamitous, have no bearing on our “happiness.” Schopenhauer and others rate happiness in relative terms—not as something positive in itself but only as a greater or lesser state of pain. Such a perspective is fine for the pessimistic set, but indications are that most people consider themselves happy most of the time. This finding has been authenticated by workers in the field of “happiness studies” (a.k.a. “positive psychology”). As one might gather, this discipline was not instituted to smear happiness as a misconception. Even though almost anything is debatable to the verge of a drooling frenzy, it seems there is no denying the world’s inventory of happiness, according to those who study it. If a research poll includes the statement “I am happy—true or false,” respondents will say “true” far more often than “false.” While it may be a shameful admission to let on that one is not happy, this cannot be construed to mean that those pleading happiness as their dominant humor are lying through their teeth. People want to be happy. They believe they deserve to be happy. And philosophers who inform them they can never be happy are not part of the dialogue.

Zapffe prescribed that we quit reproducing because all of our behavior unmasks us as beings whose consciousness has made sure we will never be happy, leading us to twist our heads into knots in an attempt be happy anyway. This twisting of our heads is responsible for an unsightly and tragic existence founded on lies that we tell ourselves are truths, which would not be so terrible if our lies were not always letting us down, leading us to twist our heads into still more knots in a futile effort to use our consciousness to kill our consciousness, which is what makes us what we are and do not want to be—beings who must bamboozle themselves and one another if they are to wring what seems to be a little happiness from a world that does not know or care if we are happy but just wants us to survive and reproduce as if we were any other organism and not one hobbled by nature with this fluke, mutation, or mistake of consciousness. Yet Zapffe is reputed to have been a man buoyant of heart, even when he was not pursuing his favorite pastime of mountain climbing. In the five volumes of his Selected Letters (five volumes, 1965-76), Lovecraft mentions his nervous disorders and other troubles in his life, but more often he wrote about what a fine time he had in the sunny outdoors or expatiated on the joys of his travels around the United States and Canada or joked around with a correspondent about a wide range of subjects in which he was well-studied. Cioran had friends galore and admitted in an interview that he loved to laugh. Schopenhauer himself was a bon vivant who lived it up even as he was working on his blanket condemnation of living. Unless an obtrusive physical or psychological woefulness pushes suffering front and center in their lives, and is more or less chronic, people—including those philosophical people who, if given a choice, would choose never to have been born—will apprise a pollster that they are happy or must stand accused of prevarication.

In Ecce Homo (1888; published posthumously, 1908), Nietzsche wrote, “Never have I felt happier with myself than in the sickest and most painful periods of my life. . . .” While Nietzsche does not explicitly correlate his “sickest and most painful periods” with being happy with himself, or draw a line between his sickness and pain and any kind of

happiness aside from that of self-satisfaction, one is hard pressed to understand these words to have some substance other than the claim that the “sickest and most painful” periods in Nietzsche’s life entailed a material correspondence with his feeling happy. Seemingly a gross perversion of the facts on Nietzsche’s part, every word in his oeuvre supports his boast and is made radiant by it. If we may be incredulous of the specifics of the man’s ideas, his honesty deserves the benefit of the doubt. Nothing in Nietzsche’s life or work suggests that the creator of the superman faked his convictions or lied about his experience. We must then ask: what was the secret of his self-happiness? His answer: an unqualified ratification of whatever existence hurled at him. Acutely sensitive to the “terrible and questionable” in life, his vivaciousness was not impeded by their effects. The jolly tone of his writings, unmarred by embitterment (as he was addicted to telling his readers), signifies his ferocious joy. How he ascended to this state of grace is as mysterious as how one clasps the brass ring of Buddhism’s enlightenment. But the human exhibition is bursting with mysteries, as the transmuted lives of U. G. Krishnamurti and John Wren-Lewis bespeak, so why not count Nietzsche’s happiness among them? Furthermore, the whole of his thought hinges on this prodigy, so we must take him at his word if we are to bother taking him at all. On his honor, Nietzsche was untouched by what other mortals might suffer as hindrances to their cheer. Migraines, gastrointestinal dysfunctions, and other pathologies were for him translated into happiness and became parents of his joy. If only he had been a theist, Nietzsche’s “word” might have caused theodicy to go out of fashion, drying up all the rivers of ink that have flowed from the Book of Job. With Nietzsche as the anti-Job, mollifications for the thrashings we take from a god who is paradoxically all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving would become outmoded, and even indefensible in themselves. His would not be a Jobian patience but a Nietzschean jollity for the floggings visited upon him by the flighty Yahweh. He would have praised every lash laid upon him and stood for more in the flagellation brothel the Elohim created in six days and has since kept in business by delegating its operations to every dominator or dominatrix that ever applied for the job.

Nietzsche would appear an anomaly in that sickness and pain stimulated him to loftier heights of happiness than he knew during times when he was relatively sound of body. Among ordinary people, the simultaneity of happiness and pain is more the rage. Most banal is the default from an interruption of pain back to one’s life-norm of happiness. The strange truth is that people whom one would expect to be unhappy are not, or not for long. Happiness happens . . . or seems to happen, which amounts to the same thing. Even survivors of mind-numbing horrors may recover and become happy, although this does not put the lie to the lives of those who do not bounce back. But for all that, the statistics of positive psychology back up the story that—whoever they are, wherever they live, and whatever their living conditions—no large percentage of the world’s population may be counted among the unhappy. Yet no one can disavow those whom we might designate as unhappy people, people who have never known a day of happiness in their lives or whose unhappy moments are so overwhelming that it would be indecent to consider a fugitive gaiety that may come their way as anything else than jeering exception to the rule of their unhappiness. There are also people who, if they only could see the pain and grief that awaits them in the future, would ordain this vision sufficient to excuse self-slaughter at the earliest opportunity. Perhaps most mournful are those who have lived a life of

happiness, then come to suffer in a way that extinguishes every memory of that life, leaving them to curse their entrance into this world. For these unfortunates, Marcel Proust was indecorously wide of the mark: one may search for lost good times without ever regaining them. And just as happiness cannot be restored in the wake of an indelible adversity, there are also torments that no enumeration of happy moments can abrogate from our days. These lacerating fortunes are everlasting certainties. They are surer than the suns of the universe because suns can explode or grow cold, but wherever there is life there is pain. Yet pain is also an asset, for without its distress signals an organism is destined for a siege of insults to its anatomy. Ask anyone with leprosy.

Whatever adventures in happiness we may have—without quibbling about whether they are absolute or relative—all take place in the shadow of souls whose torments will end only with death. Worse, the fatally wrecked must live in the shadow of others who are happy, if indeed the former are not so unfit that they are past noticing the universe or any mirth within it, existing in a windowless confinement of ill-fate, an unappealable seclusion where the only possible comparisons are between one horror and another. How could anyone find happiness in a world where such incurables are always within walking distance? We do it all the time, most surely, but should that dispense us from the guilt of being happy while those by-standers to happiness are everywhere, tears and blood pouring from their eyes? They could have brought it on themselves of course. Maybe they were just asking for it, doing the things they did, or not doing other things, and being the way they were. Somehow they could be the ones to blame for their own ill-being. They might have committed some sin, some blunder within the Tao, some crime in the eyes of a cosmic law. Perhaps disrespect of the Holy Spirit placed them among the damned in both life and death.⁹ Or maybe they were just indolent in the pursuit of happiness, while we earned ours, paid for it as we would any other commodity. The managers of society want us to be happy, which makes it politic to be mindless of anyone who is not happy along with us. What good is it being happy if you cannot be left in peace with your happiness? But any killjoy will tell you: “If even one person’s life is a living hell, then the world and any happiness within it is MALIGNANTLY USELESS.”¹⁰ This censure of the happy is moralistic, to say the least. It is a party pooper’s attempt to compromise anything that might be called happiness. It turns the very idea of happiness into an unconscionable delusion conceived by lucky clods or a deplorable rationalization dreamed up by swine. Most of all, it makes being happy seem the unforgivable sin of the saved against their siblings in the pit, who are too much occupied with horror to hear the gospel of happiness. Unshaken by these moral protests, positive thinkers and pessimists alike may retort: “Happiness is not a natural birthright. You must be thinking of death.”

Nothing is as certain as the fact that human beings require their existence to be justified. Without this justification, we could not go on living as we have all these years. Though our existence may be futile or absurd or painful makes no difference as to whether or not it is justified to us. People can go on existing with so little justification that they themselves could not tell you what justifies their existence. But if they could tell you, this is what they would say: “I exist to be happy.” This is the only justification for human existence—happiness or the prospect of happiness. What constitutes happiness, we must own, is near boundless in character. It may even be something that seems horrible, like

being burned at the stake for one's convictions. Or it may be doing something that would make a person unhappy not to do, like sacrificing his or her life for another, which if it were not done could devastate that person's future happiness. All we can really say about the nature of happiness is that to be happy is not to be unhappy. Nobody would say with candor, "I exist to be unhappy." Even someone who commits suicide may be said to have existed for some happiness or prospect of happiness that they did not believe would ever be theirs (Schopenhauer, "On Suicide"). There are also those who commit suicide because the prospect of ending the unhappiness of their lives makes them happy. That is how far people will go to be happy, and it is the only thing that justifies our existence. Any other justification is just the surface beneath which lies the real justification, which is to be happy or have a hope of being happy. This hope may not be for happiness in this world but in an afterlife. Whatever happiness may mean to us, we must have it or expect to have it; without this having or expecting to have, our existence would not be justified and we could not go on living as we have been all these years. Even if we are mistaken that we are happy or can ever be happy, we would go on living with this mistaken justification. Our existence must be justified and only happiness or the prospect of happiness, actual or mistaken, can do that. The question remains: why do we need to go on living as we have all these years? The answer is that we do not. Nothing that we know or can possibly know informs us otherwise. And if we do not need to go on living as we have all these years, then we also do not need our existence to be justified by happiness or the prospect of happiness. At this point, then, we must rethink the thesis that human beings need their existence to be justified by happiness or the prospect of happiness. There was never anything certain about that. Human beings can live themselves to death in a state of unhappiness and with a total lack of expectation of happiness. Some human beings may believe they require their existence to be justified, which is close to saying that they believe that their existence is justified. But their belief has its origins in one thing: the fact that they already exist. Human beings that exist and are conscious of existing—as opposed to fetuses, toddlers, the brain damaged and super retarded, coma patients, etc.—almost universally do not like the idea that their existence may be wholly without justification and therefore purposeless, meaningless, and useless. They also do not much care to brood upon their upcoming nonexistence, which is about all they would have to do if their existence was not justified by happiness or the possibility of happiness. These facts make existence itself into a problem for those who are conscious they exist. For them, which is to say anyone reading this book as well as its author, existence is not just a problem but is the only problem. Pitifully, there is no solution to this problem that would not destroy our conception of ourselves with nothing to replace it. Before we existed, we did not exist. And nonexistence does not need to be justified any more than does existence. Proof: nonexistence antedates our existence; since existence cannot be said to be an improvement over its forerunner, this rather invalidates any justification that could possibly be conceived for either existence or nonexistence. The latter, nonexistence, does have the advantage over its counterpart given that it does not have the handicap of existing. One might go out on a limb and say that existence is no worse than nonexistence, but that is not a justification for the replacement of one by the other. And although happiness may be thrown in to sweeten the pot of our existence, this does not justify bearing progeny who, if they had never existed, would not suffer from their inexperience of being happy in life. Nor would they suffer from uncertainties about being

happy after they are processed by death into the kingdom that may or may not be to come. Fact is, nothing can justify our existence. Existence of any flavor is not only unjustified, it is useless, malignantly so, and has nothing to recommend it over nonexistence. A person's addiction to existence is understandable as a telltale of the fear of nonexistence, but one's psychology as a being that already exists does not justify existence as a condition to be perpetuated but only explains why someone would want to perpetuate it. For the same reason, even eternal bliss in a holy hereafter is unjustified, since it is just another form of existence, another instance in which the unjustifiable is perpetuated. That anyone should have a bias for heaven over nonexistence should by rights be condemned as hedonistic by the same people who scoff at Schopenhauer for complaining about the disparity between "the effort and the reward" in human life. People may believe they can choose any number of things. But they cannot choose to undo their existence, leaving them to live and die as puppets who have had an existence forced upon them whose edicts they must follow. If you are already among the existent, anything you do will be unjustified and **MALIGNANTLY USELESS**. And anyone's disposition to mock this paragraph as sophisticated or detect in it some affinity with their own temper is their prerogative.

NOTES

1. Some quotes from U. G. may be useful here. The likeness between U. G.'s contentions and those of Zapffe, as well as to others made or to be made by the author of the present work, are fairly blatant. As U. G. has said, "All insights, however extraordinary they may be, are worthless. You can create a tremendous structure of thought from your own discovery, which you call insight. But that insight is nothing but the result of your own thinking, the permutations and combinations of thought. Actually there is no way you can come up with anything original." The following selection is taken from interviews with U. G. collected as No Way Out (1991).

The problem is this: nature has assembled all these species on this planet. The human species is no more important than any other species on this planet. For some reason, man accorded himself a superior place in this scheme of things. He thinks that he is created for some grander purpose than, if I could give a crude example, the mosquito that is sucking his blood. What is responsible for this is the value system that we have created. And the value system has come out of the religious thinking of man. Man has created religion because it gives him a cover. This demand to fulfill himself, to seek something out there was made imperative because of this self-consciousness in you which occurred somewhere along the line of the evolutionary process. Man separated himself from the totality of nature.

Nature is interested in only two things—to survive and to reproduce one like itself. Anything you superimpose on that, all the cultural input, is responsible for the boredom of man. So we have varieties of religious experience. You are not

satisfied with your own religious teachings or games; so you bring in others from India, Asia or China. They become interesting because they are something new. You pick up a new language and try to speak it and use it to feel more important. But basically, it is the same thing.

Somewhere along the line in human consciousness, there occurred self-consciousness. (When I use the word "self," I don't mean that there is a self or a center there.) That consciousness separated man from the totality of things. Man, in the beginning, was a frightened being. He turned everything that was uncontrollable into something divine or cosmic and worshiped it. It was in that frame of mind that he created, quote and unquote, "God." So, culture is responsible for whatever you are. I maintain that all the political institutions and ideologies we have today are the outgrowth of the same religious thinking of man. The spiritual teachers are in a way responsible for the tragedy of mankind.

I am questioning the very idea of consciousness. There is no such thing as consciousness at all. Consciousness is nothing but knowledge. Don't ask me how knowledge originated. Somewhere along the line knowledge started with you, and then you wanted to know about the things around. That is what I mean by "self-consciousness." You have become conscious of what is going on around you, and so naturally you want to know. What I am suggesting is that the very demand to understand the mystery of existence is destructive.

The identity that we have created, that culture has created in us, is the most important factor which we have to consider. If we continue to give importance to this identity, which is the product of culture, we are going to end up with Alzheimer's disease. We are putting memory and the brain to a use for which they are not intended.

The constant use of memory to maintain our identity will put us all ultimately in a state where we are forced to give up. When someone gives up the attempt to fit himself or herself into the value system, you call that man crazy. He (or she, as the case may be) has given up. Some people don't want to fit into that framework. We push them to be functional. The more we push them to be functional, the more crazy they become. Actually, we are pushing them to suicide.

The body cannot be afraid of death. The movement that is created by society or culture is what does not want to come to an end. . . . What you are afraid of is not death. In fact, you don't want to be free from fear. . . . It is the fear that makes you believe that you are living and that you will be dead. What we do not want is the fear to come to an end. That is why we have invented all these new minds, new science, new talk, therapies, choiceless awareness and various other gimmicks. Fear is the very thing that you do not want to be free from. What you call "yourself" is fear. The "you" is born out of fear; it lives in fear, functions in fear and dies in fear.

Your own death, or the death of your near and dear ones, is not something you can experience. What you actually experience is the void created by the disappearance of another individual, and the unsatisfied demand to maintain the continuity of your relationship with that person for a nonexistent eternity. The arena for the continuation of all these “permanent” relationships is the tomorrow—heaven, next life, and so on. These things are the inventions of a mind interested only in its undisturbed, permanent continuity in a “self”-generated, fictitious future. The basic method of maintaining the continuity is the repetition of the question, “How? How? How?” “How am I to live? How can I be happy? How can I be sure I will be happy tomorrow?” This has made life an insoluble dilemma for us. We want to know, and through that knowledge we hope to continue on with our miserable existences forever.

I still maintain that it is not love, compassion, humanism, or brotherly sentiments that will save mankind. No, not at all. It is the sheer terror of extinction that can save us, if anything can.

I am like a puppet sitting here. It's not just I; all of us are puppets. Nature is pulling the strings, but we believe that we are acting. If you function that way [as puppets], then the problems are simple. But we have superimposed on that [the idea of] a “person” who is pulling those strings.

2. A similar case is that of Suzanne Segal, who, like U. G. Krishnamurti and John Wren-Lewis, suddenly found that she had become bereft of an ego (self). After years of seeking a cure to the unease this experience incurred in her—it would seem that not everybody is at peace with being nobody—she wrote Collision with the Infinite: A Life Beyond the Personal Self (1996). The following year she died of a brain tumor at the age of forty-two. Although no link was established between her diseased brain and the disappearance of her ego, cerebral tumors presenting altered states of consciousness and changes in personality are not unknown. (Ask Charles Whitman, who left a written request that an autopsy be done on him that might explain why he ascended a tower at the University of Texas to shoot at and kill strangers before he himself was shot and killed by policemen. Whitman did have a brain tumor, but neurologists could not establish a link between his tumor and his actions, possibly because he was dead. In a note written a few days preceding his murderous rampage on August 1, 1966, Whitman stated that in March of the same year he had consulted with one Dr. Jan Cochrum, to whom he confided his “unusual and irrational thoughts” and “overwhelming violent impulses.” Cochrum gave Whitman a script for Valium and referred him to a psychiatrist, Dr. Maurice Dean Heatly. In his one session with Heatly, Whitman said that he had an urge to “start shooting people with a deer rifle.” While no link was established between Whitman’s brain tumor and his bloody actions, he probably should have had his brain checked out sooner, or at least “chosen” not to destroy so many lives. In a determinist court of justice, perhaps Cochrum and Heatly would have been tried as accomplices in the murders. But what sense would that make of a senseless tragedy when the law could put it all on Whitman’s head?) Unlike U. G. but similar to Wren-Lewis, Segal sought answers to her transformation in spiritual traditions that addressed egoless experience. Unlike Wren-Lewis but similar to U. G., Segal had pursued a spiritual practice, Transcendental Meditation, before she became the beneficiary of “enlightenment by accident.” TM sells

its followers enlightenment on the installment plan (“Cosmic Consciousness in three years. Payment not refundable.”), although what they have bequeathed to the world has been little or nothing. In a joint venture with the prosperous organization headed by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, magician and TM promoter Doug Henning unsuccessfully attempted to develop a theme park in his native country of Canada. It was to be called Maharishi Veda Land. This project followed Henning’s failed bid to attain a seat in Canada’s parliament. His platform was a pledge that, should he be elected to office, thousands of yogis—the number varies depending on the source—would fly over Canada and cure the nation’s civic problems. (One might think that such an event, rather than being debased as a campaign promise, might be actualized purely to improve Canadian society and to stun the world with a bravura performance of real magic. But apparently even yogis adhere to the code of quid pro quo.) Segal lost her ego two years after discontinuing TM, which she performed for eight years. In an interview, she stated that she did not feel meditation played a role in the loss of her self-identity. U. G. was in concord with Segal: after years of pursuing ego-death through meditation, he inveighed against this procedure as pointless and perhaps harmful. Compared to what happened to the three individuals mentioned in this note, arriving at a TOE is dull stuff. For most of humanity, including that part which studies consciousness, the phenomenon of ego-death is not enthralling, or even well marked as a human experience. Regular folk are illiterate with respect to this branch of the Tree of Knowledge. All their big questions have already been answered by some big book. And the reality specialists have their reputations to consider as high priests of the noosphere. In other words, almost no one figures their time to be ill-spent in bickering about how to interpret some fine point of scripture or the results of a clinical study rather than in contemplating some extraordinary heads that have called into question what we are or what we might be aside from puppets of the ego.

3. “Aftereffects of Near-Death Experience: A Survival Mechanism Hypothesis” *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* (1994).
4. Glossing Metzinger’s study of the illusion of selves is an interesting fact: Metzinger is a lucid dreamer. His treatise Being No One contains an entire chapter on the singular endowment of being able to “wake up” in one’s dreams and recognize that one’s consciousness is operating within an illusory environment created by the brain. This might very well explain Metzinger’s stake in the nature of waking perception and the possibility that, in the words of Poe, “All that we see or seem / Is but a dream within a dream.” These lines sum up the argument of Being No One and its conclusion that nothing a philosopher of mind or a cognitive neuroscientist could discover and coherently explain to his fellow beings would in any way reconstruct our lives as conscious entities who know they are alive and know they will die. What a shocker, then, that in the last paragraph of his 699-page book—after the reader has slogged through a brain-sapping examination of how and why human beings evolved in such a way that we believe we are someone while actually being no one—Metzinger avails himself of a misty hope, a wistful mayhap, that although his theories may be iconoclastic and upsetting to the authorities, he is still a good citizen who supports humanist ideals and delusions. (His one other major field of curiosity is ethics.) “At least in principle,” he writes, “one can wake up from one’s biological history. One can grow up, define one’s own goals, and become autonomous.” So imponderably nebulous, the meaning of these words can only be guessed at, since they are among the closing remarks of his book and Metzinger leaves them hanging in the air. One is unreservedly stymied as to how this transformation could occur in terms of Metzinger’s theory and research. Did he wrap up his treatise prematurely? Does he know something he is not telling us? Or did he just want to end a

disillusioning book on an up note? A year after publishing Being No One, Metzinger muddled the issue further. In a 2004 lecture, he referred to our captivity in the illusion of a self—even though “there is no one” to have this illusion—as the “tragedy of the ego.” This phrase fits like a glove into Zapffe’s theory of consciousness as a tragic mistake. Disappointingly, Metzinger states that “the tragedy of the ego dissolves because nobody is ever born and nobody ever dies.” This is an adage plagiarized verbatim from Zen Buddhism. Metzinger seems to think it should alleviate our fear of death. But the reality is that every body is born and every body dies. And anybody who is consoled by Metzinger’s Zennist wordplay is kidding himself. In traditions of enlightenment, the only redress for our deluded condition is to wake up to our brain’s manufactured sense of self and thus eliminate it. Metzinger has tried to shed light on the neurological mechanisms that make this goal unfeasible . . . except “in principle.” How droll that this is just the thing in which we are already engaged by one means or another—that is, conspiring to lose ourselves by means of such diversionary activities as waging war, praying to gods, or rooting for the home team. Unless cognitive neuroscience can come up with a better way to off our selves, it can make zero difference in our lives as dreamers within a dream. We are encumbered with our selves, stuck in a life of us-ness. As paths of deliverance, both spirituality and science have so far revealed themselves to be useless. Comparatively, Zapffe’s solution of saving the future from the poison of consciousness by closing down the head factory once and for all seems both level-headed and beatific.

5. As individuals, we profit from hypocrisy, this is true. But we realize its blessings most intensively when we band together into societies and societal institutions. Great nations and religions must be frontmost in hypocrisy, all of them having run up a record of crimes that, should they be brought to light, would commit them to a well-deserved decline or ruination. “Well-deserved?” one might ask. By what laws, in a world a fabricated reality, should such entities be judged? Answer: by their own. Even further, it is not great nations and religions that compete with one another but their hypocrisies, their lies. These armaments must proliferate and be vigilantly enlarged, for dominion would be lost were they to be overturned by more seductive hypocrisies, more vaulting lies.
6. The lie of free will and the lie of the self are intimately connected. One cannot operate without the other. And the hold they both have on our perception of ourselves is unbreakable. That this hold is anchored in illusion but is denied to be so, although it may be confirmed by logic and sometimes by lived experience, is the work of cognitive defense mechanisms that keep us surviving and reproducing, that will not let us wake into consciousness of what we are until it is too late. The result is a being that is not what it believes itself to be, a puppet that cannot realize its puppet nature. Everything in our world coils around this grotesque misconception of ourselves. Our incompetence in seeing through this misconception, these lies that perpetuate us, is the tragedy of humankind.
7. The sixth edition of The Columbia Encyclopedia states that “Gracián’s masterpiece is the allegorical and pessimistic novel *El criticón* (3 parts, 1651–57), which contrasts an idyllic primitive life with the evils of civilization. It brought him exile and disgrace.” Evidently, Gracian was only an outside observer of the devious ins and outs of civilized intercourse. And anyone who champions a less complicated way of life to that offered them by society is bound for the margins of life in this world and probably extinction. An interesting example is that of the celibate sect of the Shakers, who at their peak attracted some six thousand adherents. At last count, there were four practicing Shakers living in

Maine. As breakaway members of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers), the Shakers followed the Mosaic Law against killing other human beings, which, along with their forbearance from breeding, secured their oblivion.

8. The emphasis here is on “news” in the sense of a report or conclusion based on data assembled from informed sources, and not on “bad” in the sense of evil—a moral category, for those who care—or an inequality between pleasure and pain in the world, something which can never be sorted out. The pessimist begins in disgruntlement and ends with a judgment: the Creation should not be because it is MALIGNANTLY USELESS for conscious beings, the only ones for whom the Creation needs to be “right” or “correct,” just as a good investigative news story must have its facts straight to justify its dissemination. (Of course, to speak about the “Creation” is to speak in error, as the Creation has no unfluctuating being but is an ever mutating mishmash of forms.) This is Zapffe’s Paradox: consciousness is a mistake, something that is wrong or incorrect, and can be made right only by the disappearance of humans from the Creation. Although disgruntlement remains for the pessimist, it does so only because his judgment is laughed off, travestied, and stamped as invalid by votaries of affirmation. Being refused a full hearing or a particle of credibility could explain the pessimist’s incendiary rhetoric and animosity toward the normal world. If you want to alienate someone whose pain you cannot see or do not understand, just tell him that the problem is all in his head. This works both ways, naturally, and ensures an abiding impasse between the disgruntled and the contented . . . as well as between any groups or individuals that do not see eye to eye with one another.

9. Catholic children are taught that while they may go to heaven, their friends and family may go to hell for infractions of “God’s laws” that they neglected to repent, should they even be aware that they were guilty of an act disagreeable to the Creator of the Universe. This would seem to put a damper on eternal salvation. Yet Catholics do not squawk about this final solution for sinners. (Ask William F. Buckley, Jr.) Oppositely, Mahayana Buddhism has as its soteriological end-point the salvation of all “sentient beings.” Without regard to the metaphysics of Catholicism versus those of Mahayana Buddhism, these two religions are mutually subversive on an earthly plane. One of them goes by the book to divide the sinners from the saved; the other’s work is not done until we are all joined together in a plenary salvation. Catholics and other Christian sects are legalistic, presuming that everyone has an equal chance to behave themselves and not be sentenced to an eternal stretch in hell. Or so goes the theory. This arrangement would not quiet the conscience of a Mahayana Buddhist nor any others whose consciousness extends beyond the gates of their own backyard. But heaven and earth seem to be full of people who can sit back and drink the tall cool ones while the rest shrivel on the searing coals both in life and in death.

10. To have one’s own pleasure decimated by the guilty knowledge that others are suffering is more often an indicator of a pathological hypersensitivity than of real compassion, that is, identification with those whose suffering exceeds our own. Extreme cases of this neurosis are few and far between due to a protective narcissism which, because it is so ingrained and common to human beings, is not on any list of pathologies. Without such protection, especially in the forms that Zapffe names in “The Last Messiah,” we may only “laugh—but smile no more,” as Poe ends his poem “The Haunted Palace.” This laughter, we know, is infernal. No pleasure quickens it. Those most far gone into pessimism are protected from

the infernal, and their heads are unaffected by what would spoil their pleasures. They feel merry even while they are in mind of the horrible. Nonchalantly, they say, “We’re all going to suffer and die, so why not have fun while we can? Why not laugh it up? Come on, let’s see that smile.” Their pessimism is the most horrible pessimism, and their laughter and smiles are the most horrible laughter and smiles. Only for those among the protected, only among the greatest of all pessimists, can the horrible provoke complacent smiles and unthinking laughter.

A procession of puppets boarding a cruise ship, the debaucheries of a vacation romp filling their skulls, is iconic of this world-shattering pessimism. By contrast, what an example of temperamental balance was the Cynic Antisthenes, who said, “I would rather go mad than enjoy myself.” In Woody Allen’s Annie Hall (1977), the character Alvy Singer says to his girlfriend Annie, “I feel that life is divided into the horrible and the miserable. That’s the two categories. The horrible are like, I don’t know, terminal cases, you know, and blind people, crippled. I don’t know how they get through life. It’s amazing to me. And the miserable is everyone else. So you should be thankful that you’re miserable, because that’s very lucky, to be miserable.” This is one of the most quotably funny bits in Allen’s movie, which was originally titled “Anhedonia,” the psychopathology that places Alvy among the miserable. Clinically, anhedonia is the inability to experience pleasure. The main reference to this disorder occurs when Alvy fecklessly, and hilariously, tries to get Annie to understand him by saying, “I can’t enjoy anything unless everybody is. If one guy is starving someplace, that puts a crimp in my evening.” In real life, anhedonia is no joke: it is a symptom of the worst cases of depression and schizophrenia. In Annie Hall, it is illustrative of an artist sublimating the tragic into escapist entertainment. One guy or billions of guys in an earthly hell will not persuade many to think of life as **MALIGNANTLY USELESS**. That would not only put a crimp in one’s evening—it would damn us all to a philosophical anhedonia and a pathological hypersensitivity, stifling all pleasure we take in the futurity of our species, that deluge of bodies cascading out of nothing and back into the same.

CONSUMING HORROR

BLEAKNESS I

To salve the pains of consciousness, some people send their heads to sunny places on the advice of a self-help evangelist. Not everyone can follow their lead, above all not those who sneer at the sun and everything upon which it shines. Their only respite is in the unpositive. The best thing for them, really the only thing, is a getaway into bleakness. Turning away from the solicitations of hope and the turbulence they bring to the mind, sanctuary may be petitioned in desolate places—a pile of ruins in a barren locale or a rubble of words in a book wherein someone whispers in a dry voice, “I am here, too.” But dejected readers must be on their guard. The lure of phony retreats has taken in many a chump who treasures philosophical and literary works of a pessimistic, nihilistic, or defeatist nature as indispensable to their existence. Too often they have settled into a book that begins as an oration on bleak experience but wraps up with the author stealing out the back door and making his way down a sunlit path, leaving dejected readers more exasperated than they were before entering what turned out to be only a façade of ruins, a trompe l’oeil of bleakness. A Confession (1879) by Leo Tolstoy is the archetype of such a book.

Having savored renown as the genius who wrote War and Peace (1865-69) and Anna Karenina (1875-77), not to mention his station as a wealthy landowner who indulged in sexual contact with his serfs, Tolstoy underwent a crisis of consciousness in which he became disenchanted with human life. Naturally, he began casting about for something to ease his discomfiture. After turning to science for answers to the eternal questions that had lately begun to eat at him, he came up with this: “In general, the relation of the experimental sciences to life’s questions may be expressed thus: Question: ‘Why do I live?’ Answer: ‘In infinite space, in infinite time, infinitely small particles change their forms in infinite complexity, and when you have understood the laws of those mutations of form you will understand why you live on the earth.’” Those inclined to query the various sciences today, or at any time in the future, will come upon the same answer. It is a malignantly useless answer to a malignantly useless question. But Tolstoy did not think the question malignantly useless, only the answer, so he kept on digging until he read Schopenhauer, who only aggravated the Russian’s crisis by answering, “Life is that which should not be—an evil; and the passage into Nothingness is the only good in life.” Tolstoy was impressed with Schopenhauer as a thinker and tried to hold the plow steady as he cut his way through the philosopher’s daunting works.

At length, Tolstoy harvested four answers to his crisis. Three of them do not deserve mention. The one that is worth remarking on was his tentative conclusion that the ultimate response to being alive “consists in destroying life, when one has understood that it is an evil and an absurdity. A few exceptionally strong and consistent people act so. Having understood the stupidity of the joke that has been played on them, and having understood that it is better to be dead than to be alive, and that it is best of all not to exist, they act accordingly and promptly end this stupid joke, since there are means: a rope

round one's neck, water, a knife to stick into one's heart, or the trains on the railways [one of which Tolstoy arranged to be the vehicle for Anna Karenina's exit]; and the number of those of our circle who act in this way becomes greater and greater, and for the most part they act so at the best time of their life, when the strength of their mind is in full bloom and few habits degrading to the mind have as yet been acquired."¹¹

Earlier in his life, Tolstoy had fought intrepidly in the Crimean War, and in War and Peace he used this experience for his rendition of Russian life during the reign of Napoleon. But the literary master evinced even greater fortitude in writing the words in the above quotation. Few men of such expansive wealth and accomplishment have had the mettle to express sentiments of this nature within earshot of their peers and the general public. Naturally, Tolstoy wrote these words only after he had moved to safer ground, which turned his "confession" into a self-help workbook for survivors, a trip guide with directions for skating around the pitfalls of consciousness as Zapffe would later outline in "The Last Messiah."

By and by, Tolstoy hit upon a way of renouncing coherence and embracing religion, even though it was not religion of the common sort and led to his excommunication from the Russian Orthodox Church. A true genius of conceptual prestidigitation, he had rationalized his way into irrationality. Spending time with his serfs helped him to bypass intelligibility, and Tolstoy more or less became a born-again peasant. Like them—more nicely, like his perception of them—he began living not by his brain but by his "gut." Then he started reasoning with his gut. For better or worse, his gut must have spared him the ordeal of becoming a suicide. Later, though, his head went to work again, and he was once more in crisis. It seemed that what Tolstoy required was not an answer to his philosophical spasms but a lobotomy. He remained preoccupied with life and death and meaning for the rest of his days, preaching the kind of twaddle that turned back the bleakness which once dogged him.

BLEAKNESS II

After being disappointed with Tolstoy's Confession, connoisseurs of bleakness may become shrewd readers: if they are mistrustful of a book, leery that the promise of its inaugural pages will be broken by its conclusion, they turn first to the ending. Due to the quirks of the literary market or an author's duplicity, many books whose flap-copy guarantees a "dark vision" finish up by lounging in a warm bath of affirmation, often doing a treacherous turnabout in the closing pages or paragraphs.¹² Grim is a grabber, as every publisher knows. What else could be the reason for innumerable magazine articles with such titles as "Are We Doomed?" or "Is This the End of Everything?" (The answer is always "no," sometimes resounding in its declamation but more often qualified, which is even worse.) The bleak-minded could still be in for further consternations, but these will be fewer once they have learned to begin a new and seductive book where it counts—at its conclusion. One of the finest curtain closers in fiction is that of Horace McCoy's novel They Shoot Horses, Don't They? The protagonist of this story is a young woman named Gloria Beatty. Hoping to walk away with a sum of much-needed cash, Gloria becomes an entrant in a grueling dance marathon during the era of the Great Depression. A moral loser from the start of the book, she begins the dance with an insight

that is not habitually stressed in popular fiction. "It's peculiar to me," Gloria says to her future partner in the marathon, "that everybody pays so much attention to living and so little to dying. Why are these high-powered scientists always screwing around trying to prolong life instead of finding pleasant ways to end it? There must be a hell of a lot of people in the world like me—who want to die but haven't got the guts." After the dance marathon has taken its toll on Gloria and the other contestants, her once happy-go-lucky partner goes over to her side, and, with more nobility than any high-powered scientist and more mercy than any god born of human imagination, helps her to end it all. This liberation is carried out in one of the far from pleasant ways people have been forced to use for so long—a bullet from a gun. The ending of McCoy's novel is what the average mortal would call bleak.

They Shoot Horses, Don't They? was first published in 1935. Since that time, scientists have continued screwing around to extend our days of pain and have done almost nothing on the other front. It is as if they have taken on Victor Frankenstein as a role model and emulate him as they can. In his 1994 award-winning bestseller How We Die: Reflections on Life's Final Chapter, surgeon Sherwin B. Nuland recounts how he persuaded a ninety-two-year-old woman to undergo an operation that would squeeze from her a few more months or years of life. While she initially declined, content to die at what was already an advanced age, Dr. Nuland ultimately wore her down and got her into the operating room, figuring, as he states, that his patient was "one of those people to whom survival was not worth the cost." He admits that he duped her by withholding the full horror of that cost as it would be extracted in the form of postoperative agonies should she survive the surgery. She did survive long enough to suffer those agonies and to let Nuland know what a louse she considered him to be. After some compulsory passages of hand-wringing doubt about his underhanded ministration, the doctor defends himself by confiding that, had he not performed this operation, he would be criticized by his peers at the hospital's weekly surgical conference for not following standard operating procedure. Nuland's fellow surgeons would have viewed a decision not to operate as his patient's rather his own. And that would be bad, since doctors should be the only ones to decide such things as whether or not a patient goes under the knife.

In their actions, Nuland and his colleagues played out a mainstay of the horror genre: that of an experiment gone wrong. This convention became proverbial in Mary Shelley's novel published in 1818. It is as if Nuland and his fellow mad doctors took the botched surgery in that book as their guiding light. "What protocol would Frankenstein follow?" they might have asked themselves. He was their mentor: the one for whom Life was the greatest stunt of all, and one that he longed to master. Additionally, Nuland had already sized up the old woman as "one of those people." Although not as precocious as McCoy's Gloria in They Shoot Horses, Don't They?, Nuland's patient knew when to throw in the towel. She thought she might be allotted that much control over her life. What she did not know was that she was living in Frankenstein's world, and by damn she would live and die by Frankenstein's Oath: "We, as certified protectors of the species and members in good standing of the master-class of the race, by the power invested in us by those who wish to survive and reproduce, vow to perpetuate and enforce the fiction that life is worth having and worth living come hell or irreparable brain damage."¹³ How

could an old woman who had been stigmatized as “one of those people” go up against such a juggernaut of chicanery? How can anyone?

Eventually euthanasia will become standard practice for the terminally ill, and perhaps for anyone who so chooses this sure cure. Until then, those who reject Frankenstein and affirm McCoy’s Gloria must take care of themselves . . . if they can work up the guts or get a little help. But standing in the way of their making the right move are some formidable obstacles. One of them is the conscience (archaic for “consciousness”) that Shakespeare’s Hamlet avowed “makes cowards of us all.”¹⁴ Another obstacle is the peer pressure that Dr. Nuland felt would be pointed in his direction. Still another is that of “other people” whose lives are entwined with those of suicides and who die with them though they live on after the “crime” of self-murder. If nature made a mistake by spewing out creatures in which consciousness grew like a fungus, she still knew enough to implant in them a universal instinct that serves the species and spurs on its members to chew off a leg to escape capture and killing, whose dominant drives are survival and the spreading of themselves far and wide.

As Ernest Becker expostulated in his Pulitzer Prize-winning Denial of Death (1974), a work that later kindled a branch of psychology with the marvelous name of Terror Management Theory, human beings are in thrall to the fear of death, and this fear determines the entire landscape of our lives. To skip around our death anxiety, we have engineered a world to deceive ourselves into believing that we will linger beyond the final breakdown of our bodies. We know this fabricated world because we see it around us every day, an offense to the eye. Shamelessly indiscreet are houses of worship where people go to get a whiff of meaning . . . and meaning means only one thing—immortality. In heaven or hell or reincarnated life forms, we must go on and on—us without end. Travesties of immortalism are effected day and night in obstetrics wards, factories of our future that turn out a product made in its makers’ image, a miracle by which we enter into a devil’s bargain with God, glorifying Him with the credit and giving us a chance to have our names and genetics projected into a time we will not live to see.¹⁵

But Becker did not anatomize this scheme as quite so simple. Those churches cannot be just any churches—they must be our churches. The same holds true of progeny and its stand-ins. In lieu of personal immortality, we are willing to compromise by accepting the survival of persons and institutions that seem to extend who we are—our families, our heroes, our religions, our countries.¹⁶ And anyone else who presents a threat to our sense of self, anyone who does not look and live as we do, should abstain from treading on our turf because in this world it is every self for itself and all of its facsimiles. In such a world, one might extrapolate, the only honest persons—from the angle of self-delusion, naturally—are those who brazenly implement genocide against outsiders who impinge upon them. Genocide is the pulse of every culture, even the multicultural Land of the Free. “And anyone who doubts this can ask any Indian,” as the expatriate American writer James Baldwin once said. Will the human creature ever undergo a reformation, an evolutionary leap beyond its ancient recourse to genocide by methods either egregious or discreet? It seems a long shot.

Against those who let loose genocide for their own augmentation, some are boosters for its total inverse as shown to us by Gloria Beatty. They will shut the door quietly and act according to the logic of pain. Others, misguidedly, may think their suicide will have an impact as a laconic critique of the world or as vengeance against certain parties. But for a members-only society, speaking confidentially, the truth is a darker thing. Would-be perpetrators of a worldwide extermination, they would kill themselves only because killing it all is closed off to them. They hate having been delivered into a world only to be herded as sheep to the abattoir. They despise the conspiracy of Lies for Life almost as much as they despise themselves for continuing to function within it and to criticize those who are party to it by any other method than the erasure of the whole lot. If they could unmake the world by pushing a button, they would do so without a second thought. There is no satisfaction in a lone suicide. The phenomenon of “suicide euphoria” aside, there is only fear, bitterness, or depression beforehand, then pain in the act, and nothingness afterward. But to push that button, to depopulate this earth and void its orbit as well: unalloyed satisfaction, as of a labor well done . . . and the end of labor for eternity. This would be done for the good of all. Those who unknowingly nurture the conspiracy against the human race are also its victims.¹⁷

FICTIONS

Before Horace McCoy crafted They Shoot Horses, Don't They? as a novel, he offered it to Hollywood in the form of a film treatment. This was astute from both a financial and an aesthetic standpoint. But the treatment was rejected, and it was subsequently converted into a novel which sold poorly and in translation became a favorite of the French existentialists. While McCoy's novel is bleak, it is also boring. The 1969 film adaptation won or was nominated for a slew of Academy Awards, arguably because McCoy was right: a narrative whose setting is a dance marathon should take the form of a movie. Another outstanding example of story-to-screen adaptation is Apocalypse Now (1979), which comes as close as any movie to rivaling source material that is above the grade of popular entertainment, in this instance Joseph Conrad's novella Heart of Darkness (1902). Naturally, without Heart of Darkness there would be no Apocalypse Now. And, in the final analysis, Apocalypse Now suffers upon subsequent viewings because it is the nature of cinematic images to grow overly familiar and lose their effect, whereas this does not occur with Heart of Darkness or any other notable literary work. But whether the book was better than the movie or the other way around is beside the point: they are both but a means to kill time for their consumers and to make a living or a name for their creators.

As Pascal wrote, “All man's troubles come from not knowing how to sit still in one room.” While this often-quoted statement is both unconvincing and impracticable, it does play up some facts that might not otherwise receive serious deliberation. We are all born into a society resembling that in Zapffe's “The Last Messiah,” one where people occupy themselves, when they have the leisure to do so, with such things as movies, books, songs, and other toys for the mind and senses. Together, these form the recreational wing of a conglomerate chaired by our social, political, and spiritual overseers, who purvey their products like pimps. (Pascal himself, foreshadowing Zapffe, made much in his writings of distraction [divertissement] as a self-deceptive scheme by which humanity attempts to turn its consciousness from that which would make it vulnerable to a resolute

despair.) We also have utensils for distraction and anchoring forced into our hands by schools and other institutions. If we really put our minds to it, we might see through the mechanisms of this conspiracy. But as it is, we are helplessly obedient to its first, and only, commandment: “Thou shall have thy head and hand-cart filled with the most hair-raising bullshit known to man or priest.” Those shopping for a good deal in a used-up world will follow this exhortation with unflagging avidity, for they must have no inkling of any business other than show business. The mass media is the first line of defense against any tip-off that there might be a way to exist—or not exist, as it were—other than agitating our brains like machines spitting out popcorn in a movie theater. We are particularly discouraged, both by our own heads and the heads of all the nations, faiths, and families of the world, from going head-to-head with the inescapable troubles of existence and perhaps grappling with those troubles by more effective means than those offered by the entertainment industry in its multifarious forms or the tribal shaman with his chants and gyring. (“We think, but only what our religions and televisions tell us to think.”) Is the threat to the social order so great that constant pressure must be brought to bear on every participant in the global calamity? If a momentary lapse into reason leads the stragglers among us into the arms of silence and solitude, this is more than compensated by the majority’s unashamed distaste and biological indisposition for tranquility over turmoil. Why go into apoplexies of angst that we will run out of conflicts with ourselves and others? There will always be debacles aplenty for our distraction. The horsemen of Peace, Love, and Understanding are not going to ride into town and confiscate our weapons. And a world of peace, love, and understanding would be as useless as any other.

Although few would own up to it, even to themselves, we love havoc in both life and art. What we call “evil” captivates us from childhood to old age, never paling in its seductive entreaties, its heady effects on our imaginations and our glands. We are gluttons for atrocity and yawn at the quiescent. The most prominent of the angels is the one who started a war in heaven. In a milieu where there seemed no place for anything new, he invented evil . . . and has been on our minds ever since. One thing about infamy—it is never boring. The diabolical is a bracing jolt to our enervated systems; screams echo in our blood and invigorate us. The penalty we pay for this reprobate indulgence is a nominal one: formalized and shiftless expressions learned by rote and spoken at regular intervals against intemperance in carnage, carnality, intolerance, or whatever seems to be the evil of the moment. But any quietist leanings we may have—as in the wake of a gruesome episode that has disheveled our personal or public history—are fast abandoned as we return to sup at the banquet table of horrors. Individually, as well as in cosmetically distinguishable yet more deeply uniform groups, humans are not the whip-smart life form we are advertised to be. We have nothing but scorn or rebuke for quiescence and, like the children we are, will not sit still for a moment if instead we can be running aimlessly about until we drop dead from either enfeeblement or injury. Of course, Pascal could not have been such an imbecile that he meant we should sit still in one room every second of our lives. That room did not build itself, and the person sitting in it will probably seek out food now and then. (Remember the Shakers, the monastic laborers, and the Buddhists in the wilderness.) But beyond attaining food and shelter, our species has pursued a range of

activities every one of which leads to hell or heartbreak. Let it be said—human beings are the most retarded organisms on earth.

TRAGEDY

In conformance with the human race itself, tragedy is a derivative of unintended circumstances—a car crash, a premature death (no such thing), a spectacular “act of God,” the birth of consciousness. In the theater, tragedy is a genre. And in musical theater it is a miracle. Among such miracles is Stephen Sondheim’s Sweeney Todd (1979). In the custom of any great tragedy, it is based on source materials—a 1974 play by Christopher Bond—that it brilliantly surpasses. But Sweeney Todd deviates from most works in this genre, with or without music, in that it underlines the tragedy of our species in a way that makes us part of a catastrophe of evolutionary proportions.

People size up the world differently. If this were not so, we would all be living in harmony with one another, which has never been and never will be the rule. Actually, universal harmony, which is a mere metaphor, would not liquidate differences, which can mean anything from a good-natured divergence of opinion to dreams of genocide. To put things truly right, to make a world truly just, assonance itself would need to dissolve into a single pitch sung by a multitude of voices—a unison impossible outside of heaven or a fairy tale. So we fall back into harmony. Because without harmony, there can be no music, no singing, no anything. Harmony is created by differing tones. At its extreme, it is dissonance. Our common crime on this earth is that we prefer difference to unity, dissonance to monotony. (“For what’s the sound of the world out there?. . . It’s man devouring man, my dear.”) To claim otherwise is a lie. We do not love oneness and cannot abide sameness, let alone endure the redemption of eternal silence. What we want—the sound of what we embrace—is the screech that cuts the air and signals the opening to Sondheim’s melodramatic telling of the Demon Barber of Fleet Street.

If it were not for tragedy, the human race would have become bored into extinction long ago. No one knows this better than the entertainers among us, who could not sell a book or a song or a seat in a theater without drawing upon the screams and tears arising from that primal pit of twisting shadows from which every life emerges and to which every life returns. Thus, each action and consequence in Sondheim’s Sweeney Todd flows out of and feeds into the tragic. It is the groaning pedal tone over which everything else—for instance, beauty and love—serves as fleeting grace notes that only seem to suggest the existence of something other than the tragic, yet are actually part of the piece as much as the mordant horror that stalks the stage. And tragedy (Oedipus, Hamlet, Long Day’s Journey into Night) begins at home.

“There was a barber and his wife.” In the style of many a horror that has wormed its way from the muck of organic existence, Sweeney Todd has as its backstory the seeding of new life, the child Johanna. (“Wake up, Johanna, it’s another bright red day,” sings Pater Todd.). And new life only perpetuates the pain of old life when one offspring meets another. “I feel you, Johanna / I’ll steal you, Johanna,” sings Anthony to his beloved, who together compose a couple whose purpose is to cast a ray of hope into the mayhem of the drama. However, to anyone who has been watching closely, this new Adam and Eve are

only being readied for the meat grinder of their future life, just as were a barber named Benjamin Barker and his wife Lucy. It is only when Benjamin and Lucy have been dragged through the inferno of their lives that they are fit to sate our hunger for tragedy. They are positioned within the innermost circle of hell, while Mrs. Lovett, Judge Turpin, Toby, and others radiate concentrically about them with their own fateful cravings (for beauty and love of course), edging them ever closer to the barber's blade and the fire-belching oven.

Ultimately, all of us end up as filling for one of Mrs. Lovett's meat pies. In the reported last words of Thomas Lovell Beddoes, the Romantic poet and physician called himself "food for what I am good for—worms." While worms do not get to feast on many of us in modernized nations, the point still resonates that our lives are fundamentally inglorious, whether we are John Milton or John Q. Public. It is as a counterweight to the astounding mediocrity of human life that tragedy as entertainment performs a crucial function—that of daubing the dullness of our days with a tinge of grandeur and style, qualities of the theatrical world and not the everyday one. This is why we are thrilled with the horror of Sweeney Todd and envy the qualities that he possesses and that we lack. He is as edifying as any sage when he croons "We all deserve to die," given the fact that none of us can unmake the tragedy of our birth. He has a sense of purpose that few who are made of flesh and blood rather than of music and poetry will ever know ("But the work waits / I'm alive at last / And I'm full of joy"). Most of all, he has the courage and bravado to do that which he knows needs to be done. "To seek revenge may lead to hell," he says, to which Mrs. Lovett answers, "But everyone does it and seldom as well . . . as Sweee-ney." Nature is limited to Grand Guignol, pure carnage and fests of slaughter. We can reach for things more heady and perverse than the corpse. After murder and cannibalism have been played out in Sweeney Todd, the dead rise and mingle with living, all of them grave to the bone, in a great, freezing crescendo of ecstatic horror—an incommensurable frisson within the gates of the supernatural. As in the beginning, so at the end, the puppet players sing once more: "Attend the tale of Sweeney Todd," a story that, if only during an evening at the theater, leads our consciousness into a world of tragedy that is so much more than a mistake of nature.

SUPERNATURALISM

When the narrator of Joseph Conrad's novel Under Western Eyes (1911) writes that "the belief in a supernatural source of evil is not necessary; men alone are quite capable of every wickedness," he seems to be speaking for the author, who shunned the supernatural in his fiction. By doing so, it might be argued, Conrad had confined himself to the role of a portraitist of the tearing insanity in the world of human beings, turning a blind eye to the tearing insanity of the world itself as seen by human beings. In Heart of Darkness, he pulls at the leash of realism, plying his genius for innuendo and at times stealing up to the very border of supernaturalism. He stirs in his readers the feel of a horror beyond rational understanding, an ineffable devilry that nests at the bottom of our world. What the career of Kurtz meant to Marlow, the story's narrator, seems to surpass the "wickedness of men," depositing both of them at the threshold of an occult truth about the underpinnings of the reality they had known—the anchoring fictions of civilization. If Kurtz is only a man who has realized his potential for wickedness—which, by corollary, is a potential for

each of us—then he is just another candidate for incarceration or the death penalty. But if he is a man who has probed the mysteries of a world the very essence of which is wicked (or **MALIGNANTLY USELESS**), then he has crossed the point of no return, and his last words—“The horror! The horror!”—have prodigious implications. Not to say that the assorted overtones critics have heard in the story—civilization is only skin deep; European imperialism was a bad business—are not horrors. But they are not the horror that every incident of the narrative so meticulously portends.¹⁸ As a fiction writer, Conrad would not have to cede “the horror” a local habitation and a name (e.g. The Creature from the Black Lagoon), but only to suggest, after Edgar Allan Poe and others, a malignity conjoining the latent turpitude of human beings with that active in the world itself, as seen by human beings. That world is not in “darkest Africa” or any other exact geography: it is situated at the point where our heads collide with the universe, meeting dead in the heart of a secret too terrible to know.

Many writers have alluded in their works to the insignificance of the human race in a dizzyingly inscrutable universe ruled by forces incomprehensible to our species. For Lovecraft, this insignificance is the alpha and omega of his work. At the heart of it all is a blind idiot “god,” whether it is designated as Azathoth or the Colour out of Space or the groaning blackness that sounds above the Rue d’Auseil in “The Music of Erich Zann.” It was in the last-named work that Lovecraft came up with a model supernatural horror story, one in which a subjective mind and objective monstrosity shade into each other. The subjective mind is that of the nervously afflicted narrator; the objective monstrosity is the unnamed and unnamable nemesis of the musician Zann, who, with his viol-playing, battles to keep at bay this thing that would destroy the tenuous order of an already crooked, creaking world as represented by the Rue d’Auseil, the tumble-down street on which he lives and dies. To some extent, “Erich Zann” is correlative to Algernon Blackwood’s “The Willows,” in which there is a minatory force as nameless and unseen as the one in Lovecraft’s story. One of the characters in “The Willows”—the Swede, who is described as an “unimaginative” individual—does offer possible explanations for the supernatural incidents in the narrative, referring to “a sound in the fourth-dimension” or some other realm of reality in which everything would make sense if only one could attain that perspective. In “The Music of Erich Zann,” Lovecraft offers no explanations that would betoken a covert order in the universe. What he does offer is a world of “weird notes,” which can work their magic only in literary form (no film could duplicate these harmonic or melodic impossibilities), and a battle that will always be lost against the horror that is our lives. Such is the outward formation of Lovecraft’s consciousness. His is a lonely voice speaking through lonely characters in a lonely universe, one as lonely as our nightmares. A self-acclaimed “non-entity” in his own time, Lovecraft has enlarged in stature since his death. This should not be taken as a sign that the world has “caught up” with him. That is not the issue. Neither the public nor the academic mind can embrace the consciousness of Lovecraft any more than it can latch on to that of Schopenhauer or Cioran, much less Zapffe’s. None of these writers portrayed a world acceptable to either average or distinguished heads, not as long as those heads can believe in God or Humanity, not as long as they are disgorging gospels of purpose and meaning and a future as vomitive as the past.

While belief in the supernatural is only superstition, the sense of the supernatural cannot be denied. It is the sense of what should not be at its most justly potent, the sense of the impossible as we often experience it in our dreams and in unsettling moments of our lives, particularly during those intimations of mortality or madness that for some are as regular as a heartbeat. The evil here is not bound up with bad men but with the nature of existence itself, or at least with our existence as victims of consciousness. The supernatural may be considered as the metaphysical counterpart of insanity and, as such, is the best possible hallmark of the uncanny nightmare of a conscious mind marooned for a brief while in this haunted house of a world and being slowly or swiftly driven mad by the ghastliness of it all. This viewpoint does not keep tabs on “man's inhumanity to man” but instead is sourced in a derangement symptomatic of our life as transients in a world that is natural for all else that lives, yet, by our lights, when they are not flickering or gone out, is anything but. The most phenomenal of creaturely traits, the sense of the supernatural, the impression of a fatal estrangement from the visible, is dependent on our consciousness, which merges the outward and the inward into a universal comedy without laughter. We are only passersby in this jungle of mutations and mistakes. The natural world existed when we did not, and it will continue to exist long after we are gone. The supernatural crept into life only when the door of consciousness was opened in our heads: the moment we stepped through that door, we walked out on nature. Say what we will about it and deny it till we die—we have had a knowledge imposed upon us that is too much to know and too secret to tell one another if we are to pace along our streets, work at our jobs, and sleep in our beds. It is the knowledge of a race of beings that are both specters and spectators in this cobwebbed corner of the cosmos.

STYLE

Ostensible in all writing, either by devising or default, style is not well understood by much of the reading public. Should they sense its presence, they will fix only upon mannerisms of language. The style of a work is then placed between polarities that range from the simple, impersonal narratives of popular novelists to the complex, idiosyncratic coruscations of writers such as Bruno Schulz and William S. Burroughs.¹⁹ But as any student of style could tell you, language is only the surface. More attentively inspected, style is an expression of consciousness as opposed to linguistic constructions that may be as plain as the morning newspaper or as phantasmagoric as dreams. Whatever we read during our leisure hours, from the works of canonical masters to spy stories, we read for entertainment. But we will not be entertained unless a writer's consciousness is both comprehensible to and sympathetic with our own. If you have a weakness for tricky thrillers in which love and conscience audaciously defy the amoral expedencies that make the world go round, then you will comprehend and be in sympathy with John le Carré's The Spy Who Came in from the Cold (1963). But not every reader goes for plot twists and moral telegrams. One might prefer a literary exegesis of life as a tragic or comic nightmare: a doleful vision that not many readers can parse as either comprehensible to or sympathetic with their consciousness and one that only an infinitesimal cadre of writers was born to concoct. Tough luck, then, to the authors commended in the current text, whose works do not make the bestseller lists and are passed over for prestigious awards. Their style of consciousness has never been and never will be in style. The problem is that they either pass over subjects that entertain low-

middle-, or even high-brow readers, or they handle them in a way puts off most people, which is to say normal, happy people.

In every literary work, there is an intersection where the handling of subject matter and verbal mannerisms meet. It is at this juncture that a writer's consciousness expresses itself and his style is exposed to the full. For example, compare two horror novels that postulate the reality of supernatural possession—William Peter Blatty's The Exorcist (1971) and Lovecraft's The Case of Charles Dexter Ward (written 1927; published posthumously, 1941). In the world of Blatty's formulaic novel, certain characters are dressed for doom and others for survival. Two priests, Frs. Karras and Merrin, die good deaths in the process of saving Regan, a young girl whose body, and perhaps her soul—the relationship between body and soul among Christian sects can be tortuous—has been possessed by a demon or demons. The deaths of these priests are acceptable to readers. Burke Dennings, the director of the movie in which Regan's actress mother Chris MacNeill stars, is murdered by the possessed Regan. He is not a terribly sympathetic character, being a profane and belligerent drunk, so the function he serves is that of a character who can be killed off for pure thrills. This follows the formula and thus is also acceptable to readers. Such is the way that the greater part of those who patronize works of fiction and cinema like to see a writer handle this kind of subject matter. They want a finale in which good wins out over evil (we can spare the quotes), reassuring readers that human life, and the fabricated theistic order to which it is annexed, is all right. As a popular novel, the narrative of The Exorcist is spun out in a lively and nondescript “show, don't tell” manner. Intended readers of Blatty's novel of demonic possession will be engrossed by its subject matter alone—which they believe is true, or could be true—and they do not want any verbal embroidery to get in the way. The Exorcist is known to be based on newspaper reports from 1949 of a talk given by a clergyman who claimed to have performed the ritual of the exorcism on a boy named Robbie. Blatty took these reports and plugged them into a template of popular fiction that is more or less reportorial. The result was a bestselling book.

The Case of Charles Dexter Ward is in every way a negation of Blatty's Exorcist. In Lovecraft's novel, the universe is in the hands of forces that are indifferent to human life, as it is in the real world. This is acceptable to very few readers. Good and evil are childish abstractions, as they are in the real world. Again, this is acceptable to very few readers. And the idea of human beings as creatures with souls is not an issue in the story because it was not an issue for Lovecraft. Everyone, not only the hapless protagonist of the book, exists in a world that is nightmare through and through. In Lovecraft's universe without a formula, everyone is killable—and some kill themselves just ahead of the worse things waiting for them. Life as we conceive it, let alone a configuration of atoms with the given name of Charles Dexter Ward, occurs in a context of permanent jeopardy that only remains to be discovered and never to be defeated. Lovecraft does not want to take you on an emotional roller-coaster ride, at the end of which he tells you to watch your step as your car slows down and you settle back onto steady ground. He wants to catapult your brain into a black madness from which there is no return—a weightier undertaking for a horror writer, even though no reader has ever been so influenced.²⁰

Lovecraft's handling of the subject matter of supernatural possession is so at odds with Blatty's that the two men might have been living in different centuries, or rather millennia. The narrative parameters of The Exorcist begin and end with the New Testament; those of The Case of Charles Dexter Ward could only have been conceived by a fiction writer of the modern era, a time when it had become safe not only to place humanity outside the center of the Creation but to survey the universe itself as centerless and our species as only a smudge of organic materials at the mercy of forces that know us not (as it is in the real world). As for the protagonist of the title, his possession is just a means to much larger ends that have been eons in the making: he is, as previously imaged, a configuration of atoms and not an ensouled creature of a god who has been monkeying around with us for only a hundred thousand years more or less. Lovecraft's narrative is not only modern, it also emerged from an imagination that was deferential to no dogma that may be dated, one that assimilated what had come before and envisioned what might come to be in the evolution of human consciousness, deliberating with a fearsome honesty until it settled on a position it could hold in good faith and was ready to jettison as dictated by evidence or cerebration. Lovecraft drew upon and extended the most advanced thought of his time as well as all previous scientific and philosophical developments that tended to disenchant the human species with itself. In that sense, he really went the limit of disillusionment in assuming the meaningless, disordered, foundationless universe that became the starting point for later figures in science and philosophy. Lovecraft existed in no man's land of nihilism and disillusionment. He will always be a contemporary of whatever generation comes along. One cannot say the same about most recipients of the Nobel Prize in literature, never mind writers of horror fiction.

Whereas Lovecraft was uninterested in the human race except for its scale in proportion to an indifferent universe full of monsters, Blatty has proven himself as someone who is "involved with humanity" and sensitive to its suffering. To overlook this fact is to miss the point of his work. That he is dependent on religious salvation to justify human suffering cheapens his writing for the unfaithful as much as it should give it value for believers. Perhaps no one since John Milton has made such an attempt to excuse human misery in religious terms. (This is a Sisyphean labor destined to be ineffectual, making it an easy mark for an atheist poet like A. E. Housman, who wrote that "malt does more than Milton can / To justify God's ways to man.") Lovecraft and Blatty each depicted the invasion of something terrible into this world in variant ways. Likewise, the manner in which this subject is rendered by their respective authors is worlds apart. It is at the intersection of manner and matter that their style of consciousness diverges. The nonsense prose of The Exorcist and its supernatural subject come together at a rutted intersection as old as the Cross, a Golgothic crossroads littered with spent formulas borrowed from the Catholic Church. Blatty stands in the same place as endless others before him. He would not be misunderstood by anyone who lived during the Middle Ages. In The Case of Charles Dexter Ward, Lovecraft's rhetorical fervor cannot be confused with that of anyone else, and the locus to which he escorts his readers is a cosmic crux that no one had ever glimpsed before him. He would be as alien to a medieval mind as the modern or postmodern world itself. That Blatty wins the contest for the time and money of the legions should perplex no one. Average readers will stand

patiently in line to buy a bestseller; few of them will even get in line to buy a literary classic of its type.

NOTES

1. At this point in his life, Tolstoy was running low on each of Zapffe's four methods for obnubilating one's consciousness—isolation, distraction, anchoring, and, most toweringly, sublimation through his work as a literary artist. Each of them had served him well for a time before letting him down. A genius of disillusionment, Tolstoy reached a juncture where he inferred that all our actions are just a way of killing time. Only subsequent to our demise can we take a breather, as our survivors like to think of it. Perhaps this is why the ground, the crypt, or the wall-space where our remains are interred is called, with Olympian impropriety and untruth, our final resting place. As if our anxious need to kill time allowed us any other rest-stops along the way.
2. A cinematic exemplification of this betrayal is the closing voiceover of Se7en (1995), which was indeed a work of dark vision in which chaos triumphs over order until, at the last minute, the actor Morgan Freeman saves the day by intoning, "Ernest Hemingway once wrote, 'The world is a fine place and worth fighting for.' I agree with the second part." The quote is taken from Hemingway's 1940 novel For Whom the Bell Tolls. The words are those of the hero of the book, Robert Jordan, who sacrifices his life in war for what he considers a good cause. Not minding being killed by the enemy, Jordan is also willing to commit suicide in order to avoid capture. But he would rather not kill himself. His father had done that, as Hemingway's had, and Jordan judges him a coward for this act. Could Hemingway have also thought himself a coward when he adjourned this life as a suicide some decades after writing For Whom the Bell Tolls? (See footnote number one to the section "Creating Horror" below.) What a triumph of order over chaos that would have been—a terrible but heroic integrity right to the end.
3. The following is a philosophical bromide of the post-nihilistic era: being alive has no value except within a limited framework. In the movies, a stock plot is that of a law-enforcement official who moves from a big city to a small town because in the big city his efforts to better his environment were ineffectual or unnoticeable while those in a small town, he expects, will "make a difference." The plan here is to change frameworks in hopes of creating the illusion that one's life has value in itself. Outside of the movies, this plan of exchanging one framework for another is more difficult to pull off successfully. And since these frameworks are made up by our minds, and not by a filmmaker, they are liable to dissipate at any moment. Any ultimate frame in which our lives take place is uncertain both in its consolations and its reality. Faith in some absolute—or, alternatively, in the absence of absolutes—may go limp at any moment. The only assured life-value we can know comes to us from outside the edges of the frame—from the fact that our lives will end but have not yet done so. Naturally, this value is, at best, devalued in some measure by unpleasant feelings such as sadness and anxiety. And there may even be no value to it, commonly speaking, if one would prefer to have it all done with for some reason. But if there is any value to be had, it has but one certain point of generation—the end of our lives, whether in oblivion or in an immortality whose framework is unknown, as already discussed under the subhead "Philosophy" of the section "Thinking Horror." While human life may have value on a contingent and relative basis, it still retains holding places waiting to be filled by pain and then, in some form, the process of dying. If death is the home of potential value, dying is a valueless

way-station that cannot be bypassed. The most desirable epitaph to have etched on one's tombstone is this: "He never knew what hit him."

4. Hamlet's allegation is passably true. Yet not all are made cowards by the consciousness of postmortem "ills . . . that we know not of"—as if the possibility of unknown horrors after death were better left hanging over our heads for the rest of our days rather than discovered to be or not to be true as soon as possible. Either way, they are a real life-spoiler if one thinks about the matter more thoroughly than did the Prince of Denmark. But a sloppy and imaginative generalization suits the self-interrogative soliloquy better than would a dry and well-considered answer. For God's sake, he is not replying to a pollster's survey: "Question: Is being dead all right or not all right? Especially when you consider the alternative?" In his essay "Ideas concerning the Intellect generally and in all Respects," Schopenhauer is more fastidious and less speculative than Shakespeare's Dane, enumerating "certain universally popular errors firmly accredited and daily repeated by millions with the utmost complacency." Number one among these errors is the following: "Suicide is a cowardly act." In another essay, "On Suicide," Schopenhauer argues that self-murder betokens a mistaken conception of one's nature and motives, but he does not dismiss it as a cowardly act. Anyone who has felt the urgency to do oneself in knows the nerve it takes to go through with it.
5. The human instinct to have one's own "way of life" outlast those of competing ways is risibly preserved in Stanley Kubrick's Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb. Faced with the extinction of humanity at the hands of a doomsday device created by the Russians and set to be activated by a nuclear attack on the part of the U.S., American politicians and military officials, at the urging of ex-Nazi scientist Dr. Strangelove, plan to survive by living in mineshafts for the next hundred years, after which they would emerge and, in Strangelove's estimation, "work their way back to the present gross national product within, say, the next twenty years." Worried that the Russians could have the same plan, Gen. Buck Turgidson, with all the foresight one would expect from a man of his position, speculates, "I think we should look at this from a military point of view. I mean, supposing the Russkies stashed away a big bomb, see. When they come out in a hundred years, they could take over!" Another general agrees with Turgidson, who rambles on, "Yeah, I think it would be extremely naïve of us, Mr. President, to imagine that these new developments are going to cause any change in Soviet expansionist policies. I mean, we must be increasingly on the alert to prevent them from taking over mineshaft space, in order to breed more prodigiously than we do, thus, knocking us out in superior numbers when we emerge!" The goofball insanity played out in this scene has had audiences soaking their drawers with laughter since Kubrick's film was released in 1964. The characters seem to be such funny little puppets as they sketch out a survival plan, the success or failure of which they will not live long enough to see. All they ask for is the hope that succeeding generations will survive and persevere in the same goofball insanity as they did. In Zapffe's terms, Dr. Strangelove is a work of artistic sublimation. Its audiences can bust a gut watching it and still go on breeding to secure the way of life it parodies. Should the events of this movie ever be realized, those who emerge from the mineshafts will laugh as riotously at its goofball insanity as those who went in. George Santayana's epigram "Those who cannot learn from history are doomed to repeat it" is one of the biggest hoots of all time. Only by repeating history every second of every day can human beings survive and breed. How ludicrous that anyone would not want to be doomed to repeat history. Or that any mortal could possibly learn anything from it that would change our "way of life." That would be the doomsday scenario, the prologue to a tragedy that ends with the entrance of the Last Messiah.

6. Consciousness studies sometimes draw attention to the phenomenological view that at your death the whole world dies because the representation of it that you have inside your head is the world, a solipsistic dreamland of your own making. Thus, there is no possibility of enshrining the world as you know it or partaking by proxy—for instance, by sexual reproduction—in the future.
7. In her 1995 book Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament, Kay Redfield Jamison cites an identical apocalyptic sentiment contained in the letters of the French composer Hector Berlioz, who remarked that in his frequent moments of depression he felt as if he could without hesitation light a bomb that would blow up the earth. Antecedents of Jamison's work are The Anatomy of Melancholy (1621) by Robert Burton, Born under Saturn: The Conduct of Artists: A Document History from Antiquity to the French Revolution (1963) by Rudolf and Margot Wittkower, Voices of Melancholy: Studies in Literary Treatments of Melancholy in Renaissance England (1971) by Bridget Gellert Lyons, and The Demon of Noontide: Ennui in Western Literature (1976) by Reinhard Kuhn.
8. Skilled use of the supernatural is one reason why one might consider Shakespeare's Macbeth (c. 1606) a superior work to his Hamlet (c. 1600-1601). While both dramas are patterned along the lines of a soap opera—complete with family squabbles, betrayals, jockeying for position in a world on the make, etc.—Macbeth is played out within a supernatural order that is reinforced throughout the play and gives it a terrible mystery that Hamlet lacks. The latter work does have its ghost, but this apparition serves only as a dramatic device to get the plot moving, which could have been done without an otherworldly intervention, rather than coloring all the incidents of the play with a shadowy and malefic presence, as is the case with Macbeth. Without the three witches (a.k.a. Weird Sisters; Sisters of Fate), who officiate as masters of a power that reduces the characters of the drama to the status of puppets, Macbeth would not be Macbeth. Without the ghost of Hamlet, Sr., Hamlet would still be Hamlet. (As we all know, later in the drama Hamlet the Younger doubts the word of his father's spirit and double-checks them by having a troupe of actors stage a number called The Murder of Gonzago so that he can see for himself how Claudius responds to the play's reenactment of his uncle's murder of his father. The play's the thing, not the ghost. It is just too much that after all the inside information thunderously told by the elder Hamlet in the first act, Hamlet would still feel the necessity to engage in his own detective work before making his move. Another set-up could have been used to point the finger at Claudius's nefarious deed and its method.) There is, of course, a mass of fine rhetoric and a gloomy view of the human condition expressed by the title characters in both Hamlet and Macbeth. However, there is another dimension of the unknowable in the latter work that goes beyond the unknown movements of the human heart and presents the world itself as a living nightmare from which one may awaken only by the nightmare of dying.
9. To laud a writer's work primarily for its style is the worst affront in a critic's game book. See John Updike's introduction to the paperback edition of Schulz's Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass, which begins by calling the Polish genius "one of the great writers," [emphasis not added], so as to artfully withhold from Schulz any real greatness as a writer. Alfred Kazin similarly trivialized Burroughs in a review entitled "He's just wild about writing."

10. If fiction could indeed be so bewitching, you can be sure it would be watchfully regulated or co-opted by the authorities. Laughably, or perhaps not, certain groups of religious citizens, in consort with such institutions as the Catholic Church or the hydra of Islam, have acted as if this were a dangerous possibility. (Why else execute Marguerite Porete, excommunicate Tolstoy, ban J. D. Salinger's Catcher in the Rye from certain schools, or put Salman Rushdie on a Muslim hit list for his novel The Satanic Verses?) The machinations of these coalitions are the acme of anchoring as explained by Zapffe, wherein the anchor—in this case one of superstitious faith—is thrust deeply into the heads of believers.

LIVING HORROR

SICKNESS

Through the translations of Charles Baudelaire and others in France, the works of Edgar Poe promoted life-negation as a literary value as well as a general complexion of mind. The French tradition relating to Poe's life-negating genius began in the eighteenth-century with such authors as the Marquis de Sade and Sebastian Chamfort and continued into the nineteenth century with the Romantics Alfred de Vigny and Gérard de Nerval and authors of the Symbolist and Decadent movements that included Auguste Villiers de l'Isle-Adam and Maurice Rollinat. While pre-Socratic philosophers and tragedians such as Gorgias and Hegesias of Cyrene formed a pocket of life-negation in the Western world, it was not until the advent of Poe that writers fully expressed this inclination in their works. Take the first two sentences of "Berenice": "MISERY is manifold. The wretchedness of earth is multiform." Who in earlier Western literature would have dared to open a story in this manner except perhaps as an insincere or deceptive utterance? Poe's authority as a literary great inspired others throughout the world to align themselves with him. In the United States, it was no great leap from Poe's declaration in "Berenice" to Lovecraft's opening words to "Facts Concerning the Late Arthur Jermyn and His Family": "Life is a hideous thing, and from the background of what we know of it peer daemonical hints of truth which sometimes make it a thousandfold more hideous." Poe's bequest to humanity: the freedom—after thousands of years under the whip of uplifting

religions and the tyrannical politics of the positive—to speak as individuals who can no longer lie to themselves about the value, or rather inverse value, of human life.

While writing is a solitary business, few writers are solitaires. Most write as members of society and witnesses of the times in which they live. They respond to the heads around them and put their heads together with theirs. If their works seem bizarre to the general reader, it is because they are writing from within a social circle of bizarre heads. (Example: participants in literary movements with or without manifestos.) These are not solitaires, who write from inside their own heads and whose writing cannot be understood solely within the compass of a specific place or by the clock of a specific time. Solitary writers come out of nowhere and do not belong anywhere. They are not domesticated or socialized, not as writers. Their subject is not the world about them but the one within them. From story to story or poem to poem, they repeat themselves because all they have to work with are themselves and their dreams, which are strange dreams and often bad dreams. As anyone knows, nothing is more troublesome to communicate than yourself and your dreams, the feelings and visions that have molded you into what you are. So solitaires such as Lovecraft and Poe had their work cut out for them . . . and only them. The works of both writers have been hooted down for what appears to their critics as bad writing, which translates as meaning that they wrote with an emotional intensity and in a spirit of self-disclosure that violated the rules of detachment to which professional authors largely adhere. True, their prose styles are often high-strung to hysterical. This is not untypical for solitary writers. It is also true that if they had not written as they did, nobody would be reading them today. The possessed quality of their writing is precisely why their works have lasted. The darkest vision of life is best illumined by a dazzling pageantry of language. Neither the lucid exposition of Lovecraft's travelogues nor the analytical clarity of Poe's literary criticism explains the endurance of these long-dead artists' works. That can be accounted for only by the most manic passages of their fiction and poetry as well as by the thoughts and emotions they expressed with such anomalous valor.¹

Expressions of the morbid, the macabre, the fantastic, and the feverish are more at home in poetry than in prose. Thus, Poe and Lovecraft, along with every other solitary writer, used lyric devices in their fiction. They did this through various techniques: rhythm, diction, imagery, tone, and so forth. Other writers have done the same, some with a bewitching panache. Splendidly effective as a tool for infusing fiction with the expressiveness of poetry is metaphor. Comprising a fantasia of this device are the works of the twentieth-century Polish writer Bruno Schulz. The cumulative effect Schulz's prose style is that of a world in delirium, a land where people and objects are the clay of the author's heated imagination. Here is an example. "Came the yellow days of winter, filled with boredom. The rust-colored earth was covered with a threadbare, meager tablecloth of snow full of holes. There was not enough of it for some of the roofs and so they stood there, black and brown, shingle and thatch, arks containing the sooty expanses of attics—coal-black cathedrals, bristling with ribs of rafters, beams, and spars—the dark lungs of winter winds. Each dawn revealed new chimney stacks and chimney pots which had emerged during the hours of darkness, blown up by the night winds: the black pipes of a devil's organ." It should be noted that within this passage, metaphor calls forth the

fantastic in the form of those chimney stacks that grow like mushrooms in the night. Incompatible with the wholesomeness of fancy or fantasy, the fantastic is a decidedly unhealthy mode of expression. And Schulz was one of the great sick men of literature. Among the words used to describe Schulz's work is one that turns up occasionally in Lovecraft's writings. That word is "febrile." This term suggests a diagnosis as much as a narrative idiom and may be applied to all great literature of nightmare. Schulz's brain burned with a fever that presented itself as a sumptuous use of metaphor. Dependence on such quantities of this device indicates an interior life without parallel in external reality. It also illustrates the limits of language to voice sensations and sensitivities of an exceptional or pathological nature.

In healthy discourse, metaphor is an instrument for decorating widely known or effortlessly imaginable experiences. These are made a bit more interesting with a cautious use of metaphorical nuggets, but nothing too involuted or esoteric. As an instance, we might consider the long-expended likening between temperature and psychophysiology. One person is burning with ardor. Another is a cold fish. Everyone knows the conditions to which these statements refer and how we are supposed to understand them. For an overwhelming portion of our species, the healthy and happy majority, metaphor is an extravagance. They can say things such as "I have a headache" or "I feel a pain in my shoulder" and be clearly understood due to the universality of these experiences. This is the frame within which their lives are circumscribed, and beyond it they are not eager to stray or to admit that they have done so when something unpropitious pushes them out of that frame. Yet there are also those who, often without any choice, have been shoved from the circle or rectangle of a salubrious life. For them, metaphor is the only conveyance they have for getting across the border between them and the rest of humanity. And it is these cases that reveal the breakdown of metaphorical language.

Writers can make themselves understood only to those who already share their experience or can coordinate it with their own. For most of them, there exists in any language a word or two that makes the connection, because billions have undergone identical emotions and sensations in their lives. The same goes for the unexceptional mortal. You tell the doctor that you are nauseated. Even though no instrument exists for measuring nausea, he immediately knows what you mean because he himself has felt nauseated and the symptoms and causes of nausea belong to the knowledge base of medicine. For these reasons, specifics for treating this complaint are obtainable. Now imagine nausea as a debility not recognized by any medical text or institution. How would you explain it to the relevant authorities? You might say that you feel a storm raging in your gut, but what would people make of that comparison who had not felt this sensation themselves and were not trained to recognize it? There could be insinuations that you are a hypochondriac, a not unheard-of reaction to disorders that have not, or not yet, been documented in the Physician's Desk Reference. Certainly no ready preparation would be available to treat your condition, given its unofficial standing. Perhaps you would be offered some words to placate you or even an elixir that your doctor guesses to be applicable to the dysfunction that you translate as a storm raging in your gut. This approach would be a hit-or-miss affair of the sort that is familiar to every person taking

pharmaceuticals for depression. And since nausea, like depression, does not normally incapacitate its sufferers, you would be sent out into the world to carry on as if nothing were wrong with you and to live among those who would look at you strangely the moment you spoke of a storm raging in your gut or used another metaphor you thought might convey your lonely sickness. Perhaps you might take to literature and compose works to ventilate how your nausea has caused you to view human existence. If you wrote engagingly enough, you might be published and those who also knew what it meant to feel nauseated would understand what you were saying in a way no others could. This is the plight of the sick writer. For Schulz, substitute “febrility” for “nausea” and you may understand why he has only a sprinkling of readers and why those who do read his works celebrate him more often for his prose style than for his vision of a world that is a nightmare of ever-mutating forms. Naturally, Schulz failed to produce a body of writings that fabulate pretexts for survival and reproduction. No one would wish to generate a new creature in the world of Schulz’s metaphors, obscure as they will always remain to those who are not in alliance with his febrile vision.²

DEPRESSION

In “The Last Messiah,” Zapffe indicates four broad methods (isolation, anchoring, distraction, and sublimation) that we employ to insulate ourselves from the horrors brought on by consciousness. None of these are infallible for all mortals at all times. Those who are untalented in self-deception are especially at risk for a breakdown in the machinery. One such breakdown is depression, which is fascinating both as a disease and an existential drama. (The Swedish writer Jens Bjørneboe wrote that “he who hasn’t experienced a full depression alone and over a long period of time—he is a child.” Bjørneboe’s bilious discharge is more bombast than immutable truth, but it does have at least a smidgen of validity.) Ranging across a continuum of experience that may become trying in private practice, varieties of depression are clear-cut within the psychiatric literature for convenience sake. The statistically prevailing form of this disease is “atypical” depression. But whatever family name has been given to a case of depression, it has an objective in common with all its kind: to sabotage the network of emotions you had come to identify as the composition of yourself. It is then you discover that your “old self” is not the substantial and inviolable thing you thought it was, nor was the rest of your “old” reality.

What organization and sense our lives seem to have—the florid symptomology that makes this or that game appear to be worth the candle—is the work of emotion. Without it, there is no sense of organization, no sense of sense. By asphyxiating or deranging the emotional phenomenon, depression dissolves the latticework of you and your life. Emotion, in union with memory, is the substrate for the illusion of self and the illusory substance and properties we see, or think we see, in the world. As do the contradictory doctrines of world religions, emotions roll over one another all the time for lack of a substructure upon which to erect anything consistent, anything “real,” in the long run. Nevertheless, there they are—either weak and fleeting or so intense that it may seem that something of an absolute nature must underlie their experience. Ask any couple who believe their love will never die, a vital fiction that for a time puts blinders on one’s consciousness of the human tragedy.

Among the drawbacks of consciousness is that it exacerbates all necessary sufferings and creates unnecessary ones, such as the fear of death.³ To the pain of depression, which might otherwise be experienced as a set of unpleasing physical sensations, consciousness adds desperation as sufferers wonder how long it will last (oftentimes for life), how bad it will get (possibly total incapacitation), and, in general, what will become of them. Since not everyone who suffers from depression has what it takes to take their own lives—ask Gloria Beatty—they come to the following realization: they had better get better or die trying, because the rest of the world does not run on depression time—pain time—but conducts its business on happy time, whether or not that happiness is honestly felt or is pure pretense. To adapt the words of the thirtieth President of the United States, “The business of life is business.” Hence, those who aspire to occupy the top positions in this world tend to paint a rosy picture of how things will be under their proprietorship and, against all indications to the contrary, will continue to do so once they are in power. Directed by a manic will, they are able to infect others with their delusions by projecting decades and centuries of emotional prosperity.⁴

Naturally, we are all for feeling good rather than feeling bad, even to the point of pathology. Howbeit, nature did not make us to feel too good for too long (which would be no good for the survival of the species) but only to feel good enough to imagine, erroneously, that someday we might feel good all the time. To believe that humanity will ever live in a feel-good world is a common mistake.⁵ And if we do not feel good, we should act as if we do. If you act happy, then you will become happy—everybody in the workaday world knows that. If you do not improve, then someone must assume the blame. And that someone will be you. We are on our way to the future, and no introverted melancholic is going to impede our progress. You have two choices: start thinking the way God and your society want you to think or be forsaken by all. The decision is yours, since you are a free agent who can choose to rejoin the world of fabricated reality—civilization, that is—or stubbornly insist on . . . what? That we should rethink how the whole world transacts its business? That we should start over from scratch, questioning all the ways and means that delivered us to a lofty prominence over the amusement park of creation? Try to be realistic. We made our world just the way nature and the Lord wanted us to make it. There is no starting over and no going back. No major readjustments are up for a vote. And no nihilistic head case is going to get a bad word in edgewise. The universe was created by the Creator, goddamn it. We live in a country we love and that loves us back. We have families and friends and jobs that make it all worthwhile. We are somebodies, as we spin upon this good earth, not a bunch of nobodies without names or numbers or retirement plans. None of this is going to become unraveled by a thought criminal who contends that the world is not double plus good and never will be and who believes that anyone is better off dead than alive. Our lives may not be unflawed—that would deny us a future to work toward—but if this charade is good enough for us, then it should be good enough for you. So if you cannot get your mind right, try walking away. You will find no place to go and no one who will have you. You will find only the same old trap the world over. It is the trap of tomorrow. Love it or leave it—choose which and choose fast. You will never get us to give up our hopes, demented as they may seem. You will never get us to wake up from our dreams. Your

opinions are not certified by institutions of authority or by the middling run of humanity, and therefore whatever thoughts may enter your chemically imbalanced brain are invalid, inauthentic, or whatever dismissive term we care to assign to you who are only “one of those people.” So get the hell out if you can. But we are betting that when you start hurting badly enough, you will come running back. If you are not as strong as Samson—that no-good suicide and slaughterer of Philistines—then you will return to the trap. Do you think we are morons? We have already thought everything that you have thought. The only difference is that we have the proper and dignified sense of futility not to spread that nasty news. Our shibboleth: “Up the Conspiracy and down with Consciousness.”

ESCAPING

We mortals seem to have an inveterate need to escape our baseline of emotion. This intolerance for stasis in our emotional lives, an unbalanced compulsion to modify our chemistry by artificial or natural means, jibes with what Buddhism avows is the unsatisfactory nature of life as such. We pine for escapades from the quotidian, the day-to-day grind whose enchantments come into relief only when contrasted with deadly alternatives. Besides the fact that we are biologically quixotic, why else succumb to romantic risk taking? In one of his plentiful moments of fulgurant clarity, Schopenhauer spelled out why he thought that “sexual desire, especially when through fixation on a definite woman it is concentrated to amorous infatuation, is the quintessence of the whole fraud of this noble world; for it promises so unspeakably, infinitely, and excessively much, and then performs so contemptibly little.”⁶ The lesson is a straightforward one: everything in this life is more trouble than it is worth. And simply to be alive is to be enwombed in trouble. This is something that has been recognized more in the East than in the West. Minor figures in Greek philosophy instruct us to seek equanimity rather than pleasure, but their lectures never caught on. Early Buddhist teachings cautioned their adherents not to seek highs or lows but to follow a middle path to salvation from the average sensual life, which is why these doctrines were trounced by the commonality of heads and mutated into forms more suited to the human creature. In addition, meditating Buddhists must be able to sit still as a stone, a knack that few are electrified into perfecting. As children, we spin in circles until we fall to the ground with vertigo, and this practice is repeated in one way or another throughout our lives.

Art products are among the most approved contrivances for thwarting one’s baseline of emotion. Both creators and consumers of these goods and services are “transported” by aesthetic manipulations, although such transports are not very keen when compared to those that satisfy a biological drive or an acquired habituation. As a method of escapism, creating or consuming art seems a harmless pastime. Those who depend on artistic distraction trust that they can always fall back on it, even when every other stimulus has abandoned them. Nevertheless, many have been disabused of this assumption. The writer who can no longer write is taught the blighted impotence of the newly paralyzed. Musicians or music lovers who suffer from untreatable pain or depression are debarred from their haven of pleasure, frozen in a landscape where all sounds merge into the sameness of silence. How can these invalids replace what has gone absent from their lives, these children who can no longer spin about until they dizzily drop to the ground? Deprived of even relatively mild tonics for enhancing one’s baseline of emotion—that is,

of getting high—they discover how dependent they were on their intoxicants. Ogden Nash's noteworthy line "Candy is dandy but liquor is quicker," aside from its original context of sexual seduction, may, at a higher level of abstraction, also concern how a body may be more effectively transported from its usual humdrum trajectory by the use of chemicals. The fact that they, too, are more trouble than they are worth is often due to legal and societal sanctions against them rather than to their effects either in the short run or over time. (You can either ask Art Linkletter, who believed that his twenty-year-old daughter Diane jumped to her death because she was on LSD, or William S. Burroughs, a long-lived narcotics addict and literary genius.) While conspirators in the War on Death enforce life at all costs, turning the act of suicide into a ritual of devastating loneliness, those who conspire for universal sobriety are sparked by the same heinous zeal. They might instead choose to attend to doings that cause far more misery, but why they do what they do is as much a mystery as why others do not. Call it a matter of choice, if you will.

What is the grievance that people—meaning those professionally normal people who make the rules—have against the escapist use of drugs? Manifestly, these individuals are not averse to dulling or altering their consciousness. This is what everyone does to get through their lives and not think about their forthcoming deaths, so why not do it by the most effective and proven agents, those that have helped us since the most ancient days of our race? To uncover a credible answer to this question requires that we turn our backs on a stringent Puritanism or an honorable concern with the public weal. These are only cover stories for condoning the sadistic punishments awaiting those who would cope with existence by unsanctioned means. Irrationality—and penalties for drug use are the quintessence of the irrational—explodes from assorted emotional origins: rage, love, fear, and so forth. Such explosions blow all mental composure to smithereens and leave behind them a rubble of ignorance of the worst kind—that of institutionalized self-deception. The real arguments against the use of drugs cannot speak their names. That pleasure-inducing substances may dynamite the lives of individuals and their families is true. But since when has an advanced and still burgeoning society ever cared about individuals and families? They allow whole segments of their populations to founder without a wince. And these are the segments in which drug use is most penetrant. They also include those persons who are of the least benefit to a society's economy and would not be missed were they all to overdose themselves in a single day. These individuals and their families do not exist for a society in the first place, so their death has no meaning for the status quo. What does have meaning for the happy, productive social beings who want to survive and reproduce, who want to keep existing, are these facts: (1) being on drugs is the closest one can come to being dead without actually dying; (2) drugs do what every form of pleasure does—they satisfy a need—only they do it better and without the intermediary agents and activities that bring profit to a society, such as popular entertainment, interest in one's work-life, spending earned income on a new car, etc. No question that these agents and activities are non-chemical counterparts of drugs. They keep people's minds off the **MALIGNANTLY USELESS** nature of human existence. They also net the big money and deliver it to the right people—those who exist, those who are driven to survive and to produce more people like themselves. Anti-drug programs are directed at these people, not at those who are officially dead to a society and who remind its

members, those who really exist, that drugs are next-door neighbors to death and do not contribute a cent to Project Immortality. Here are the real arguments against the use of drugs, the ones that cannot be uttered because by being uttered they would expose the blackness below every person's life and the lies that are a society's safety net above this blackness. To be on drugs is to expose as an impotent whimsy Schopenhauer's Will-to-live, that irrationally thrashing force of vitality whose reality is not quite plausible and whose denial is only a head game with a metaphysical nimbus about it. To be on drugs is the short way round to a private Nirvana, a place where there is space for only one of us at a time, not for families, societies, nations, or religious subgroups and their gods—all the accoutrements of normal insanity. The problem is not that a social and political system that entitled people to use drugs would be overthrown; the problem is that it would have to welcome mortality into its system and even begin to profit from that mortality, as it would do once the middlemen of a living death had been cut out of the action. Although any drug war is a business running at a loss it can never recover, the fight must continue for Project Immortality and its dummy corporations. Never mind that immortality would lead anyone to drugs or suicide. But as a harebrained possibility, it performs the service of obscuring from the public consciousness, the consciousness of those who exist, the real meaning that drug use has for a society, excluding those unpersons who live in its ghettos. What a high price societies must pay for their witlessness, far higher—if our masters were not too politically self-interested to admit it—than that which could ever be incurred by drug use. Ask William F. Buckley, Jr., a good Catholic—why should they care what people do to or with their bodies?—and a defeatist on the subject of the American war on drugs, which may one day seem as quaint and thrill-packed as the era of Prohibition. But this will not happen until drugs have been branded and marketed by people who exist, and not sold on the street by and for those of us who, whatever the shade of our skin, are just niggers.

No one in a productive society wants you to know there are ways of looking at the world other than their ways, and among the effects that drugs may have is that of switching a mind from the normal track. Reading the works of certain writers has a corresponding effect. When receptive individuals explore the writings of someone such as Lovecraft, they are majestically solaced to find articulations of existence countering those to which the heads around them have become habituated. Drawn to peruse further that small library of the hopeless, the futureless, they may happen upon minds whose soundings into certain depths of thought immediately become indispensable to their existence. Some may fall to their knees to hear a voice other than theirs execrating this planet as a nightmarish penitentiary, not excusing its dust as that of a dreamy paradise in the making. By these words they have been confirmed. So they trust in the errant madness and misery of everything. They trust in the horror of human existence and its flimsy fronts, behind and beyond which are the strings that pull at us. They trust in the greatness that would attend humankind's self-administered oblivion, a feat so luminous it would bedim the sun. They trust in these things and many others.

After publishing his first book in French, which in English appeared as A Short History of Decay (1949), Cioran learned from the volume's enthusiastic reception that his style of philosophical pessimism was exhilarating for certain readers. (Necessarily, Cioran was a

bedazing word-artist, which is a vital quality for any writer whose deep-dyed attitude is that of pessimism. Readers will put up with the most vapid prosaist as long as he supplies them with comforting lies. If you have nothing but bad news and bitching to offer, then you had better write with a silver pen.) Lovecraft, among other authors of his kind, can have the same exhilarating effect: rather than encouraging people to surrender, they may instead fortify them to carry on, even after being visited by what both he and Zapffe labeled as “cosmic panic.” This hygienic reaction makes the case: nothing is inescapably depressing about either Lovecraft’s works or those of any other writer who is not hollering Hooah for human life. Those asseverating to the contrary do so only out of a despicable prejudice. Then again, Lovecraft may be dandy, but a bullet in the head is quicker. Piteously, almost everyone quails at this option both in principle and in practice. Once a head is born into this world, it learns that blowing itself to bits is neither lightly done nor pleasant. How much easier it is to beguile one’s brain than to close it down. And so we keep promenading to the toneless drum beating inside our skulls.

WORK

The tolerance that we, the people, have for submitting ourselves to a life of toil gives one a sense of why the rulers of this world have such contempt for us and enact their villainies whenever the mood strikes them. Consciousness is passed out to everyone; ambition and intelligence (with or without guile) are reserved for the Few. They are the elect; we are the electorate. Their game is to pretend to serve us, but we are the servants and they are the masters. Genius is welcome to the party of power when it can produce something its patrons want—once artworks, now weapons. The rest of the population, those who are not well endowed with street smarts or dominated by an ambition to dominate, need the power of the Few to gorge them with moral nourishment—a sense of order and security, a sense of being part of something greater than themselves, and, naturally, a sense of the future. In substance, these are also the services of religion, and anyone who is buying into one is a prime customer or victim of the other. This explains the traditional alliance between these power groups. As Machiavelli observed, two of the canniest means for crowd control are “good arms” and “good religion.” The originator of realpolitik, Machiavelli knew that both Bibles and battalions were indispensable for keeping the mob under control and husbanding “good” states such as those operated by the Medici, who, as we now know, were only also-rans among the mad tyrants racing over the course of history.

If Western religion has faltered or become too fragmented since Machiavelli’s time to shore up the state with the muscle it once had, its duties have ably been taken up by corporations, those secular religions which are joined at the hip and head of power. Like their political and ecclesiastic partners, corporations offer an arena of activity for those with a concupiscence for ruling others who, on their part, are fairly content to be ruled in exchange for a stronghold to take them in, a flag or a logo to wave, and, naturally, a ticket to the future. While almost everyone has desultory fantasies in which they are boss of the world, leadership itself does not tantalize many. Broadly speaking, most of us would rather sit on the sidelines, hooting and hollering at those who would be kings or queens. Others, however, are irredeemably tempted by the sirens of power and cannot eschew this allurements, either as a destiny or simply a career path. A very small group of these types

are privileged with a superfluity of talent for dupery, and these are the ones who become the monarchs of the masses. What are revolutions all about? They are about a few organizers who are baffled that someone else is sitting in what should be their seat of power. They are called rebels one day and patriots the next. They have the rhetorical flair of all demagogues as well as memorable faces, qualities that must pair up if the revolution is to be successful. Somehow they manage to entrench their discontents and illusions in those who have nothing to gain, and much to lose, by fighting for them. Later, these revolutionaries will prove themselves worthy of their promotion by outdoing in villainy those they replaced. If they fought against a murderous regime, they will show their ex-compeers what murder really is. If they started a revolt against unjust taxation, they will end by taxing everyone in sight, except perhaps religions and corporations. This is the way it has always worked—war, death, and damage for the Many, spoils for the Few. If only the latter could satisfy their obscene proclivities without globalizing them. But in order for their system to work, everyone must be involved. We do not even dream of saying, along with Herman Melville's *Bartleby*, "I would prefer not to."

A large corporation once financed a television commercial that blandly stated, "Owning your own business is part of the American dream." This may or may not be true, depending on how "American dream" is defined. Nevertheless, the phrasing and hauteur of this announcement is redolent of those oxymoronic slogans that George Orwell's Winston Smith in *1984* (1949) had forced upon him day in and day out under the totalitarian regime that overshadowed his life. Will future advertisements blare through your television and computer that "Work is leisure" or "Overtime is your time"? The halcyon days of your life are over the moment you stop being a fetus and begin training to become a foot soldier for hire. Love it or hate it, you must either turn up for duty or become one of the walking wounded. Earning your bread by the sweat of your brow is traumatic and damnable. It is combat in slow motion. Some people, prevalently alpha males such as General George S. Patton, have a real tolerance for combat situations. But if you are not one of those people, then you can look forward to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Any reform in how human life is lived must begin by disobeying our orders to eat or be eaten. Our rulers could at least give us a third pick—euthanasia. But euthanasia-for-the-hell-of-it might cut down the customer base of those who dream of owning their own business.

Less common than major depression and other types of mental disease, the obsession to amass an excess of wealth afflicts only a select coterie among us. Nevertheless, many have a measure of this propensity, although they are generally relieved of it by prostration or inadequacy. Thereafter, they resign themselves to longing looks at the heights they once attempted to reach. Real success in money-getting must take place on a mountainous scale and beget Himalayas of assets. Being the owner of a small business may equip one with a modicum of shiny possessions and employ the workers of the world, but for all practical purposes it remains a realm of serfs and servants living in the foothills of a landscape owned by persons who might seem mythical if they did not appear on television and the covers of business magazines. The game is to get the small-timers to identify with the big-time players, those for whom the lines between money and power have become blurred. This is an elementary con, since on the whole people are

only too willing to believe they have a fair stake in the game. (A government-run lottery, which everyone knows as a “stupidity tax,” is proof against arguments to the contrary.) Napoleon referred to his troops as “cannon fodder,” but you can be sure that they spoke well of him, because by doing so they believed they were speaking well of themselves as the sidekicks of a Great Man. Such minds are convinced that they are part of a greater cause than any to which they could aspire on their own. They will argue for it, they will kill for it, and they will die for it. All they require is a paper-thin slice of a humongous pie, a walk-on role in a historical epic, and a few shares of common stock in Project Immortality and Sons, Inc. They will never be allowed or allow themselves to understand the real workings of the system. Shakespeare’s Henry V—a one-time rich kid who came into his own—called himself and his cohorts the “happy few.” For persons of wealth and power, the fewer they are the happier they are. As for the Many: the more, the more miserable. Whoever said “The more, the merrier” must have been on drugs.

Some disgruntled ingrates believe that the world owes them a living. Their rationale could be rendered in the following way. Although only two people are directly responsible for anyone coming into this life, that couple was egged on by thousands of years of breeders who never interrupted their coitus long enough to think that maybe there were already enough people who knew they were alive and knew they would die. Cioran counted among his greatest accomplishments his success in breaking himself of the habit of cigarette smoking and the fact that he never became a parent. Nothing in Cioran’s file would lead one to think he was ever tempted to have children. His remark was a dig at people whose fecundity had swollen a world he would rather have seen in ashes. He also criticized those who gave in to the temptations of authorship, and was merciless in reproving his own predilections as he was those of others. But criticism of our own weaknesses does not aid our case against those whose weaknesses are not of the same species. Affairs of a deeply personal, non-malignant nature are immune to the faultfinding of their antagonists.⁷ They are ingrained into us and only await a detonator to set them off. We do not pick and choose our motivations, nor can we divine with exactitude their effects, should these cross our minds. Prospective parents may indeed be ogres, but it is too ghastly to contemplate that anyone consciously enters a new vertebrate into the rat race with the idea that its life will be preponderantly an unhappy one. Its death, a cheerless certainty, is another matter. None may plead ignorance on that score. Then how do they do it? How are people able to look their children in the eye without flinching? How is it that they are not haunted by remorse for embroiling them in this high-volume business of putrefying bodies? What vow of silence keeps them from informing their offspring that they have been sentenced to suffer years of regimented schooling and a lifetime of work and worry before they will be allowed to rest a bit, with any luck, in the latter years of their term on this pretty blue planet? If people are going to reproduce, they should at least throw together a system that will provide for all the material wants of their progeny for the life of the product. In the immortal words of Gloria Beatty, “What’s the sense in having a baby unless you got dough enough to take care of it?” But the ordinary human stockyard cannot raise that kind of dough.

No one has ever put forth a praiseworthy incentive for reproduction. None are needed. People do what they do, including the deed of procreation, because of overpowering

pressures—fears, infatuations, and so on—that come from within them and from outside them. All social orders command their members to imbibe in pipe dreams of posterity, the mirage of immortality, to keep them ahead of the extinction that would ensue in a few generations if the species did not replenish itself. This is the implicit, and most pestiferous, rationale for propagation: to become fully integrated into a society, one must offer it fresh blood. Naturally, the average set of parents does not conceive of their conception as a sacrificial act. These are civilized human beings we are talking about, and thus they are quite able to fill their heads with a panoply of less barbaric rationales for reproduction, among them being the consolidation of a spousal relationship; the expectation of new and enjoyable experiences in the parental role; the hope that one will pass the test as a mother or father; the pleasing of one's own parents, not to forget their parents and possibly a great-grandparent still loitering about; the serenity of taking one's place in the seemingly deathless lineage of a familial enterprise; the creation of individuals who will care for their paternal and maternal selves in their dotage; the quelling of a sense of guilt or selfishness for not having done their duty as human beings; and the squelching of that faint pathos that is associated with the childless.⁸ Such are some of the overpowering pressures upon those who would fertilize the future. These pressures build up in people throughout their lifetimes and must be released, just as everyone must evacuate their bowels or fall victim to a fecal impaction. And who, if they could help it, would suffer a building, painful fecal impaction? So we make bowel movements to relieve this pressure. Quite a few people make gardens because they cannot stand the pressure of not making a garden. Others commit murder because they cannot stand the pressure building up to kill someone, either a person known to them or a total stranger. Everything is like that. Our whole lives consist of metaphorical as well as actual bowel movements, one after the other. Releasing these pressures can have greater or lesser consequences in the scheme of our lives. But they are all pressures, all bowel movements of some kind. At a certain age, children are praised for making a bowel movement in the approved manner. Later on, the praise of others dies down for this achievement and our bowel movements become our own business, although we may continue to praise ourselves for them. But overpowering pressures go on governing our lives, and the release of these essentially bowel-movement pressures may once again come up for praise, congratulations, and huzzahs of all kinds.

Just because certain behaviors such as procreation are not praiseworthy does not make them blameworthy either. That praise or blame is publicly accorded to anyone for anything is also a function of pressure, this time the pressure upon groups and subgroups to create themselves and unendingly recreate themselves, sometimes on a tight schedule or a grand scale. Every day, people are recompensed with money and honors because they possess chance attributes for which they cannot rightfully be credited. As Oscar Wilde wrote, "If only the poor had profiles there would be no problem in solving the problem of poverty." And those among the poor who do happen to be born with head-turning profiles have just the edge needed to rise out of the rabble. Even more outrageous are the advantages that accrue from flukes of parentage, those which give someone a gigantic head start on the field of his fellow mortals. It works the same way with individuals who produce something that society values—a book, a song, an invention. These producers might seem to have a more legitimate reason to be proud of what they

have done than those who just happen to be physically attractive or just happen to be born into a family of wealth and reputation. In fact, we are as likely to take credit for what pure luck has made us as for what we have made of ourselves, figuratively speaking. Most cruelly, the opposite also applies: persons without fetching looks, rich parents, or God-given gifts are often scarred by their inadequacies and know an unwarranted shame, just as in bygone days the children of unmarried couples were consigned to the status of social pariahs. If nothing else, though, almost every member of the accursed can join in the miracle of reproduction. As named above, pressures—fears, infatuations, and so on—steer us through life’s whipping winds, and who among us can say that we do not do their bidding in one form or another, thus releasing the bloated imperatives created within us? Whether we create the body of a child, compose a body of work, or are just an anatomical piece of the body politic, we need to flaunt something that proves we are not completely useless and have earned the right to hold our heads up among our kind. This is the system of insanity to which consciousness has chained us. No surprise, then, that such a system is not about to grant an income to those who wish they had never been born. This is not how our species works. No different from any other on this planet, it flourishes while it can and at a fiendish cost to the individual organism. Among human beings, lip service is paid to the value of every life. This is a staggering lie that anyone with a good head on his shoulders should be mortified to underwrite.

The individual is only a means to a dead end in this world, yet our species is more or less characterized by the egos of individuals. Once again, tragedy emerges as a function of consciousness, which is always a consciousness of difference: the difference between the human and the non-human, the difference between one human and another, the difference between how the world is and how we would wish it to be. Because we have no natural enemies, we must look to our fellow puppets for our prey, falling upon everyone and everything like a stick-wielding Punch, beating the dickens out of whatever irritates our consciousness of difference. Any form of government, any economic system, any set of ideological or religious principles could serve to lessen the tribulations of organic existence on one condition: we would need to recognize that, in all constitutive facets of life, our interests and our fate are shared by all. Such unanimity, most naturally, can never be reached.⁹ As Zapffe noted, consciousness leads our heads to stray from both the facts and from one another. While the life-slog of one person is at every major point indistinct from that of all other persons, the ways in which we confront our common lot are divergent unto madness. To live by our differences is to live in chaos. It is to live with the kind of delusions we impute to those heads which are torn by disease, those which are psychotically fragmented and in conflict within themselves. These individuals of an extreme alienation are tolerated by the world’s normal citizenry only if they do not disturb the peace, break any laws, or go off their medication. Our mistake, the mistake that limits and defines us, is in resisting the diagnosis that everyone is among the alienated and that no messianic alienist will ever succeed in curing us. And unanimity—like peace, love, and understanding—would not offset the nuisance and vanity of being alive and aware in this world.

NOTES

1. There have been isolated instances in which a solitary writer by chance publishes a work whose subject matter strikes a chord with a wide readership. Vladimir Nabokov's Lolita is a famed example. Banned as obscene in several countries and rejected by U.S. publishers, the novel first appeared in 1955 from a French press that specialized in erotica. Three years later, following several laudatory reviews by distinguished literary figures, the book was made available to American readers, who were taken with its portrayal of a sexually precocious adolescent girl and her lovers. More finely, readers were taken in by the controversy surrounding the book rather than taken with the book itself. The central figure of Nabokov's next novel, Pnin—which appeared in 1957, one year before the U.S. edition of Lolita—is a university professor, which happened to be Nabokov's occupation at the time. In post-Lolita editions of Pnin, the titular professor is depicted on the dust jacket as an ogler of young co-eds, deceptively publicizing the book as something of a follow-up to Lolita, than which nothing could be more untrue. That, of course, is show business. But the important thing is that the success of Lolita brought financial independence to the solitary Nabokov, who left the United States and moved to Switzerland, where he lived for the rest of his life. Among major twentieth-century writers, few were as obsessed with death and suffering as Nabokov. Pnin contains two consecutive sentences that critics should never forget when analyzing his work: "Harm is the norm. Doom should not jam." In their economy, their sense, and their four-time mouthing of the letter "M," these words sound a thrilling echo of the opening sentences of Poe's "Berenice."

The unique thing about Nabokov is that he practiced the writing of fiction as a form of sorcery. His novels and stories draw you in with their language, their humor, and a troupe of demented narrators who seem to be descendants of Poe's band of madmen. But behind the language and the humor there is another dimension, a world of a terrible desperation where Nabokov works a wizardry that makes the impossible happen right before the reader's eyes—specifically, defeating the limitations of time and space, recovering the losses brought about by the ravaging vicissitudes of one's life, heckling the tragicomic congeries of the historical record, and, ultimately, conquering death. This is the world of Nabokov's works, and it is most perceptible and moving in Lolita, wherein the leading characters, who are declared legally dead in the preface to the book, are all brought back to life in quite spectral ways by the writing of the book itself. Of course, the magic does not really work, except from an exclusively aesthetic perspective, which is the saddest and deepest meaning of Nabokov's fiction.

2. Perhaps even more than Poe or Lovecraft, Burroughs was the American master of the febrile. He set the standard of fever, nightmare, and the grotesque by which all other writers who aspire to these qualities in their works should be calibrated. In his last novel, The Western Lands (1987), he writes of the smell of rotting metal, and Burroughs never wrote about anything that was not tangible to his senses. That is sick genius if there ever was such a thing. Now, this descant on sickness might raise a question in some people's minds: if this is the sort of thing one adores, then why not just read case histories of psychopaths and psychotics, suicide notes, and such books as Daniel Paul Schreber's A History of My Nervous Illness (1903)? Indisputably, many people are very interested in real-life misery. Ratings for television news shows confirm this fact. But some individuals do not care for the evening news, viewing it as a ticker tape of fragments and abstracts from a world simmering in its own stupidity. Real-life misery has no coherence to it, no vision to channel. As Mark Twain said, "Life is just one damn thing

after another.” Not every mortal who owns a television wants to consume the raw data of the world any more than they must. Instead, they would prefer to attend to the words of someone who will stand up and say, “Life is just one damn thing after another” rather than surrender their heads to some jackass of a news anchor who presents the day’s horror as so many human interest stories and tearful installments of emotional pornography because his corporate overlords figure they can use this kind of stuff to sell advertising minutes. Everyone knows that this is the case. Everyone knows that this is an abomination. And everyone, more or less, is hooked on it. As for Mark Twain, not many can unglue themselves from the rollicking righteousness of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1884) long enough to behold his late-blooming sagacity as it appears in the dialogue “What Is Man” (1906) or Letters from the Earth (written 1909; published posthumously, 1942). Naturally, few will give the time of day to these works, which are as un-American as those of Burroughs.

Burroughs is also germane as an example of a writer who, in some quarters, has been exiled to the hinterlands of the pessimistic, nihilistic, or whatever you like. This penalization, of course, has only been applied by those who have actually read his works. As renowned as Burroughs’ writings may be, they have been all but invisible to those who really get het up about such things as pessimism and nihilism—namely, social conservatives, religionists, and normal folk in general—as have the writings of almost anyone who is exemplary of the major trends in literature and thought since the late nineteenth century. If he were more extensively read, Burroughs, along with most authors considered “modern” in a broad sense, would be one of the names on the list of forbidden writers that the Vatican used to keep. As it is, the names to be included on such a list have long past the point where they can be kept up to date for the indignation of those who believe that morals, meanings, and other such nonsense—whether divinely revealed or naturally evolved—are real. Perhaps this dual contingent of the holy and the humanist at some point realized they could not stride along with trends of the sort that Nietzsche foresaw in the 1880s and have therefore blinded themselves to the existence of any current of ideas that are a threat to them on the sociopolitical game board. Even though Naked Lunch (1959, Olympia Press, the same concern that published Nabokov’s Lolita) was the subject of the last major censorship trial in the history of U.S. jurisprudence, it was still only a book and not a very popular one. In the same year that Naked Lunch was being considered in the Massachusetts legal system for a permanent slot as a banned title, teenage Christians were getting all the press by burning their Beatles albums because of a remark John Lennon had made about his band being bigger than Jesus. Some years later, Lennon would become much beloved for his song “Imagine,” which envisions a world of atheistic communism. By then, though, Lennon had been relegated to the same colony in which Burroughs and others had already settled.

3. One of the most balls-out idiotic rationalizations that philosophy has used to soothe our fear of death is the following pitch: we accept with great aplomb that we did not exist before we were born; why, then, should we fear the nonexistence that will postdate our death? Here is the answer: although we did not exist prior to our birth, after we are born we can and often do acquire a sense of what things were like long before we were alive, even those events during the billions of years prior to our birth and the events that astronomers and astrophysicists think possible billions of years into the future. This sense of the eternal, or the near eternal, will terminate when we do, and there is no sense in pretending that this is no big deal for us. As for the near term following upon our late being, we can only imagine that it will not differ greatly from the time during which we lived, with the exception that we will not exist anymore. We will be dead. We will be

stiffs like every other stiff we have witnessed in repose while the loved ones wept and mere acquaintances checked their watches because they had places to go and people to see who were not yet in rigor. Go ahead and dream of the negligible eons before and after your death . . . and fear not, if you choose. Our selves may be illusory, but our horror of death—a horror that is unique among horrors—cannot be assuaged as an inaccurate conception of human life. Subjectively, this horror is as real as our worst nightmare, the only distinction being that we cannot awaken from it. Objectively, it is one minus one equals zero. Now, as any lover of logic would remonstrate, neither stand trotted out above on how we should face death is an arresting evocation of rationality. But any fool knows that logic goes limp at those times when it most counts, while reason, some fellow said, is the flashiest pimp for irrationality that ever strode down the mean streets of life. Another issue altogether is the When and the How of our dying. That will happen while we still exist and can be nothing but a source of fear. No philosophical rationalization exists for why we should be unafraid of the manner in which we will be dumped into oblivion. This is the greatest oversight in the history of human thought.

4. The requisite optimism of politicians may shine a light on the near universal disesteem in which they are held. Everyone naturally likes to hear that things are not going to hell either in the short or the long term. But when someone tells us that everything is all right all the time and will only get better with no end in sight, we have a feeling deep down that we are being taken for a ride by a bullshit artist. Drawing upon our life experience and the benefits of a normally operational intellect makes it impossible to guzzle the whole hogshhead of any politician's optimism. In a section of The World as Will and Representation that is devoted to arguing the reality of pain over the illusion of pleasure, Schopenhauer closes with these words: "I cannot here withhold the statement that optimism, where it is not merely the thoughtless talk of those who harbor nothing but words under their shallow foreheads, seems to me to be not merely an absurd, but also a really wicked, way of thinking, a bitter mockery of the most unspeakable sufferings of mankind" (emphases not added). Even those who do not wholly endorse Schopenhauer's opinion of optimism in the widest sense can still gain some understanding of what he is talking about when they hear some political monstrosity deliver a stump speech or maneuver around the facts at a press conference. It is on such occasions that most the demonic aspect of optimism reveals itself and repels many who normally prefer an optimistic spell to be cast upon them. "Wickedness," of course, is a moral category reserved for believers in such fabrications, including Schopenhauer. But to see the horribly clownish rictus on the face of a winning candidate bellowing out a victory speech while his supporters hop about like devil worshippers around the body of a sacrificed babe can make the most hardened non-moralist begin to pronounce commonplace value judgments left and right.
5. One school of evolutionary psychology thus hypothesizes the origins of our error: pleasurable emotions and sensations germinated because they were adaptive. Example: release from the stress of sexual desire was once the catalyst for reproduction. (Following the outbreak of language, everyone began praising sexual pleasure for its own sake, while no one has ever celebrated the biological drive that leads to it, just as everyone praises a good meal but not the hunger that makes it so pleasurable.) But knowing the devious ways of nature, should anyone be thunderstruck that she has put a lid on the intensity of our pleasure and a time limit on how long it may last? If our pleasure did not have both a cap and a ticking clock, we would not bestir ourselves from our enjoyment long enough to attend to the exigencies of the body. And then we would not survive. By the same token, should our mass mind ever become discontented with the crumbs of pleasure

grudgingly dished out by nature, we would omit the mandates of survival from our lives out of a stratospherically acerbic resentment. And then we would not reproduce. As a species, we do not shout into the sky, “The pleasures of this world are not enough for us.” In fact, they are just enough to drive us on like oxen pulling a cart full of our calves, which in their turn will put on the yoke. As highly evolved beings, though, we like to think that it will not always be this way. “Someday,” we say to ourselves, “we will escape from this world in which we are battered between long burden and brief delight, and we will live in pleasure and contentment for what days are left to us.” The belief in the possibility of long-lasting, high-flown pleasures is a deceptive but nicely adaptive flimflam of consciousness. Why the above hypothesis should appear as a controversial theory of evolutionary psychology rather than as a commonplace in current psychology, excepting positive psychology, is one hair-ripping riddle for the ages.

Of course, the ultimate con for the continuance of our species—which, if only in principle, is capable of estimating the pros and cons of this toilsome life and coming to the sensible solution of putting paid to its existence—is the assurance of eternal felicity in the afterlife. While priests and nuns of the Catholic Church lead celibate lives, if only in principle, the core of this religion is the family, specifically its Western form known as the nuclear family, with marriage taking a place beside holy orders as one of Catholicism’s seven sacraments. Catholics have always been notorious breeders, with a papal go-ahead to eschew the inconveniences of birth control. Traditionally, this ethos has resulted in a squad of offspring for every Catholic household, although it should be said that other religiosos also procreate with ecumenical gusto. In the hierarchy of fabricated realities comprising our lives, the family has proven itself more durable than national or ethnic affiliations, which in turn outrank god-figures in terms of stability and staying power. Thus, any progress by liberation in this world can begin only when our gods have been devalued to the status of refrigerator magnets or lawn ornaments. Following the death rattle of deities, it would appear that nations or ethnic communities are next up for the boneyard of history. The family will certainly hang tough long after fealty to a country or a people has been shucked off as an impediment to the evolution of the species. Last of all, and apparently the least endangered of fabricated realities, is the self. This hierarchy may change in time, depending on the inroads made by neuroscience, which could reverse the progression, with the extinction of the self foretelling that of families, national and ethnic structures, and gods. But the exemplary sequence by which we free ourselves from our selves and our institutions is still that of the legendary Buddha, who, born a prince, embarked on a quest to nullify his ego by first leaving behind his sociopolitical station along with his family and gods. Buddha’s example notwithstanding, a speedy and efficient breakdown of fabricated realities having a global ambit seems remote without the intervention of science, which could provide a vaccination against the development of “selves” after models already in use to wipe out certain viruses and diseases. Once we have revoked our selves, what would be our incentive to reproduce? Ten billion non-selves would be the equivalent of none. But such a painstaking route to a humanless planet is incontestably as fantastic as Zapffe’s suggestion that we cease reproducing for reasons both practical and philosophical. What a tragedy that a world without humans should come to pass without our assistance or acquiescence, leaving us with only the fear, pain, and lonely resistance we have demonstrated as our preferred style of dying.

6. As one who kept a diary of his romantic affiliations and activities, Schopenhauer should not be understood here as a reclusive thinker who was indulging himself in a moment of detached ideation. Unfortunately, the relevant document was destroyed by a prudish

overseer of the philosopher's posthumous reputation. More unfortunately, Schopenhauer fathered a child, an all but certain eventuality considering the philosopher's promiscuous nature and the lack of effective birth-control methods at the time. This fact lends a special piquancy, perhaps indicating a bad conscience, to his ejaculations quoted in the present work on the aversion human beings might have to the reproductive act without the pleasures accompanying it.

7. One may rail against those who have taken a different byway in this life, but not from a superior or self-righteous position. Having said as much, we may continue as if it had not been said. What else can we do? No one is better than anyone else, only more or less fortunate. But if all of us ever behaved accordingly, we would have no need of Zapffe's Last Messiah: everyone would become voiceless and motionless before the universe until no one was left standing. Then decomposition would take over, and the elements would do their work until the ashen outlines of our skeletons have been disseminated over the lands, our seed never to be sown again. Without apology, then, let us each look down upon the opposition from a superior and self-righteous vantage.
8. Contradicting the positive image that is propagated by society, the data of positive psychology has revealed that, whatever a couple's rationale may be for having children, they can expect newborns in their household to have a negative effect on their well being or, best case, no effect. It seems that the two happiest days in parents' lives are the day their children are born and the day they leave home. Mutatis mutandis, the same has been said about people who buy recreational boats, a high-maintenance hobby that customarily delivers a worse than neutral payback. The reader is invited to reflect to no avail on any acquisition or pursuit that is not more trouble than it is worth. And many practices besides procreation are devoid of a praiseworthy incentive. Child-bearers, then, should not feel unfairly culled as the worst offenders in the conspiracy against the human race.
9. Nevertheless, we cannot count out the possibility that with the passing of hundreds or thousands of years the world will have attained the highest imaginable state of unity as well as the hedonic payoff for which we have slaved. Those extant during this epoch, which all previous eras of history have been working toward, may even be immortal, thriving without physical bodies in a full-immersion virtual environment maintained by technological systems inconceivable to date (Kurzweil's Singularity). Let us also presage that at this distant stage of human evolution we have fully fathomed all matters of the universe—its beginning, its end, and all of its workings. Having reached such an apex, we would need only to stave off a single question. The question takes various forms. Here is one of them: "What use is it to exist?" Herman Tennessen, in his essay "Happiness Is for the Pigs: Philosophy versus Psychotherapy (*Journal of Existentialism* 7, no. 26, Winter 1967), cites another form of the question: "What is it all about?" He then explains the context and import of the question. "Mitja (in *Brothers Karamazov*) felt that though his question may be absurd and senseless, yet he had to ask just that, and he had to ask it in just that way. Socrates bandied about that an unexamined life is not worthy of Man. And Aristotle saw Man's 'proper' goal and 'proper' limit in the right exercise of those faculties which are uniquely human. It is commonplace that men, unlike other living organisms, are not equipped with built-in mechanisms for automatic maintenance of their existence. Man would perish immediately if he were to respond to his environment exclusively in terms of unlearned biologically inherited forms of behavior. In order to survive, the human being must discover how various things around as well as in him operate. And the place he occupies in the present scheme of organic creation is the consequence of having learned how to exploit his intellectual capacities for such

discoveries. Hence, more human than any other human longing is the pursuance of a total view of Man's function—or malfunction—in the Universe, his possible place and importance in the widest conceivable cosmic scheme. In other words it is the attempt to answer, or at least articulate whatever questions are entailed in the dying groan of ontological despair: what is it all about? This may well prove biologically harmful or even fatal to Man. Intellectual honesty and Man's high spiritual demands for order and meaning may drive Man to the deepest antipathy to life and necessitate, as one existentialist chooses to express it: 'a no to this wild, banal, grotesque and loathsome carnival in the world's graveyard'" (emphasis not added). The work from which Tennesen quotes is Zapffe's On the Tragic.

CREATING HORROR

ATMOSPHERE

Billions of years had to pass following the formation of this planet before its atmosphere became . . . atmospheric. This development occurred in conjunction with the debut of consciousness among our species. Seeing shadows in the moonlight and hearing leaves rustling in the wind, our ancestors impregnated these sights and sounds with conceptions of what they might portend. With our bodies bogged down in the ordure of this world, the exercise of our new faculty of consciousness resulted in the genesis of other worlds, excrescences born of our anxieties about the one we knew. Created out of nothing, or very little, these worlds borrowed aspects of ours to exude atmospheres that fostered strange rules and strange rulers. From the beginning, the unadorned atmosphere of the moonlit night and the lonely place has been used in horror tales to prepare the entrance of a supernatural abomination. One continues to see this kind of bare-bones atmosphere in the movies. The shadows, the rustling leaves, the moon with or without clouds, and the lonely place—the same primal scenery that raised the hair on the heads of our ancestors endures as establishing shots and in production design. But once the monster arrives, atmosphere recedes into the background—now you see it, now you don't—so that the action can begin. In better movies, atmosphere and action are more integrated. The focus does not shift from spooky backdrops to actors fighting for their lives or from an atmospheric nightscape to a busy police station where someone is telling an off-color joke while someone else is crabbing about the poor quality of the coffee. These movies, the better ones, are often based on works of fiction and take place in a relatively unchanging locale—a room, a house, an apartment building, a mental institution, a motel or hotel, a forest or desert or jungle, someplace where atmosphere is ever-present and part of the action and every character is enmeshed in the same supernatural snare. Nevertheless, atmosphere in movies, even the better ones, is still based on physical surroundings. It is on the outside, a costume in which a horror tale is dressed up. And costumes come straight from Wardrobe, not from the consciousness of human beings, where atmosphere was born and subsequently raised to labyrinthine dimensions.

Unlike filmmakers, horror writers do not create atmosphere with locations, lighting, and sound effects. There are indeed ready-made atmospheres that may be chosen for a work of horror fiction, but the great names of this literary genre do not select what atmosphere they will use—it selects them. For these writers, the atmosphere of their works is as unique as a signature or a fingerprint. And it comes from inside, where their incomparable consciousness has been brewed out of a mix of their sensations, their memories, their emotions, their physiology, and everything else that makes them who they are and predetermines what they will choose to express as artists if they are bold enough to do so or incapable of doing otherwise. These are the solitaires of horror, whose writing bubbles from inside their own heads and cannot be understood solely within the trends of their art form. They come out of nowhere and are buried unceremoniously. They will be exhumed only when their consciousness hits the sensitive nerves of another, which will happen more exquisitely than it will often. Their subject is not the world about

them but the world that has been generated within them. From horror to horror, they repeat themselves because all they have to work with are themselves and their dreams, every one of which is a bad dream. As anyone knows, it is impossible to recreate one's dreams in a way that others can experience. Their moods are too profound and strangely magnified and their thoughts are too intricate and ambiguous. But the atmosphere of those dreams is part of the consciousness of great horror writers and shapes the moods and thoughts of their waking life, which is what they attempt to put onto a page and transfuse to us. Thus Lovecraft, in a 1935 letter to Catherine L. Moore, set down these remarks on the weird story: "It must, if it is to be authentic art, form primarily the crystallization or symbolization of a definite human mood—not the attempted delineation of events, since the "events" involved are of course largely fictitious and impossible. These events should figure secondarily—atmosphere being first. All real art must somehow be connected with truth, and in the case of weird art the emphasis must fall upon the one factor representing truth—certainly not the events (!!!) but the mood of intense and fruitless human aspiration typified by the pretended overturning of cosmic laws and the pretend transcending of possible human experience" (emphasis not added). Lovecraft's theoretic of atmosphere and mood in the weird (or horror) story are now legendary, and the literary works in which he most ably put his ideals into practice are masterpieces. Yet he wrote himself off as a failure and struggled to the end of his life to do what, in fact, no other horror writer had done before him nor will ever do: lay bare his consciousness in an artifact. By the stress he placed on atmosphere, Lovecraft showed the way to an analytics of this element in horror literature, and, by extension, to an evaluation of the genre as a whole.

From the perspective of atmosphere, horror fiction may be dated only as far back as the novels of Ann Radcliffe. As a deservedly illustrious name in Gothic fiction, which was not gloriously atmospheric before her, Radcliffe turned a craze in the late eighteenth century for the picturesque in natural scenery into one that included gloom and dread as complements of the picturesque aesthetic. Her works are known for the descriptions they contain of immense and awesome landscapes featuring lofty mountains and deep gorges. To facilitate the plots of her essentially romantic narratives, she entrapped her heroines in castles so great and gloomy that their dungeons seem to have dungeons and their towers appear to the imagination to sprout supplementary towers into infinity. Within this gargantuan setting, these young women are terrorized by men of a wicked nature. They are also terrorized by simulacra of the supernatural. Then they are rescued by their beloveds and, presumably, live happy lives unmarred by their experiences. They are not harmed; they are not disillusioned. The shortcoming of Radcliffe's work for someone of Lovecraft's temperament, or for anyone more concerned with the consciousness of horror than with love stories, is that she rationalized seemingly supernatural events with natural explanations. If she did not do this, her protagonists would have to look into the face of metaphysical insanity instead of the lesser horror of having to marry some very bad man. More disastrously, Radcliffe did not follow through on threats to her characters' lives with death itself, which may please those readers expectant of happy endings but which retroactively diminishes her atmospheric set up. Like value in life, atmosphere in horror fiction flows backwards from a terminus in death.

The next innovation in atmosphere began with Poe in the early nineteenth century. Poe was familiar with Radcliffe's works, which pioneered the trappings of the Gothic romance genre and registered brisk sales. Possibly in reaction to Radcliffe's world of scenic thrills and salvation, Poe turned that world on its head in "The Fall of the House of Usher." As everyone knows, the story begins at evening as the narrator approaches on horseback a secluded mansion of the grimmest design, flanked by a swampy and putrid-looking tarn. While the House of Usher may at first seem to be an estate oozing with the charm of classic Gothic atmosphere, the narrator goes out of his way to argue that this is not so. The decrepit condition of the house, with that deep crack running across its façade, is not enchanting in the manner of the ruins, both actual and man-made, that were all the rage in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This place is not desolate in a sublimely cozy way—as were the settings of Radcliffe's novels—but is plumb dispiriting, a locus of indomitable despair whose effect on the narrator is one of withering vastation. From the tenor of this beginning, the reader can expect no saving outcome, creating an atmosphere that is actually atmospheric because it is anchored in the deaths of Roderick and Madeline, the moribund brother and sister who occupy the house. Furthermore, conditions at the House of Usher descend to the point where the structure crumbles altogether, the light of a blood-red moon shining through a widening crack in the masonry, and sinks into the noxious tarn. The narrator has earlier told us of the identification that obtains between the House of Usher and its inhabitants, and the story admirably culminates in the death of both. With this conclusion to Poe's story, the world of Mrs. Radcliffe's Gothic heroines is now behind us. The picturesque and sublime have been displaced by a disillusionment with life and an atmosphere flowing out of death. A new phase in the evolution of the atmospheric had begun.

It was almost a century after the 1839 appearance of "The Fall of the House of Usher" that Lovecraft took the next great step in both the history of disillusionment and in the art of atmospherics with his "Call of Cthulhu." Its introductory sentences, while known to every reader of horror fiction, require transcription here.

The most merciful thing in the world, I think, is the inability of the human mind to correlate all its contents. We live in a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far. The sciences, each straining in its own direction, have hitherto harmed us little; but some day the piecing together of dissociated knowledge will open up such terrifying vistas of reality, and of our frightful position therein, that we shall either go mad from the revelation or flee from the deadly light into the peace and safety of a new dark age.

From Lovecraft's overture to this classic story, the reader may surmise that something worse than physical death is in the offing. While his statement is abstract, it is all the more atmospheric for being so, and we are anxious to read what "dissociated knowledge," not a particularly evocative phrase on its own, has been pieced together by one Francis Wayland Thurston. We can only try to comprehend how, in the Year of Our Lord, 1926, it was possible for Lovecraft's consciousness to chart the coordinates of a universe of

disillusionments undetected before him. His is a world of horror that makes those of former days, and days to come, seem relatively naïve. "I have looked upon all that the universe has to hold of horror," F. W. Thurston writes after he has connected the dots, "and even the skies of spring and the flowers of summer must ever afterward be poison to me." In other words, he has done what no one has been in a position to do before him: sort out the worst of existence from any compensatory dividends, a process which leads him to conclude that life is a malignancy it were better had never been. Lovecraft does not bother to destroy the world, although he has put together the means for doing so in his story. But that would be too simple, too merciful. And Lovecraft's world, like Poe's, is neither. It is encrusted with madness, it is merciless, and it is doomed. The world of "The Call of Cthulhu" is not the place its narrator thought it was. People still innocently go about their business, but, for him, and for anyone else who knows too much, a dense and downcast atmosphere hangs over everything. This atmosphere is not hygienic for a human mind, and it was Thurston's mistake to have ever thought it could be anything else. Life is a tale told by, about, and exclusively for idiots. And after the "piecing together of dissociated knowledge," Thurston can no longer isolate himself from an omnipresent horror or anchor himself in the lies of his civilization, nor can he distract himself from or sublimate the revelation of a great conspiracy. Needless to say, he left no heirs, for to reproduce in such a context would be only to enrich the insanity which already exists. A true Gothic hero, Thurston would not allow himself to become party to the conspiracy against the human race . . . as if he had a choice.

THEME

The literary world may be divided into two unequal groups: the insiders and the outsiders. The former are many and the latter are few. The placement of a given writer into one group or the other could be approached by assessing the consciousness of that writer as it is betrayed by various aspects of his work, including verbal style, general tone, selection of subjects and themes, personal statements and public manifestos, etc. As any reader knows, such things do vary among authors, particularly those of the modern era. To pin any of them down within a capricious or hallucinated taxonomy of insiders and outsiders would thus seem an experiment in uselessness. Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, Jean-Paul Sartre, Samuel Beckett, T. S. Eliot, Knut Hamsun, Hermann Hesse: who is on the inside and who is on the outside? The brain reels when considering well-known works by these writers, as they seem to express sensibilities at several arms' length from those of the ordinary person who likes to turn pages. Immediately, we recall Hemingway's story "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," which ends with a travesty of the Lord's Prayer: "Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name." Then our thoughts turn to the collection of degenerates in Faulkner's novels, which do not seem incorrigibly intent on showing off the nobler side, if there is one, of the human race. Nor should we forget Eliot's hymn to meaninglessness, The Wasteland (1922), or the alienated protagonists who lead us through Hamsun's Hunger (1890), Hesse's Steppenwolf (1928), Sartre's Nausea (1938), and the entire output of Beckett. Conveniently, the status of these notable authors—insider or outsider?—has been adjudicated for us by the Swedish committees that dispensed to each of them a Nobel Prize in literature, which is annually given out, in the words of its eponymous originator, to authors who produce works of "an idealistic tendency." But does the verdict of a panel of Swedish judges really settle things for all of

these greats of modern literature? Are they to be classed as insiders by virtue of receiving a prize? Some would say yes, but not entirely because of the Nobel. Some would say no, despite the Nobel.¹ Consequently, the job is unfinished insofar as determining the consciousness of an author to be that of an insider or an outsider. To expedite this inquest, we could use a candidate whose credentials unambiguously place him in the latter group, whose works in their entirety cast him as an outsider without qualification. To fill this position, any number of worthy candidates could be appointed. One of them is Roland Topor, whose short horror novel The Tenant (1964) is a document that expresses the consciousness of an unimpeachable outsider. To discern with a modest confidence what places a writer on the inside or the outside, The Tenant will be compared with another short novel that substantially shares its theme, One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand (1926) by the Nobel Prize-winning Luigi Pirandello. In itself, there is no giveaway of an author's consciousness. What counts is how that theme is resolved. Pirandello's resolution parades the appalling symptoms of "an idealistic tendency," while Topor's flashes the anti-idealist position (read: pessimistic, nihilistic, or any other negative modifier one chooses to pin upon the chest of those who are not on the inside).

The theme of One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand is explicitly that of the self as a falsehood born of our systems of perception and cognition. In contrast to the dogma of the many, as Pirandello's narrator and leading character Vitangelo Moscarda comes to appreciate, the self is an insubstantial construct that we spontaneously invent to lend coherence and meaning to an existence that is actually chaotic and meaningless. While everyone has a body, we also recognize—only because we are occasionally forced to do so—that they are unstable, damage-prone, and ultimately disposable phenomena. At the same time, we tend to believe—until a malignant brain lesion or some queer life-event causes us to question this belief—that our "selves" are more sturdy, enduring, and real than the degrading tissue in which they are encased.

In One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand, Moscarda is made aware of his misperception of his self, and by extension of the entire world of forms in which the self functions, by a misperception he has made about his body. Early in the story, he believes his nose to be evenly structured on its right and the left sides. Then his wife tells him that his nose is not symmetrical but is slightly lower on the left side than on the right. Being an incurably pensive individual, Moscarda is troubled by his wife's remark; being an intellectually honest individual, he has to admit it is true. That he misperceived this single feature of his appearance leads Moscarda to investigate what other delusions he has been entertaining about his appearance throughout his life. He ascertains a constellation of them. After scrupulous self-examination of his physical person, he concedes that he is not who he thought he was. Now he believes he is an outsider to himself—a figment in the mirror that appears one way to him and other ways to other people. But Moscarda is condemned to further revelations: "I still believed this outsider was only one person: only one for everybody, as I thought I was only one for myself. But soon my horrible drama became more complicated. . . ." This occurs when our narrator makes "the discovery of the hundred thousand Moscardas that I was, not only for the others but also for myself, all with this one name of Moscarda, ugly to the point of cruelty, all inside this poor body of mine that was also one, one and, alas, no one. . . ." Fortunately for Moscarda, and

ruefully for the reader (at least the reader who is an outsider), he comes to accept the unreality of everything he had conceived himself to be and becomes one with all that exists: he no longer thinks but simply is. “This is the only way I can live now. To be reborn moment by moment. To prevent thought from working again inside me. . . .” The last paragraph of the novel is an exaltation of his new state of existence.

The city is distant. From it, at times, in the twilight calm, the sound of bells reaches me. But now I hear those bells no longer inside me; but outside, rung for themselves, and perhaps they quiver with joy in their humming hollowness, in a fine blue sky filled with hot sun amid the shriek of the swallows or in the cloudy wind, heavy and high over their airy spires. To think of death, to pray. There are those who still have this need, and the bells become their voice. I no longer have this need; because I die at every instant, and I am reborn, new and without memories: live and whole, no longer inside myself, but in everything outside.

End of story. Things turn out all right for Moscarda. He is now an outsider who has been saved. In his loss of a self, he brings to mind U. G. Krishnamurti and John Wren-Lewis—those flukes who recovered from what appear to have been physiological traumas, following which their thought processes shut down, disabling the cognitive mechanisms which produce a fictive ego. In these instances, the individual who loses himself or herself are the beneficiaries of an incalculable payoff in the sweepstakes of consciousness. This is truly a “good death.” They have disappeared as so-called individuals and reborn as . . . no one. They are content just to exist, and equally content not to exist. But does anyone believe that Luigi Pirandello knew first-hand what it was to be in such a state of inert beatitude? Or is it more likely that he imagined this ending of a decidedly “idealistic tendency,” perhaps after reading the works of some mystic or psychologist? Granted, Pirandello was a genius of imagination for having pictured both the philosophical infirmity from which Moscarda suffered and the manner in which he was delivered from it, an ideal resolution for a painfully self-conscious audience of the Modernist era, or any other time. And yet it is not a resolution available to the reader, who could follow Moscarda’s process toward salvation step-by-step and never be delivered to the promised land of the ego-dead. If it were so, Pirandello would have invented the most phenomenal cure ever known for the agonies specially reserved for humankind. He would have solved every scourge we face as a species. But as one might expect, he did no such thing. Pirandello imagined a fairy-tale resolution as sure as if the prayer that Moscarda says he no longer needs were offered as a restorative for his bedeviled state—a *deus ex machina* for moderns. His book is a curish deceit. This is what the literary insider offers. In The Tenant, Roland Topor supplies the opposing view of the outsider.

When Pirandello’s character Moscarda describes his escalating perplexities about his identity as a “horrible drama,” these words appear as a formality—a perfunctory gesture that fails to convey the nightmarish quality of his situation. This criticism may not be lodged against The Tenant, wherein Topor affectingly dramatizes the horror of his non-

hero Trelkovsky as he traverses the same nightmare terrain as his Italian counterpart. (A pivotal passage in Topor's novel begins with the following sentence: "At what precise moment," Trelkovsky asked himself, 'does an individual cease to be the person he—and everyone else—believes himself to be?') A Parisian with a Slavic name, Trelkovsky is an outsider and moves in a world where outsiders are persecuted, as they are in the real world. While seeking a new home in an apartment building, he is made to feel as if he is nobody by the landlord, Monsieur Zy, and then by the other residents of this sinister place. By flexing their self-appointed prestige, Trelkovsky's persecutors can maintain their own delusional status as somebodies, real persons who are comfortable in the hell they have created for themselves. Anyone who is marked as being outside of the group is fair game for those who would assert their reality over all others. Yet they, too, are nobodies. If they were not, their persecutions would not be required: they could pass their lives with a sure mindfulness of their substance and value. But as any good Buddhist (or even Pirandello's Moscarda) could tell you, human beings have no more substance and value than anything else on earth. The incapacity to repose alongside both the mountains and the mold of this planet is the wellspring of the torments we inflict on one another. As long as we deny a person or group the claim to be as right and as real as we are, so long may we hold this dreamlike claim for ourselves alone. And it is the duty of everyone to inculcate a sense of nothingness, an ache of being empty of substance and value, in those who are not emulations of them. Without being consciously aware of it, Trelkovsky experiences an epiphany about his neighbors at the midpoint of the novel: "The bastards!" Trelkovsky raged. "The bastards! What the hell do they want—for everyone to roll over and play dead! And even that probably wouldn't be enough!" He is more right than he knows. Because what they want is for everyone to roll over and play them.

Martians—they were all Martians. . . . They were strangers on this planet, but they refused to admit it. They played at being perfectly at home. . . . He was no different. . . . He belonged to their species, but for some unknown reason he had been banished from their company. They had no confidence in him. All they wanted from him was obedience to their incongruous rules and their ridiculous laws. Ridiculous only to him, because he could never fathom their intricacy and their subtlety.

Trelkovsky's neighbors cannot admit to themselves what he comes to realize: everybody is nobody; no one is empowered to define who they are. But people do arrogate to themselves the authority to make a ruling on who you are, and you will stand mute before their bench. At first, Trelkovsky is manipulated by others toward this knowledge; finally, he comes to embrace it. In his broken mind, the only way to defy his neighbors' murderous conspiracy against him is to cooperate in it. He does this by allowing himself to fall from the high window of his apartment. The first time does not quite do the job, so he drags his bloody anti-self back up the stairs, jeering at his neighbors who have come out to lunge out at his body with sharp objects. He then falls a second time from the window. Following in the footsteps of Anna Karenina and Gloria Beatty, he decides to call it quits in the world's lugubrious game. Interestingly, The Tenant concludes with the

same kind of leap beyond the known criteria of the everyday world as does One, No One, and One Hundred Thousand. Sadly for Trelkovsky, it is a leap in the opposite direction. More accurately, it is a leap that does not deliver Topor's protagonist from his "horrible drama" but one that catapults him into the outermost nightmare of nobodies.

As an insider, Pirandello was under orders to resolve the themes of his work in a spirit-lifting, vacillating, or at least tolerable mode. Outfitted with a different consciousness, the outsider can only give up a resolution from another prospect overlooking the nature of things. For the past few slivers of human history, those of us living in what is called the "free world" have been allowed to have our diversity of worldviews accredited, but only on the condition that they are affirmative and not pessimistic, nihilistic, or any other negative modifier one chooses to pin upon the chest of those who are not on the inside. These qualities might well be valued by outsiders, but the preponderance of insiders that compose humankind will not incorporate outside ideas and attitudes into their philosophies, ideologies, national policies, or fraternal by-laws. Both Pirandello and Topor dealt with the same theme: the transformative dissolution of one's self-concept. The former writer ended his story with a portrait of a man who joyously transcends himself by becoming the "no one" in the novel's title. This resolution has already been deplored as an indecent imposture. An insider might say the same about the ending of Topor's novel, which implies a descent into nightmare that Trelkovsky never saw coming.

In the epilogue to The Tenant, it turns out that Trelkovsky survives what should have been his death-plunge. But he does so in a strange way. Coming to consciousness in a hospital bed—the same hospital bed where he stood, at the beginning of the story, looking over the former tenant of the apartment he hoped to rent, who also fell from that shabby room's window and was not expected to survive—the newly bedridden patient, like the one before, now sees who the visitor is. It is himself. Immobilized by his injuries and his face bandaged to expose only one eye and an opening for his mouth, he realizes that he has been metamorphosed into Simone Choule, the woman whose apartment he once coveted. Perhaps not for the first time, caught in a series of reincarnations, he has come to be at his own bedside. He emits a scream when he learns what has happened to him, the one in the bed, and what is going to happen to the one standing over him. Trelkovsky has now solved his (and Moscarda's) riddle: "At what precise moment does an individual cease to be the person he—and everyone else—believes himself to be?" Answer: when one's defenses, conjointly with those of this fabricated world, cease to hold up and break down into the overweening lies they have ever been and ever shall be. Because conscious life is not just onerous but is also, as every philosopher has clandestinely argued, refractory to comprehension, supernatural stories are most suitably fitted to relate horrors that are true to life and worse than death, those which almost everyone disarms their heads from imagining.

As neither Pirandello nor Topor underwent the transformative dissolution of the self-concept that is the common theme of their stories—it would be the highlight of each man's biography if they had—are they not equally disingenuous? That would turn upon which author's representation of the world you buy as more symbolically credible:

ending one's days in serene communion with all that makes up the world . . . or lying with a damaged body in a hospital bed, unable to do anything but scream at the sight of a clueless specter, the nobody who was you and has already died time and again in the dream or delirium that was your life. Whichever ending to these thematically analogous stories appears more faithful to human experience depends on who you are . . . or who you think you are, which amounts to the same thing. (This is a very Pirandellian theme.) While Topor's vision seems empirically more robust, Pirandello's is the crowd favorite. To receive the prize Pirandello awards Moscarda, if only for a moment before one's death, would make amends for a lifetime of afflictions. Grievously, just because something is a desideratum does not mean that believing in it will save you. But Pirandello and his kind want you, and themselves, to die trying. All Topor and his kind have to say is that you should always have your affairs in order, which may bring you some peace of mind if you are lying in a hospital bed . . . or only looking for a new apartment.

In conflict with Nobel Prize winners and other insiders, the literary outsider is prone to be non-idealistic. He will not stand in awe before the pyramids of the past, present, or future; he will not salute the flag of the status quo. The characters in his works will get nothing for their sufferings except the imprint of pain, that is, should they survive, since the outsider is not skittish about depicting death and doom as our natural birthright. Beckett's Malone may die in Malone Dies (1951), but the representative slogan of the Irish genius is "I can't go on, I'll go on." This is the theme of Beckett's novels and plays—going on—and his characters do it rather well. In the face of exhaustion, confusion, and debris, his casts of outcasts remain unstoppable. Cornered by his consciousness of the ever-flushing crapper of existence, however, the outsider resolves the theme of going on as follows: no one will go on, and in our inevitable going there is only gore without glory, madness and mutilation without deliverance. The outsider will not lap up the illusions of his neighbors, those insiders who either actively oppress him for not sharing in their delusions or undermine him with indifference. Nevertheless, the outsider may still endure as amusing freak with a niche audience. How else can one explain the shadowy careers of a Zapffe or a Topor?

Among commentators on horror, consideration has been given to the question of whether or not this popular genre is by nature conservative, a form created by and for insiders. Naturally, mass-market novels and movies are under duress to follow the orthodoxies of their society and the entertainment industry. These powers forbid the peddling of items that would depress a paying customer. This is a rule of popular culture and its attendant economics, which enforce a conservative outlook. Obviously, the word "conservative" is here being used in a sociological rather than a political sense. Every society must be conservative if it wants to stay in business, and all but the most marginal writers obey this law of survival. For his short novel The Stranger (1942) and other works in which he publicized the absurdity of human life, Albert Camus may have seemed a pernicious bohemian or an anarcho-nihilist to the shopkeepers and salesmen of the state. But to any outsider he was only preaching the party line of his or any other time: "We must content ourselves with all that is the status in quo for the sake of the future." This is more or less

the philosophy behind Camus' essay The Myth of Sisyphus. We should not be astonished, then, that Camus was a recipient of the Nobel Prize.

For the record, the full statement of what qualifies a writer to win the Nobel Prize is the production of "the most outstanding work of an idealistic tendency." Do The Tenant and Topor's other writings make for "outstanding work"? They may for some and they may not for others, readers' tastes being a funny thing. But they damn well do not if you are one of the insiders, who are not gung-ho for a literary artist, even those writing in the horror genre, to resolve their themes in a pessimistic, nihilistic, and defeatist vein. Is it so absurd to think that an art form denominated as "horror" should do anything else? Ask Edgar Allan Poe, Ambrose Bierce, Arthur Machen, M. R. James, H. P. Lovecraft, and any other writer whose works are the bedrock of horror literature.

CHARACTERS

Life on earth had been percolating for billions of years before human beings became the latest comers to the festivities of the organic. This fact has raised questions in our heads that called forth two types of answers, one mythological and the other scientific. Either we were created by a superior entity or we just "happened" as part of a sequence of events extrinsic to the appearance of H. sapiens. It does not particularly matter toward which explanation one's head may list; some have even adopted both without becoming flustered or conflicted. What does matter are these words from Cioran's essay "The Undelivered": "The more we consider the Buddha's last exhortation, 'Death is inherent in all created things; labor ceaselessly for your salvation,' the more we are troubled by the impossibility of feeling ourselves as an aggregate, a transitory if not fortuitous convergence of elements." While Thomas Metzinger addresses the science behind this practical impossibility in Being No One, what use is it to know why you are an illusory self, an obstinately believable character, if no remedy exists for your condition? But though we may be only make-pretend beings, fly-by-night ephemerids of eternity, we can still establish a pecking order in the unreal. To compensate us for being nobodies without a diplomatic bag or a self to stash inside it, we may lord it over characters in fiction. With some experimental exceptions, fictional characters do not display any awareness that they are just paper people, odds and ends of a human being held together by words, absolute nothings that exist only in someone's imagination—first that of a writer and, later, that of a reader. "Why should it be so crucial," one might ask, "that characters in a work of fiction believe that they are real and never become enlightened as to their true status in the imaginary?" More to the point, why must we believe that they believe in the lie of their character? To this query there is only one response: because their whole-cloth nature reinforces the legitimacy of our perception that we are really real, or as real as things get.² As long as they are not aware of what they are, the undergirding of our grand illusion—selfhood—is secure. They exist only in a story, giving us the superior position of beings who serve as the models for their fabrication. This envelopment of one reality by another is redolent of Russian nesting dolls, wherein smaller dolls are inset beneath the shell of larger dolls. We are the big doll that has the others inside it, the mother doll gravid with copies of itself. This shell game is made both possible and necessary by our consciousness.

If no solid conclusions ever come forward on the why, what, and how of consciousness, one thing is well known: it is the cause of our greatest misgivings. Among these is the horror that we are only as real as we imagine ourselves to be. In the course of our disillusionments, we have made the admission that we are not entirely segregated from the animate and inanimate world in which we walk. But we must stop short of any tidings that would turn us into talking trees or stones that dream. That would be to skyrocket disillusionment to the highest power, leaving us without a particle of our delusional selves. Thus, to ensure that we will not get lost in the scenery around us, and to advance ourselves to center stage, we have invented a hierarchy of players among whom we are of the highest order within the earthly domain. This existential jugglery can have eerie consequences. One is that even the Creators (Supreme Beings) we create, and who do us the favor of creating us in return, serve a de facto role as characters inferior to ourselves, since they exist only in stories. We say that they are superior beings, but this is only part of the confidence game of fiction: we must believe that they are the absolute reality if their story is to be convincing because Creators cannot write themselves into existence and the only words they speak are those which we put into their mouths. You could search every inch of the universe and not ferret out a single Creator.³ Ask a Christian theologian, who will tell you that his god exists outside of space-time and would not be caught dead hanging from a cross without a resurrection and ascension as part of the deal.

Outside the pages written by the hand of humanity, Creators do not make personal appearances, even to those who believe in them (not counting stories and hallucinations). They are no-shows at the party, where the other guests can only burble rumors about what they are really like. A Creator may be portrayed in a book as omniscient, but, all told, these characters do not outpace the knowledge and intelligence of their creators. (Writers cannot dream up characters smarter than themselves, but they can make them seem that way.) From the wallflower Brahma to the lame-brained Yahweh to a menagerie of prime movers who spawned the earth and its denizens through unreasoning verve or groaning defecation, Creators come off as a rather sorry bunch. Their products are so shoddy that they are constantly dying out or blowing up or breaking apart right out of the box. And their antics remind one of toddlers who are playing with their toys one moment and smashing them the next. For pure brainpower, Creators are unqualified to carry the deerstalker hat of Sherlock Holmes, a construct that outshines any star set to explode in this spilt-milk of a universe.⁴ Nature herself began as a fictional character who was superior, which is to say inferior, to us. Later in the narrative of her adventures, she was reduced to playing a supporting role to the gods. Most recently, nature has been busted down to the rank of a concept in the history of human imagination. Not the first to suffer this fate, she was preceded by the older, less credible divinities of world mythology, the ones who long ago lost their eminence and devolved into apparitions of a minor symbology. No one except characters in horror stories goes into conniptions of panic at the idea of the Great God Pan, not even pantheists.

As multitudinous beholders of Christendom have noted, the character we have been most enraptured with creating and recreating is not God but his antagonist Lucifer. The former has no shape, no definite features, and has been idle or unresponsive for thousands of years. The latter has been vividly drawn in literature and dramatized on stage, screen, and

television. His name and image have been licensed to makers of household products. He is alive and among us; he is mobilized. The Other is long past His prime, a stiff who, even in the form He borrowed from us, has lost all dynamism. Perhaps He is rehearsing for an apocalypse that is ever being moved back by those to whom He speaks on the sly. During His active years, as chronicled in the Old Testament, He could not get His rules and regulations taken seriously. Almost none of His commands and commandments were followed except by certain people, God knows why. Perhaps he did not make much of an impression because he farmed out His ultimatums to intermediaries such as Elijah and Jeremiah, whose words were laughed off before He choked off the laughter by doing what he does best—execute His doubters. Even when God spoke in His own voice, He was not always forthcoming in making the consequences of disobedience to Him known to those whom he liked to order about, beginning with Adam and Eve. Patsies in paradise, their compliance with the Almighty's orders to eat from one tree and not some other would have been the kiss of death for humanity. (If the answer is "humanity," the question must be, "What two-bit vaudeville act got its start either in a bath of one-celled organisms or through the offices of famed talent agent God the Father?") As luck would have it, Adam and Eve could no more choose not to do what they did than they could choose not to choose not to choose. . . . And their Master was no help, choosing to keep His own counsel about the booby traps he had strung between the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. After they tripped the wire, He had his excuse to throw the recalcitrant twosome out on their ear from Eden, so that they might become the first family of a race of inbreds. As fall guys go, so they went. Lucifer, of course, had inside information, being a longtime acquaintance of the Creator and knowing full well what He was capable of. When paradise was lost, those two people in the Garden of Eden played second fiddle to the Tempter, who also upstaged his former boss and took over the puppet show. It is Lucifer, rather than the Elohim—in singular, plural, or Trinitarian format—who would sustain us, or rather sustain our imagination of ourselves. The Gnostics' biggest mistake was their attempt to rehabilitate this figure as one of truth and knowledge in opposition to the Old Testament imposter, whom they disparaged as an evil demiurge. Lucifer endears himself to us only as the Lord of Lies, for in this role he is most convincing as a character, which is to say, as a fiction that has been so fully realized that he misguides us with a false feeling of our own reality because we are the ones who made him: he is subordinate to us, especially in the art of lying. For the acephalics among us who have said that the Devil's greatest trick was convincing the world that he did not exist, it must be said back: if he did not exist, then neither would we.

God may have created humanity in his image, as the story goes, but we created the Evil One in ours. In a universe that was already rife with built-in torments, Lucifer, following our lead, chose to complement this standard hell with an optional one of his own making. God was long gone before Nietzsche made his death certificate into a slogan, but no one has yet written the obituary of the Devil. He must endure to represent us to ourselves as the fiendish miscreations of this world—so tortured, so deceiving, so real. He is the true hero of the race, and as long as we keep him breathing, as long as we outrank him and any other beasts of our invention, then we are the immortal, the deathless, the superior, if not literally then at least in literature. The hope of answering to our satisfaction whether or not we exist as selves is a fruitless one. Patterning ourselves after Lucifer, we spurn the

self, the selfless, and any heaven that may be real. Instead, we act out a destiny with a beginning, middle, and an end and inhabit a hell in which we are the regnant characters.

PLOT

In his Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational (1917), the German theologian Rudolph Otto describes an encounter with the “numinous,” the wholly Other (in other words, God) as a mysterium tremendum et fascinans (“a terrifying and fascinating mystery”). Such experiences are uncommon outside the lives of religious mystics, who may be terrified by their supernatural assignations but are never undone by them. For them, the supernatural is a terror of the divine, not a demonic horror. And it is the absolute reality. After conjuring up the wholly Other through prayer and meditation, these cultists of the sacred feel themselves to be nothing in its presence, only a bit of crud stuck to the shoe of the numinous. Eventually, according to Otto, they make common cause with the numinous and are able to feel good about themselves. On Otto’s say-so, these experiences are what the supernatural is about: any others, including those evoked by the plots of supernatural horror stories, are primitive or perverted. What else can a theologian say? What other kind of supernatural story would he have to tell? While The Idea of the Holy has some thrilling moments when things are touch and go, the ending is all blessedness and no harm done. But this is not what readers expect when the supernatural is the featured element. They expect death, good or not so good, and will feel swindled if they do not get it. Because death is what really terrifies and fascinates them. In the midst of their lives, they are deep in death . . . and they know it. They do not know the numinous, which hangs back from life and welcomes very few into its midst. Why this should be the way things are is the real mystery.

The context of Otto’s tract is the nature and origins of religion. Ghost-chasers and paranormal investigators have written with as much conviction and hearsay evidence about their own hobby-horse; they, too, have tales to tell of the terrifying and fascinating, as if anyone could have a monopoly on these emotions or reserve their copyright for true believers only. The supernatural is in public domain, and, whatever the ontological angle, it is packaged with plots that are missing from the natural world. When we and our prototypes were part of that world, our lives had about as much plot to them as those of the birds and the bees. We had no heads for stories about anything beyond our senses. As our heads began to grow, we also grew away from the natural. Our bodies stayed behind, but our minds searched for stories with a better plot than survival, procreation, and death as such, without narrative embellishments. But these stories could not be set in the natural world, where there are no stories—where things just happen willy-nilly and events have no meaning outside of practicality. These stories had to have plots at a distance from biology.

Say what we like, we do not believe ourselves to be just organisms. Ask any atheistic biologist in his home-sweet-home if he thinks of himself and his wife and kids in the same way he does the animals he left back in the lab. That we are critters is a verdict decided on a technicality. What we see in our mirrors are human beings, and what we need in our diet is the sustenance of stories telling us that we are more than the sum of

our creaturely parts. And our supply of this provender comes from only one source—our consciousness, which dramatizes survival into storied conflicts between humans and humans (less often between humans and nature) and tricks up procreation into tales of courtly love, bedroom farces, and romantic fictions with or without laughs. But such stories are distanced just so far from nature. Have a good look at narratives of physical or psychological conflict. Are they really so removed from survival in the natural kingdom? No, they are not. They are still nature, red in tooth and claw. Bedecked by our consciousness and its illusions to seem humanized, our war stories, street stories, success stories, and other bio-dramas are not qualitatively different from their analogues in the wilderness. The same goes for romance yarns, those dolled-up variations on mating rituals as seen in nature documentaries. They are not detached from the procreative dog and pony show as observed by zoologists and would be dramatically senseless without a sexual climax as their central motive. Properly considered, they are an ornate pornography, with oft-repeated plots having their only denouement in a release of biological tension and their falling action in what cinematic pornographers term a “money shot,” which in conventional filmic or fictional products is replaced by a kiss or a marriage by way of consummating the piece.

As survivors and procreators, we compose stories which are set at a distance from nature but which are not at their root dissimilar from its habitual behaviors. However—and this is one pregnant “however”—as beings who will die and who know they will die, we are indisputably dissociated from the natural world, thrown out on our ear from nature’s home. We may isolate this awareness, distract ourselves from it, weigh anchor away from its shores, and sublimate it as a subject for our stories, but at no time and in no place are we protected from being touched on the shoulder and reminded, “You’re going to die, you know.” However we have tried to ignore it or transform it into benign shapes, consciousness haunts us with this knowledge. Our heads were baptized in the font of death; they are drenched with the horror of our moribundity.

Death—do we really believe it is part of the order of our lives? We say that we do. But when it becomes lucent to our imagination, how natural does it feel? Death is not like survival and procreation, which almost no one seems to mind very much. It is more like a visitation from another world, one to which we are connected by our consciousness. No consciousness, no death. No death, no uniquely human stories—their value dribbling backward from the end, with a beginning and a middle that is headed nowhere besides endness, deadness. Animal stories of survival and procreation have no comparable structure because animals have no consciousness of death . . . and without consciousness of death there can be no story to come to an end. Not all plots end in death, only those which walk a character right to the end, just as every plot in real life does. When the end is revealed, the story is over. If we could be conscious of the way each of our stories will end, that would be the end the story. That would be the end of us. Without this knowledge, we can keep going, because we do not know how or when our story will end. We remain in suspense about these details. Who could live through a story whose end they knew in advance—not in a general sense but as to the how and when? Who could produce another person whose ending they knew to its closing excruciations? Such a plot would decompose before it got going. One cannot begin a story at its end and go

backwards, not a real-life story. It would lose what little value it had. It would become a nightmare, a story that stayed in one place, a real horror tale about a self-conscious nothing stagnating at the end, a puppet dancing in its own death. There could be no build up, nothing to distract one from the death at the end of all life stories. To know the how and the when of the ending makes all plot impossible. But everyone knows what is going to happen at the end. Everyone is conscious of that. We just do not know what it will be like when what is going to happen actually happens. One would think that would be enough to spoil the story, knowing what is going to happen—that no one is going to make it through. Somehow, though, it does not spoil the story. Our heads have taken care of that. They have thought a thousand different endings, or not thought about the ending at all. Yet when it comes, it comes. Nothing will turn away that visitor. After being long refused admittance into our lives, death materializes on our doorstep and begins pounding to be let in. Now everything quivers with an aura of something unseen, and shapes begin to form just out of sight. As consciousness surges, the pieces fall together into patterns that are not good to know. Being alive is all right, or so most of us say. But when death walks through the door, nothing is all right. It is all wrong. We are seized by a supernatural stage fright, as though we had been invited to speak in the dark to an audience whose faces we cannot, and do not want, to see or be seen by. Death is something that, deep down, we believe should not be. That is its terror and its fascination.

Without death, no story of supernatural horror would ever have been written. Apart from human mortality, there is also the death of sanity, identity, ideals, and hand-me-down conceptions about the universe and everything in it. Death is accepted in horror stories because a plot that did not arouse its terrors—in a fictional world, that is—would be a forgettable dud. Real life also offers these sensations, but morgues and mausoleum chambers are abysmal diversions, though we may avert our minds from reflecting on what puts us in these places. Being alive is supposed to be all right, but not when you are forced to consider the alternative. (“I think, therefore I will die, I will die, die, die.”) To our consciousness, death means that something has begun to function in an unfortunate way, something has failed, something has gone off course. To give a relatively prosaic example, we might consider the plot of a traffic accident, a mischance that is commonly experienced as a dreamlike ramble with unforeseen stops along the way. You may be traveling on slippery roads when, without warning, your vehicle begin sliding across several lanes of oncoming traffic. You know in principle that such things can happen. They may even have happened to you on a prior occasion. You know that they happen to other people all the time. Nevertheless, this accident was not in your plans, which is why it is called an accident. It seems a mistake, even if it may be explained by a cause-and-effect confluence of circumstances. But you had an idea of how things were supposed to be that day, as you do every day, and spinning out of control in your car while others try to circumvent a metal-crunching collision with you, perhaps unsuccessfully, was not part of your schedule. One second ago you had a firm grip on things, but now you are careening toward who knows where. You are not filled with horror, not yet, as you career along the pavement that is slick with rain or snow glistening in the moonlight, the wind howling and shadows scattering. At this point, everything is all strangeness. You have been taken to a different place from where you were, and you are no longer in control. Then it begins. This can’t be happening, you think—if you can think at all, if you are

anything more than just a knot of panic. In fact, anything could happen now. This is the whispering undercurrent that creeps into your thoughts: nothing is safe and nothing is off limits. All of a sudden something was set in motion that changed everything. What was not meant to be, at least according to your deluded conception of life, has descended upon you. Of course, these things happen, as everyone knows. They have always happened and always will happen. They are part of the natural order of things. But this is not how we would have it. This is not how we think things should be for us. Confusion now reigns between what we believe should be and should not be; and it is on this confusion, we remember, that all supernatural horror depends.

Might we have avoided this confusion, this special horror, by warding off any belief in what should be and what should not be, by believing only in what is? No, we could not. We were doomed to this belief and to the confusion that, at certain times, emerged from it. What doomed us, glaringly enough, was consciousness—that which should not be yet had become . . . the primeval confusion. It was consciousness that awoke us from our slumber in the natural. But we still like to think that we know the difference between what is natural and what is not. We like to think that, whatever dissimilarities exist between us and every other living thing, we are not in essence wholly alienated from them. Perhaps there is something a little unnatural about us, but nothing too far gone from nature. We are not perverted organisms who frequent haunts on the other side of the unreal. We do have a sense of the supernatural and its horror, this is true. But we try as hard as we can to eject this confusion born of consciousness out of our heads. There are certain times, admittedly, when this special horror takes possession of us, when our belief in what should be and what should not be comes up and clashes like two worlds within us. No other life-forms know they are alive, nor can imagine what death might be like. This is our curse alone. Without it, we would never have withdrawn as far as we have from the natural—so far and for so long that it is a relief to say what we have been trying with all of our might not to say: We have never been denizens of the natural world. Even as we survived and procreated there, we knew something that other creatures did not. And anyone can guess what that something was: that we would die. Having this knowledge, we could never be at home in nature. As beings with consciousness, we were delivered into another world—the one that is not natural. All around us were natural habitats, but within our every atom was the chill of the unknown, the uncanny, the unearthly, and even the terrible and fascinating mystery of the holy. Simply put: we are not from here. We move among living things, all those natural puppets with nothing in their heads. But our heads dwell in another place, a world apart where all the puppets are dead in the midst of life. We are those puppets, those crazed mimics that prowl about for a peace that will never be theirs. We are the undead who cannot live with what we know and are afraid of what we do not know. And the medium in which we circulate is that of the supernatural, the special horror of those who believe in what should be and should not be. This is the domain where we secretly exist and inwardly rave with an insanity on the level of metaphysics, fracturing creation and breaking the laws of life. From across an unseen divide, we bring the supernatural into all that is manifest. We walk alone as beings that are not as we seem, strange even to ourselves. Our occurrence was an aberration on this earth. Even as we survive and reproduce, we know we are dying by degrees in the darkest corners of existence. No other things around us have this

supernatural sight, nor would choose it if they could. These skeletons of ours—when will they come out and show themselves? They rattle inside us, dancing toward death. How long will they last before their burial or burning? Time breezes by with such haste. Is the child in that old photograph really an erstwhile version of you, your little hand waving hello or farewell? The face of that child is not the one you now see in the rearview mirror of your skidding car. That child is now disappearing into the darkness behind you, before you, around you. The child is waving and smiling and fading. Bye-bye. Then another face appears beside you. The face is smiling, but too much to be real. The scene shifts moment by moment. Places, people, and things appear and disappear. You appeared as others had expected but not as you chose. You will disappear as if you had never been, having taken your turn in this world. You always told yourself that this was the natural way of things, something you could live with, as if you belonged only to nature . . . MALIGNANTLY USELESS nature, which coughed you up like a little phlegm from its great lungs. Yet all the while the supernatural cleaved to you, working its oddities into your life and waiting for death to begin beating on your door. It has not come to save you, but to bring you into its horror. Perhaps you expected to make it through this horror that sat like a gargoyle upon your life. Now you find there is no way through. The days pass by, each one strangling you a little more with its horror. Incantations are spoken all around. They have lost their power. The living and the dead jabber inside you. You cannot understand them. Dreams become more lustrous than memories. Darkness is shoveled over dreams. What is this life! you cry out. Only silence answers, and it is eloquent. Shining eyes open in the darkness, the eyes of that face, smiling too much and too long. Without a word, that smile coerces from you an old question: Was it all so useless? The smile pushes up at its edges, too rigid to be real. You cannot look away as it widens past all natural proportion. There is nothing left but that big smile. It is the last thing you see: a great gaping mouth like the entrance to a carnival ride. Then: the sense of being swallowed. That is the story; that is the plot of our lives.

ENDINGS

It would be as facile to believe that Zapffe was wrong as it would be to believe that he was right. If his analysis of human behavior and consciousness appears secure within itself, so do other theorems and formulas that have been argued or overturned. Nothing means any more than one wants or needs it to mean. Was Zapffe's Last Messiah closer to the truth because he called for the extinction of humankind? Was he any less a thing that believed it could choose to choose? Whether we are sovereign or enslaved in our being, what of it? Our species would still look to the future and see no need to abdicate its puppet dance of replication in a puppet universe where the strings pull themselves. What a laugh that we would do anything else, or could do anything else. That we might be only self-conscious nothings would not really be a secret too terrible to know—a paradox and a horror . . . the insufferable condition of a planet of puppets that are aware they will die, shadows without selves enshrouding the earth, puppet-heads bobbing in the wind and disappearing into a dark sky like lost balloons. If that is the way things are, go shout it from the rooftops and see where it gets you.

Being somebody is rough, but being nobody is out of the question. We must be happy, we must imagine Sisyphus to be happy, we must believe because it is absurd to believe.

Day by day, in every way, we are getting better and better. Vital fictions for vital persons. They shoot horses, don't they? But as for shooting ourselves—ask Gloria Beatty, ask Michelstaedter, ask Mainländer, ask Weininger, ask Hemingway. But do not ask Jean Améry, who made his exit with a drug overdose. He survived Auschwitz, but he did not survive his survival. No one does. With our progenitors and the world behind us, we will never hold this life and its horror to be **MALIGNANTLY USELESS**. Almost nobody declares that an ancestral curse contaminates us in utero and pollutes our existence. Doctors do not weep in the delivery room, or not often. They do not lower their heads and say, “The stopwatch has started.” The infant may cry, if things went right. But time will dry its eyes; time will take care of it. Time will take care of everything that is and everything to come. Then all will be as it was before we took our place in this place. Human life: it does mean something, but not so that it might as well mean nothing. So be it.

There will come a day for each of us—and then for all of us—when the future will be done with. Until then, humanity will acclimate itself to every new horror that comes knocking, as it has done from the very beginning. It will go on and on until it stops. And the horror will go on, as day follows day and generations fall into the future like so many bodies into open graves. The horror handed down to us will be handed down to others while the clock is still ticking. Could it be possible that we all deserve to die, and to die out? But our heads are not obsessed by such questions. To ask them is not in our interest . . . or what we think is our interest, which amounts to the same thing. And to answer them hand on heart and not with our heads in the sand could put an end to the conspiracy against the human race. But that will never happen. Ask anybody.

NOTES

1. Hemingway thought Pío Baroja, a Basque writer whose works are of a pessimistic, cynical, and atheist tendency, was more worthy of the Nobel than he was and visited him in the hospital to tell him so as the author of the 1911 novel The Tree of Knowledge, a meditation on the uselessness of both knowledge and life, lay dying. Some years later, as we all know, Hemingway committed suicide, his second attempt, using a shotgun. Depression and suicide are tragic themes running throughout the saga of the Hemingway family before, during, and after its most illustrious member took his own life.
2. This contention may seem counterintuitive, since much of the distraction-value of reading fiction stems from the reader's acceptance of the characters in a narrative as more lifelike than many of the persons in their lives and certainly more so than most of humanity past and present. However, since “actual persons” are here considered only as fictions (selves), the distinction is between competing realms of unreality, a situation that is abetted by a fiction reader's embracing the substance of beings constituted of words on a page, which would be madness without an underlying recognition on the part of readers that the substantiality of their own world will never be eclipsed by that of the story in which they are “lost.” A reader must take comfort, as counterintuitive as it may seem, in the sense of her reality being real and that of the characters in a narrative being unreal.

The alternative would be an experience of anxiety of the kind we know at those times when we become conscious we will die, which negates any reality we ever fastened to ourselves.

3. The reason that people believe in Creators is something they are happy to admit: because certain books tell them so. This is the default position for all theists, whether they are pedestrian titlers or top-notch theologians, whose theories of God must go back to books. What they believe, then, is that those who wrote the books about a supernatural being somehow had inside dope to which they, as readers of these books, are not privy. It works that same way with popular narratives of any type. The task for writers of widely read books is to prove that they know more than their readers about the world and its workings. By and large, writers do have more facts at their fingertips because that is part of their skill-set. And if they are not knowledgeable in some specialized area, they may research a subject to garner more information about it than that of the average reader, which is no Herculean labor since people have just so much spare time and do not fact-check an author's research—they only gorge themselves on it for the sake of being entertained. The more recondite and removed from a reader's life the doings within a book appear to be, the more likely the inexperienced reader is to believe in its truth. If a reader happens to know more than the author about a subject, then the game is over and the book is tossed aside. A more lowly method for taking readers for a ride may be sampled in books of self-help, inspiration, or motivation, the pith of which is to bear witness that "It happened for me. It can happen for you. You can become rich. You can become happy. Aliens have invaded your body but you will become rich and happy once we have audited them from your system. You live in a world created by a loving god and have an immortal soul." All that is required for this scam to work is a reader's desire to believe the persons making these claims. Need it be said that myriads of readers will line up if the line they are being handed is scandalously pleasing to their eyes and ears? Anyone who is not willing to exceed the bounds of seamliness and good sense (and do it with a straight face) or to deliver nothing but good news to the downhearted will be obscurities in the above-named genres. The least scent of a negative word will be met with disbelief or inattention. Sometimes it does not matter what you say but how you say it. This is another method to keep in mind. Imagine a disheveled person roaming the streets with a sign that reads "The end is near. Prepare yourself." Offering a prevision or opinion unwelcome by all, this individual will be shouldered aside by people shaking their heads, rolling their eyes, and snorting in disgust. Now imagine a well-dressed huckster on television who says, "Praise be, we are at the end of days. Soon we will be together in paradise. I've got the spirit in me. I've got Christ on a cracker. Send contributions to the address on your screen." By generating a positive atmosphere and a vision of good times beyond the end times, a televangelist pig will receive tax-free money by the bagful. Yet whether there is a claim to rendering actual facts—the class of communication under which fall such genres as gossip, history, and religious narratives—or a frank admission that one is producing a wholesale yarn, the creation and consumption of stories is apparently a need endemic to the fairgrounds of the human freak show. Born of consciousness and the artifact of language, storytelling in some form will never saturate its market. Those who are not in it for the money or the glory are nonetheless practitioners in this field: we can hardly open our mouths without telling a tale. In every society, storytelling is compulsory and addictive. We are coaxed into its practice every day of our lives. What is the first question posed upon hearing of someone's suicide? Answer: "Was there a note?" We want the story. Acceptable or not, this appetite of ours is unhindered by compunction or discretion and is insatiable. Fortunately, there will always be those eager to cater to this relentless desire. The most adept of them are

immortalized, so to speak, as gods of literature whose place in our world is regarded as being of the highest worth. What madman would derogate the addiction that is the mainstay of libraries, universities, and whole cultures? We are as incapable of impugning the need under discussion as we are of fairly examining the consciousness that lies beneath it and brings it forth as a scum-filled pond does a lotus flower. Ask any literary genius. A distinguished author once said in an interview that writers who ask themselves why they write are doomed. So are those who approach human consciousness as something it were better never to have been.

4. One gasps to hear scientists swooning over the universe or any part thereof like schoolgirls overheated by their first crush. (Albert Einstein, Karl Popper, Carl Sagan, Richard Dawkins, many others.) From the studies of Krafft-Ebbing onward, we know that it is possible to become excited about anything—from shins to shoes. But it would be nice if just one of these gushing eggheads would step back and, as a concession to objectivity, speak the truth: THERE IS NOTHING INATELY IMPRESSIVE ABOUT THE UNIVERSE OR ANYTHING IN IT.

END
