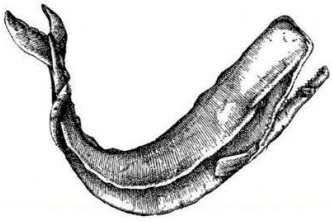
ALL THINGS SHINING

Reading the Western Classics to Find Meaning in a Secular Age



HUBERT DREYFUS and
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and
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Contents

If hereafter any highly cultured, poetical nation shall lure back to their birthright, the merry May-day gods of old; and livingly enthrone them again in the now egotistical sky; on the now unhaunted hill; then be sure, exalted to Jove's high seat, the great Sperm Whale shall lord it.

—HERMAN MELVILLE, from *Moby Dick*

A Note to the Reader

The world doesn't matter to us the way it used to. The intense and meaningful lives of Homer's Greeks, and the grand hierarchy of meaning that structured Dante's medieval Christian world, both stand in stark contrast to our secular age. The world used to be, in its various forms, a world of sacred, shining things. The shining things now seem far away. This book is intended to bring them close once more.

The issues motivating our story are philosophical and literary, and we come at them from our professional background in these disciplines. But *All Things Shining* is intended for a nonspecialist audience, and we hope it will speak to a wide range of people. Anyone who lives in the contemporary world has the background to read it, and anyone who hopes to enrich his or her life by experiencing it in the light of classic philosophical and literary works can hope to find something here. Anyone who wants to lure back the shining things, to uncover the wonder we were once capable of experiencing and to reveal a world that sometimes calls forth such a mood; anyone who is done with indecision and waiting, with expressionlessness and lostness and sadness and angst, and who is ready for whatever it is that comes next; anyone with hope instead of despair, or anyone with despair that they would like to leave behind, can find something worthwhile in the pages ahead. Or at least that is what we intend.

ALL THINGS SHINING

1

Our Contemporary Nihilism

It was warm on January 2, 2007. The newspapers reported that week that an optimistic cherry tree at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden had sprouted thousands of blossoms. Throughout the city people gathered spontaneously, drawn together by the hopeful atmosphere of spring.[1] On the subway platform at 137th and Broadway in Manhattan, however, just after lunchtime, the spring mood vanished in the blink of an eye. Cameron Hollopeter, a twenty-year-old film student, collapsed to the ground, his body overtaken by convulsions. According to newspaper reports at the time, a man and two women rushed to help him. As they did, Mr. Hollopeter managed to raise himself, but then stumbled to the platform edge and fell backward to the subway tracks below.[2]

What happened next both inspired and awed the spring-softened world of New York. Wesley Autrey, the fifty-year-old construction worker who initially rushed in to help Mr. Hollopeter, had left his two young daughters, Syshe, four, and Shuqui, six, farther back on the platform. When the headlights of the southbound No. 1 train appeared, however, he did not hesitate. Leaping onto the tracks he pressed his body down on top of Mr. Hollopeter, pushing him into a trough that was about a foot deep. The train's brakes shrieked before

them, but the train was unable to stop: five cars screeched over the top of the two men, missing them only by inches, before the train finally came to a halt. As they lay there beneath the train Mr. Autrey heard the screams of terrified onlookers above. "We're okay down here," he yelled, "but I've got two daughters up there. Let them know their father's okay." Cries of wonder and applause erupted from the platform. Later, after cutting the power, workers were able to extricate the two men from beneath the train. Except for the grease that smudged Mr. Autrey's blue knit cap, and some bumps and bruises, both men were unhurt.

The newspapers dubbed Wesley Autrey the "Subway Hero," and he enjoyed a well-deserved spate of popular press. Politicians rushed to be seen with him[3] and scientists and culture commentators debated whether his actions showed that he was "more hard-wired for heroism"[4] than the rest of us, or just that New York City has the same small-town values and caring attitude that you might expect to find in Dubuque.[5] A self-congratulatory public insisted that they too would have acted as Mr. Autrey had, and a solemn police chief advised that New Yorkers take Mr. Autrey's lead and act when people near them are in distress.[6] But throughout it all, Mr. Autrey himself insisted that he was no hero, had done nothing out of the ordinary. "I don't feel like I did something spectacular," Mr. Autrey said. "I just saw someone who needed help."[7]

Not only a hero, one might think, but humble too! And there is no doubt that Mr. Autrey's actions are indeed inspiring and heroic. But it may be that what comes across as humility is really just Mr. Autrey's honest report of his own experience. As it happens, although heroic actions like this are of course rare, it is not at all uncommon for the people who perform them to report that they were just doing what anybody in their situation would have. As Dr. Charles Goodstein, a clinical professor of psychiatry at New York University School of Medicine, said at the time:

> If you look at the history of most people who are designated heroes in the military and in other places, most of the time they say the reaction they had was without any mental preparation. It was spontaneous, it was without much consideration for the practicalities, the realities of the moment. I think they're honest when they say they don't think of themselves as heroes, they just reacted to something they saw as an emergency.[8]

The point here is not that anyone in a similar situation actually would do the same thing. There is ample evidence that most people would not. But perhaps what Mr. Autrey and others are honestly reporting is that when they are in the midst of acting heroically, they do not experience themselves as the source of their actions. Instead, the situation itself seems to call the action out of them, allowing for neither uncertainty nor hesitation. As Mr. Autrey said, "I just saw someone who needed help."

This sense of certainty is rare in the contemporary world. Indeed, modern life can seem to be defined by its opposite. An unrelenting flow of choices confronts us at nearly every moment of our lives, and most of us could admit to finding ourselves at least occasionally wavering. Far from being certain and unhesitating, our lives can at the extreme seem shot through with hesitation and indecision, culminating in choices finally made on the basis of nothing at all.

The truly extreme version of this, of course, is a parody. The paralyzing level of neurosis to which a Woody Allen character descends, for example, is fortunately not the lot of most. Or consider T. S. Eliot's famous version of this parodic extreme. J. Alfred Prufrock is so unable to take action that to him a single moment before tea consists of an almost immeasurable series of uncertainties:

Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea.

And yet if these are parodies, they resonate precisely because there is some recognizable element of truth in them. We are not constantly paralyzed by the choices that confront us, thank heavens, but we recognize their constant flow. And sometimes we wonder on what basis we should choose among them.

The choices that confront us are recognizable to all. Some of them seem trivial: Should I hit the snooze bar again? Is this shirt too wrinkled? Fries or a salad? And so on. But some of the choices we confront, perhaps even regularly, seem deeper and more troubling. It can feel as though they cut to the core of who we really are: Is it time to move on from this relationship? This job? Shall I pursue this opportunity or that one? Or none at all? Shall I align myself with this candidate, this co-worker, this social group? Shall I choose this part of the family over the rest? Many of our lives seem rife with these kinds of choices. We wonder on what basis to make them; we regret or rue or celebrate the ones we have made.

Many will point out that the freedom to choose is one of the great signs of progress in modern life. And there is certainly some truth to this. Those who live in abject poverty worry very little about which kind of food to eat precisely because there are no choices before them. The freedom to choose one career over another is not available when a poor economy has stripped all the jobs from the area. And yet the characteristic feature of the modern world is not just that many of us have a wider range of choices than ever before—choices about who to become, how to act, with whom to align ourselves. Rather, it is that when we find ourself confronted with these kinds of existential choices, we feel a lack of any genuine motivation to choose one over the others. Indeed, about our own lives, our own actions, it is rare to

find the kind of certainty that Wesley Autrey felt when confronted with a person in distress.

THERE ARE AT LEAST two kinds of people who manage to avoid the contemporary burden of choice, but in the wrong way. First, there is the man of self-confidence (usually it is a man). He plunges forth assuredly into every action he takes. He presents the world as obvious—"How could anyone wonder about the right move here?" he seems to ask—and in certain cases his assurance draws others along with him.

The man of self-confidence is often a compelling figure. Driven and focused, he is committed to bringing the world into line with his vision of how it should be. He may genuinely believe that his vision for the world is a good one, that the world will be a better place if he can shape it to his will, and sometimes he is capable of making changes for the better. But there is a danger to this attitude as well. Too often it turns out that the blustery self-confidence of such a person hides its own darker origins: it is really just arrogance combined with ambition, or worse yet a kind of self-delusion. As a result, when his plans fail, as they are bound to do at least some of the time, the self-confident man is often unable to recognize the failure. Stubbornly and inflexibly committed to his vision of how things ought to be, he has no ability to respond to the world as it actually is. The self-confident man believes that confidence is its own virtue; at the extreme, this kind of self-confidence can lead to fanaticism, as we'll see in the monomaniac Captain Ahab that Melville portrays in *Moby Dick.*

Perhaps a good example of such a willful character can be found in Orson Welles's portrayal of the newspaper magnate Charles Foster Kane in his great movie *Citizen Kane.* Welles's Kane is charming and powerful, and he demands total loyalty and obedience from those around him. He is astonishingly successful, enormously wealthy, and through the influence of his newspapers he claims even to be capable

of directing the course of history. As he says, in a famous line from the movie, "You provide the prose poems, I'll provide the war." Kane is a man who never looks back, who would never dream of a moment of weakness, and who despises those who are incapable of moving with enough alacrity and force to rebut his attacks. Eventually, however, his arrogance and his lust for power become his undoing. When an affair ruins both his marriage and his political aspirations, Kane's life spirals out of control. His dying word, "Rosebud," turns out to be a wistful reference to the only time in his life when he lived in poverty, when his self-confidence wasn't itself sufficient to ensure the satisfaction of his every desire.

Kane's self-confidence allows him to avoid the burden of choice. He is clear about his desires and forges ahead in fulfilling them. But the self-confidence upon which he bases his existence turns out to be empty, grounded in nothing but his own lust for power, and in the end it is insufficient soil for a worthwhile life. In contrast with this, a genuine confidence of the sort that seems to have directed Mr. Autrey's actions is driven not by some internal set of thoughts or desires, nor by a calculated set of plans or principles. Indeed, as in the case of Mr. Autrey, it is experienced as confidence drawn forth by something outside of oneself. It is grounded in the way things actually are, not in the confident person's perhaps self-serving characterization of them. The genuinely confident agent does not manufacture confidence, but receives it from the circumstances.

There is a second way to avoid the contemporary burden of choice, but it is at least as unattractive as the path of manufactured confidence. We are thinking here of the person who makes no choices about how to act because he is enslaved by obsessions, infatuations, or addictions. Such a person is, it is true, drawn by something beyond himself to act in the way he does. But there is a world of difference between him and the heroic Mr. Autrey.

The case of addiction is well known in the modern world, and there is no need to mention its various forms. As always, there are drugs, entertainments, and manifold other temptations in the face of which we can lose all sense of ourselves. But the peculiar phenomenon of addiction is highlighted well by a modern form unknown before the technological age: blogs and social networking sites. Many people have experienced the draw of these sites. At first there is an excitement associated with them. When one discovers the world of blogs, for example, one finally feels as though one can be up-to-the-minute with respect to every breaking event on the current scene. Suppose that politics is your bailiwick. All of a sudden it seems possible to keep up with precisely what is happening on Capitol Hill. Not just this week but this very moment; not just today but somewhere between the onset of one breath and the conclusion of the next. Similarly with social networking sites. Finally one feels completely in touch with all of those friends you didn't realize you had been missing for so long.

If one falls into the grip of these kinds of obsessions, its phenomenology has a sinking dimension. For one finds oneself constantly craving the newest, latest post, wondering what the most recent crisis or observation or tidbit could be. One cycles through the list of websites or friends waiting for the latest update, only to find that when it is completed one is cycling through the sequence once again, precisely as expectant and desiring as before. The craving for something new is constant and unceasing, and the latest post only serves to make you desire more. With this kind of addiction there is a clear sense of what one must do next. But the completion of the task fails entirely to satisfy the craving that set you on your way. By contrast with this, the heroic actor experiences a heightened sense of joy and fulfillment when a noble and worthy action draws him to its side.

The burden of choice is a peculiarly modern phenomenon. It proliferates in a world that no longer has any God or gods, nor even any sense of what is sacred and inviolable, to focus our understanding of what we are. What we have seen just now, though, is that not every

way of resolving choice is equal. Although willful self-confidence and addictive loss of control are both ways of shirking the burden—the first because it refuses to recognize alternatives and the second because it is incapable of doing so—neither of these conditions characterizes the experience of the unthinking heroic actor.

What can it be like to act with certainty in the way that Mr. Autrey did—to act but not experience oneself as the source of one's actions; to be drawn by a force outside oneself but not enslaved to it? In fact, although we do not pay attention to it, a mild version of this is familiar to us in everyday life. The morning commuter all of a sudden realizes that he has gotten on the bus, but doesn't remember doing so. The long-distance truck driver all of a sudden realizes that he has been driving for some miles without "paying attention." Stumbling home from a long day's work, the tired worker finds herself in a favorite chair, but then realizes that she never decided to sit there. Habitual actions of these sorts can occur "offline," as one might say, without the agent even noticing that she is performing them. And yet it is part of the habitual action that the person performing it can break in at any moment and resist. In some sense the habitual actor, like the heroic one, is neither willful agent nor unwilling slave.

But habitual action is not heroic. The difference is that whereas the habitual actor lacks a sense not only of himself but of his surroundings, the heroic actor by contrast has a heightened awareness of what the situation calls for.

This sense for what the situation demands is nothing like an objective awareness of what is happening. The other bystanders on the subway platform presumably saw *that* Mr. Hollopeter was in distress; in this sense they were good, objective witnesses to the event. Many of them presumably saw, in addition, *that* the situation called for some kind of action. Presumably many of them even felt an urge to act themselves. But they were not sufficiently motivated to act on his

behalf. Their experience allowed for hesitation; Mr. Autrey's did not.

It is hard to blame someone who responds in a nonheroic way to such a situation; most of us are familiar with their experience. Perhaps they thought desperately to themselves, "Oh my God! That poor man has fallen on the tracks—somebody do something!" They were not lacking empathy for the victim, we can assume, and indeed perhaps they felt strongly that something must be done to help him. But if we are to take Mr. Autrey at his word, then none of these desperate thoughts ran through his head, and he therefore never *decided* to do anything at all in response to them. Rather, it was Mr. Hollopeter's distress itself that drew him to act without hesitation. In this way his experience was different from that of people acting habitually with no experience of their surroundings at all. He differed from the bystanders at the scene as well, since the experience they had of the situation allowed them to wonder what must be done. By contrast with both of these, Mr. Autrey not only experienced his surroundings, he experienced them directly in terms of what they demanded from him.

This can sound like a bizarre phenomenon, and we admit that it is rather rare. In the extreme form, indeed, it is about as rare as heroic action itself. But if we pay attention we can find versions of it in our daily lives. Perhaps the most common version is found in the domain of sports. Indeed, some of our everyday locutions even emphasize this phenomenon. When someone is playing very well, for example, we can say that they are playing "out of their head"; they have left the domain of thought altogether, in other words, and are carried along by the flow and demands of the game. A master athlete at the top of his game has a heightened awareness of his surroundings not unlike what Mr. Autrey experienced.

One of the great descriptions of this kind of athletic mastery is found in John McPhee's *A Sense of Where You Are*.[9] McPhee's book profiles the college basketball career of Bill Bradley, whom he describes as perhaps the best college basketball player ever. Bradley went on, of course, to be a Rhodes scholar, a Hall of Fame basketball player

for the New York Knicks, and eventually a U.S. senator and presidential candidate. But McPhee's book is about Bradley's presence on the college court, and here he describes the phenomenon we are after.

One of the most impressive features of Bradley's game, according to McPhee, was his ability to be aware of everything that was going on in the game at once. He had this awareness without needing to look, as in the case of a certain shot he had perfected:

> The over-the-shoulder shot had no actual name. He tossed it, without looking, over his head and into the basket. There was no need to look, he explained, because "you develop a sense of where you are."[10]

This kind of vision for the court allowed Bradley to be aware of everything going on around him until the moment he let himself be drawn in directly by an opportunity in the game. As McPhee describes:

> His most remarkable natural gift, however, is his vision. During a game, Bradley's eyes are always a glaze of panoptic attention, for a basketball player needs to look at everything, focusing on nothing, until the last moment of commitment.[11]

The vision that is a "glaze of panoptic attention," in McPhee's delightful phrase, is precisely not the kind of awareness that the eyewitness has. It is attentive to opportunities for action, not to details of the scene. It is what allows a master player like Bradley to perform, in the biggest game of his career, against the top-ranked team in the nation, before thousands in Madison Square Garden, like this:

> Michigan played him straight, and he played Michigan into the floor. . . . He stole the ball, he went back door, he threw unbelievable passes. He reversed away from the best defenders in the Big Ten. He held his own man to one point. He played

> in the backcourt, in the post, and in the corners. . . . Once, he found himself in a corner of the court with two Michigan players, both taller than he, pressing in on him shoulder to shoulder. He parted them with two rapid fakes—a move of the ball and a move of his head—and leaped up between them to sink a twenty-two-foot jumper. The same two players soon cornered him again. The fakes were different the second time, but the result was the same. He took a long stride between them and went up into the air, drifting forward, as they collided behind him, and he hit a clean shot despite the drift. . . . [When he fouled out toward the end of the game, he had to watch the rest] from the bench. As he sat down, the twenty thousand spectators stood up and applauded him for some three minutes. It was, as sportswriters and the Garden management subsequently agreed, the most clamorous ovation ever given a basketball player, amateur or professional, in Madison Square Garden. . . . [D]uring the long applause the announcer on the Garden loudspeaker impulsively turned up the volume and said, "Bill Bradley, one of the greatest players ever to play in Madison Square Garden, scored forty-one points."[12]

Greatness of this sort is nearly mystical to apprehend. It is characterized by the kind of sustained responsiveness to the demands of the situation that the Subway Hero embodied when he leapt onto the tracks. It is unflinching, unhesitating, and unwavering, and it has these certain qualities precisely because the activity flows not *from* the agent but *through* him. As a spectator of heroic activity one has the sense of watching something nearly inevitable, as though it is ordained by some force beyond the mere whim of human self-assertion. Indeed, one indication of the similarity between Bradley and Autrey is the spontaneous eruption of applause that both performances elicited from witnesses to the events. It is clear to all those present that something superhuman has been achieved.

One name we have for the superhuman is the heroic, and there is a sense in which both Bradley and Autrey are properly considered heroes. There is an important difference between them, however. Bradley's activity, superhuman as it may have been, took place only in the context of the limited domain of basketball. Autrey's actions took place in the broader domain of life. But for the moment it is the similarity between the cases that we would like to emphasize. Both are at the pinnacle of human possibility precisely because they leave no room for the kind of human indecision that plagues us all.

THE BURDEN OF CHOICE, as we have called it, can seem like a necessary feature of human existence. Even if heroic actors such as Bradley and Autrey can escape it for moments, in certain circumstances, the broader existential form of this burden seems to weigh heavily upon all of us. In the most basic case it amounts to profound questions: How, given the kinds of beings that we are, is it possible to live a *meaningful* life? Or more particularly, where are we to find the significant differences among the possible actions in our lives? For it is these differences that provide a basis for making decisions about who we are to be or become. At a certain stage in life these questions can seem unavoidable. The college students we teach everyday, for example, cannot keep from asking them. When they wonder whether they want to become doctors or lawyers, investment bankers or philosophers, when they try to decide whether to major in this or that, when they ask themselves whether they want to advocate liberal or conservative political positions, or associate themselves with a place of worship, or remain faithful to their boyfriend or girlfriend back home—all of these questions ultimately seem to lead them back to the basic one: On what basis should I make this choice?

But it is not only the maturing adult who is confronted with these kinds of existential choices. Even if we are firm in our identities—father or mother, businessperson or software designer—even if we

have already made our political or religious commitments, we are always susceptible to good reasons for rescinding these commitments. And even if we were not so susceptible, the question of identity is never concluded. Feeling a certain commitment to my identity as the father of my son doesn't by itself tell me how to take up that role. The basic question always seems to be just around the corner: On what basis am I to make this choice? The heroic certainty of a Bradley or an Autrey seems a distant hope in this existential domain.

Although the burden of choice can seem inevitable, in fact it is unique to contemporary life. It is not just that in earlier epochs one knew on what basis one's most fundamental existential choices were made: it is that the existential questions didn't even make sense.

Consider the Middle Ages, for example. During this period in the Christian West a person's identity was determined by God. To say this is to take no stand on whether there actually was a God in the Middle Ages. The classic metaphysical arguments for the existence of God, or for the necessity of his various attributes, are irrelevant here. What matters instead is that in the Middle Ages people could not help but *experience themselves as* determined or created by God. Indeed, it was so much a part of the way they understood the world they lived in, so taken for granted by everything that made sense to them, that it was virtually inconceivable that one's identity might be determined in any other way. This was true, of course, about kings and queens. To say that they ruled by divine right, as was commonly understood in the Middle Ages, is to say that they were chosen specifically by God to be the rulers of society. But it was not only the kings and queens who were chosen by divine right: everyone else fell into a place in society according to the divine plan of God himself. Indeed, not just people but every item in creation had its place in the divine order, in the Great Chain of Being: kings above noblemen, noblemen above townspeople, all these above serfs, and so on, but also all people above all other animals, all animals above all inanimate objects, and all these, including people, below the angels and ultimately below

God. This order of things was not a *belief* that anyone argued for or a worldview that anyone proposed; it was simply taken for granted by everyone worth talking or listening to. Members of this society made sense of everything in terms of this fundamental idea—one could explain a victory in battle, for instance, or an untimely storm in terms of the will of God—but the idea that everything had its proper place in God's divine plan was not itself a *belief* one could accept or reject. It was an entire way of life.

The way of life of a culture is not an explicit set of beliefs held by the people living in it. It is much deeper than that. A person brought up in a culture learns its way of life the way he learns to speak in the language and with the accent of his family and peers. But a way of life is much broader than this. It involves a sense for how it is appropriate and inappropriate to act in each of the social situations one normally encounters; a familiarity with how to make sense of things and of how to act in the everyday world; and most general of all, a style, such as aggressive or nurturing, that governs the actions of the people in the culture although they are normally not aware of it. We can think of it as a cultural commitment that, to govern people's behavior, must remain in the background, unnoticed but pervasive and real. In the Medieval World, when this commitment involves a sense of God's divine plan, there is simply no question on what basis a person should choose who he is or is to become. For after all, that one *chooses* one's identity at all is inconceivable.

That is not to say that in the Middle Ages one never made any choices. One could always willfully turn away from God's plan and pursue a course that deviated from his desires. Or one could aim for the course of right action and fall short. In the terminology of medieval Christendom there were not only Saints but Sinners too, not only those who lived Virtuous lives but those who succumbed to the perilous attractions of Vice. Dante's *Inferno,* which we shall discuss in greater detail in chapter 5,[13] contains a large and informative discussion of the various ways a person of the Middle Ages could go

astray. (Dante wrote around 1300, at the height of the Late Middle Ages.) Despite their extraordinary variety, what is characteristic of all of Dante's sinners is that their actions involve deviations from or perversions of a path already understood to be laid out by God.

Consider a characteristic example. In the second circle of Hell Dante discovers Paolo and Francesca, two lovers who in life were overcome by their overwhelming desire for one another. After being caught together by Francesca's husband, who was also Paolo's brother, and killed by him for their adulterous affair, the two were condemned to spend eternity blown about by the tempestuous wind of their uncontrollable passion for one another. We shall consider this example again in our discussion of Dante later, but for the moment all we need to notice is the medieval conception of sin that it illustrates. Dante's presentation of the case makes it clear that there was one right path of action for Paolo and Francesca—to avoid the adulterous affair—and that their sin lay in succumbing to the attractions of Vice. It has always been difficult, in certain situations, to act in accord with the standards for living well—the Greek philosophers called this difficulty *akrasia,* or weakness of the will; it is the inability to do what we know to be the right thing. At least some of Dante's sinners are victims of this kind of incontinence.

But in the contemporary world we face a deeper and more difficult problem. It is not just that we know the course of right action and fail to pursue it; we often seem not to have any sense for what the standards of living a good life are in the first place. Or said another way, we seem to have no ground for choosing one course of action over any other.

Consider, by contrast with Paolo and Francesca, the more modern, nineteenth-century case of Emma Bovary. In Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* we are told the story of Emma, who is married to the boring and talentless country doctor Charles. To escape her superficial, banal, and empty life in the provinces, Emma has adulterous affairs and lives beyond her means. Things end up badly, of course, but even

so it is not obvious that Emma's adulterous affairs themselves are what was wrong. We have some sympathy with her desire to get more out of life, little sympathy for Charles and his empty mode of existence, and in some sense are meant to understand and endorse Emma's desire for escape. The lust for life that she exhibits seems admirable, and provides a creditable counterweight to the commitment her marriage engages her in.

Although in some general sense Emma's adulterous affairs share much with that of Paolo and Francesca, Flaubert's treatment of the situation could not differ more radically from Dante's. For Emma is presented by Flaubert as having been faced with the kind of existential question that Paolo and Francesca, as characterized by Dante, were not. The medieval couple *knew* that it was wrong to engage in an adulterous affair—there was no question about it; unfortunately, they couldn't resist the sinful passion of lust. Emma's situation is much more complicated. Do we really believe that she should stay with Charles? On the contrary, not only can we understand her desire to leave him, it seems at least possible that it could be for the best. Indeed, Charles himself recognizes her actions as admirable: he continues to idolize her after she dies, never criticizing her, and indeed he attempts to adopt her way of life. So the question of whether Emma's actions were admirable or not is a vexed one, and the confusion she felt about her course of action is supposed to be immediately recognizable to us. After all, she felt the burden of choice that nowadays seems so obvious to us all.

How did we get from the fixed certainty of Dante's world to the existential uncertainty of our own? The story is long and complicated, and this book is devoted to articulating the bones of that story. But it may help to get at least a brief sense for one of the major transition points, which occurred at the beginning of the seventeenth century, in what is known as the early modern period of the West.

By 1600 the Medieval World was breaking down. In particular, it was no longer possible to take it for granted that God's will structures the universe. Very few people at the time, if any, explicitly recognized this development. Practices that a whole culture takes for granted are extremely difficult to identify. But we can find the clues to this historical development throughout the literature and philosophy of the time. Let us take two examples.

First, Shakespeare himself seems to have been nearly obsessed with the breakdown of the divine order. Whether he knew it or not, this development motivates many of his plays. As a great and sensitive artist, Shakespeare seems intuitively to have sensed that the breakdown of the divine order was one of the world-historical issues of his day. Many of his most successful characters confront this modern development in one way or another. Consider Macbeth, for example. Here we find an individual who by his "o'ervaulting ambition" alone hopes to leap beyond his natural place in the divine order into a new and higher place as king. The very idea that one should, by one's own will and desire, transform the divine order of the universe would have been anathema to Dante in the world of the Middle Ages. Indeed, we shall see that the character whom Dante most associates with this kind of self-directed ambition is Satan himself, who attempts to substitute his own will for God's, and is banished to the bottom of Hell for the attempt. Far from condemning Macbeth's ambition, however, Shakespeare seems fascinated by the way it pulls our intuition in different directions. On the one hand, Macbeth is in some ways a sympathetic character: his ambition to improve his position in the world seems understandable even if his particular strategy for doing so does not. Indeed, it is not just that Macbeth is in fact a sympathetic character; the very success of the play absolutely depends on our finding him so. This is because the tragedy of the play cannot get a grip on us unless we are rooting for its main character to succeed; there is no tragedy in a purely evil character getting his due. Despite being in some way sympathetic, however, Macbeth is doomed to failure. For better or for

worse, the divine order is tenaciously resisting the rise of self-directed ambition. It is as if Shakespeare can see this ambition as a potentially admirable trait even though the world he lives in will not yet support this way of life. The divine order is tenaciously resisting the rise of self-directed ambition, for better or for worse. In other plays, such as *Troilus and Cressida,* the breakdown of the divine order is presented as comical at best, and very likely as unambiguously bad. In general, it seems Shakespeare can see that the way of life based on a divine plan is crumbling but he can't figure out exactly what to think about it.

Or consider the case of Hamlet. His famous soliloquy from Act III Scene 1, "To be or not to be, that is the question," takes on the fundamental issue of whether he should choose to live or choose to die. The very idea that he understands this as a choice open to him indicates that his culture no longer takes it for granted that God determines these fundamental facts of our existence. This is not to say, of course, that nobody ever contemplated suicide before Hamlet. But the cultural interpretation of what one is up to when one is contemplating such a thought is radically different for Hamlet than it would have been for a character of the Middle Ages. In the medieval tradition suicide is understood as an act of rebellion against God, an attempt to take over from God a decision that is rightfully his. (Indeed, Dante puts the suicides in the seventh of the nine circles of Hell, sitting right beside the blasphemers against God.) Once again, we find an act of rebellion of the same sort that Satan engaged in when he tried to organize a rebellion of the angels against the Lord. For Hamlet, by contrast, the thought that suicide would be an affront to God never seems to occur. The question is simply "whether 'tis *nobler in the mind* to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune / Or to take arms against a sea of troubles. / And by opposing, end them?" The question, in other words, is not whether it is an affront against God, and therefore obviously the wrong thing to do. The question is whether *it's a better decision*—"nobler in the mind"—to suffer or to commit suicide. God, or the understanding of God as the divine planner of the

universe, offers no help to Hamlet in considering this question. The breakdown of the divine order of the Middle Ages, in other words, has opened up the possibility for genuine existential questioning.

The freedom to choose who we are to be, however, comes with a heavy burden. For without God's divine plan to ground us, on the basis of what are we to make our existential choices? The desire for a fundamental ground, for some unshakeable conviction on the basis of which to build our understanding of ourselves and the universe, can be seen most clearly in the philosophical tradition.

René Descartes, surely the most important philosopher in the history of modern philosophy, was writing in France approximately one generation after Shakespeare wrote in England. (Descartes' most important works were written around 1630.) One of his main philosophical projects was to show that it is possible to know *for certain,* and *without any doubt at all,* the most basic things that we know. That there is an external world, for instance, or that people other than ourselves exist. It turns out to be very difficult to prove these things with absolute certainty. The characters in the movie *The Matrix,* for example, seem to be living lives just exactly like ours; it turns out, however, that although they are having the very same kinds of experiences that we all have, in their case there is no world at all of the sort they seem to be experiencing. The idea that the world is as it seems to be is a very basic idea. Descartes showed, however, 350 years before Hollywood, that it is very difficult to know this basic fact *without doubt.* But the idea that this is the kind of thing we could doubt at all, and the even more extreme idea that we should have to try to find out whether we could *know* this kind of fundamental thing *for certain,* is an idea that wouldn't occur to someone who lived in a world in which these kinds of questions don't really make sense. The Cartesian project itself would be understood as an act of hubris in the Middle Ages. The idea that we have to prove to ourselves that God *isn't* tricking us takes as a background assumption that, well, for all we know God *is* tricking us. But this kind of assumption doesn't even make sense in

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David Foster Wallace's Nihilism

Wonder is the feeling of a philosopher,
and philosophy begins in wonder.

—PLATO

David Foster Wallace was the greatest writer of his generation; perhaps the greatest mind altogether.[1] He wrote enormous, ambitious novels, stories, and essays that were dedicated to showing his readers how to live a meaningful life. "Fiction's about what it is to be a fucking human being," he once said. Good writing should help readers to "become less alone inside."[2]

David Foster Wallace hanged himself on September 12, 2008. He was forty-six years old.

What can we make of Wallace's suicide? Not much, probably. It is well known that he had suffered from depression for decades, that he had been treating his condition with the antidepressant medication Nardil for nearly twenty years, and that he had undergone many courses of electroconvulsive therapy, including fully a dozen during the months leading up to his death.[3] It is also well known that Wallace's final descent coincided with his attempt once and for all to wean himself from Nardil, the medication that James Wallace said "had allowed his son to be productive."[4] There is no doubt that there are

neurophysiological and neurochemical aspects to severe depression, and it seems natural to conclude that Wallace finally succumbed in the face of the biological odds.

And yet.

There is also some truth to the claim that Wallace's writing captured, and Wallace himself embodied, some of the prevailing moods of the modern age. His doorstop of a masterpiece, *Infinite Jest,* is a stylistic embodiment of modern self-consciousness. It is filled with paragraph-long sentences that are constantly undermining themselves, bringing their own premises into question, and then coming back ouroboros-like to eat their own tails. Many of these sentences are complemented by lengthy endnotes that continue the process, as if to say that this is the way we are aware of ourselves in the modern age: we say something, wonder about what we've said, unsay it, ask about it again, circle back to it from a different perspective, qualify it, unqualify it, and so on, footnoting our endnotes and endnoting our footnotes to infinity. We conclude, if at all, without resolution.

Even Wallace's relationships seem to have had this character. At the age of forty-two Wallace did finally marry a visual artist named Karen Green, and their marriage was by all accounts a happy one until his final year. But Wallace had many unsuccessful relationships before that, including a serious, and seriously volatile, relationship with the poet and memoirist Mary Karr.[5] Despite its volatility, or perhaps because of it, Karr was important enough to him that he tattooed a heart upon his arm with her name in it. When eventually, years later, he and Karen Green fell in love, this remnant presumably became something of an embarrassment. He tattooed a strikeout through Mary's name and an asterisk beneath the heart. Further down his arm he added another asterisk and Karen's name, "turning his arm," as D. T. Max writes, "into a living footnote."

Perhaps it's too obvious to recall Melville's tattooed native Queequeg here. But if Melville is right that we wear the sacred practices of our culture tattooed upon our body, as our argument shall claim, then

Wallace's life must be seen as a cautionary tale. What we hold sacred, he seems to be saying, is the ability to footnote our commitments—to qualify them, change them, and take them back. Our most sacred commitment, in other words, is the freedom to choose our commitments. And the freedom to unchoose them again, when that is what we choose to do.

Infinite Jest clocks in at a full 1,079 pages, including almost 100 pages of weighty endnotes, and it now stands as the principal contender for what serious literature can aspire to in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The novel takes on addiction, depression, consumerism, terrorism, and tennis academies, among many other characteristic late-twentieth-century problems. It is—both stylistically and substantively—a detailed and deeply perceptive attempt to say what it is to be a fucking human being in America at the turn of the millennium.

And what exactly is that like? "There's something particularly sad about it," Wallace said, in a 1996 interview with the online journal *Salon,*

> something that doesn't have very much to do with physical circumstances, or the economy, or any of the stuff that gets talked about in the news. It's more like a stomach-level sadness. I see it in myself and my friends in different ways. It manifests itself as a kind of lostness.

This lostness may simply have been the physiological depression that Wallace had battled his whole adult life. But there is another possibility too. Perhaps Wallace was not so much describing his own personal depression as he was describing aspects of the culture that that depression made him sensitive to. Aspects that others might well overlook, or cover up, or otherwise avoid—aspects of modern existence that we all live through but fail to see. Perhaps, in other words, his depression made him peculiarly sensitive to something that pervades the culture, something not personal and individual but public and shared. And

perhaps his job as a writer was to reveal that aspect of ourselves to us. That, at any rate, is how Wallace seems to have seen it:

> The sadness that the book is about, and that I was going through, was a real American type of sadness. I was white, upper-middle-class, obscenely well-educated, had had way more career success than I could have legitimately hoped for and was sort of adrift. A lot of my friends were the same way. Some of them were deeply into drugs, others were unbelievable workaholics. Some were going to singles bars every night. You could see it played out in 20 different ways, but it's the same thing.[6]

And later in the interview he talks about this sadness and lostness as a mood—an American mood—that results from the inability of our culture, or certain segments of our culture, to confront the deepest questions about who we are:

> I get the feeling that a lot of us, privileged Americans, as we enter our early 30s, have to find a way to put away childish things and confront stuff about spirituality and values.

There is no doubt, then, that underlying biological facts played an important role in Wallace's severe depression and ultimate suicide. But to the extent that his work captures something of the modern age—as its success must indicate—then perhaps the mood to which he was attuned is something more than a result of his personal physiological makeup. Perhaps it is an indication of our metaphysical makeup, of the way our age fails to allow us to tell a coherent story about the meanings of our lives. As Wallace told *Whiskey Island,* a literary magazine, in 1993, "This is a generation that has an inheritance of absolutely nothing as far as meaningful moral values."[7]

If Wallace is right about this, and if it is this cultural fact to which he was deeply sensitive, then his suicide is much more than the loss

of a single, talented individual. It is a warning that requires our most serious attention. It is, indeed, the proverbial canary in the coal mine of modern existence.

In the tidal wave of commentary devoted to Wallace's work, it is a fair bet that no serious person has considered its relation to that other canonical engagement with American culture: chick lit. Elizabeth Gilbert, arguably, is the reigning queen of this genre. Her 2006 memoir *Eat, Pray, Love* has over five million copies in print, and it spent more than a year as the number one bestseller on the *New York Times* Paperback Nonfiction list. The rising tide of Gilbert's fame has lifted even the pseudonymous characters in her story out of obscurity. Richard from Texas, for example, the drawling former junkie she meets at an ashram in India, has already appeared on *Oprah.* Twice.

Gilbert takes up the mantel of chick lit queen with some ambivalence. Uncertain what the genre consists of precisely, but certain that it is not meant to be a compliment, she chafes a bit at the description. Still, she accepts that there is something apropos about it as well.

Despite the almost unimaginable gulf between chick lit and the avant-garde, however, Gilbert's approach to writing is driven by the same kind of human ambition that motivated Wallace. "Writing has always been my particular way of translating life," she explains. "Of taking experiences out of the ephemeral and digesting them, making them real."[8] And as avant-garde as Wallace's work is, as postmodern and experimental and contemporary as the style and substance of his writing can be, he has a similar goal in mind. Like Gilbert, Wallace wants to unpack the world as it really is. "I've always thought of myself as a realist," he said in the *Salon* interview.

> The world that I live in consists of 250 advertisements a day and any number of unbelievably entertaining options . . . I use

and countless other testimonies from the early part of the twentieth century. No, what makes these contemporary authors worth reading instead is that they are trying to find a way into the light. In seeing how they fail, we will prepare ourselves to search for the sacred possibilities still alive in the modern world.

Wallace's final, unfinished masterpiece has at its center the deep spiritual struggle of a dedicated, nearly monastic group of IRS tax return examiners. Referred to as *The Pale King,* the project was increasingly unwieldy and had swelled to enormous proportions. Wallace complained of being unable to get its racing narrative under control. It's like "trying to carry a sheet of plywood in a windstorm," he moaned.[11] In a January 2006 email to his friend the author Jonathan Franzen, Wallace spoke of "many, many pages written, then either tossed or put in a sealed box."

> The whole thing is a tornado that won't hold still long enough for me to see what's useful and what isn't. I've brooded and brooded about all this till my brooder is sore.[12]

One problem with the narrative was structural. Wallace had deliberately hamstrung himself by choosing the most boring characters imaginable: people who sit for eight hours a day reviewing other people's tax returns. As Michael Pietsch, Wallace's friend and editor, points out, the author had "posed himself the task that is almost the opposite of how fiction works."[13] Normally driven by the directive to leave out the boring parts of life, Wallace's project, by contrast, was meant to focus on them.

But the structural problem was not arbitrary, either; indeed, in Wallace's view it seems to have been absolutely essential. The struggle of the IRS examiners was Wallace's own struggle with writing, and it was the struggle he saw at the center of modern existence as well.

In part, this was the struggle to focus on one's task despite the ever-present and constantly beckoning distractions from it that increasingly constitute the social world in which we live. As Wallace said in a 1997 interview with Charlie Rose, describing an upcoming sabbatical year:

> CR: And so what would you do with that year?
> DFW: If past experience holds true I will probably write an hour a day and spend eight hours a day on biting my knuckle and worrying about not writing.
> CR: Worrying about not writing. Not worrying about what to write?
> DFW: Right. Worrying about not writing.[14]

The central challenge of the contemporary world, Wallace seems to think, is not just that we don't know how to live meaningful lives; it's that we don't even seem to be able to focus for very long on the question.

Infinite Jest is in part an exploration of society's increasing devotion to the perfection of distraction. At the center of the novel is a film so "fatally entertaining,"[15] so "terminally compelling,"[16] that those who watch it are reduced to a state of drooling anomie. One such unfortunate, a medical attaché, watches the fatal "entertainment cartridge" by accident one evening. Hours later:

> The medical attaché . . . is still viewing the unlabelled cartridge, which he has rewound to the beginning several times and then configured for a recursive loop. He sits there, attached to a congealed supper, watching, at 0020h., having now wet both his pants and the special recliner.[17]

The film, like the book in which it appears, is called *Infinite Jest.*

The book and the film both take their title from a well-known scene in *Hamlet.* In the graveyard behind a church Hamlet discovers the skull of Yorick, the court jester of his youth. Upon taking it up he cries:

> Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath born me on his back a thousand times.[18]

In Shakespeare's rendering Yorick, the fellow of infinite jest, is drawn in stark contrast with the melancholy Dane. Wallace's contemporary treatment offers us a whole culture taken over by Hamlet's heavy disposition. The flight to distraction, however, ends no longer in the arms of a man of most excellent fancy, a court jester who bears you on his back and lifts your spirits. Instead, the power of infinite jest is sedating; it leaves you congealed, in your special recliner, having wet your pants. Entertainment of this perfect sort takes away our humanity instead of restoring it to us.

Because the false happiness of this perfect entertainment is merely a ruse, because the pursuit of it eviscerates us, collapses our world into "one small bright point,"[19] and because in its perfect version it is impossible to resist, Wallace's earlier novel is essentially a sad one.[20] It depicts our world as devoted to the perfection of an entertainment in the face of which we will necessarily annihilate ourselves.

The goal of *The Pale King,* as it might be imagined, is to show us how to avoid this fate.

Crushing, crushing boredom turns out to be the key. In a typed note discovered with the papers he left at his death, Wallace describes the premise of the book:

> Bliss—a-second-by-second joy and gratitude at the gift of being alive, conscious—lies on the other side of crushing, crushing boredom. Pay close attention to the most tedious thing you can find (Tax Returns, Televised Golf) and, in waves, a boredom like you've never known will wash over you and just

> about kill you. Ride these out, and it's like stepping from black and white into color. Like water after days in the desert. Instant bliss in every atom.[21]

The Pale King was incomplete at Wallace's death, though excerpts from it have been published in several places.[22] The publishing house Little, Brown has announced plans to bring out the manuscript in some form or another. From the excerpts that have appeared so far, however, it seems clear that Wallace had moved beyond his earlier preoccupations. The new novel is not so much interested in the transformation of our distractions, in the way they sedate us, even annihilate us, instead of bringing us back to ourselves. Rather, the new work is interested in the various states that precede and precipitate the flight to distraction: the boredom, the anxiety, the frustration, and the anger that propel us toward any distracting entertainment that offers relief. The spiritual journey of Wallace's IRS examiners consists in learning to live in these prior states—especially the state of boredom—and to find in them redemption and spiritual value.

This is no mean feat. One employee, Lane Dean, Jr., has particular difficulty sticking to his task. The description of his struggle seems to come from deep personal experience, and one cannot help but recall Wallace's own struggle with writing:

> Lane Dean, Jr. . . . did two more returns, then another one, then flexed his buttocks and held to a count of ten and imagined a warm pretty beach with mellow surf, as instructed in orientation the previous month. Then he did two more returns, checked the clock real quick, then two more, then bore down and did three in a row, then flexed and visualized and bore way down and did four without looking up once . . . After just an hour the beach was a winter beach, cold and gray and the dead kelp like the hair of the drowned, and it stayed that way despite all attempts.[23]