

"Bloody Stumps and Donald Trump":
A Taxonomic Inquiry into My 1%

(For Julie and Jeff)

I The Bloody Stumps Phenomenon

Many years ago, when our son Zack was five or six, and we were driving home from a July Fourth party above Trancas Beach (just north of Malibu), we got stuck in a terrible traffic jam on Pacific Coast Highway. Traffic jams were a matter of course on PCH on every Fourth of July, but this one was especially bad. We were stopped cold for at least an hour, and then merely inching along, stop and go, for what seemed like another two. Finally, we came alongside the scene of the accident - or what had been the accident. The wrecked cars had all been cleared away, and there were only burnt-out flares and glass and plastic shards littering the shoulder.

"Goddammit," I complained, in mock petulance. "I'm pissed. I wanted to see some bloody stumps. We waited long enough -- the least we could get for our trouble is some bloody stumps."

Diane shook her head in dismay, but Zack erupted in laughter. And for years after, "bloody stumps" was a catchphrase among us.

"Some model you are," Diane would say.

"Come on, Diane," I said. "Didn't a tiny part of you want to see some bloody stumps, too?"

"No," she replied.

"Well, you're a better man than I."

There was never any question of that. Diane would occasionally laugh at my sick jokes, but she was not one to make them herself. She lacked that inner hostility, or insecurity, or aggressive edge, or whatever it is that prompts the display of sadistic humor. Maybe it's a male thing. Certainly, women can be as cruel in their way as men; but the telling of sick jokes is not something I have ever known a woman to indulge in. Sick jokes seem to be the province of males. Women simply don't need, or have any interest in, the sort of dubious recognition that accrues to the sick-joke-teller. Or maybe it's just an immaturity thing. (Which is also, I think, a largely male affliction.) I don't know. I do know, though, that given the "right" circumstances - alcohol, strictly male company, and the inflated sense of jocular bonhomie that tends to go along with these things - it is very hard for me to resist the urge to tell a sick or off-color joke, or to venture an uncomfortable admission of one sort or another. (This essay may even be an instance of the latter; though the

only substance I am currently under the influence of is tea.)

Not long ago I was talking with my friend Rita, whose brother-in-law is gay, and recently got married to his partner. Rita and her husband attended the wedding, in California, and she was telling me about it. I allowed as I was 99% in favor of gay marriage.

"And the other 1%?"

I did not know how to reply, so I adverted to the 1% of me (OK, maybe it is a little more than 1%; actually, it almost certainly is; but for ease of reference, I'll just call it my 1%) that is constitutionally troublesome, perverse, politically incorrect. This is the same 1% that had not wanted to see "Brokeback Mountain" - though when I finally did, I was moved. 99% of me was, anyway. The gay kissing parts were weird, but I dealt with them -- in my immature male way -- by averting my eyes.

My 1% bothers me. It also slightly pleases, entertains, and confuses me. Could it be that this 1% is in some way analogous to the economic 1% of Americans that the rest of us hate, resent, and secretly - or not so secretly - wish to emulate? At any rate, it is a 1% that I am loath to dispose of entirely -- even if I could, which I

probably can't. For no rational or justifiable reason, I seem to be rather fond of it. My horrible 1%.

And in this, perhaps, lies the analogy with the economic 1% of our country. For the economic 1% have done horrible things - they must have, some horrible things, anyway - to get where they are today. And my 1%, too, has done horrible things, and is capable of doing more. But it is not my purpose, here, to confess those horrible things. (I've done that already, in other writings.) I want to talk a little, instead, about the horrible sympathies I may - no, do -- harbor in regards to that particularly egregious member of the economic 1% who is so much on our minds these days.

I speak, of course, of Trump. My 1% sort of likes The Donald. It gets a kick out of him. It enjoys reading and hearing about him, and watching him on TV. Like most of us, I cannot get enough of him. Although I have also - like most of us - had altogether too much of him; and although he, and his politics, and his values, and his profound personal vulgarity, and everything he stands for and elicits in his supporters, make me sick to my stomach - I still cannot get enough of him. The schadenfreude part of me, the bloody-stumps part, the sick-jokes part, the gay-guys-kissing-is-gross-but-I-am-sort-of-intrigued-in-

spite-of-myself part (are these all different parts, or parts of the same part?), likes Trump. And more than that, I'm afraid. My 1% is even sort of glad that he's now the presumptive Republican nominee.

Not only because I look forward to him getting trounced in the general election, by perhaps the biggest landslide since Goldwater. And not only because I abhor Cruz. (I hate Cruz even more than most of me hates Trump, because I believe that there is at least 1% of Trump - call it his "reverse 1%", the 1% of him that may be redeemable - - that is not entirely sincere in his hateful statements and beliefs. Though come to think of it, if this is true, it makes him even worse. Whereas I suspect, rightly or wrongly, that Cruz is -- or was, when it mattered, when he was still in the running -- 100% sincere.) Cruz, it seems to me, has no reverse 1%. As far as I can tell, he is totally horrible. Also, Cruz appears to have absolutely no sense of humor, whereas the Trumpster, whatever else you can say about him, does appear to have a sense of humor. I'm not saying it's a good sense of humor, or in any way comes close to redeeming him for his many outrages; but it is a sense of humor nonetheless. And it allows me to believe - perhaps wrongly - that Trump is not 100% serious in all of his horribleness.

But there is another reason why I'm glad that Trump is the presumptive Republican nominee. This is because I enjoy - my 1% enjoys -- the thought of the spectacle of further heinousness and egregiousness (can we lump these qualities together and call them "heino-egregiousness"?) that his candidacy will usher in. The spectacle of political travesty; of national excruciation and laceration (in the Dostoyevskian sense); of almost inconceivable horribleness, ridicule, and shame. My 1% is looking forward to this, and relishes the thought, as one relishes the thought of scandal, and the public humiliation of the high and mighty brought low. It is not so much the prospect of what seems to me Trump's inevitable defeat that pleases me as it is the thought of the general spectacle -- the excitement of the horrible -- displaying itself for all to see.

It is not exactly schadenfreude, my 1%; well, maybe it is; but I like to think it is a little more philosophical, at least, than the garden variety of schadenfreude. For it is aware of its own horribleness - aware that the curious pleasure it derives from the spectacle of our country's worst side coming out (the counterpart to the country's best side, which emerged in the election of '08) is also a poor reflection on itself. I am demeaned in my own eyes

(not to mention others') by the pleasure I get in seeing disgraceful things acted out on the national stage. There are, in my attitude, both a feeling of superiority and a recognition of the spuriousness of that feeling. It's the kind of feeling that instantly self-destructs as soon as it becomes aware of itself, like the desktop items in the "El Capitan" update of Mac OS X that self-implode in a puff of smoke when they are deleted. To put it in even more graphic terms, which reflect the rank unsavoriness of the whole affair: in enjoying the spectacle of Trump, and Trumpism, I am having my cake and eating it too, then vomiting it up -- and then eating that, too.

II The St. John Reflex

Perhaps you are ready to stop reading now. Well, there is part of me that is ready, after that last eructation, to stop writing as well. I admit it was in poor taste. Then again, my 1% itself is in poor taste. It knows no shame. (And it knows this, too.) It wishes to expel itself from my body, so that I can be pure. (This is what I call the St. John Reflex: "So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth.") Just like the St. John Reflex (or Reflux!), my horrible 1%

-- the part that is not even lukewarm, but actually even kind of warm, towards Trump -- seeks to expel itself for the greater good of the organism. The toxin must be voided. Let it out, then. Spue thou forth. Let 'er rip. Bring it on, as one of Trump's fellow-Republicans once said.

That was a cheap shot, I admit. Totally unfair, and below the belt. Because Trump makes Dubya look like a moderate: reasonable, sober (indeed, recovering!), conciliatory, even inclusive. Exposure to The Devil Himself has a certain palliative effect on the appearance of his lesser minions, and can make them look good by comparison. But that is perhaps also unfair, and even incorrect. For Bush II is not a lesser minion; he is, after all, a major member of that same Republican establishment the devil is in the process of disestablishing.

Let the disestablishment proceed. Long live disestablishmentarianism. Bring it on. And to hell with the antidisestablishmentarianists. To that extent, I have sympathy for the devil. Then again, I always did. I mean, who is not partial to Satan in Paradise Lost? You'd have to be a real drag not to be. (Incidentally, I think they should make a movie of Paradise Lost, and Johnny Depp

should play Satan.) As a character in that narrative, Satan is much preferable to God, and Christ. (They are both kind of a drag.) Similarly, in the narrative - always part fiction - that is Campaign '16, Trump was always preferable to Cruz; the New York devil to the Texan bluenose; the out-and-out sinner to the phony saint. (I speak here not only as a Democrat, for whom candidate Trump, as an opponent in the general election, is obviously strategically preferable to candidate Cruz. I speak also as an unaffiliated consumer of political spectacle.)

But this isn't a political essay. It's not about my opposition to the Republicans, or my support of the Democrats. It's about my sympathy for the devil. (Sing it, Mick!) The devil we love to hate. It's about how I also love the part of myself that I hate. But maybe love is too strong a word. Sympathetic recognition, then. I sympathetically recognize the part of myself that I hate. The part that gets a kick out of Trump. The part that just can't take him seriously.

At my own peril, I realize. (As well as that of the country.) To not take Trump seriously is the very worst kind of political complacency. I know that. I mean, my 99% knows that. But my 1% is a patsy.

A possibly evil patsy? The kind of patsy that would have "gotten a kick" out of Hitler, too? (This isn't one of those slippery-slope Hitler arguments, is it?) Well, some of Trump's ideas do look very much like Fascism. Fascism more than Nazism - but that's bad enough, isn't it? I mean, how much do I like the taste of my own vomit?

Maybe, though, it isn't so much a question of liking the taste of my own vomit - the lukewarm, St. John vomit from the cake I so much enjoy having and eating too - as it is of just recognizing and registering its taste. Recognizing it as something familiar, an inalienable part of me. The "gawker's block" part of me. The part that recognizes, while I am also doing it, how awful it is that people slow down their cars as they pass the scene of an accident - not so much on the off-chance of seeing some bloody stumps, as of just seeing something. Something exciting. Something even remotely suggestive of the possibility, the distant but distinct possibility, of bloody stumps.

III The St. Paul Syndrome

"The possibility of bloody stumps"? What does that mean, exactly? It has to do, I think, with another analogy - an

analogy similar to the one I suggested before - between the personal, the "horrible 1%" of me (or of anyone), the part that is secretly curious to see bad things happen, and the political/historical acting out of these personal tendencies on the world stage. I am wondering whether, statistically speaking, if enough people give in to their 1% -- allow it, accept it and even cherish it - whether maybe eventually that personal 1%, over the course of time and history, will somehow get translated into action, social and political action, that will be allowed to happen. I am wondering whether, historically speaking, bloody stumps will happen. I am wondering whether bloody stumps will be allowed to happen.

But wait a minute. Bloody stumps are happening, all over the world. Literally. People in Sierra Leone had their hands and legs cut off by terrorist rebels in the civil war there in the 90s, and are living out the rest of their lives with these mutilations. ISIS is beheading people in Syria and Iraq, and making videos of it. Organized, powerful gangs in El Salvador are terrorizing the population, and trying to frighten the government into submission, by murdering policemen and bus drivers, randomly shooting them like sitting ducks in a gallery. These things are actually happening every day in the world.

And in light of these facts, and our knowledge of them, what possible value can my idle personal and political/historical reflections have? What can be the value of the merely personal and speculative, when put up against the hard facts of events -- horrendous, evil events -- in the world? How can any "analogy" be made between one privileged American's personal feelings - his fears and doubts and worries and hesitations and hair-splitting subtleties of thought and emotion - let's face it, his autobiographical trivia - and the hard facts of real people's suffering, people whose lives have essentially been destroyed, but who continue to live? How can I possibly have the right to claim anyone's attention for my personal shit, when there is so much deep suffering going on? There is a strong and indeed perhaps unanswerable argument to be made that I should stop writing this right now and volunteer my time, for the rest of my life, to Doctors Without Borders.

But I don't. I don't do that. I don't volunteer my time - not to anyone, or any cause. (And I don't stop writing about my guilt at my selfishness, either.) The good that I would do, I do not. (St. Paul sure nailed it. I'll call this the St. Paul Syndrome.) And why? Why don't I do the good that I would - that I could? Because, quite

simply - and quite horribly - it appears I'm just not willing to do the work. What work? Well, ironically, the work of writing. In this case, the work of being a journalist. Travelling, meeting people who have suffered, talking to them, asking them questions, learning their stories, and then passing on those stories to the world. That is what journalists do. That is what the writer Andrew Solomon - journalist, psychologist, autobiographer, witness to suffering, and one of my masters -- does. Surely that is the thing to do, in the matter of suffering - of other people's suffering. Surely that is more valuable than sitting on my personal ass and writing my personal shit. Surely that is what I should do. Surely, surely. Surely I should change my life.

Yes, but... But what? Well, but I just keep hoping that in writing about it - in writing about not changing my life, although I know I should - in writing about my own St. Paul Syndrome, it will all somehow come clear. It will all come clear, and I will find hope, despite the horribleness. As Wallace Stevens (another one of my masters) wrote, "It is possible, possible, possible. It must be possible." I have always loved those lines, and found comfort in them. Although I have no idea what the "it" refers to. Hope, perhaps - hope, despite the

horribleness. And despite the laziness - or perhaps because of it. Because when you know you are lazy, what do you hope for more than one day waking up early, "as morning throws off stale moonlight and shabby sleep", and suddenly - miraculously, magically -- finding yourself not lazy anymore?

IV The Lucretius Effect

The Bloody Stumps Phenomenon often carries with it, as a sort of horrible fellow-traveller, the feeling expressed by the saying, "There but for the grace of God go I". An ignoble feeling, to be sure - but no less welcome for that. For who does not welcome the feeling of relief? (My mother used to say that relief is the most gratifying of the emotions: physical relief, emotional relief, and - remembering her Catholic girlhood, no doubt, and the feeling she would get as she left the confessional - spiritual relief as well.) The concomitance of the Bloody Stumps Phenomenon and the feeling of "There but for the grace of God go I" can be distilled into what I will call, for brevity's sake, the Lucretius Effect. Here is Lucretius, from the beginning of the second book of De Rerum Natura:

'Tis sweet, when, down the mighty main, the winds
 Roll up its waste of waters, from the land
 To watch another's labouring anguish far,
 Not that we joyously delight that man
 Should thus be smitten, but because 'tis sweet
 To mark what evils we ourselves be spared...

It has always interested me to observe the Lucretius Effect, in myself and others. And it makes me wonder: Why should our awareness of another person's suffering produce mixed feelings in us - and even a kind of pleasure (what Lucretius calls "sweetness")? Is this "sweetness" any different from schadenfreude? I think it is; it is, for one thing, less sadistic, and more philosophical.

(Lucretius was, after all, a philosopher -- a follower of Epicurus.) And a philosopher might say that the Lucretius Effect raises the question, What is the proper attitude to another's suffering?

But how can I even talk in such detached terms? "Proper attitude"! Shouldn't our response (not our "attitude", but our response) to another person's suffering just be immediate and unqualified sympathy, empathy, fellow-feeling - an unthinking, instinctual, prompt readiness to help? To take away part of the burden of suffering by sharing it? If the "Gawker's Block" (as it is called in traffic reports on the radio), and even the more

philosophical Lucretius Effect, are undeniably a part of human nature - part of what makes us the strange creatures we are - should they receive any more attention than, say, the Mother Theresa Response? Granted, "Gawker's Block" and the Lucretius Effect are much more common than the Mother Theresa Response. But there must be at least a few Mother Therasas among us - among the millions and millions of gawkers and Lucretiuses (Lucretii?), there must be at least a few more Mother Therasas. Why not go in search of them and celebrate their achievements? Indeed, writers like Andrew Solomon and Nicholas Kristof are doing just that. Why don't I do that too, rather than lingering over and anatomizing the more unsavory elements of our nature, as I do? What is to be gained by indulging in this dubious nostalgie de la boue?

Is it - other than being a result of my laziness - just more material for my writing? Is suffering - other people's suffering, and my own (mostly, my suffering of guilt at the knowledge that I am using other people's suffering for my writing) - only a means to my own rather paltry and self-serving ends? If it is - and I think it is - then I am indeed complicit in other people's suffering. I am, if not exactly a cause of that suffering, then at least an aider and abettor of it. I am an audience, an

observer, a commentator on suffering - not just my own, but that of others as well: the others in the July Fourth accident years ago that I was just the tiniest bit disappointed that I didn't get to see; and the others - the many millions, all over the world - who would suffer if Trump became president. (A possibility that I will do my best to prevent by voting for his opponent. But wait a minute. Is that really the "best" that I can do - voting for his opponent? Couldn't I do better - much better - by volunteering say for Hillary? But a possibility, also, that a very small part of me nevertheless gets a kind of pleasure - a sick, deplorable, guilty pleasure - in contemplating.) The election of Trump would be not only a catastrophe of global proportions. It would also be - and here I am trivializing the catastrophe, in pursuit of my own (paltry) thematic metaphor - like a massive national and international car accident, with millions upon millions of virtual bloody stumps on display. (And, behind that virtual display, the hard reality of millions of suffering human beings, in all manner of agony.) Surely I cannot want this. Surely I cannot get any kind of pleasure - any kind of Lucretian "sweetness" - from the contemplation, however abstract, of such a scenario.

But it is not really a question, here, of wanting anyone to suffer, for whatever reasons. It is more a question, as I said above, of a sense of possible complicity in that suffering. The sense that in being a mere spectator of suffering, and not doing anything about it, not doing anything to alleviate it, I am in some way enabling that suffering. By not doing anything to alleviate it, I am contributing to it. (Lucretius Effect meets St. Paul Syndrome. Let's party, guys!) According to this analysis, the Lucretius Effect becomes not just a passive effect, but an immoral action. A "sin of omission", as the Catholics say. By not doing anything good, you are effectively doing something bad. The "If-You're-Not-Part-of-the-Solution-You're-Part-of-the-Problem" Syndrome. We'll call this - again, for brevity's sake - the Citizen's Guilt Infliction. So named because it is the kind of guilt trip that people who are "citizens" lay on people who are not. I'm using the word "citizen" in a special sense here. A "citizen" is a person who is an upstanding member of the community. Needless to say, I am not a citizen; many writers aren't.

IV The Problem of Complicity, and the Gladiatorial Desire

Lots of syndromes and effects and reflexes here, I know. It's all part of the horribleness. Let's look a little more closely at this horribleness. Let us, in other words, anatomize it. Because that is, after all, what I do. I anatomize horrible things, in order to note the lineaments and understand the fundamentals of the horribleness. And isn't it horrible to be curious, in a kind of detached, "objective" way, about the suffering of another human being? Take, for example, the Bloody Stumps Phenomenon. Granted, I never actually saw any bloody stumps that time on PCH, and I'm not sure what my reaction would have been if I had. But didn't 1% of me - at least 1% -- sort of want to see bloody stumps, at least in an abstract way? And if I had in fact seen them - if I had been present at the time of the accident, or right after, when the bloody stumps were actually in evidence -- what would have been my honest reaction? Would my response have been one of unadulterated (100%) horror, sympathy, and empathy? Or would it perhaps have been a response of adulterated horror? That is to say, 99% (or less) of horror/sympathy/

empathy, and 1% (or more) of something else - let us say relief, and/or curiosity?

The possibility of adulteration - the Adulteration Factor, let us call it - brings us to the Problem of Complicity. Because if one's horror is adulterated - and I submit that in some people, such as myself, one's horror at real-life horrors is always adulterated - if only by 1%, the horrible 1% -- then one is implicated in that horror in a kind of complicit way, if not exactly as a cause of that horror (which would put one in a totally different category: that of the perpetrator, which doesn't concern me here), then at least as a kind of effect, a sort of by-product, of that horror. The effect of being a mere observer of the horror. And it is the moral status of the mere observer of real-life horror that interests me here. (Indeed, one could even say that I am curious about it.) I mean, if one is doing nothing concrete or in any way useful to palliate or alleviate the effects of the horror, then it seems to me that one is somehow (say 1%, even) culpable in the enactment of that horror.

I am not a professional ethicist - hell, I wasn't even a philosophy major (though I did take a number of extension philosophy courses at UCLA, over 30 years ago, when I was working in the film business, and feeling the emptiness of

that endeavor; so I tried to fill the emptiness with philosophy; does that count?) - and so I realize I am totally out of my depth here. Then again, it is important, sometimes - and even sometimes good -- to be out of your depth. It is important, sometimes, not to really know what you are talking about (as I really don't right now). Because sometimes, when you don't really know what you are talking about, you can learn things that, by definition, you wouldn't otherwise.

Take the figure of being out of one's depth. Being out of one's depth makes one aware of the unknown -- and perhaps profound -- depth of the water, and the strange and awful (in both senses) and frightening and possibly wondrous creatures that may lurk in those depths. I sometimes have bad dreams about this, and on occasion have experienced it in real life, too. For example, whenever I go swimming at an ocean beach, and find myself over my head in the water, I get thoughts of what may lurk below me. Those thoughts can be scary, and creepy. Yet I am also inexplicably drawn to water over my head, just as I am drawn to ideas I don't quite understand - and, in a different way, to bloody stumps. To the possibility of bloody stumps, anyway. And to Trump. The possibility of

Trump. (The possibility of Trump's stumps - his hands - we will leave for another time.)

Another way of putting it would be to say that we are all, in a sense, present at the gladiatorial contest. We are all spectators at the spectacle - the unseemly spectacle, the violent spectacle, the spectacle of suffering - that is the modern world, and the news that represents a part of it. We all experience, to a greater or lesser degree, the Gladiatorial Desire. The Gladiatorial Desire -- which is not only the desire to observe the horribleness, but also the suspicion that we observers of suffering are all complicit in the suffering we are observing - complicates the Lucretius Effect by showing us that our response to suffering can be both passive and sympathetic, yet at the same time complicit and even perhaps sort of active, in the sense that we are (if only in 1% of ourselves) cheering on the suffering, and the person who is causing it, while simultaneously deluding ourselves into thinking that we are only passive and sympathetic observers. Because no one - at least, no one who has come of age - is ever really innocent again; no one is blameless; and in our quest for innocence and blamelessness (for no one likes to think of themselves as

complicit in someone else's suffering) we delude ourselves, as Baudelaire noticed almost two centuries ago.

V The Baudelaire Gambit

So what am I going to do about all of this? What can I do about it - the Gladiatorial Desire, and the Lucretius Effect, and the St. Paul Syndrome? Besides noting them, that is - because obviously, noting them isn't helping the people who are suffering in the world - who are, you might say, their victims -- the victims of the Gladiatorial Desire, and the Lucretius Effect, and the St. Paul Syndrome. And noting them isn't helping the people who are experiencing them, either - other than to let them know they are not alone, and that there are probably millions of people worldwide feeling the same things, experiencing the same guilt of passive (or aiding and abetting) onlooking.

But so what? To note something is certainly not the same as doing something about it, and suffering is something you need to do something about.

I said before, in connection with the St. Paul Syndrome - "the good that I would do, I do not" -- that I was lazy, and not willing to do the work of a journalist. But perhaps that was not entirely correct. Perhaps it is

not so much that I am not willing, and also just lazy - though I am those things - as that I am not capable. I have not the training of a journalist. The training, or the mindset. Doing something about the problem of suffering - in the way, say, of a journalist, researching and travelling and tracking down and talking and listening to people - is simply not an option for someone of my background (PhD in literature) and time of life (almost 62). But is this really true? Or is it just a lame - practical, safe, and easy -- excuse? After all, I have writing and research skills, and am reasonably intelligent. (Not the greatest listener - more of a talker than a listener - but I'm sure that, in the face of the kind of sufferings the real world has to offer, I could learn to pay attention to what is important.) And I do care about people. I want them not to suffer.

So lame! Such lame excuses - and such a lame desire, really. To not want people to suffer. Who does want this? Apart from psychopathic sadists, and drill sergeants, and some evil, incompetent teachers that we have all had at one time or another, who does want their fellow human beings to suffer? The problem seems to me to be not one of deliberate intention, but accidental (in the philosophical sense, meaning circumstantial) complicity. People like me,

well-intentioned people, can be complicit in other people's suffering by way of the Citizen's Guilt Infliction. This problem comes about as a result of a combination of laziness, lameness, and being satisfied with too little. Perhaps another word for this last would be acquiescence. It is so easy to acquiesce.

I was once remonstrating with my father about not keeping to his heart-healthy diet. "Gog," I said - using the infantile name I'd called him by since early childhood - "what's more important than your health?" "My convenience," he shot right back. I had no reply to that at the time, and I still don't. But now, it's for a different reason. I can't reply to it now because - well, not only because he is dead, but also because I recognize in his response a cognate of my own passivity, my own laziness and acquiescence. My convenience is more important than the satisfaction of my conscience, for a couple of reasons. First, because it would take effort - hard thought, planning and then action - to satisfy my conscience; and it is more convenient for me not to make that effort. And second, because if my conscience were satisfied, then what would I have to write about? An uneasy conscience fuels my need to write. Words take the

place of deeds. And thank God for that. Because if they didn't, I would have to act. The Hamlet Dilemma.

Thought vs. action. But aren't words the pathway of thought? And isn't thought the prelude to action? And isn't thinking - together with planning and action - one of the efforts I'm not willing to make in order to satisfy my conscience? I mean, I am fine with thinking as long as it's not a prelude to the kind of action - for example, useful, practical work - I'm too lazy to take.

And what about that supposed opposition, thought vs. action? Isn't that a false dichotomy? Precisely of the kind that bedeviled Hamlet? Am I not also suffering from the Hamlet Dilemma? (And today, the day I am first writing these words, is, oddly enough, Shakespeare's four-hundredth yahrzeit: April 23, 2016! You didn't know Shakespeare was Jewish, did you? But how could he not be? How could Shakespeare not have been Jewish? This has always baffled me. The anti-Semitism of The Merchant of Venice, you adduce? Only more evidence of his Jewishness! The anti-Semitic Jew; alas, poor Yorick, we know him well.)

Wait a minute. I think I may have just nailed it. I am suffering from something, am I not? It doesn't really matter what - the Hamlet Dilemma, The Lucretius Effect, the St. Paul Syndrome, the Citizen's Guilt Infliction,

depression, or some other malady yet to be identified in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. The point is, I am suffering! I am not just an observer of the Lucretius Effect. I am also the guy in the storm at sea, laboring in anguish. So what if I am, at the same time, the guy on shore, watching - in safety -- the other guy-who-is-me's labors? I am - part of me is, anyway - the guy at sea, and I am suffering!

And I just realized something else: my 1% is gay! The same part of me that is not in favor of gay marriage is itself gay! (And that's the reason, no doubt, why I am not in favor of it.) Gay homophobia. Like Shakespeare's Jewish anti-Semitism. I oppose myself. I always have, and I probably always will. The part of my conscience that won't let me rest because I am not doing anything proactive to alleviate the sufferings of others is the same part that is suffering itself. And it is precisely because it is me that is suffering that I cannot help myself. I don't know how to help myself. I never learned. I was too busy feeling guilty about not helping others. So busy that I didn't realize I was the guy in the storm at sea.

So maybe this was all obvious to you already. It probably was. But it wasn't obvious to me. As I said before - I'm never quite sure what I'm talking about. But

writing helps. Writing helps me know a little better what I'm talking about. And it is also a means of helping myself. So it's therapeutic. But so what? Is all of this then just therapy for me? Am I dragging you through all of this, reader, just for the sake of helping myself, and finding out a little better what I am talking about? How trivial and selfish and self-involved is that? Shouldn't I just keep it for my journal?

But here's a secret - another secret I will divulge to you as part of my St. John Reflex: I don't keep a journal anymore. Not really. Maybe once, twice a year I'll write in it. But hardly ever now. I write essays instead. I write essays about not really knowing what I am talking about, and being sort of a horrible person in a number of ways (Bloody Stumps Effect, 1% -- minimum -- oppositional, schadenfreude - albeit philosophical; micro-homophobic hypocrite, micro-crypto-Republican, lazy St. Paul-cum-Citizen's-Guilt Syndrome).

And why do I do this, reader? I think it's because I want you to like me. I don't even know you, and yet I want you to like me. I want you to find me amusing, and entertaining, and insightful. And also, reassuring. Reassuring how? Well, because when you see how fucked-up I am - how confused, and hypocritical, and lazy - you may

feel a little better about yourself. You will perhaps recognize a little bit of yourself in me - but not so much as to cause you dismay. Quite the opposite, actually. Only enough to cause you relief. And for you to realize, in accordance with the Lucretius Effect, that you are better off than I am.

But what if, instead, you are not reassured by this essay? What if, instead, you realize that you are not in fact better off than I am? What if you realize you are worse off than I am? What if you recognize, in identifying with me, that I am not a more extreme case of you, but only, instead, a milder case of fucked-up-ness than you? What then?

Well then, reader, I invite you not to despair, but to write your own essay - if only in your mind, on the scratch pad of your mind -- about how bad you feel for being even worse than me. (This we can call the "Baudelaire Gambit", from his introductory poem to The Flowers of Evil, where he invites the reader to identify with all the sins he is also admitting to in his life: "hypocrite reader, my likeness, my brother.") Write such an essay, dear reader, as would bring me sweet relief were I to read it. Let 'er rip. Bring it on. Sing it, Mom! And whoever you end up voting for this November, know in your heart - your secret heart,

that place of Baudelaire's "folly and error, sin and avarice" - that it could have been otherwise. You could have given in to your 1%. But you didn't. You wrote an essay about it instead.