

Self-Abuse

I

The Hollowness

"Headpiece filled with straw."

I have a hard time being from L.A. It seems a very bad place - the worst, actually - for a writer to be from. I sometimes think it dooms me. Especially as a memoirist, or autobiographer, or personal essayist, or whatever the hell I am. See? I don't even know what I am. I am such a perfect product of L.A. Someone without a clear identity, lacking a feeling of authenticity. Lacking in seriousness, perhaps. A total creature of Tinsel Town.

It might have been different if I'd grown up in Watts, or Compton, or East L.A., or Korea Town, or any place - any L.A. place - with an authentic or ethnic identity. But I didn't. I grew up in Pacific Palisades - lily-white, upper-middle-class Pacific Palisades. Now I realize this is a kind of ethnic identity, too - to be white and upper-middle class. But it is an identity that sucks, right? I am kind of ashamed of it. Does it help that I can say I am half Jewish? No, I don't think so. Jews in America have become totally white. So I don't think it helps at all. It may even make things worse, because of the Jewish guilt. A white, privileged, half-Jewish kid (on

the wrong side - my father's) who grew up in Pacific Palisades and went to private schools all his life. (Except for my undergraduate years at Berkeley. But even there, I wasted my freshman year trying, in vain, to transfer to Harvard, because being at a huge public school like Berkeley was kind of scary for me.) Now I am very proud of having gone to Berkeley, but freshman year, frankly, I was ashamed of not being at an Ivy League school. (I'd been rejected also by Stanford and Princeton, and although I'd gotten into Brown, and was planning to go there - my photo was even in the freshman facebook - my father, who'd gone to Harvard, and felt that Brown was second-rate, thought that Berkeley was a better choice. (Besides, at the time, it was practically free; tuition was \$212 a quarter!) So I ended up totally standing up Brown and going to Berkeley. I didn't even write Brown a letter, so somebody on the waiting list could have gotten in. I'm ashamed of that, too.) I guess I'm ashamed of a lot of things: whiteness, privilege, Pacific Palisades, private schools. So really, what hope was there ever for me as a writer? What hope for strength and perseverance of character, authenticity, meaningful material - meaningfulness, even? I was doomed to irrelevance -- or worse -- from the start. I never even had a chance as a writer - doomed by the uneven playing field that was totally in my favor, and where I had nowhere to go but down. And down I went. The future was

mine to blow, and I blew it. Snatched defeat from the jaws of victory. Choked, as D.J. Trump - that Master of Hollowness -- would say. I'm surprised, actually, that he's not from L.A. himself. No, actually, I'm not that surprised. He has too much edge to be a white person from L.A. Too much edge - but all hollow inside. As for myself, an upper middle-class white boy from L.A., I was doomed from the get-go - doomed to candy-assedness: candy-ass Pacific Palisades, candy-ass white privilege, candy-ass private schools. Candy-ass all the way.

If it sounds like I'm trashing myself as well as L.A., well, I know I am, and that - my distinct awareness that that's what I'm doing, trashing myself - only makes the whole thing even worse. And it already could be no worse, for a writer. But I'm making it worse by trashing myself and still trying to be a writer (and even putting my trashing of myself at the center of trying to be a writer!), instead of, say, trying to make amends for my life of privilege by helping people, becoming a social worker, say, or an inner-city schoolteacher, or a doctor serving the underprivileged, in some place like Detroit, Cleveland, East St. Louis, Pittsburgh, or Mobile - any place with character and soul, authenticity and real people. But instead, having grown up in L.A., and having spent the last 20 years on Long Island (also candy-ass, in its own way - a different brand of candy than Pacific Palisades, definitely, but

still candy-ass - Sean Hannity, you, Sir, are a candy-ass too! Long Island, in fact, sucks in many of the same ways that L.A. does: materialistic, consumeristic, car culture, de facto segregated suburban communities - except that Long Island also contains an element of swinishness that L.A., for all its faults, doesn't have) - anyway, despite all of my dismay at my own white privilege, guess where I am now moving to? Seattle! I mean, can you get any whiter than Seattle? I know, they had their grunge movement in the 80s and 90s. But it was a white grunge movement, created by privileged white kids like me. And it's over, anyway. Seattle is now high-tech, and teeming with more privileged, highly-educated white people like myself.

So here I am, a privileged Pacific Palisades white kid, a baby boomer, now grown up, grown middle-aged, growing old, moving to Seattle, without having contributed to society in any meaningful way, without having helped to make the world a better place. Without having justified my privileged existence in any way. I may have no reason to live. Randy Newman said that, satirically, of short people. But I am not being satirical. I am being serious. Trying to be, anyway; but I am from Southern California, so I can't even really be taken seriously. An argument could even be made that because of my provenance, I am incapable of true seriousness - of true intellectual heft. Incapable of "the high gloominess of deepest thought", as Saul

Bellow once wrote. (Or something along those lines.) I revere Bellow. He, Sir, has true intellectual heft. He is from Chicago, "that somber town". But I am from L.A. -- that sunny, feckless town - and I have no true heft, no true depth. All I have is no reason to live.

Whoa there, cowboy. Movin' kinda fast there, aren't you? And taking dumps on yourself in the saddle, while you're at it. (Lovely image, that. Though when you come to think of it, there had to have been at least one cowboy who...) A Facebook friend of mine actually once said that, after I posted a photo of the title page announcing of my newest autobiographical manuscript (Shame: A Transgression). "Still taking dumps on yourself?" he commented. I took great offense at this, and immediately wrote back an excoriating private message: "Your comment was crude, insulting, offensive, insensitive, and tactless." I was in what they call, or used to call, or someone once called, "high dudgeon". How dare he confuse my guileless honesty with self-abuse? (But was it really guileless honesty? I don't think so. More on that in a minute.) It was only my unvarnished truth-telling that was the problem, I told myself. People were not used to such forthrightness in self-portraiture. They confused it with low self-esteem - an unforgivable sin in our positive-spin, self-inflationary culture. Well, that was their problem, I told myself. I would just keep on doing what I was doing, and

they would eventually come to recognize my uncompromising honesty for what it was.

"Good luck with that," as another friend of mine (a real one - and a real cowboy, too, from Nebraska) would say. I am still waiting.

II

The Faux Cowboy

I know I can be rather dramatic in my self-presentation. I am also prone to pronouncements, as a pre-Facebook friend - my oldest friend, actually, from childhood -- recently told me when we were having a heart-to-heart. I know that, too. And my take on L.A. probably suffers from this foible as well. Surely it is not the place of unmitigated, Trumpian hollowness that I make it out to be. After all, Susan Sontag spent some of her formative teenage years in L.A. She graduated from North Hollywood High. Susan Sontag a Valley Girl! Of course, she then went on to the University of Chicago at age 16 or something - Bellow's university, too: the heftiest, intellectually speaking, of all universities west of Berlin. Surely Susan Sontag provides a counter-argument to the intellectual and spiritual lightweightness of L.A.? Or is she only the exception that proves the rule?

I once submitted a short story to her. She was one of the guests at a writing conference I attended at Berkeley, the year after I graduated. You could select which participating writer you wanted to read and comment on your story, so I picked Susan Sontag. But I never got to meet with her. She sent an assistant to our appointment instead, and the assistant gave me Sontag's comments. They were cursory and, I felt, dismissive. I was dissed by Susan Sontag. Some might consider that an honor. You might even think that I, given my generally low self-esteem, would have considered it an honor. But I didn't. I was hurt that she hadn't even considered my story worthwhile enough to meet with me. I accepted this hurt without question at the time - didn't really think any less of Susan Sontag for it, because of course, I understood implicitly - with the implicitness of habitual low self-esteem -- that she had better things to do than spend time with me going over a story she hadn't liked. Still, I was hurt, and I guess in the back of my mind I did think less of her for it. I sure do now. Kind of pisses me off, actually, when I think of it. I wouldn't have done that, even to a nobody writer. Epecially to a nobody writer. Then again, from another perspective, I would expect no less - and no more - from a fellow-Angelena. You can take the girl out of L.A., but you can't take the L.A. out of the girl. Susie flaked out on me.

But wait a minute. I'm from L.A., and I wouldn't have done that. I wouldn't have flaked out on a nobody like that. I would have done the stand-up thing. The Pittsburgh thing, if you will. The Omaha thing. And of course, I realize there are people from these cities living in L.A., too. And it's really not fair or accurate to deal in such wholesale generalizations anyway, is it? Am I not just playing off trite stereotypes about L.A. shallowness here? Am I not just doing the exact same thing that I hate when other people who are not from L.A. (especially East Coasters) do? Am I not guilty myself of the same L.A.-bashing that I hate?

Maybe, but I don't think so. I don't think I'm really bashing L.A. I guess it goes back to the "guileless honesty" thing I was talking about before. I think I am merely, in my own way, being honest. I grew up in L.A. I know it well. Not all of it, granted. But unlike some from Pacific Palisades, I have been to Watts. I have been to Compton - several times. I tutored for a couple of years in East L.A. Mind you, I am making no claims based on this. I am still a candy-ass. I will always be a candy-ass. Did I go to these places just so I could say I'd been there? Maybe partly, yes. But not completely. In the case of Compton, I had to go - at least two times, I had to go - for funerals: once for our housekeeper Aline's mother Katie's funeral, and once for Aline's funeral, some years later.

And then, for East L.A., I tutored there, so I had to go there too, obviously. I wasn't just a tourist. Actually, I wasn't a tourist at all. (Even though I sort of felt like one. But then wherever I am, I always sort of feel like a tourist. But that's another story. Unless it's not. Unless it's part of the same story. I'm not sure. We'll see.)

But this kind of talk smacks of the "Some of my best friends are black and Mexican" thing, doesn't it? Isn't it totally lame, and even sort of racist? (Unintentionally racist, which is maybe the most exasperating and intractable kind of racism.) I mean, check it out: Guy from Pacific Palisades goes to his family's black housekeeper's mother's funeral in Compton, and then, years later, the housekeeper's own funeral (also in Compton), and brings friends to see the Watts Towers a couple of times, and volunteers to tutor in the Barrio while he's in graduate school - and then uses all of this to show he has a more than superficial and lilywhite grasp of the city? Come on, Poindexter. You can't change your eyes, or your skin, or the fact that you could go home from Compton and Watts and Ramona Gardens to Pacific Palisades and sleep in your comfy bed by the sea, listening to the sound of the waves rolling up through Santa Monica Canyon. Those facts wre formative. They formed your candy ass: your well-intentioned, right-thinking, liberal,

sheltered, naïve, presumptuous (and also somewhat patronizing) confectionary posterior.

Your clearly self-abusive ass, as well. It really is hard for me to give myself a break, isn't it? So what part of this is honesty, and what part of it is the faux cowboy, just shitting myself in the saddle? This is what I meant before by my "maybe not so guileless honesty". Maybe there is another agenda to my putative honesty, which is connected with my determination to dump on myself, to shit myself in the saddle. That's why I was so indignant when my Facebook friend called me on it. Because I knew he was right. I knew that was what I was doing - taking dumps on myself. I hadn't come up yet with the figure of the cowboy in the saddle doing it - back in the saddle again! - but I knew that was essentially what I was doing. And I knew how unseemly it was. But it also seemed necessary. Necessary, as a bodily process is necessary. Necessary for the ongoing functioning of the organism. Yes, OK - but it is also a fundamental rule of society, and of culture, is it not, that we don't share the details of our bodily processes with others? That is beyond the pale. You just don't do that; even if there is an ulterior motive - which in this case is honesty (or so I tell myself) - you don't do that. And can you even make honesty an ulterior motive? Isn't true honesty always a frank end in itself? Well, no - not if that honesty is merely self-

indulgent. If that honesty is merely for the sake of self-gratification - the curious self-gratification of self-abuse - then that honesty is really faux-honesty. The faux honesty of the faux cowboy, beshitting himself in the saddle.

That is the question, isn't it? Is my honesty towards a higher end, or just the faux honesty of self-indulgence? And what if you have to go through the faux honesty of self-indulgence in order to get to the "higher honesty"? What then? Will the faux honesty itself, alone, totally blow it for you in terms of your audience, so that they will leave you sitting in the dust - shitting in the dust! -- atop your horse, in your beshatten saddle, and there will be no one sticking around to listen to your higher truth? Will the faux honesty turn off everyone? Is that what will happen, cowboy?

We shall see, pardner. We shall see if, at the end, there is anyone left to attend to the tale, or if it is just me, sitting alone - beshatten and alone -- in the dust atop my horse. We shall see. In the meantime, a little story.

III

The Disbeliever

A couple of weeks ago, my supervisor at work - the chair of the department in which I teach freshman comp - sat in on my class, as part of the protocol for new hires in the department. The class went well - the students were in fine form, and so was I, riding high in the saddle (which was pristine) - and a few days afterwards, my supervisor came into my cubicle to give me the thumbs up. She had some very nice things to say about the class, and my conducting of it. And as she was speaking, and elaborating on her impressions - which were all positive - I found myself growing more and more uncomfortable.

Uncomfortable, disbelieving and embarrassed. Embarrassed for both of us. Embarrassed for her, because I felt that she wasn't telling the truth, and didn't know it, and there was really no way I could tell her this. And embarrassed for myself, because I felt I was being lied to, and was conscious that a part of me - a big part of me - wanted to believe the lies she was telling me. It was a kind of folie a deux: a dance that both the liar and the liee were heavily invested in. The liar was not, or did not at least appear to be, aware of this, but the liee was - that is, he believed himself to be; although at the same time he - I - knew that I was almost certainly wrong about the whole

thing: knew that she, my supervisor, was not lying at all; that I was not really the fraud I felt myself to be; that we were both not really deceiving the other, but were just engaged in an enterprise that was actually much less complicated, and much more common: one person was simply conferring praise upon another for a job well done. Happens all the time, and now it was happening to me.

Why then was this process so hard for me to see for what it was, and accept?

Reader, it has been ever thus with me. Good news concerning myself has always left me a little ambivalent. The pleasure of it has always been laced with a little disbelief, self-consciousness, embarrassment, discomfort. It has seemed necessary to cut the pleasure with something close to pain. It doesn't seem like pain at the time; but I recognize now that that is probably what it is - pain of a perverse and disguised sort.

But hold on a minute. I would be understood here. If I am indeed some sort of masochist - and I probably am - my masochism is not of the physical variety. Like almost everyone else, I hate and dread the experience of actual physical pain. (With one exception: I used to love, when I had a bad case of poison oak - which I did several times as a child - to run hot water over the lesions. The experience rendered a pleasure of

excruciating, nearly orgasmic delight. The hot water exacerbated the itching, so that it became a pruritus of almost unbearable deliquescence. But there was some pain involved, too, as the hot water poured over the weeping lesions, irritating them and causing them to redden even more, and throb.) But absent the Poison Oak Experience, I do not and never did relish pain. Yet a tincture of something very much not pleasure - an antagonist to pleasure, let's call it - seems necessary for me to add when compliments come my way. It seems necessary for me to administer this retardant to myself out of a kind of superstitious belief: the belief that if there is not some interference present, then the pleasure I am feeling may turn out to be not genuine. It is the presence of the antagonist that guarantees the authenticity of the pleasure.

A brief example:

IV

The Friday Night Syndrome

When I was nine or ten -- and perhaps a little older, too -- I used to like to pretend it wasn't really Friday night when it was. I remember one Friday night in particular, being out to dinner with my parents at the old Hamburger Hamlet (of sacred memory) on San Vicente Blvd. in Brentwood, and feeling very

happy as I looked forward to the weekend in store, and then trying to make myself for some reason believe that it was not in fact Friday night at all, but rather Sunday night, that worst of all nights - the end of all mirth and hope, the repository of all woe, the graveyard of our great expectations and lookings-forward-to; the asshole of the week, to be honest. (Monday and Tuesday nights, you see, one is already "in it", so to speak; the week is already happening, undeniably; one can admit the reality and deal with it, and begin to look forward to the weekend again; but Sunday night somehow always arrives unexpectedly; its insuperable gloom takes one by surprise. And this never changes as one gets older - except in summer, if you're a teacher. Then, summer Sundays are a liberation - like having two Saturdays in a row. The economy of the week in summer is totally different.)

The purpose of this strange behavior, I think, was to create a future surprise for myself, to insure a kind of golden nugget of expectational treasure that lay in store for me. A sort of booster shot to paradoxically add to the pleasure I was already feeling in contemplation of the weekend ahead by temporarily detracting from it. The happiness of Friday night could somehow only be truly appreciated and "contemplated about" (I deliberately and idiosyncratically use this intransitive locution, rather than the more usual transitive one -

"contemplated" - because it seems dreamier, more indirect, and thus more descriptive of what I do, and how I do it; I do not "contemplate something", I "contemplate about it") - the happiness of Friday night could only be truly experienced by being made to contrast with the despair of Sunday; and this needed to be done not just theoretically, but viscerally as well. I had to make myself believe in the full reality of Friday night - truly experience it -- by fully imagining the miserable reality of Sunday - by already cancelling out the anticipated pleasures of the weekend. By nipping pleasure in the bud, and trampling it underfoot, I could then recover it, and so add to it. The way of true pleasure lay through denial. (Similarly, sometimes when I got a new toy that I had especially been wanting, I would deliberately not play with it for a while, and even hide it and pretend that I had never gotten it.) And in this I was not wrong. Kind of insane, perhaps, but not really wrong; only supremely perverse in feeling I needed to manufacture that denial myself, not knowing - not having any way to know, at that young age - that life itself would inevitably provide the denial I sought.

Weird, I know. But you will long since have inferred that I am a weird guy. You may also have noticed that there is something quite childish about all of this. An inability to handle the full-strength, adult intercourse of emotions, you

might say. It is probably not unrelated to the grimace I used to give when Diane and I were embracing (she could feel me grimacing over her shoulder, and would say, patiently and gently, "Stop grimacing"), and that I still give when Julie and I are embracing. Because a compliment, you see, is a kind of embrace, and I cannot take it "uncut" - cannot tolerate it without administering the antagonist agent - the grimace, the Friday Night Syndrome - of disbelief, which in the case of my supervisor's evaluation took the form of imagining her to be, if not exactly a liar, then at least a person operating under some sort of serious misapprehension regarding my abilities, which it was embarrassing for me to have to witness.

Kind of a sick puppy, too. I know. No doubt this is something to be discussed with my psychiatrist - as Julie has gently suggested I do. And I did bring it up at our last session. But then I said I was going to write about it, which pretty much meant it was off-limits for our therapy. I didn't want to "dilute" it by talking about it. This reminds me of my father, a screenwriter, who perpetually refused the psychotherapy he (and the rest of us!) so needed, and could have so greatly benefited from. (I'm thinking here of his prolonged sulks; his mean streak, and his twisting of the knife; his refusal - maybe his inability -- to look in the mirror; and his general bedevilment by the things in himself he couldn't bring

himself to look at). He refused therapy because, in his own words, he didn't want to "mess around with" the unconscious he relied on for his writing. Now you'd think my father's unfortunate precedent, in this regard, would be something I'd want to overturn; but I guess I'm my father's son here too. I mean, I do believe in and practice psychotherapy; but I also keep some things back, or at least do not fully explore them in my sessions. My thinking being, more or less, Save it for the writing; don't talk it all out beforehand. Which suggests that writing itself is a kind of therapy, which I guess I believe as well -- as is any kind of creative pursuit. But if that is the case, then the therapy of writing sure didn't work for my father. At least not that I could ever see. Though he was a different kind of writer from me. He used to tell me that if I wanted to be a writer, I should be a "real writer", not a screenwriter. (It's not hard to see where I get at least some of my self-esteem issues from.) Another thing I should probably talk to my shrink about. We started to, once, but then - this was years ago, the summer of the fifth anniversary of Diane's death - I got really depressed, and went to see a woman therapist for a while, and when I went back to my shrink, we'd lost that particular thread, and never did quite pick it up again. And now I'm about to move to Seattle, and so we're winding up the therapy, and talking of other things.

V

The Letter of Recommendation

One of which, of course, is the impending move, and my new life that is about to begin. Which is another reason my supervisor sat in on my class - so she could write me a letter of recommendation that I could use in my academic job search in Seattle. She told me, when she came to see me that day after sitting in on the class, that she would write me "a very strong" letter, as the parlance goes.

But here's the thing: I already know I will not read this letter when she sends it to me. I won't be able to. I mean, I'll glance at it, and of course I'll thank her for it - but I won't really read it. I will not allow myself the pleasure. But no, that's not quite right either. Because, you see, it wouldn't be a pleasure to read this letter. Quite the opposite. It would - will -- be an embarrassment. Along the lines of the short conversation we had in my cubicle the other day - only worse. Because this time, the compliments will be in writing, and so will have been made sort of permanent. Officialized. They will be staring me in the face with their delusional kindness (or so it will seem to me), their good intentions and well-wishings and sincerity, which could apply very well to someone else; but not to me. No, it would be intolerable to

read this letter. The letter will be kept, of course, and produced when requested, and duly conveyed to the requester. But it will never, ever be read again, after the first (and last) cursory glance. It will not be able to be read. It will be, quite simply, intolerable -- as intolerable, in its way, as the running of the hot water over the poison oak lesions. No, worse. For at least the Poison Oak Experience was pleasurable -- all-too-pleasurable. But there is no pleasure involved in the Letter of Recommendation Experience.

For the letter of recommendation, like all letters of recommendation written for me, will suffer from a double untruth -- and therefore a double dose of embarrassment and contemptibleness. The letter of recommendation will be, simultaneously, both too good and not good enough. Always too good, and never good enough. With someone like me, you see, there is no winning this game. Anything good one may have to say about me is doomed, from the start -- "always already" doomed, as the Post-Structuralists would say. Inscribed (again, their terminology) with the self-defeating terms of its own laudatory discourse -- its discourse of laudation. The letter cannot be believed by me, it will never be believed by me, it must not be believed by me. For it is much too good, much too generous; yet it also falls far short of my own self-estimation. Of course, if I ever saw a letter of recommendation that

measured up to my own best estimate of myself - my sense of my intellectual, artistic and compassionate superiority - then my inferiority complex would not let me believe it.

How is it possible, you ask, to have both a superiority and an inferiority complex at the same time? Very easily, actually. One aspires to a standard one knows one can never reach. Indeed, it is that standard's unreachability that keeps it worthy of aspiring to. But no, that doesn't get it quite right, either. It is the knowledge of one's own high standards that makes one feel superior, that gives one the sense - sometimes amounting to a conviction -- of superiority: a superiority not of achievement, but of imagination. The most dangerous kind of superiority, because it is impossible to corroborate in the real world. In the real world, one knows one is not very much - certainly not compared with other real-world examples of excellence. (Choose your own writers here.) And one tends to despise oneself because of this discrepancy. One knows one is being ridiculous, but one despises oneself anyway. The ridiculousness is even evidence of the underlying (and overarching) excellence. Only the very best, you see, know how little they really are. It is sort of like the revelation of our own piddling insignificance that comes from those rare, brief insights into the scale of the cosmos.

Whoa there again, cowboy. And you're right. My distaste for my letters of recommendation is of course not on that cosmic scale. But it is a large distaste nonetheless - much larger than my capacity to deal with it. So I don't even try to deal with it (other than by writing about it); I just give the recommender a brief and insincere "thank you", and file the thing away, never to be read a second time. (Not that it was ever really read a first time.) I say an "insincere 'thank you'", but that isn't completely true. It is really only half-insincere; the other half is sincere enough. I really am grateful for the efforts the recommender went to to do the right thing, and the best she could. It is not her fault, after all, that the letter can never, ever, be good enough.

Did I mention that I also feel sorry for the letter-writer? For a number of reasons. First of all, she really has no idea who she is dealing with - the basically impossible nature of the person she is recommending. This trusting ignorance is touching, and is one of the things that makes me feel sorry for her. On the one hand, she does not know that the person she is writing on behalf of is constitutionally unable to believe anything good she may write about him, because he knows - or thinks he knows - it isn't true. Therefore, he - I -- feel my recommender is, if not exactly lying, then at least somewhat delusional on my account, and the delusion under which she is

laboring (unawares) is another thing that makes me feel sorry for her. In addition, she has no idea that I will never seriously read what she has written. She has spent time and effort on my behalf, producing something I cannot take seriously, and won't even be able to give a second glance; and this good-faith effort of hers is another thing that makes me feel sorry for her. Poor little lamb; she knows not how I hold her words somewhat in contempt. (How grateful I am for those good words, yet how I hold them somewhat in contempt!) And, because of those words, I'm sorry to have to admit that I also hold the writer herself slightly in contempt -- an attitude which is not at all incompatible with feeling sorry for her.

On the other hand, I also feel sorry for her because she does not rate me highly enough; because she apparently does not know enough to rate me as highly as I believe I deserve (even though I also believe I don't deserve it at all!). The letter-writer does not apparently have the perspicacity, the depth of vision, the sophistication - let's just say it: the intelligence - to recognize my true superiority, my excellence, my brilliance, which are so much greater than the praise in her letter - her well-intentioned but woefully inadequate letter - reflects, or could ever reflect. I feel sorry for her, then, not only because she has underrated me, but because she apparently knew no better than to underrate me. Why was this?

Perhaps because she sensed my self-disparagement (it would be hard to miss, after all), and fell for it, and foolishly took me at my word. (I say "fell for it" because it was not completely sincere, my self-disparagement. Like my faux honesty, it was a faux self-disparagement.) This misjudgment and gullibility of hers make me think less of her, too. (They also, needless to say, make me feel sorry for her.) Just as I suffer from a simultaneous inferiority- and superiority-complex, so my letter-writer suffers from a simultaneous "distorted judgment complex", which errs both ways, so to speak. She rates me both too highly and too lowly. She is therefore twice-deluded, and this double-dose of delusion elicits in turn my sympathy, pity, and mild contempt. Forgive my letter-writer, oh Lord - she knows not what she does.

Damned if you do, damned if you don't. There is obviously no winning with me, because I can never win with myself. But my letter-writer, I can't help feeling, should have seen this coming, and begged off. Only by begging off writing me a letter could she have earned my respect.

(This actually happened in graduate school. A professor I asked for a letter of recommendation said she couldn't write one for me because she really didn't understand what I was trying to do in my dissertation. (She turned out to be right! I didn't really know what I was trying to do either, which is why I

flunked my orals the first time around.) In any event, I accepted her decision unquestioningly, and made a deliberate - and, as far as I know, successful (albeit obsequious) - effort not to hold it against her. (We could call this my faux magnanimity.) I respected her for her honesty, which I did not feel, had our roles been reversed, I myself would have been capable of.)

No, she does not begin to know who she is dealing with, my poor little lamb of a letter-writer; and she apparently doesn't even know enough to know that -- which is another reason to feel sorry for her. I believe there is a medical term for this - not being able to recognize that you don't know something - but so far I haven't been able to find it. It's a particular form of agnosia, where you don't know that you don't know. Anyway, my letter-writer appears to be suffering from a version of this condition: she doesn't know that she doesn't know I'm a fraud. And this makes me feel sorry for her, too.

She is unquestionably well-intentioned, though, and this counts for a lot. Actually, I couldn't feel sorry for her if she weren't well-intentioned. It is, in fact, her well-intentionedness in the face of her ignorance, and her credulousness, and her not knowing that she doesn't know, that is the biggest factor in my feeling sorry for her.

VI

The Romantic Idealist: The Motion Picture

And there you have it, I'm afraid: who rides with me, rides with the impossible. But this is actually kind of admirable, because it is idealistic, and I admire idealists. I am one myself. Even though I know better - or I tell myself I know better - I too am an idealist. Ever committed to the underdog, the lost cause, the dark horse. Always, the dark horse. So maybe I am not, after all, quite as contemptuous of my letter-writer as I make myself out to be. Maybe my contempt is really just sort of a pose - a pose I adopt before myself. Only before myself. (Because you see, I would never want to be seen expressing contempt for someone who was doing me a good turn.) Furthermore, I would never want to even feel contempt for such a person.

But what I would want is beside the point here; the truth is, I do feel mild contempt for my letter-writer - in all the ways I have just enumerated - and it is pointless to pretend otherwise.

It is pointless, also, to pretend this puppy is not a rather sick one.

But do I bank too much on my sad, sick puppy eyes to endear me to people? Is that what I am doing with you, reader? Are

you just another kind of letter-writer, from whom I am hoping for - and also dreading - a good review? Is this whole essay just a kind of back-handed, paradoxical way of ingratiating myself with you? Ingratiating myself through self-abuse? A curious strategy - though one that has been known, sometimes, to work. (Though, truth be told, it has failed more times than it has succeeded.) Because we know that self-abuse is unseemly, off-putting - in poor taste. It is certainly no kind of strategy to adopt if you want people to listen to you. It is, in a word, self-destructive. Is that really what I am doing - pursuing a self-destructive enterprise? Is this whole riff on self-abuse not really just a form of self-destructive behavior? And if it is - who wants to hear that shit? Tell it to your shrink, jojay. (My nickname for myself; kind of pathetic that I would have to give myself a nickname, isn't it?) Instead of writing this essay, maybe you should just tell it to your shrink. (You feared that if you told it to him, you would never write it. Well, maybe that would be a good thing.)

You have a point there, jojay. Because this spilling of my guts onto the page is not only unseemly, and in poor taste - it is also boring. And that is my greatest fear. It may be every writer's greatest fear, and greatest sin -- to be boring. For a writer, to be boring is the ultimate self-destructive act. (OK,

the penultimate one; but still, it's bad enough.) And to be boring about one's own self-destructiveness - a double-whammy!

But wait a minute. Isn't self-destructiveness, or rather the expression of self-destructiveness -- the pursuit of self-destructiveness -- itself really rather boring, when you get right down to it? Of course it's true that we also have a fascination with self-destructiveness. The myth of the gifted, doomed genius, bent on self-destruction, despite all his gifts - and because of them. So often, the self-destroyers are poets: Dylan Thomas, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, John Berryman, Delmore Schwartz. But not always. Mark Rothko. Philip Seymour Hoffmann. Marilyn Monroe. David Foster Wallace. Kurt Cobain. But these are compelling stories, are they not? Far from boring. Yes - but they are all celebrity stories, too. People in the public eye. Their suicides may have cemented their celebrity - but they were well on their way already. How about the self-destructive nobody? How about me? Isn't that story kind of boring? Well, I guess it all depends on the quality of the teller - and the tale.

And the tale was about suicide; and before that, idealism. Is there a connection between them? Maybe. One imagines sacrificing oneself in a blaze of glory; giving up one's life for a noble cause; or just making, before one dies of self-inflicted causes, a noble gesture. There may even be, in

certain cases, something noble about suicide itself. The ancient Romans thought so; so did the Japanese. In some instances, suicide can say to the world you're too good for it. On the other hand, remember that suicide is the ultimate act of self-abuse. Maybe this is even one of the critiques of masturbation: that it is a form of suicide. ("Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame..." the Shakespeare sonnet goes.) However, such a belief today seems not only pernicious, but silly; but maybe there is some truth to it after all - as there is to many ideas we react strongly against. In any event, I do believe that in at least some cases of suicide, there is a form of idealism - a tragically misguided form of idealism - in operation. The suicide - I mean the person who suicides - stands for something: perhaps for a kind of noble failure. Think F. Scott Fitzgerald here, and his "romantic" suicide by alcohol. (A recent biography of Fitzgerald is titled "Some Sort of Epic Grandeur.") (Think also of Dylan Thomas.)

OK, but let's not mystify things here. Isn't suicide often just the result of extreme depression? And what does depression have to do with idealism? Quite the opposite, perhaps. It has been said that depressives often are simply realists who've let their clear-sightedness get the best (or worst) of them. They just don't know how to put it to use, and it turns inward and makes them brooding and depressed. I don't know. As I say, I

don't want to mystify depression or suicide. I don't want to go so far as to say there is anything noble about them, do I? Or do I? Is that what I am suggesting?

Maybe it's best to stick to my personal experience here, and end by sharing with you an image I used to have in my mind, as a teenager, of myself as a noble sacrifice. Nothing like a Christ figure; rather, a half-Jewish, romantic, idealistic, quixotic noble sacrifice. This image came from the autobiographical movie that sometimes ran in my head in high school. In this movie, I was not committing suicide explicitly; but I was engaging in some sort of self-destructive behavior, such as getting really drunk, or getting impossibly stoned, or even shooting heroin - and experiencing some sort of glorious epiphany or apotheosis when I did it.

This was probably inspired by a few things I was into that summer - the summer of 1972, just after I graduated from Exeter. (White privilege, anybody?) I was reading Malcolm Lowry's 1947 novel Under the Volcano, whose doomed hero, British consul Geoffrey Firmin, was drinking himself to death in various cantinas in small-town Mexico during World War II. A couple of years before, I had been profoundly affected by John Malcolm Brinnin's memoir of Dylan Thomas, Dylan Thomas in America. (Can you spell alcoholic?) Though never much of a drinker myself, I was deeply attracted to these stories of self-excruciation.

Some films also made their impact on the nascent artist's sensibility I was cultivating at the time: Visconti's Death in Venice, Ken Russell's Women in Love, and the 7-hour Soviet film version of War and Peace. With the help of these sources, I projected myself into an ongoing film that starred myself as the tragic hero, modeled on a combination of all of the above. In this movie of my life as it was unfolding, the incongruous backdrop of L.A. was the venue of my self-destructive apotheosis as I sacrificed myself on the altar of a tragic yet inspiring futility. I was a figure of noble impossibility: my sensibilities exquisite, my coping skills nonexistent (as they must be for such a personage), my standards of excellence uncompromising. I lived out of time (and to do this in a place as timebound and youth-obsessed as L.A. was truly a feat!), a mysterious traveler (taken from the title of a Weather Report album around that time) through the realms of gold. (Or rather, gold plate.) The overwrought language was part of my doomed revolt, too. I abhorred vulgarity, and dedicated myself to the quixotic pursuit of an ineffable aesthetic perfection. Yes, reader: I was as insufferable as I was impossible. And that was just the way I wanted it. I knew myself to be cutting an absurd figure - and this absurdity too was part and parcel of my self-styled mystique. (See also the ending of Joyce's story "Araby": "Gazing up into the darkness I saw myself as a creature driven

and derided by vanity; and my eyes burned with anguish and anger." Ah yes; sing it, James...)

All that summer, I rose in the afternoon, and went to bed near dawn. I really didn't get going til around midnight. I drove my parents' 1960 Buick Invicta all over the city, and used its bleaker locales (El Segundo, Azusa, Chatsworth, City of Commerce, Hawaiian Gardens) for the settings of dubious fictions chronicling my doomed heroes' sufferings in the City of Hollowness. I remember one of my stories was titled "Wound Channel". Another began, "Raggedy Ann was alive." And another: "Bozo the Clown was undressing in front of the mirror." An ominous yet understated style, backed by a tone of baffled urgency, was everything to me. My literary God was Nathanael West. I had a white top hat made for me at a costume shop in Hollywood, in emulation of the one Pierre wore at the Battle of Borodino (which, as a civilian, he somehow survived). Towards dawn on most nights I would smoke pot and masturbate. It saddens me now to think of this, but at the time I seemed to be pursuing a noble vision, which I could picture so well, in the form of snippets of the autobiographical movie that was playing more or less all the time that summer in my head. I think it was the first flowering of that tendency to grandiosity that would take fuller form in writing many years later -- grandiosity, and the irrational but persistent sense that self-

destructiveness, excellence and art were somehow always inextricably combined, and it was my calling to synthesize this mixture before I died - which maybe would be soon.

The thing is, 44 years later, I can still feel acutely how drawn I was to this romantic, doomed vision. Now, of course, it is much more disguised with irony and self-consciousness - but it is still there. I am still the subject of my own epic - though nowadays it takes the form more of a future biography than a movie. But if somebody, at some point, wants to adapt that as-yet-unwritten biography into a movie, I would not object. I would just demand gross points up front.

You can take the boy out of L.A., but you can't take the L.A. out of the boy. Isn't that right, Susie?