Sadness:
Reflections on the
Creativity of Diminishment

How appropriate to be writing this on Labor Day – the last day of summer, and the saddest. How fitting, too, that the sadness should not be unmixed with traces of gratitude. For I am writing here of mixed feelings: regret for the summer that is ending, mixed with anticipation of the school year about to begin – my 24th consecutive fall term of teaching. Then there's the excitement, this year, of starting at a new school, in a new state, mixed with some nervousness and anxiety: Am I up to this job? Can I hack it? Will I be able to handle teaching a class at 8 AM (which I haven't done for over 20 years), five days a week (which I've never done)? And there's another feeling, too, less clearly identifiable perhaps, but no less real for all that – the sense of a new passional life beginning, with the woman I married only six weeks ago; and along with that sense, an accompanying trace – perhaps more than a trace – of regret for the solitary old life of widowerhood I am leaving behind. But not forgetting. Never forgetting. Say rather, enshrining. I have a tendency to enshrine the things I love; and about this tendency I have mixed

feelings, too. Mixed feelings all around today; no better mood for Labor Day.

On the street outside, the waning light of a Labor Day afternoon. More than a hint of sadness. Despite the admixture of feelings, on balance a sad hour, of a sad day, at a sad time of year. Across the way, an elderly man in shorts and a polo shirt cradles his tiny dog in one arm – a Chihuahua, it must be – and sets it gently down on the margin of yellowed grass in front of the apartment building facing ours, to do its business. As he watches the dog, the man wears a mild, affectionate expression. This touches me. It seems an expression consonant with the time; but maybe here too I am just projecting my own feelings. Is the man a widower, as I used to be? I have never seen him with a partner, other than his dog. And when I have seen him – a half-dozen times or so in the eight months I have lived in this Seattle neighborhood, hard by the highway below the hill, and the freight yards running through the declivity just beyond -- it has always been in this same spot. Maybe his routine changes with the season. Did I see him last winter and spring? I don't remember. Maybe not. What do I know about his life? Next to nothing, except for what I have glimpsed for a minute or two, a handful of times, through my own rectangle of glass,

in front of my writing table. Not a very wide frame of the world, to be sure. "A small thing, but mine own." (I remember this line from The Magic Mountain – spoken, as I recall, by Herr Settembrini to Hans Castorp; but apparently, from what I can find on Google, the phrase is proverbial, and goes back to the ancient Greek.)

Ah yes… The ancient Greek, and the ancient Greeks. These too are of a piece with the hour, and the time – early September, the beginning of school, and the dusty, golden light of Homer. It has become a tradition with me, every September, to write to my old professor and dear friend, Peter M., with whom I read The Iliad and The Odyssey my first semester in college – the Lattimore translation of The Iliad (austere and noble), the Fitzgerald translation of The Odyssey (warmer, more domesticated) -- to remind him that it is, once again, the season of Homer. The start of the academic year will always be, for me, the season of Homer – the remembered time of the elegiac light and the noble, hard wisdom of Homer: so distant, so alien, so evocative.

I won't be teaching Homer this fall; I will probably never teach Homer again. As a semi-retired, part-time adjunct instructor of English (I used to be a tenured professor, but my college of 19 years closed down last

year, due to low enrollment, gross mismanagement, and – finally -- bankruptcy), my pedagogical province is now freshman comp – the rigors of sentence coherence and cohesion, thesis development and support replacing the grander challenges of Homer and the Heroic Tradition. But I have had my day in the academic sun, and I am grateful. Gratitude and nostalgia add their own special flavors to the mix of feelings today. Ripeness, if not exactly all, has its rewards. The sweetness of maturation, before the bitter end.

A rather morbid turn for a classicist, I know. Then again, I am not really a classicist at all, but a certified Romanticist, with a dissertation on Byron and Wordsworth under my (expanding) belt. (Peter was my dissertation director, many years after that freshman course.) True, I was a Classics major as an undergraduate; but I chose that field more out of a taste for its aura of eccentricity and rarified elitism – which I confused, at the time, with intellectual excellence. My motto should have been a quote from Spinoza (which I came across only years later, as the epigraph of a study of Heidegger by George Steiner -- more rarified elitism!): Omnia praeclara tam difficilia quam rara sunt. ("All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.")

I'll confess that I have never really gotten over my excessive regard for rare things, and my tendency to confuse them with things of true excellence. (Nota bene to my inner eccentric: Refinement of taste not at all the same thing as fineness of thought and feeling.) I've learned that much in my older age. But I've learned also to look on the caricature of the intellectual I used to perform with tolerance, and a measure of affection, to balance out the embarrassment and aversion for the rather absurd, late-adolescent personage that used to be myself – or rather the image of myself that I was so intent on presenting to the world. I realize it was – is -- all part of the journey, part of the process.

My beloved Romantics – especially Wordsworth and Coleridge; not so much Byron – were big on process; and in this we may be their creative heirs. Process. Growth. Change. The change of the season; the expectation of change, and the mix of feelings that always occurs at this time of year. Romantic and classical; Wordsworth and Homer. The nostalgic and elegiac light – "the light that never was on sea or land" – and how hard it is to let go of the past.

How hard it is, too, to let go of my sadness. But who says we have to – who says I have to? I remember Peter

saying once, in class, that poetry was where you could have your cake and eat it too. Only in poetry could you do that. And I remember thinking, How great that there is a place in life, called poetry, where you can do that – have your cake and eat it too. And maybe that's also one of the reasons I'm writing this essay – so I can keep doing that. But in a way, I'm fooling myself. It may be hard to let go of my sadness, and there's a part of me that doesn't want to; but I know I have to.

But why do I have to? Well, the pure and simple truth of it is that I'm married now. I fell in love and got married again, and moved to Seattle from Long Island, and left my Long Island life behind -- including my Long Island sadness.

But why doesn't part of me want to leave that sadness behind? Why doesn't part of me want to let it go? I think it's because the sadness is part of Diane, my first wife, who died 13 years ago. That sadness has been with me for 13 years, waxing and waning, while I lived – almost always alone -- on Long Island. That sadness is my own. A small thing, but mine own. And in leaving the sadness behind, in leaving Long Island behind, and letting go of my sadness, I am letting go of Diane, and my life with her. Not only my life with her while she was alive, but also after she died

– for those 13 years after she died, while I was a widower, before I got married again. The 13 years of her afterlife, so to speak, when she was still with me, in a way. In a very big way, actually. Because it was my afterlife, too – the remnants of my life, after half of it was gone. A half-life, you could say. I still had my son – our son, Zack – who lived with me another two years after Diane died, before he went off to college. So to call it a half-life is maybe a bit melodramatic. But it certainly wasn't a full life, for either of us. He had lost his mother. A loss never to be redeemed. I am still, and I suppose will always be, trying to get my mind around that one: what it was, what it is, what it meant and means, for my son to have lost his mother. She was my Diane, but she was his mother. She will always be his mother. And he will never have his mother again. That cake has been eaten, and can never be had again. And it is important to know, and to always remember, that whatever I say or can say about my own loss, I can never speak for him. Which only adds to my sense of the inadequacy, and maybe even the irrelevance, of my words.

That sense, though – however insufficient the capacities it points to -- will not keep me from speaking, if only to give my side of the story. My side of the

sadness, which I don't want to give up – in spite of my recognition that I already have given it up, in that I have left behind the place of that sadness, the place where Diane's death, from cancer, was coming for three and a half years, and then came, and then was lived with by Zack and me, and was sort of gotten used to – as most terrible things, or so they tell us, can be gotten used to – and even became sort of dear to me, as sad things will do. As anything will do that becomes part of you. So that when you leave the sadness behind, you feel you are leaving part of yourself behind, too. And you are.

And not just any part of yourself, either, but something authentic and irreplaceable. Something dear, in a way that happy things can never be dear. For happy things are not acquired in the way that unhappy things are; or if they sometimes are -- some happy things, anyway -- if the suffering that we sometimes pay for happy things with, through work and disappointment and frustration and sacrifice and deferral of pleasure – if that suffering is comparable to the suffering of loss, the two sufferings at least leave very different marks on us. The suffering we incur on the way to tangible gain does not, I think, touch the soul. Whereas the suffering we incur through serious loss – and failure, and the bafflement of hopes – very much

touches the soul. And not only touches it, but forms it. Forms it, and authenticates it. Loss and suffering and soul and authenticity are all intertwined, and indispensible.

But this is all now sounding rather abstract and theoretical, which was not my intention. The light of Labor Day – the nostalgic and elegiac light of September and Homer ("If this is September, it must be Homer") – such a light, however Romantic, requires real physical things to shine on, and reflect off of, and illuminate. An anatomy of melancholy, even if only mine own, requires a solid, material body to work on. I was going to write "to dissect", but that sounds too clinical and deliberate. We are talking about a process here; a process is underway. But the process has no program, no intentional plan. It is a natural process.

Because, for one thing – and the Romantics would certainly agree with this, too -- it is a process that takes place in nature. The process of sadness, of working through loss in sadness, took place for me in nature. In as much of nature as could be found, anyway, in the suburbs of Long Island. In my neighborhood of Huntington Station, to be exact, not far from the shore of Long Island Sound. But it was still enough nature for anyone who needed it,

and was willing to look. I did, and I was. I had the sky, and the clouds, and the trees – full in summer, bare branches in winter. Ah, the somber, dignified beauty of bare branches in winter! The simple, diminished winter trees. The beauty of diminishment – including my own diminishment. The diminishment of the Minor Period, which is what I call the period (2004-2017) between when Diane died and when I left Long Island for Seattle, to live with Julie. The Minor Period was and is dear to me, as things and times of sadness can be dear to us.

But the Minor Period, it seems to me now – and I think it seemed so even then – was a time not only of sadness, but of a certain peculiar authenticity as well. The authenticity of sadness. (Does this imply then that happiness cannot be authentic, at least for me? And is this true? Is it part of my illness? Stay tuned.) It was a time of feeling, of my feeling, that I had no choice but to make the best of a period of diminishment, of diminished possibilities and expectations. After Diane's death – after the death of Zack's mother; and let me remind myself, lest I become too egocentric in my negative nostalgia (I like that term, "negative nostalgia"; the French of course have a name for it; they call it "la nostalgie de la boue" – "nostalgia for the mud"), that Diane's death was also the

death of Zack's mother – after Zack's mother's death, after the death of my Diane, the idea of having possibilities and expectations, while not entirely eradicated, was radically tempered and diminished. My possibilities in life were less now, because they were no longer shared with her; and therefore my expectations must be less, too. But in a sense, those possibilities and expectations were also, in their diminishment, rendered more valuable and meaningful. Their diminishment paradoxically concentrated and enhanced them; the old "less is more" paradox.

Hope – the possible grounds for hope, in the face of loss, loneliness and desolation – became much more important to me. Indeed, the possibility of hope became all-important, and the sky, the clouds, and the trees became objects – or at least companions -- of that hope. To be out and about on a walk under the elements was vital. I subsisted on hope, and on all the feelings and things that worked to buttress hope, and counteract hopelessness and despair: the emotionally succoring power of clouds, of the sea (especially the Long Island Sound, for some reason, more than the open ocean, which I also had access to, not that much farther away than the Sound; but the effects of the ocean were much different – also sublime, but in a different, less "contemplational" way), the power of trees,

and of the horizon. The horizon was a big deal during the Minor Period, for practical as well as metaphorical reasons. There are no mountains on Long Island; all is flatness, unrelieved flatness, so the distant horizon became a receptacle, as it were, for my vague but insistent intimations of hope and expectation; to coin another term, the distant horizon became "expectational". That is to say, it gave me the sense of something to be looked forward to, though I couldn't say exactly what. It gave me a mild excitement, a vague sense that something was in the offing.

And along with the horizon, during the Minor Period I became much more conscious of the idea of the weather over the Sound. (The actual reality of the weather over the Sound, while pleasing to me, was somehow less compelling than the idea of the weather.) Even when I wasn't at the beach – which was most of the time, since I rarely went to the beach when it wasn't summertime – even when I wasn't by the Sound, I was thinking of what the weather must be like over the Sound. I had a picture of it in my mind; and the somberer, the better. The thought of somber, dark, cold and inclement weather over the Sound filled me with an expectational happiness. I cannot say why. And the fact that I cannot – and couldn't – say why was part of the feeling of happiness. The whole imagined tableau – clouds,

storm, rain, coldness, overcast, all of them over the distant Sound – served as a kind of emblem for me. An emblem of happiness and – perversely, counter-intuitively, even – a sense of security. Maybe it was because inclement weather implied, also, a process of sheltering – repairing to a cozy redoubt to "seek shelter from the storm". Maybe it was the thought of a cozy redoubt that made me happy. The cozy redoubt was the antidote to my sadness and loneliness – or at least a refuge from them. But I think it was more than that, too; I think the thought of heavy weather itself brought me happiness. And again, I cannot quite say why this was.

How I miss all that! How I miss not only having but imagining the clouds and heavy weather and darkness over the Sound. Because I live by a sound now too – Puget Sound – and yet how different! How different and strange this new geography is. Here there are mountains on both sides of Puget Sound: the Olympic Range to the west, between the Sound and the Pacific Ocean; to the east, the Cascades. And to the south, there is also the Fuji-esque glory of Mt. Rainier, solitary and majestic in the distance. But none of this drama, both geological and meteorological – for there is serious weather in Seattle, too; months and months of rain, and cloudy skies -- riches for this Southern

California boy, raised in the sun (we haven't talked yet about LA, nor will we, in this essay; though its eternal, or mostly eternal sunshine of the not-exactly-spotless mind is the counterpoint to, and no doubt basis of, my worship, my enshrinement, of inclement weather) -- none of Seattle's natural, elemental drama has much meaning for me yet. None of it, you see, is saturated. Nature in and around Seattle is beautiful – no doubt more beautiful, more picturesque, more dramatic than nature on Long Island – but it is not saturated. Saturated with what? With sadness, of course. My sadness. Sadness, and memories, and memories of the sadness. Even the happy memories of Long Island – getting my teaching job; moving there with Diane and Zack; getting tenure; going places with Diane and Zack: into the city; out to the beach; to the Hamptons Shakespeare Festival every summer – even these happy memories have an ostinato, a ground bass, of sadness. For they are all backgrounded by the biggest memory of all, the biggest sadness, the only sadness, in a way, which is the memory of Diane's illness and death, and its aftermath. Its afterlife.

And I miss that saturation. I miss that sadness. I am nostalgic for that mud. Because Seattle, in that sense, holds no mud for me. The light, when the sun is out – as it has been all this summer – is bright, clear, white, and

rather harsh. It reminds me more than a little of the LA light; there is a starkness and heartlessness to it. So different from the Long Island light, which is gentler, goldener. (The Hudson River School of painting got it just right.) Especially at this time of year – the Homeric time of year. Though I will say that the light here in Seattle is softer now than before (partly because of the severe wildfires we've been having in the state, and in Oregon and British Columbia as well). The light of Homer makes its way here too, as it did in the other Pacific places where I've lived, and where I went to school – in Berkeley, and LA. I suppose that September is essentially Homeric, no matter where you are. September is saturated with Homer, and I'll take what I can get. Still, the light of Seattle is too much like the light of LA, and the light of California in general. I miss the light of the East.

There is a passage at the beginning of Thomas Hardy's novel The Return of the Native that has always spoken to me, since I first read it 37 years ago. It describes the scene in a place called Egdon Heath, shortly before twilight, in November. The Heath is growing darker by the minute, but there is still a white light in the sky:

> It was a spot which returned upon the memory of those who loved it with an aspect of peculiar and kindly congruity. Smiling champaigns of flowers

> and fruit hardly do this…. Twilight combined with the scenery of Egdon Heath to evolve a thing majestic without severity, impressive without showiness, emphatic in its admonitions, grand in its simplicity. The qualifications which frequently invest the façade of a prison with far more dignity than is found in the façade of a palace double its size lent to this heath a sublimity in which spots renowned for beauty of the accepted kind are utterly wanting. Fair prospects wed happily with fair times; but alas, if times be not fair! Men have oftener suffered from the mockery of a place too smiling for their reason than from the oppression of surroundings oversadly tinged.

LA was always "a place too smiling for my reason", and when I read this in the fall of 1980, when I was 26, and going through my first (and worst) depression, in the house in Pacific Palisades where I grew up and had now returned to, it struck a strong chord with me. The chord of noble sadness, of depth of feeling. Of authentic being.

The chord, it is also entirely possible, of my own delusion – the delusion, to quote another favorite text, that "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to the house of mirth." The house of mirth is a shallow place, whereas the house of mourning is a place of depth and true feeling. As though feelings of mirth were somehow not true feelings, or at least not as true as feelings of sadness. Balderdash – Romantic balderdash! But I believe it. I have always believed it. In my heart, I have always

believed that Romantic balderdash. Despite all my Greek and Latin, despite the Homer and Plato and Virgil and Horace and Catullus, and my taste for classical clarity – including clarity of formulation – I have always believed that the deep truth is not only inexpressible, and even unknowable, but also sad. (Of course, if it is unknowable, how can I know that it is sad? More balderdash!) What a bunch of bullshit! And yet I believe it.

Or is it more that I just want to believe it? Because believing it would make me – what? More "authentic"? Would make me not the privileged, candy-ass son of a screenwriter from LA that I am (the son being from LA, not the screenwriter; my father was born in New York City, and was shot down in World War II, and his plane made a belly-landing in the mountains, and the crew hid out in caves, and then my father was taken prisoner and spent 18 months in Italian and German prison-camps, and was liberated by the Red Army, and travelled overland with the Russians for a while, before arriving in Paris and gallivanting around there, and then in London, until the US Army finally caught up with him and sent him home to New York; my father, in other words, was authentic) – but rather someone else less privileged and therefore more authentic? Because I believe also that there is an inverse relationship between

privilege and authenticity. Or rather, I both believe this and I don't. I don't believe it because three of my favorite writers – Proust, James and Byron – were highly privileged as well, yet were no less writers – and no less authentic -- for all that. But then they were also geniuses, and I, Senator, am no genius. And for non-geniuses, privilege is the kiss of death, as far as both creativity and authenticity go.

Probably all balderdash, too. But the truth remains that, however deluded and just plain wrong some of my Romantic beliefs are, I still feel more "anchored" when I am sad than when I am happy. Once again, I know not why this is, but it is. Maybe that's what that Biblical verse means – that the house of mourning is better than the house of mirth because it is more anchoring. After all, you are doing something worthwhile when you go to the house of mourning. You are comforting people. And comforting people, besides being the right thing to do, is also anchoring. Exposing yourself to sadness, and comforting people, anchors you more in reality than partying does. Plus, happiness passes, but sadness remains. The poor you have always with you.

More balderdash! part of me says again. Both sadness and happiness are passing, the Buddha says. Impermanent.

Change and flux alone are real. It's just that sadness has a certain cachet for the Romantic because, due to the peculiar orientation of the Romantic psyche, it feels more tethered to reality when it is sad than when it is happy.

Or maybe it's just a question of neurochemistry. For the depressive, the default is sadness. I know there is an important distinction that is always made here: sadness is a normal response to external reality, whereas depression is a pathological condition. That's the standard line, and I'm not challenging it here. What I'm saying is just that I recognize that my cultivation of and attachment to sadness is partly Romantic balderdash, and partly neurochemical destiny, and partly, also, a kind of creative superstition. I feel that sadness – at least my sadness of the past 13 years, and probably long before that, long before the Minor Period; probably way back into childhood, the more I think about it – sadness has for a long time been associated, in my mind (and not only my mind, but in the popular mythology as well), with creativity. That too is part of what another professor of mine in graduate school, the great Jerome J. McGann, called "The Romantic Ideology". (He was using "ideology" in the Marxist sense of false consciousness.)

But I can be more precise than that, and I need to be. At least in the Minor Period, I think I associated sadness with a certain kind of creativity. I will call it the creativity of diminishment. In the Minor Period I wrote three books, three memoirs: Failure: An Autobiography, The Widower: An Afterlife, and Shame: A Transgression. So in a sense you could say that the Minor Period is chronicled – at least the interior vagaries and vicissitudes of the Minor Period are chronicled – in those books. And those books, along with the various sadnesses that they chronicle, are dear to me, too. They are the tangible products of the Minor Period. They came out of my sadness, and they make me – paradoxically -- happy. It's no wonder that I should be attached to them, and to everything that helped and enabled me to produce them. For all of that I am grateful – authentically grateful. (Gratitude also makes for authenticity.) Those products of the creativity of diminishment are dear to me.

So it is not merely sentimental of me, I think, to be attached to my sadness. And also to be somewhat apprehensive about what the outliving of my sadness will mean for me, creatively speaking. Will the specter of happiness cast my creative daimon – what the Greeks called the inner spirit of creative energy; Socrates refers

several times to his daimon; from the Greek we get our word "demon", whose meaning is rather an oversimplification of the Greek – will happiness cast my daimon into darkness, never to be heard from again? Can happy people write anything good? Sure they can, and to believe otherwise is simply yet more Romantic balderdash. The relevant question, I think, is a somewhat different one: Can happy people produce art?

But this question too is refracted through a distorted Romantic lens. They say Shakespeare was generally a good-humored person. More hearsay, of course; we know so little of Shakepeare's life. He was certainly no Romantic poet, though. Let us say, rather, that Shakespeare used his daimon very efficiently – perhaps the most efficiently of any English-language poet. He put it all into his poetry. He was the opposite, in that regard, of Oscar Wilde, who famously said, with only part of his silver tongue in his cheek: "I have put my talent into my writing, but saved my genius for my life." I would be more than happy to be able to do with my own talent one half of what Wilde did with his. (With genius I have nothing to do.)

In any event, and for whatever reasons, I am apprehensive about this, the post-Minor Period. (I actually call it the "Julistic Period" – the period of

Julie, and Julistics, which is the study of Julie.) No longer alone, but married again, in a different city, in a different state, on a different coast, with a different light (a light familiar to me, from my LA and Berkeley days – but it is not, to me, a welcome familiarity; it is not a light I associate with my daimon, such as it is). Who knows what will come of it for me, this different light? Maybe it is just "the light of common day", and I will have to make of it what I can. Facing the specter of his own diminishing powers, Wordsworth had this to say:

> Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
> The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
> Hath had elsewhere its setting,
> And cometh from afar:
> Not in entire forgetfulness,
> And not in utter nakedness,
> But trailing clouds of glory to we come
> From God, who is our home:
> Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
> Shades of the prison house begin to close
> Upon the growing Boy
> But he
> Beholds the light, and whence it flows,
> He sees it in his joy;
> The Youth, who daily farther from the east
> Must travel, still is Nature's Priest,
> And by the vision splendid
> Is on his way attended;
> At length the Man perceives it die away,
> And fade into the light of common day.

The little garden I am trying to cultivate here in soon-to-be rainy Seattle – six months of rain (at least) producing six months (at most) of splendor in the grass –

that too is a small thing, but mine own. With Julie, I got lucky for the second time in my life, and for that too I am grateful. For the time being, at least, I seem to have lost my sadness. I will not go looking for it right now. But life, if you are patient, has a way of redeeming many things.

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