“Of a High Noon in June”

A Literary Essay on the Counter-Existence

> There are in our existence spots of time,
> Which with distinct preeminence retain
> A renovating virtue, whence, depressed
> By false opinion and contentious thought,
> Or aught of heavier or more deadly weight
> In trivial occupations and the round
> Of ordinary intercourse, our minds
> Are nourished and invisibly repaired….
>
> --Wordsworth

It’s the Thursday before Memorial Day in Seattle. The weather is splendorous – the sort of day that Seattleites have worked hard half the year, in the rain and long hours of darkness, to finally enjoy. On my walk this morning I stopped at the top of the hill to observe the vista spread out before me: Puget Sound glittering in the sun, then Bainbridge Island and the low hills of the Kitsap Peninsula, and beyond that, the towers of the Olympic Range, with traces of snow still showing on their uppermost slopes. Tufts of billowy clouds perched over the mountains – nothing threatening, just enough to break up an otherwise pure blue expanse of sky. The “blue distanza”, I call it – a coinage that suggests (and is inspired by) the exotic formulations of Wallace Stevens, who would have had much to say about the prospects and resonances of a day like this, committed as he was to weathers of all kinds. (“The Poems

of Our Climate," indeed!) Stevens and Wordsworth both would have wanted to memorialize this day -- "It seems a day…One of those heavenly days that cannot die" – and I feel inspired to do the same, in my own way. (Though a walk in weather like this seems already to constitute a sort of homage.)

Back when I was living on Long Island, in the wake of the death of my first wife, Diane, I began a tradition of going on long walks at the start of the Memorial Day weekend, as one way of marking the beginning of summer -- the beginning of "the gladsome time", as I dubbed it. (Though properly speaking, "the gladsome time" for me typically began in early May, when the lilacs and the two chestnut trees in the back yard came into bloom.) Memorial Day weekend also marked the beginning of summer on another calendar: the academic one. Graduation at the Long Island college where I taught for 19 years always came a week or so before Memorial Day, so by the time the first holiday of summer rolled around, final grades had already been turned in, and graduation performed, and I felt the sweet, long-awaited release of duties discharged and obligations carried out. Free for the summer! The teacher's version of the student's liberation, felt now from the other side of the divide. Though (and maybe in large part because) I

am effectively retired now – the Long Island college went bankrupt and closed its doors almost exactly three years ago, right after Graduation Day, and since then I've been teaching sporadically as a part-time adjunct at a community college just south of Seattle – I can still remember how excited and proud I felt attending my first graduation as a visiting assistant professor, wearing my robes and parading across the football field to "Pomp and Circumstance". My observer's awareness of the slight ridiculousness of the processional and recessional ceremonies took nothing away from my pride and excitement that day. (It may even have added to them.) The summer was now mine, and if it was to be a "Summer of Writing" – that is, if I had a book project underway (which, for three summers during the first eleven years after Diane's death, I did) – so much the better. With the prospect of a SOW spread out before me, the time was all the gladsomer (as Stevens might have put it; he had a thing for unorthodox comparatives). My feeling, for all those years after Diane died, and before I met Julie, my second wife, that each looked-forward-to summer was to be a lonely one, gave its commencement every year a bittersweetness that was not lost on me, and became part of its accustomed atmosphere. The loneliness too was something to be explored in writing; and while the long

summer evenings after a day of writing (DOW) were certainly better than those on which no writing had occurred, the loneliness in either case was something not entirely unpleasurable. Just how and why this should be so is probably the subject of another essay; suffice it to say here that it was so, and that the contemplation of sadness has always had a certain comforting appeal. There were also a couple of "Summers of Depression" – SODs (I myself have a thing for special terminology and systems of classification – which is definitely the subject of another essay!) -- during which no writing at all took place; in those, I found myself mourning the "loss" of summer even while it was still present, and almost looking forward to the beginning of the next school year, when I would then have an acceptable excuse for not writing.

So there is an inheritance of sadness as well as expectation in these pre-Memorial Day walks, which gives them if not exactly a gravitas (I think it's more like Feierlichkeit, the German word for "solemn celebration") to balance the liberated lightness that I feel, then at least a certain contemplational resonance that contributes to thoughtfulness. I have carried this tradition across the country with me, to a different landscape and a different climate; yet the inauguration of summer with a walk still

persists, and the awareness of its continuance is pleasing to me.

There is something else, too, that I like to think about on these walks. It is an image I have held in my mind since at least the time of Diane's death – early June of 2004 – if not before. It is the image of a young man in the earliest years of his prime – say, at 18. The time of year is also early June. (Early June is kind of a touchstone with me, partly no doubt because my birthday is June 3 – Diane died five days after my 50th birthday – but for other reasons as well, which will become clear in due course.) This young man is about to graduate from high school, and has been accepted at an Ivy League college. But why beat around the bush? He is going to Harvard! Soon, he will be among the happy denizens of those hallowed halls and houses – the blessed of the earth! (Yes, I have a Harvard thing, too – call it the obsession of the excluded. More on that as well, anon.) And right now, poised as he is on the verge of – well, on the verge of just about everything, it seems to him -- he feels himself "sitting atop golden hours". (The phrase is mine, not his. Though he would recognize its aptness to his situation, he himself would never apply those exact words to what he is feeling.) He is not literary, or romantic, our young man.

But that is not the only reason he would not use the phrase. Out of a somewhat self-conscious modesty, it has always been his custom, for as long as he can remember, to partly conceal his awareness of his feelings from himself. And when those feelings break through anyway, willy-nilly, it is also his habit to resist -- again, only half-consciously – the secret pleasure they give him. Now this impulse to resist a natural pleasure one is feeling is a curious one, and our young man is not alone in experiencing it; in another essay (one that I actually wrote!) I called it "The Killjoy Genie". But the point is, if someone were to mention to him the strange phenomenon of "The Killjoy Genie", even using different words, our young man would probably still be in denial.

For as I say, he is not literary – nor particularly philosophical or speculative, either. I imagine his intellectual interests lead him more in the direction of the social or natural sciences. He may in fact already have his sights set on law school, or medical school; but if so, only dimly, because he is not really the calculating sort. Nor is he much of a grind; that would not comport well with the manner in which he carries himself, which is that of the natural athlete. (His sports are long-distance running and, above all, swimming; he is on the varsity swim

team, and moves with an appropriate loose-limbed insouciance.) He has the unselfconscious social ease of the athlete, too. Girls like him. They find him attractive, smart, sometimes even funny -- but also sensitive, when the need should arise. He is, in short, what is called "well-rounded" – one of the reasons, if not the main reason, why Harvard College has decided to admit him into that most exclusive of societies.

But wait a minute. Perhaps you find the idealized depiction of this notional young man thinly-imagined, stereotyped, and basically unconvincing. If you do, I will not take it amiss. For he is, after all, a figment of my imagination, and I am no fiction writer. As for the idealization, perhaps that will seem a little more plausible when I admit to what you may have already guessed: the young man is mostly a wishful projection of myself, the figure I would have liked – or at least part of me would have liked – to have cut, 47 years ago. A figure not so unlike the kind of person – or one particular kind of person – I went to prep school with, and about whom, at the time, I had very mixed feelings, mostly of contempt and envy. I went to a prep school – Exeter, to name more names – where the majority of my classmates went on to Ivy-League colleges. I myself was rejected by all the ivies to which

I applied (Harvard, Stanford, Princeton – I know Stanford is not technically ivy league, but I don't really know what else to call it), except for Brown. I was ready to go to Brown, but my father (Harvard '41) finally convinced me to go to Berkeley instead. As a Harvard man, he didn't think the much higher cost of Brown was worth it. (At the time – 1972 -- Berkeley's tuition for in-state residents was $212 a quarter; room and board, if I remember correctly, was around $1,000 a year.)

Now you may be wondering how this young man – bright, certainly, but not brilliant; athletic, but no star, not even as a swimmer – managed to get into Harvard in the first place. So let it be noted that my vision of him is not taken from the present. In fact, it goes back even further than 47 years ago, to the 1950s, a time when young men of his type – intelligent, but not outstandingly so; well-rounded and likeable and citizenly, rather than gifted in any way – could still get into Harvard. A time when Harvard itself was still an all-male school, and admissions were less competitive (especially if the person in question was a "legacy" applicant, which this young man – like me -- was). I know I said he was largely a projection of myself, which he is; but he is a sort of retrospective projection, if that makes any sense. He is what I imagine I might have

been like if I had been an alternative version of myself, inhabiting a different body and brain, in the world of the past – the idealized world, to be sure, of an idealized past.

The light of this past tends to be a little bit hazy, as in old black-and-white photographs. And in that light, individual features tend to get a little blurred, and some people might get mistaken for others. For instance, someone who got rejected twice from Harvard – once as a freshman, and once as a transfer student (I applied again during my freshman year at Berkeley), although he "had" both Latin and Greek (Exeter Latin and Greek, no less, as our instructors liked to remind us), and even a year of Sanskrit – such a person might, in the slightly distorting light of the past, be mistaken for a young man of more modest (if more comely) gifts, and be admitted. Mistakes get made. Nobody – not even the sons and daughters of John Harvard – is perfect.

But I am not bitter. Nor was I, even back then. I was, at the time – both times – bitterly disappointed, but not bitter. That is not my style. "All gratulant if rightly understood." (Wordsworth again. Unlike my young man, I am not only a romantic, but something of a Romanticist as well. I did my dissertation – 25 years ago

now – on Byron and Wordsworth.) And I have come to understand a few things since I was 18, one of which is that it is my vocation – and the vocation of any writer – to be an observer. The young man is the participant – the protagonist of the drama, if you will -- and I am the observer. The chronicler. The writer. It is necessary to be removed from the action if you are going to write about it. You can't have the necessary perspective, or vantage-point, if you're right there in the middle of things. And a good vantage-point is so important. You can't have a proper sense of the atmosphere, the particular atmosphere of time and place – sunlight, but slightly hazy, as in a photograph of "the olden days" – if you're not at a vantage-point out of the action and atmosphere you're trying to capture. And I'm very much trying to capture an atmosphere – the atmosphere of "the olden days" (here, the 1950s), and a young man poised on the brink of his "real life" (the life where, as he imagines it, he gets to do basically what he wants to do, and not what other people want him to), who is "sitting atop golden hours". The atmosphere of a high noon in June (for it is from the more comprehensive vantage-point of late May in 2019 that one can more properly – more accurately, feelingly, knowingly – observe the high noon of a June day in the 1950s), with

Graduation Day approaching. (The eponymous Beach Boys song, though it came out in the 60's, not the 50's, has a retrospective sentimentality that conveys the impression I'm working with.) Not quite here yet, but rapidly approaching. For anticipation and expectation are everything. "Effort, and expectation, and desire, And something evermore about to be." (Guess who?) The waxing of the moon, and the year, are gladsome times; the waning of these things is sad. For our young man, all is waxing still – and for a long time yet to come. And his observer is in the proper position – the proper vantage-point, almost three-quarters of a century removed -- from which to regard the situation. (I use the Stevensian verb deliberately, because it is a question here of not only seeing and perceiving, but "regarding". To regard is to hold an inner attitude of care and concern for what you are looking at. Thus the older man, on the brink of other things now, "regards" the much younger man, who is the object of his inner vision – his wishful, nostalgic inner vision.)

But do I really wish I were this young man, Harvard-bound, of a high noon in June? (Note the antique diction here.) No, not really. It is not to <u>be</u> him that I want, but only to <u>regard</u> him, to <u>contemplate</u> him – to contemplate

about him, as I like to say, intransitively -- fully and knowingly: knowing his hopes, his excitement, his great expectations for the future. And knowing also what I know now, which is that it doesn't matter what college you go to. ("It doesn't make a damn bit of difference," my father said to me as he held me in his arms to comfort me, after I'd told him that I didn't get into Harvard (for the second time), and burst into tears, that other June day – a real one, as it happened -- in 1973). And knowing furthermore that the young man, who is both me and not me, doesn't know that yet. At 18, having gotten into Harvard is nearly everything to him – and who am I to tell him differently? On this fine June noonday, the world is his oyster, and Harvard is its pearl. Who am I to tell him, say, that his privilege sucks – and is, in any case, the thing of an hour? I, who share that same privilege – though not exactly the same, because I never was to be a denizen of those particular hallowed brick halls and houses (Follow the hallowed brick road!); yet I know very well, I feel very well the guilt of my own privilege, as well as the shame of my failure, all of my failures. (The title of my autobiography, by the way: Failure: An Autobiography. But we won't go into that now. What a tease I am!) For that is part of the olden-day atmosphere of the time, too – a

time when white people (the vast majority of them, anyway) were oblivious of their own privilege. Not that I mean to sentimentalize, or otherwise idealize, their ignorance. (Nor do I mean to suggest that that kind of privilege is a thing of the past. It clearly isn't. Though the times now are rather different. Hence the differential in vantage-point that drives my vision of the young man.) That ignorance was certainly responsible for much evil, at the time. But white privilege was a sign of the times back then, even more than it is today -- part of the atmosphere, the very air that people like our young man were breathing.

Reader, I hope you don't hate him – though you may very well hate the class from which he comes, and represents. But if he is representative of many things, many objectionable things – white privilege, obliviousness, ignorance, institutional racism – not all of the things he represents are objectionable. For instance, his immanence. He is very much in the moment, living in the moment. Something his observer, even at the same age, found difficult. Some part of his observer was always – and always felt himself to be – separate and apart from what was going on. Always the observer, never the fully-fledged participant/protagonist. Part of the observer was always writing things down – if only in his head. Nor is this

necessarily an ignoble syndrome. Wordsworth composed while walking – and I strongly suspect Stevens of doing the same, while walking to and from work at the insurance company. (Byron just tossed it off, wherever – in both senses!) But much as I am grateful, in some ways, for my observer's status, and what it has given me – the space, the removed space, from which to write – it has also given me a hunger for immanence, and for constructing fictive, or partly-fictive (to use another Stevensian term) protagonist/participants who are immanent in a way I'm not, and never have been. I have always been slightly in orbit. And the view from orbit, as we all know by now, is splendorous. But it's also hard to be circling, always circling in orbit. And re-entry is especially difficult. It is difficult to readjust to the terrestrial terrain.

I know I said before that I am no fiction writer, yet these various conceits – fictive protagonist/participants, immanence, orbiting and re-entry – might seem to belie that claim. Perhaps I should have said rather that I am a failed fiction writer. I think that would have put it more accurately. A failed fiction writer who turned to the essay for the ample opportunities it gives for undisguised self-expression, rather than outright invention or creation. (Not that I intend to get into self-evisceration

here, or any of the gory details. That would not be to the point.) What is more to the point – and maybe even is the point – is the fact of failure itself, and what it has given me. Not just my observer's status (which I suspect is more cause than effect of failure: the observer's status, like the Killjoy Genie, was ingrained in me long before any specific instances of failure occurred), but my particular vantage-point – especially the wishfulness, the desirousness of my vantage-point – and also my "countervoice", which offers another platform from which to regard and register and consider and contemplate about the young man. As I say, I don't wish to be him – that is, the parts of him that aren't already me; rather I wish to be free to contemplate about him, and contemplate also about the differentials between us, and the meaning of those differentials.

The chief differential – the largest gear in the transmission of the character-vehicle, so to speak – being this question of failure: the importance of failure, the need for failure, the role of failure. Not, mind you, as a stepping-stone to eventual success – I'll have none of that. (Not that I have anything against success. Though is that really true? I suspect not. I suspect I have a few things against the proverbial bitch goddess.) Success,

like power, corrupts. It is not formative – not of the important things, anyway. It is not formative of character, or soul, or wisdom. Whereas failure is formative – or at least can be formative, depending on the failure, and the failer – of all three. And these are the things – character, soul and wisdom – that I care most about. And kindness. Kindness most of all.

I have said that our young man is not a romantic, nor a philosopher, nor literary. Perhaps the lack of these qualities is part of the reason why I have envisioned him in the first place. For these are all things that I am, and that I therefore need for him not to be. These are the things for which I need a "countervoice". Or perhaps it is the other way round. The things that the young man is, that he represents for me, are the things for which I need to provide a "countervoice". The young man is triumphant at 18 – triumphant as only an 18-year-old, beginning to emerge out of the initial proving-ground of adolescence, can be. And I like to contemplate (and contemplate about) his triumph, partly because it is so different from my own disappointed situation at that same time in my life, and partly because we share so much in common still: privilege, hope, great expectations. (For I am no pessimist, finally, though I certainly have a pessimistic streak; but the mere

fact that I don't shy away from failure – quite the opposite, actually – I think indicates that I am a bit of an optimist: failure is nothing to be frightened of – again, not because it leads to success in the end, but simply because it is part of life, like the darkness, the night, and the ocean: natural things that are salutary in their naturalness. Failure is another one of those forces of nature; but though it is constitutive of our human reality, it is not definitive.)

Our great expectations, the young man's and mine, are of course very different. His, at 18, are of going out to conquer the world, after his own fashion: of gaining money and stature and repute, in ways that would still be consonant with his decent values. My great expectations, at 65, break differently – but still beckon to me temptingly, through the near distance. I too, like the young man, want still to make my mark – if only in writing, if only as an essayist, and if only in the more recognized national literary journals. At 65, I have failed enough to know what I would not, could not give up in order to succeed. The young man has not yet failed at all; he has, so far in his short life, merely triumphed. And that is part of his youthful charm, his emblematic quality – and his shallowness. He is still all potential, gleaming in

the noonday sun. His character, pace Freud, is still in formation. (Very much so, for he has not yet failed.) His wisdom – the wisdom of the natural athlete – is of the body alone. And I am afraid he has not yet acquired much soul -- if only because of his failure, at this still young age, to fail.

But much about him, as I say, is still in formation, so we need not worry too much yet about the state of his soul. I have a feeling he will come out all right in the end – will have his fair share of failure, which will, like vitamins, allow him to develop properly. You could say that failure is vitamins for the soul. His bones and muscles are just fine; but his soul, as yet, is a little under-nourished.

As a protagonist – my protagonist, the protagonist to my observer – he is idealized, yes; but in other ways he is the ideal protagonist, in the sense that he is one upon whom life has yet to imprint an individual mark. In this way, he reminds me of Hans Castorp, the protagonist of Thomas Mann's The Magic Mountain, at the start of the novel. (Enough with the poets already – right, reader? Let's see what the fiction writers have to say.) A young man in many ways quite average and unremarkable, very bland – that is to say, one who lacks seasoning -- at the outset

of what is to be an adventure of the body and mind (mostly the latter, but some of the former as well) that is to provide him with an education of the soul. The German word is Bildung; The Magic Mountain is one of the greatest of Bildungsromans – in my opinion, the greatest, except for Proust's.) At the beginning of the novel, Hans' Bildung is all still ahead of him; and the story of the novel is the story of his education – not at the university, but at the tuberculosis sanatorium where the book is set. The sanatorium is his school of life. Hans' education is to be richer than anything our young man will gain at Harvard; but then it is in the nature of Bildung that it cannot be acquired in any regular school. The image I have of Hans – an image projected on top of another image (the image of my young man), which is already itself a projection – is from the beginning of the novel, and is a flashback from his earlier family history. Hans' grandfather is showing him an old family heirloom -- his (the grandfather's, but also Hans' father's, and Hans') old baptismal bowl. But what is striking for me is the way in which young Hans regards the baptismal bowl as his grandfather recites the family history inscribed on it:

> His father's name was there, as was in fact his grandfather's, and his great-grandfather's; and now that syllable came doubled, tripled and

> quadrupled from the storyteller's mouth; and the boy would lay his head to one side, his eyes fixed and full of thought, yet somehow dreamily thoughtless, his lips parted in drowsy devotion, and he would listen to the great-great-great-great – that somber sound of the crypt and buried time, which nevertheless both expressed a reverently preserved connection of his own life in the present to things now sunk deep beneath the earth and simultaneously had a curious effect on him: the same effect visible in the look on his face. The sound made him feel as if he were breathing the moldy, cool air of Saint Catherine's Church or the crypt in Saint Michael's, as if he could sense the gentle draft of places where as you walked, hat in hand, you fell into a certain reverential, forward rocking motion, your heels never touching the ground; and he also thought he could hear the remote, cloistered silence of those reverberating spaces. At the sound of those somber syllables, religious feelings got mixed up with a sense of death and history, and all of it together somehow left the boy with a pleasant sensation – indeed, it may well have been that it was solely for the sake of that sound, just to hear it and join in reciting it, that he had once again asked to be allowed to see the baptismal bowl.

There is much that appeals here: the young Hans' attitude of respectful attentiveness, combined with a certain reverential dreaminess; the patina of the past – of "the olden days" – that surrounds not only the baptismal bowl itself, but the scene in which it is presented; the hushed spell of wonder cast over the young boy by the old man and his world – the world of "silence and slow time" (to borrow from Keats' poem – another ecphrastic masterpiece). One can feel also the appeal of the

particular kind of conservatism the suffuses the scene here: not so much a political conservatism (though Mann had been a German nationalist during World War I, he changed his tune after Hitler's rise to power, and was a political refugee in the US during World War II; in fact, Doctor Faustus was written in my home town of Pacific Palisades, California, where Mann lived for several years; it's a kick to think that I may have skateboarded on some of the same streets where the creator of Hans Castorp used to walk his dog) as an aesthetic and cultural conservatism. In any case, the conservatism on display in this passage seems consonant with the light of 1950s America under which the vision of my own young man is placed. As I have said, he is not at all literary or aesthetically-minded; but in times to come I think he may grow to appreciate the spirit informing this passage. And who knows – he may even take a shot at The Magic Mountain at some point in his life, maybe after retirement. But we are a long way from that now, and I am reminded of the passage from the novel because of the resemblance I see – slight, to be sure, but detectable – between Mann's protagonist and my own. Granted, Hans is one of the most memorable protagonists in the history of the novel, whereas my young man is a merely notional figment; but it's their mutual "high averageness" that

connects them in my imagination. What do I mean by this term? I guess I mean they are both examples of what my mother would have called "the best kind" of averageness. She used this term to designate the sort of thoroughly-decent person that she, as a lifelong lapsed Irish Catholic and devout Democrat, would sometimes describe as "the best kind of WASP", or "the best kind of Republican", in order to suggest that although she herself was not of either of those ilks, she could recognize and appreciate their most enlightened forms. (Examples of these types might have been, say, George Plimpton and Mayor John Lindsey, respectively.) And so it is for me regarding the "high averageness" of both Hans Castorp and my notional young man. They are neither brilliant nor outstanding in any way; but their human antennae are in splendid working order, and continually up; they are receptive to a number of things. They are alive to atmosphere, and also to Being (though neither would ever use this term) – to what Hans' and his creator's despicable (yet indispensible) compatriot Heidegger identified as Dasein. Our young man, as I have indicated, is neither philosophical nor speculative, let alone mystical – whereas Hans, up on the mountain, develops signs of all of these qualities; they are part and parcel of his Bildung. But he (our young man) does register

atmosphere, if only unconsciously – and the atmosphere of this June noonday is not lost on him. It would be going much too far – it would in fact be ridiculous – to even suggest that it is his finest hour; but it would perhaps not be unreasonable to say that it is the first of what will be a number of fine and memorable hours in his life. And to object that this is in fact a life that does not exist, and never will exist, not even in fiction, would be to miss the point. For we all have such notional lives, conceived in parallel to our actual lives; we all have such notional times, such notional June noons in our projected existences – our "counterlives", if you will (with a nod here to another master of mine, Philip Roth, who wrote a lot on the subject, including the novel The Counterlife – not, as he once remarked, the biography of a deli man), formed according to the "countervoices" we have inside. We all have visionary scenarios in our minds of places and times that seem almost like memories of things that never were, but might have been, and perhaps should have been. But reality turned out differently. And yet far from embittering our actual lives, our counterlives, with their countervoices, help to make those actual lives richer by supplying the thought of possibilities that seem to exist still within us. They cast us in an idealized light; they

remind us of ideals that we have perhaps put aside, but not forgotten. They are the remnants of alternative selves. Some cosmologists tell us that it is a mathematical certainty – though probably one that can never be proven experimentally, at least given the state of our present earthly science – that such alternative selves exist in alternative universes; and that we live in a multiverse of such alternative universes.

Now I am even less of a cosmologist than I am a fiction writer; but I have enough of an imagination – like Hans Castorp, and like my young man, too – to be taken with the conceit. And perhaps somewhere in the multiverse, there is a young man – or some reasonable organic facsimile thereof – at a time very much like the 1950s in America, experiencing, on his planet's version of a June day, what I am only imagining on the brink of this Memorial Day. My counterself, living my counterlife, and speaking in my countervoice. As those mathematicians, those discoverers of an ideal reality -- or are they the creators of it? So the debate runs -- say in their own particular language, "Let there be a young man, such that…"

Yes, let him be, such that…he may be me.