

My Minordom

The Contemplations of a Literary Failure

For Julie

I

Failure, Room to Move, a Place to Inhabit,  
and the Vox Clamantis

I had a Major Period, but I myself am Minor. How is this possible, and what does it even mean? I will explain.

I have written about my Major and Minor Periods already, in other works -- books and essays - so I won't repeat myself here. (Though you wouldn't know it even if I did, since those "other works" remain unpublished.) The word "works" is itself a Major term - a "term of Majordom", you might even say (as in "term of art") - and makes my writing sound important. It therefore runs the risk of sounding pretentious, which is why I put it in quotes. It recalls the French word "oeuvre", which suggests weightiness - both in quality and quantity. If someone has produced "work", or has an "oeuvre", they are someone to contend with. They have gravitas. In other words, they are Major. So perhaps I shouldn't have used that term in regards to my own writing. I mean, how were you to know that I was being ironic? I remember, once, when I was introduced to a scholar/professor some years ago, at an

academic gathering at the first college I taught at, Holy Cross, she politely - and somewhat diffidently, and totally unironically - admitted that she was "not familiar with my work." I loved that. It was a flattering and rather touching assumption: that I had "work" that she thought she should perhaps be familiar with. (Both assumptions, of course, were wrong - but charmingly and disarmingly so.) I later stole this concept, and used it for my own purposes. When my son mentioned somebody in his grade-school class whose name I'd never heard before, I would say, "I'm not familiar with his work." I did the same when my wife mentioned the name of someone she worked with in the psychiatric facility of the hospital where she was employed. This got back to her colleague, who was amused at the turn of phrase. But all joking aside (as the bad comedians say), I think we all - well, no, not all of us; some of us; a few of us, maybe; one or two, perhaps -- secretly like to think of ourselves as having "work" that others should be "familiar with". The most outrageous example of this kind of thinking might be the "work" of the professional French farter Joseph Pujol (1857-1945), a.k.a. "Le Petomane", whose biography is subtitled "Sa Vie, Son Oeuvre." (I find it especially pleasing that the word oeuvre has no quotes around it.)

But even though you probably wouldn't know it if I repeated myself, I would, and that would make me sad, because there is something else going on here that I think you should know about. It is a kind of secret faith that I harbor - a grandiose, probably deluded, maybe even megalomaniacal blind faith that someday, my collected writings will be assembled, edited and published by an as-yet unknown (maybe even unborn) future editor; at which point it will have proven providential for me not to have repeated myself before my future readers.

(By the way, I love the future perfect tense; it's my favorite verb tense. It implies the eventual fulfillment - the completion -- of an expectation: in this case, the future gratification of a deep-seated desire: the vindication of one's pipedreams, which will someday be revealed, by all that is implied in the future perfect tense, not to have been pipedreams at all, but rather prognostications.)

Now if you are thinking that this is already sounding more than a little insane, I am with you. I worry about that, too. Will I be shown to be insane - or rather, to have been insane all along? Or will my deep-seated desire - the desire, I admit, to be Major, even though I know I am Minor - will this desire instead be upheld and vindicated?

Will I be revealed to have been right all along? The suspense and uncertainty are part of the fun - for me, at least. They may not be satisfied within my lifetime - or ever; but that is part of the suspense and uncertainty, too - and therefore part of the fun.

And if all of this strikes you as not only possibly insane but also more than a little like the Henry James story "The Beast in the Jungle", in which the protagonist waits his whole life for something extraordinary to happen to him, only to realize, at the end, that the extraordinary thing was staring him in the face all along, and he was totally clueless - well, that is no accident, either. Because the idea of "Major" and "Minor" - of my hoping to be Major, but expecting and preparing to be Minor - first came to me in connection with Henry James. Specifically, with a selection of Henry James stories subtitled "The Major Phase", or "The Major Period". As soon as I saw this book on the shelf of a bookstore, 39 years ago, I had a shock of recognition, and thought to myself how nice it would be, how gratifying, to have one's work - or even one's life - able to be designated thus, in terms of a Major (and therefore also a Minor) Phase. It was even a kind of "future-perfect thought", in a way: in the future, one's work, or rather a particular portion of it, will be

deemed to have been "Major" all along. Many years after seeing the Henry James book, I wrote an essay (also unpublished for many years) on this idea, entitled "On the Desire for Future Biographers". (The idea of having future biographers - in the plural, no less! - is even more grandiose, and gratifying, and self-vindicating, than the wish for a future editor and readers.)

A lot of non-publication going on here, you may have noticed. Yes indeed. Non-publication comes with the territory of being Minor. But to call myself Minor, or a Minor writer, may even be flattering myself, and presumptuous, because the designation of "Minor" seems to imply, already, a certain stature (including publication) and degree of recognition I do not possess. Though I am not entirely unpublished. I have published two books, a novel and an autobiography (entitled Failure), two personal essays, one short story, three scholarly essays, and a number of online book reviews. Not nothing, certainly - but frankly, I am not impressed. For I nursed dreams of being Major: writing Major books, teaching at a Major university - having, let us say, a Major impact of one kind or another.

Silly, foolish, grandiose, deluded thoughts. Yes. And natural, too, I think. For I know I am not alone in my

pipedreams. We all have them, of one sort or another, at one time or another - mostly in our teens and twenties. Maybe, for some of us, they last longer. Sometimes they come true (though if they do, they are called dreams, not pipedreams) - and for a blessed few, the reality even surpasses the dream.

None of this, however, really interests me anymore. I am not interested in how the dreams I had never panned out. I am not interested in what went wrong. (I already wrote that book - Failure.) I am not interested in knowing what I did wrong - and not just because such knowledge, and its acquisition, would totally terrify me, or prove depressing. Though clearly they would. But I like depressing. Depressing, as a matter of fact, interests me. The Rust Belt interests me. Pittsburgh - both the idea and the reality of Pittsburgh, where I have never been - interest me. Rochester and Buffalo and Cleveland and Detroit interest me. I am not afraid of depressing. Truth be told, I prefer it to the conventionally uplifting. I even find a kind of inspiration in it. I have always preferred my eggs "sunny side down". ("Over easy", you may call it, but I call it "sunny side down".) Depressing is part of my Minordom.

No, the main reason why I am not really interested in knowing where I went wrong, where I failed, is because I actually like my Minordom. I like where I am right now in my life. (Although I am currently unemployed, having lost my job - along with the rest of the faculty - at the college where I taught for 19 years, which went bankrupt and had to close. Talk about failure!) And there is really even no question that I prefer my Minordom to any Majordom that I might - by a generous stretch of the imagination - ever have attained to. Minordom is more interesting to me than Majordom. Minordom gives me room to move - less pressure, and more room.

It's kind of like the way it is with a minor deity. I mean, would you rather be a major or a minor deity? I would definitely pick minor deity, hands down. You get all the perks of godhood - immortality, eternal youth (just be careful not to be like Tithonus and forget to ask for eternal youth along with eternal life; he lived forever, but shriveled into a cricket), supernatural powers - and none of the drawbacks: extreme pressure, unwelcome responsibilities, huge obligations to all those dumb mortals always praying to you. Pan, it seems to me, had a much better deal than Poseidon. He got to be himself, and chase nymphs and play the flute all day, without being

burdened with all the responsibilities of exalted office. True, he was a total slacker compared to Poseidon - but that was only because he chose to be. I'm not really a slacker. I don't like pressure, but I do like to work - just at my own pace. If I had a choice, I would be the kind of minor woodland deity who lived in a cottage with a good library, and wrote books all day. (Wrote books, and published them.) I wouldn't be that into the nymphs. Not gay, just not that into the nymphs. But it seems I don't really have a choice in the matter - the editors and publishers do - and my books remain unpublished. Perhaps even unpublishable. Ah, you say - but if you were a deity, even a minor woodland one, you could control the minds of the editors and publishers and make your books be published. Yes, but that would be cheating. It would be like self-publishing. And I wouldn't want to do that. That would be kidding myself. I would rather be an unpublished minor woodland deity than a self-published one.

But back to the benefits of Minordom in general. First of all, Minordom gives you room to move: to expand, if you want, in your own way. To make mistakes and not be horribly punished for them - because if you're Minor, how many people are really going to notice? You can make your mistakes without being massively humiliated, or even

brought to account. Not that I want to get away with anything; I don't. I firmly believe that ultimately, nobody gets away with anything. Those who think they can are just horribly self-deluded, narcissistic sociopaths. But even though nobody really gets away with anything, Minor people have less pressure on them than Major people, and I don't handle pressure well. Pressure makes me choke. (Trump would call me a "choker". Never mind what I would call him.) That's one of the signs of a Minor person - that he tends to choke in the clutch. I guess that's one of the things that keeps a minor leaguer in the minor leagues. I can't imagine lasting more than two seconds in the major leagues. Realistically, though, I could never even have made it onto junior varsity baseball, because my arm as a catcher was so bad that when I tried to pick off someone stealing second I would usually end up throwing the ball to third or first instead. I could catch pitches, but that was about it. I couldn't throw worth a damn.

Second of all, Minordom gives you a place to inhabit, because when you have room to move, you can find your niche. That's what I did for 19 years. I found my niche at a fourth-tier college, and I inhabited it. I totally inhabited it. I taught what I wanted, and I wrote what I wanted. I probably couldn't have done that at a better

school, a first- or second-tier college. (I was at a first-tier college once, for two and a half years - Holy Cross, the one where the scholar/professor admitted she wasn't "familiar with my work" - but I wasn't tenure-track, and left when I got a tenure-track job at the fourth-tier college.) Being at a fourth-tier college made me sort of ashamed, yes, but it also freed me. So I got freedom and shame, as opposed to pride and constraint. At a better school, I would have had to have published regularly, and to publish regularly, you have to give editors what they want - or be Major enough to have them want what you give them, simply because it is you, in your Majordom, who are giving it.

Third of all, having a place to inhabit gives you space and time to "contemplate about things", as I like to say. "Contemplating about things" is different from "contemplating things". The intransitive inflection is less specific, less directed - more dreamy. And that's the kind of thinking I like to do - dreamy thinking. It's the ratiocinative version of the vox clamantis in deserto.

I don't mean that I'm any kind of prophet, or precursor, or religious or even spiritual person. What I mean is that I'm mostly talking to myself when I write. A conversation with myself. Not like a crazy person (or so I

like to think), but like a lonely person. A person who doesn't have enough other people to talk to, so he talks to himself. Though I hope that if I'm overheard, it will make some sense to the person overhearing it. But it's not required that it be overheard. To use contemporary publishing parlance - I have no "platform". (Unless you want to imagine a platform in the desert. Sort of like the guy who sat on a column in the desert. St. Simon Stylites, I believe it was. He had a podium on top of his column, outside Aleppo, from which he preached for 37 years.) But I pretend to no authority, and I don't intend to lecture. Only to bear witness. Not as a martyr, though. Just as a confessor. The kind that gives confession, rather than receiving it. And in the course of my confession, I contemplate about things, in my dreamy fashion, and hopefully shed some light on the subject, or subjects - in this case, my Minordom, and maybe even the state of Minordom in general.

Though that seems like rather a grand subject to take on - "the state of Minordom in general". Also, it seems it's already been done, by two contemporary literary theorists - Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, in a book on Kafka called Towards a Minor Literature. Have I read this book? No. Will I read it? Probably not. I have a

feeling that it would be too rich, theoretically speaking, for my now ex-academic blood. I read some difficult contemporary literary theory in grad school, and it wasn't that much fun. Not that I mind difficult things; I rather like them, and perhaps in somewhat the same way that I like depressing things. You might say, even, that depressing things are difficult - difficult to bear, to be borne - and it is that difficulty, as much as anything else, that gives them their value. And yet the converse is not also true: difficult things are not necessarily depressing. At any rate, I suppose it all depends on the particular difficult thing we are talking about. Some difficult things are worth the effort, others not. And I have found difficult literary theory to be not worth the effort. As opposed, say, to difficult literature, difficult philosophy, or even difficult practical criticism, in whatever field. The latter things I have found I can sometimes benefit from; but difficult literary theory remains merely difficult, without being beneficial. But I speak here only for myself; and perhaps what I have to say is indicative only of my own intellectual limitations.

Speaking for myself, then - what exactly is it I want to say about Minordom? I have a few thoughts on the subject. Mostly, though, just one: that Minordom is

liberating. Does it all really boil down to that? Maybe. But that is a lot, because with liberation comes contemplating about things, and self-discovery, and thought. Or rather, Thought. Meaning, one's own thought - though of a hopefully wider application. As Emerson said, Man Thinking. The active, specific, particular thing. The individual thing. One becomes an individual (a category Kierkegaard greatly valued - he wanted his gravestone to read simply, "That Individual") only if one has sufficient time and space to expand. (Or if one is deliberately denied sufficient time and space to expand; that too. For if one is denied those things, one resists, and that resistance produces an individual, too. Sometimes it does, anyway. If they don't crush you first. Victor Frankl, a Holocaust survivor, has written about this in his classic book Man's Search for Meaning.)

As far as I'm concerned, then, Majordom is constraining, and Minordom is liberating. It's all a question of pressure, really - the pressure exerted by the weight of Majordom. The weight of Majordom creates a constraining pressure that hampers your creative freedom - unless you can find a way of resisting the pressure. Many Major people can. And maybe it's even a person's ability to resist the constraining pressure of Majordom that

constitutes, in large part, her Majordom. Here I am only speculating, of course - not being Major myself. (I said at the outset of this essay that although I am not Major, I had a Major Period. I should clear this up now. My Major Period was the 23 and a half years that I was with my wife Diane, before she died. That time, it seems to me now, was in some ways the heart and soul of my life, for reasons that I won't go into here; I have written about them elsewhere. Having a Major Period, though, is different from being Major. You can have a Major Period - most people do, in one form or another - without being Major.) But speculation, you see, is a large part of what I do. It may even be - in fact it probably is - connected with my Minordom. Major people tend to affirm and declare; Minor people are more apt to speculate. They lack confidence and authority; they lack a platform. Only Major people have platforms; but I speculate anyway. I speculate without validation - without having been validated by any authorities or experts. I am a rogue speculator, you might say. Without platform or authority or expertise or validation, I speculate. Do these speculations have any value? Do I have any value? Do I have any reason to live?

## II

The Freedom of Failure,  
and the Unreliable Narrator

Whoa there, cowboy, you perhaps are thinking. That was quite a leap. The kind of leap that says a lot, reveals a lot, about the leaper. I guess you could say that self-esteem isn't my strong suit. No doubt this too is part of my Minordom - my lack of self-esteem. And the label itself - "Minor" -- is a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, isn't it? Not that I would really want it any other way; I wouldn't. That would be too much pressure, and not enough freedom. Freedom to do what? To fail. That's very important. To be free to fail is important. Also, just to be free, and just to fail. They're all important.

Why is it important to fail? Not because of success - that has nothing to do with it. I don't take the line that failure is only a stepping-stone to success. That would be to undercut the value of failure entirely - to not see failure as something valuable in and of itself, apart from any success that may eventually come out of it. I prefer my failure pure, neat -- undiluted with later success. Pure failure has - or can have - a spiritual effect not present when followed by success. (I mean "spiritual" in the sense of "contemplational" - that is, conducing to

solitary contemplation.) If one dwells in failure for a bit - the opposite perhaps of Emily Dickinson's famous line, "I dwell in possibility" - one's consciousness expands in a way it doesn't when one meets with success in one's endeavors. Failure expands the imagination, the potential for empathy, the connection with suffering. (I will say more about this in Section IV.) And in that sense it is actually analogous, not opposite, to Dickinson's "possibility". Failure, you see, opens up as many possibilities as it precludes. Maybe more. While it is true that failure represents a door that has closed, it also opens up a contemplational window on a different landscape: the landscape of thoughtfulness, disappointment and humility. The spirit of success can lead to a kind of triumphalism, and triumphalism is antithetical to Thought - to Man Thinking. I would even go so far as to say that to Man Thinking, success is a waste of time. Or at least a serious distraction.

No doubt this must appear perverse, and just a rationalization for my own lack of success. An attempt to justify the countless hours devoted to ventures - almost all of them in writing - that never saw the light of day. I don't want to think of those hours as wasted, so I see them as "soul-building" instead. (See Keats' letter on the

"vale of soul-making", Feb. 14-May 3, 1819.) Henry James said something, somewhere, to the effect that no time was ever wasted - and even that the time we thought had been wasted was maybe the most valuable and worthwhile time of all. Or am I just imagining this? No, not imagining it entirely, I don't think - but perhaps distorting or embellishing it. I have a collection of HJ's reflections on writing that I could consult to try to find this passage - but it's in my library across the country from where I'm now writing this, so I am thankfully relieved of the responsibility right now.

It's clear, isn't it, that I am an unreliable narrator - an unreliable witness, even to my own experience. Perhaps this is what I was getting at earlier when I wondered, echoing the songwriter Randy Newman, whether I had "reason to live". What I meant was, reason to live as a writer. If one is an unreliable narrator, an unreliable witness, is there any reason at all to read such a writer?

That's a pretty central question here, I think. And it's different for fiction and nonfiction. In fiction, the unreliable narrator is a deliberate construct - part of the fiction of the narrator herself. The narrator becomes just another character in the narrative, and not someone whose truth-value is to be taken for granted. Whereas in

nonfiction, it is a different matter entirely. In nonfiction, the narrator has a contract with the reader - an agreement to be trustworthy: as objective as possible, as disinterested as possible, as accurate as possible. The narrator and the reader are both engaged in a mutual search for the truth about the subject (inasmuch as a knowledge of the truth is even possible through the inevitably subjective vehicle of narrative).

But what if the subject is, in part, the narrator himself? The truth-value of autobiography is known to be problematic; only a naïve reader would ever take an autobiographer's word at face value. And a self-conscious narrator - such as myself - is not necessarily to be trusted any more than an un-self-conscious one. Consciousness, after all, is a tricky and involuted thing. It doubles back on itself, and the reader can get lost in the mirrored caverns of self-referentiality. (That may even be what is happening right now, in this essay.) Indeed, a self-conscious narrator, for this reason, can prove more deceptive, and therefore more unreliable, than a straightforward one.

I suppose it all depends on what sort of truth you're after. There's truth of proposition (a priori truth), and truth of evidence (empirical truth), and truth of affinity

(human truth), and so on. I am certainly no epistemologist. I don't really know (pardon the pun) what I am talking about -- and you can't get much more unreliable than that. And yet, in my own way - my flawed, unreliable way - I too am a seeker after the truth. The truth of the mystery.

Is that last sentence just a cop-out, in the form of a facile paradox? Looked at in one way, yes. It is a cop-out in somewhat the same way that Freud's famous remark was a cop-out: "The truth is not accessible; mankind does not deserve it." Yet who was a truth-seeker, if not Freud? And when was the accessibility of the object ever a prerequisite for any serious quest? Our desire to know is not necessarily commensurate with our capacity to know. (Browning: "A man's reach must exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?") I know we are not talking about a religious search here; though I did allude, before, to the spiritual value of failure - "pure" failure, uncorrupted by any later, related success. But whatever the nature of the search - or the failure - the experience of desiring and seeking and not finding cannot help but be spiritual, if undergone in the right spirit. And what is "the right spirit"? The spirit of gratitude. ("All grateful if rightly understood" -- Wordsworth.)

I referred above to the "inevitably subjective vehicle of narrative". And what about the driver of that vehicle - the narrator? What about me? After all, I am bringing you along on a bumpy ride, to an unclear destination, with someone who admits he doesn't really know what he's talking about. Why should you want to take such a journey, with such a shaky, unreliable narrator?

### III

#### Cardboard, Scotch Tape, Paper Clips and Glue; Purity of Heart

Well, reader, one reason could be that maybe you are Minor, too. Most of us are, after all. Actually, most of us are less than Minor. (If I were a songwriter even half as talented as Elvis Costello, I would write a song called "Less Than Minor".) Most of us don't even think of such things - and maybe that's a good thing, too. Because thinking and writing of such things certainly hasn't gotten me very far. It's gotten me, in fact, right smack dab in the middle of the Minordom that I am wrestling with right now, writing about eccentric, obscure, quirky subjects that may very well have no bearing on anything other than myself, and therefore never see the light of day (that is, publication).

And, as an at least potentially Minor person, perhaps you have pursued a similarly fruitless project, too. Perhaps you have been on a delusional or misguided or grandiose wild goose-chase yourself. Perhaps you have had doubts, too, as to the status of your own sanity -- or at least your sensibleness. Haven't we all, from time to time? Haven't we all had to recognize our undeniable Minordom, in contrast to the ambitious dreams and desires for Majordom we once nurtured for ourselves? The shaky, cardboard-and-Scotch-tape-and-paper-clip-and-Elmer's-Glue-constructed contraptions we cobbled together during long weekend afternoons on a child's workbench in the garage, while all the time envisioning to ourselves the sleek spaceships and magic-smooth, seamless, shiny machines that would somehow emerge from our puerile efforts? Have we not all been confronted with the profound inadequacy of our actual achievement, in such sad contrast to the easy perfection of our imaginings? Are we not all Minor -- including the Major people we see ourselves as being separated from by a gulf of talent, energy, sheer luck and, most importantly, faith?

For it is faith more than anything else, it seems to me, that separates the Major from the Minor. Faith in their own visions; faith in their abilities; faith in their

powers of persuasion -- not just their power to persuade others, but their power to persuade themselves. "Purity of heart," said Kierkegaard, "is to will one thing".

Substitute "Majordom" for "purity of heart" and you have Gidding's Theory of Majordom in a nutshell. You need faith to will one thing. You need faith to be Major.

"Purity of heart" is another matter entirely. I do not believe in purity of heart. I do not believe there is such a thing for human beings - for adult human beings, anyway. I side with Freud here, against Kierkegaard.

(Freud believed that not even children were fundamentally pure of heart. His theory of sexuality was based partly on this belief.) And one of the reasons I don't believe in purity of heart for non-children is because of the problem of delusion. Those who believe that their hearts are pure - or at least who act in accordance with such an ascribable belief - seem to me to be deluded. It is also possible to think you are Major, and be deluded in that belief. Take our president, for example. He thinks he is Major, but he is delusional. There are also people who may indeed be Major -- but evilly so, in a way that does not really meet the criteria for the kind of Major I am talking about. The kind of Major I am talking about includes people like Churchill, Bill Gates and Nelson Mandela, and writers like

Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, and Albert Camus. And other writers like William Wordsworth, Henry James, Anita Brookner, and Marcel Proust. (The latter four also being well acquainted with failure, both biographically and thematically. After all, Proust had to self-publish Swann's Way, and André Gide then eviscerated it - to his eternal remorse. And in a sense, the whole of Remembrance of Things Past (I have always preferred the original, albeit inaccurate, English title) is about failure - the story of the author's failure, prefatory to his crowning success.)

"Does a firm persuasion that a thing is so make it so?" Blake wondered. This must have been a real issue for him, who possessed such strong powers of faith, but was also an artist of the finest discernment. As far as I am concerned, that discernment is evidence - one piece of evidence, anyway - of his sound mind (which some have questioned). I think that Blake recognized, as evidenced in that quote, the possibility of his own self-delusion (thus demonstrating his fundamental sanity). He was a person of immense faith and conviction - Christian and creative faith, radical political conviction. And he produced in accordance with that faith and conviction. He produced abundantly - literary and pictorial art of a very

high order. Weird art, to be sure - quirky and peculiar and self-styled. But unforgettable. Not everyone's cup of tea - but I find myself coming back to Blake's bottomless cup, over and over again. For me, he is Major. His "firm persuasion" has the ring of truth.

But I suppose it is all a question of what you are firmly persuaded of. And of whether your firm persuasions resonate with those of other people. Not necessarily many people, but at least some people. Over time, some. In his lifetime, Blake was not well-known. What recognition he obtained was as an illustrator of other people's works - Dante and Milton, among others. He only gradually gained a following, over the nineteenth century, as a poet and artist. His Majordom was posthumous -- like Keats' (who also referred to his tuberculosis-ridden life as "posthumous"), but even more so. Blake was entirely self-published - though, since he was a printer by trade, this was more a question of using what was ready-to-hand than of his own conceit. It made sense for him to print, and distribute privately, what he produced. His whole career, like Kierkegaard's, was an act of faith. Or rather many - innumerable - acts of faith. Perhaps that was what Kierkegaard meant by "purity of heart".

## IV

## The Faith of a Tuesday Afternoon

But it is not just the Major who have faith. The Minor can have faith, too. And what is the faith of the Minor? Is it any different from the faith of the Major? What, for instance, is the nature of my own faith? It is not Christian, religious, or even particularly spiritual - unless all faith is in some way spiritual. It is rather what I would call "immanent" -- as opposed to "transcendent". It is the faith of a Tuesday afternoon. Certainly not the faith of a Sunday, nor of a Friday or Saturday or even Thursday night - much as I hold dear the inherent excitement of those nights, with all their jam-packed power of looked-forward-to-ness. The faith of a Tuesday afternoon is utterly different. It is, as I say, the faith of immanence. A thoroughly secular faith. A faith that is locked into everydayness. The faith that does not try to transcend or escape its reality, but rather that embraces and inhabits its reality. The faith that embraces a Tuesday afternoon in frigid February, or sweltering August, and that brings what Wordsworth called "the philosophic mind". For Wordsworth, "the philosophic mind" had to do with how we process suffering and loss.

But the faith of Tuesday afternoon need not have directly encountered suffering or loss. It need only have encountered boredom. Because boredom is also a form of suffering, and entails loss as well - loss of energy, of the kind of energy that for Blake was synonymous with life.

The faith of Tuesday afternoon entails hope-in-the-face-of-despair. Nothing dramatic, though - rather a modest hope (what Wordsworth would call a "mild hope") in the face of a mild despair, composed mostly of boredom - boredom, and mild depression. Indeed, the mild depression that comes with boredom. The kind of mild depression/boredom that hits one in Burbank, CA, of a smoggy Tuesday afternoon in February or August - the two most evacuated months of the year. Evacuated in what sense? In the same sense that Tuesday itself is evacuated: evacuated of hopeful anticipation, of great expectations - of "effort, and expectation, and desire/And something evermore about to be" (Wordsworth again). If one can have faith on a Tuesday afternoon - if one can have faith in Tuesday afternoon, in the idea of Tuesday afternoon -- then many things become possible. Not all things - remember, the faith of Tuesday afternoon is a realistic, modest, mundane faith - but some things, anyway, become possible. A few good things, at least. One might make it to Wednesday, which could be a

better day. A good day, even. The faith of a Tuesday afternoon looks forward to Wednesday. This may seem to be a contradiction in terms - how is it possible to look forward to Wednesday? - but on closer inspection, it proves not to be. For by Wednesday, one is thoroughly "locked in" to the week, committed to the course of the week. By Wednesday, one is, you might say, already a Citizen of the Week. By this term I do not mean anything honorary, or even out of the ordinary - as when, for example, one might have been voted "Citizen of the Week." Nothing like that. Quite the opposite. I mean only that by Wednesday, one is a thoroughgoing participant in the week's business - the work of the week, whatever that is. And on a Tuesday afternoon, one is on the verge of being able to commit to Wednesday.

On Wednesday, one looks back on Monday and Tuesday in all of their everydayness. One no longer misses the previous weekend - that is too far away now - but is not yet in a position (as one will be on a Friday) to fully envision the weekend to come. One is stuck in medias res on a Wednesday, which is the very definition of immanence. By Wednesday afternoon, however, the slide towards the end of the work week has begun, and although one has still Thursday and Friday to get through, the process of

beginning to look forward to the weekend is underway. But on Tuesday afternoon, one is still on the uphill trudge of the week - at the end of that uphill trudge. Therefore it is Tuesday afternoon, still to be followed by Tuesday evening and Wednesday morning, that bears the full charge of the week's everydayness.

Now some of this same "calendrical" way of thinking can be applied to the questions of Majordom and Minordom, success and failure. The faith of a Tuesday afternoon is without illusions; and the mindset of Minordom, and of failure, has no illusions either. Those of us who are Minor, who are considered - or consider themselves - failures by their society's standards of success, are fully ensconced, so to speak, in a Tuesday afternoon of the spirit. In this state, there is nothing (yet) to celebrate, and there is still much to be endured. Much to be gotten through. And this is of the essence of immanence: to be fully ensconced, to be enduring, and not to be celebrating. In the state of immanence - as opposed to, say, transcendence - there is nothing to celebrate. Quite to the contrary, actually: there is much to regret, to mull over, and to feel sorry for. There is much, in short, to contemplate about. Minordom, by its very nature, is thoughtful - like the minor key in music. Those who

have failed have much to think about. The losers always do.

Take, for example, the end of a baseball game on TV. The winners prance and cavort, high-five and celebrate; the losers are cast into a slough of despond. But there is no doubt as to which state is better for the soul, and more conducive to reflection and fellow-feeling. The losers feel for each other, and seek to console each other. (Well, at least some of them do.) There is much for them to think about. The winners, on the other hand, think about nothing. They have no need for thought or reflection. Their attention is all caught up in the happiness of the moment; for them, there is no looking forward or back. Yes, there is certainly a sense in which the winners, the successful, the Major ones, are themselves ensconced in immanence as well - in the triumph of the moment. But a triumphal moment is very different from an abject one. An abject moment - the immanence of abjection, if you will - is plunged into thought and reflection. It looks back in regret, and perhaps forward to better days. But the moment of triumph looks nowhere; it only basks in its own pleasure. Basks modestly, perhaps - I'm not saying the victors are necessarily always obnoxious. They may very well be graceful and tasteful in victory. But their

victory itself constrains them, limits them - limits their imaginations and feelings to a single major chord, without nuance or subtlety. Success is limiting to the imagination and spirit in a way that failure is not; failure, paradoxically, is spiritually empowering and salutary.

Or is it just because I have failed - as an academic, as a writer - and am trying to rationalize that failure, that I speak of success as a limitation, and failure as salutary? If I had succeeded, would I not be singing a different tune? Would I not be singing the song of success? No doubt; we are the products of our circumstances, after all. We work with what we've got. We produce what we can, from what's at hand. Or, as Henry James once wrote: "We work in the dark - we do what we can - we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion, and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art." Sing it, HJ. (I am a Jamesian, too. Except when I'm not. When I'm not - say, when I try to read The Golden Bowl - I tend to fling the damn thing across the room in exasperation. But I usually power through his other writings. After all, he is one of us.)

By "us" I mean the failures - that select group - millions upon millions, but still select - who have fallen short, come up empty-handed, who have disappointed

themselves, stalled and choked in the clutch, and known the sweet sting of defeat. Why sweet? Because, for the losers, there is always tomorrow. (Failure is not to be confused with despair.) The losers always have tomorrow, whereas the winners are imprisoned in the straitjacket of today - the endless, hopeless cycle of success. The winners have no further hope - whereas we losers have nothing but hope. And hope is of the essence. The essence of what? Of Being. The essence of Being is hope. (And I don't even need Heidegger to tell me so.) The Minor live in sweet, perpetual contemplation of - about - the past, and hope for the future: hope of eventual recognition; of vindication; "of joy in widest commonalty spread" (Wordsworth). Whereas the Major live merely in a triumphal present. The Lord Buddha deliver me from the triumphal present - the prison-house of the present. The present limits me (as Emerson might have said -- he is another one of my masters); it takes away my contemplation, and replaces it only with what I have, not with what could or might be - or could or might have been. Mind you, I don't reject the present; I accept it for what it is. Which is not that much. Whereas the past and future are full of contemplational glories.

I am aware that there are those who would say, who do say, that we should live in the present as much as possible. That the small but real rewards of life are to be found in the present. The Buddhists, for example, say this. And I have much respect for the Buddhists. But I cannot join them here. I must proceed on my own Hinayana ("Lesser" or "Minor Path"). There are also those who would say, as well, that to raise the past and future above the present is to promote a counsel of despair; to be ungrateful for what we have; to wish that what simply is were otherwise. Not necessarily so, I say. I accept and in my own way celebrate (a la Whitman) what I have; I do not wish it otherwise. But I am always also looking forward, and back. Appreciation is not to be found only in the present, but harvested as well from the past, and planted in the future. "It is never too late to be what you might have been." (George Eliot, as quoted on a billboard on a railroad overpass in Worcester, MA, in the mid-1990s, when I was at Holy Cross, and never forgotten.) I love the syntax of that sentence, too. It is not exactly the future perfect tense, but partakes of something rather like it. It looks into the future as a fait accompli. "To be what you might have been" implies the projection into the future ("to be") of a past possibility of being ("what

you might have been"). This is my kind of sentence, expressing my kind of thinking. It gives hope to the Minor, to those who are Minor, and confirms them in the righteousness of their past-and-future thinking. Sing it, George (or Mary). Sing the Song of Minordom. And I will sing back-up for you.

V

I Will Not Be Sad in This World

I was writing recently in the library, and gazing idly at a bookshelf, where I saw a book that I thought was entitled Walking, Dreaming, Being. I immediately felt an excitement in the region of my solar plexus (which is where I feel expectational excitement), and took the book down from the shelf to see what it was about. Then I noticed that it was actually entitled Waking, Dreaming, Being, and subtitled Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy. As soon as I realized my mistake, my excitement immediately lessened. It did not disappear entirely, but it definitely lessened. I'm not sure why, since all three of those subtopics - neuroscience, meditation and philosophy (no Oxford comma for me, sorry) - still interest me a lot. But the realization that it was

not walking that the author, Prof. Evan Thompson, was associating with dreaming and being, but rather waking, caused me to feel disappointment, and a retraction of the antennae, and a slowing of the heart. It also caused me to feel mild relief and hope: relief that Thompson was not thinking exactly along the same lines as I was (and that my originality was therefore still intact), and hope that his more scientific approach might leave the way open for my own Hinayana - my Minor Path. (For it also became immediately clear to me that Thompson, formerly of the University of Toronto, now of the University of British Columbia, was Major, whereas I - formerly of the fourth-tier college, and currently unemployed - was not.)

Consequently, my spirits also partook of the lift of hope that paradoxically goes along with being Minor. Because remember: Minordom = freedom = hope, whereas Majordom = constraint = a slight sinking of the spirits, and a constriction of prospects and expectational horizons.

Thompson's approach to self and consciousness was obviously entirely different from my own. He also had a platform; he had authority; he had academic and institutional validation; he was, in a sense, already "pre-vindicated".

I was the vox clamantis in silva (minor woodland deity

variety). I was free to walk along my Minor Way; he was a prisoner of his Majordom.

This was unfair to Thompson, of course. Having not read his book, who was I to say anything of these matters? I had no grounds for an opinion; I had, in an intellectual sense, no reason to live. I was merely, and once again, as always, a speculator -- a creature of cardboard, Scotch Tape, paper clips and glue; he was a man of science. I was only a boy, still on his garage workbench. But I was free: free to walk, to dream, to be. To Be.

Many of my best thoughts, my best contemplations, occur while walking, while dreaming, while contemplatively Being. Alone = solitary contemplation. But this does not mean that alone = lonely. For I have the clouds gathering over the Long Island Sound, and the trees, and the sky, and the stars to keep me company. ("Lonely? Why should I feel lonely? Is not our planet in the Milky Way?" -- Thoreau, at Walden Pond.) Perhaps someday others will be able to read about my thoughts; perhaps someday I will be published. For if I thought, if I truly believed I would never be published, then I would be sad. And I am determined to not be sad. Despite what might look like a sad state of affairs to an "objective" observer - unemployed, unpublished, unauthorized, unvalidated - I am

determined to not be sad. (Just as I am determined, also, to often - oftener than not - split my infinitives. Because to not split my infinitives seems too fussy - and even, in a sense, pedantic in its propriety.) There is an album by an Armenian composer, Djivan Gasparyan, entitled I Will Not Be Sad in This World. I like this title very much. I heard some music from this album once on the radio, many years ago. I do not remember the music, but I never forgot the title. It is a consummately worthy pledge, to not be sad in this world, despite the fact that, in this world, such a pledge may not always be capable of fulfillment, since there is so much to be sad about. But let the wish stand for the deed. Let the journey supersede the destination. Let the minor materials and fasteners of our dreams - cardboard, Scotch Tape, paper clips and glue - hold together the ephemeral constructions of our much greater imaginations, while we contemplate about their future visionary perfection. For, as Wallace Stevens hoped, "It is possible, possible, possible, it must be possible." Bismarck called politics the art of the possible, but I prefer to give that definition to poetry, and go with Emily Dickinson:

I dwell in Possibility -  
 A fairer house than Prose -  
 More numerous of Windows -  
 Superior - for Doors -

Of Chambers as the Cedars -  
Impregnable of eye -  
And for an everlasting Roof  
The Gambrels of the Sky...