

My Exceptionalism

For some time now I have been getting emails inviting me to submit to various writing contests, or informing me of workshops that will show me how to write a marketable manuscript, or fashion a book proposal or pitch letter that is sure to snag the interest of agents and editors. These notifications elicit a number of different reactions in me: anxiety, dismissal, resistance, contempt, condescension, and (not least) guilt -- the guilty sense that I should be doing much more than I am to "get my work out there". I know I am not trying hard enough. I ought to behave more professionally, be more persistent, and less discouraged by rejection. But there is also, simultaneously, the countervailing feeling that I am growing too old, at 64, to even be playing this game anymore -- that I should, by now, be a lot farther along in my writing career than I am. Then again, I observe that in fact I really have no writing career to speak of, and never did. Which is not to say that I have not written quite a lot - five unpublished, full-length books, both novels and nonfiction, and 21 unpublished essays - but only that I have not published very much (two books in nearly 40 years), have gotten

virtually no recognition, and have made hardly any money at all through my writing.

Perhaps the most curious of these reactive feelings is the feeling of condescension - of a condescending false superiority. I believe this attitude originates in a kind of magical thinking, which assures me I really don't need to suffer any of this nonsense - that I shouldn't have to go through any of the "normal channels" that apply to other writers; that I will not play this sucker's game; that I don't need to play this sucker's game, because by and by, in due course, I will be discovered, recognized and acknowledged for what I most devoutly wish to be (and secretly believe I am): someone for whose special talents and originality (which, though they may not be on the level of genius, can at least be put into the category of "gifted") exceptions must and will be made. This kind of thinking, I realize, amounts to a form of exceptionalism that is really, when I look it square in the face, quite hateful to me; yet it has, by this time, become an inveterate part of my character, and I am finding it very hard to shake off.

What exactly does this exceptionalism mean, in terms of my writing? It means that, try as I may (though how hard, really, do I try?), I cannot quite stop nursing the

hope that sooner or later, I will be proven (by whom? By critics and biographers - see next paragraph) to be someone who is not subject to the kinds of restrictions or obstacles or limitations that most other writers have to deal with. It is a comforting fantasy, this hope, and feels liberating. All of the rejection, disappointment, resentment and masked-over envy that I have experienced in my unconsummated writing life, so the fantasy goes, will ultimately have been worth it: my secret wishes and beleaguered hopes will be vindicated, victory at long last will be snatched from the jaws of defeat, and a hard-won triumph will finally be mine.

This delusion I have come to call "biographization". It is the idea - amounting to a kind of fixation with me - that it is possible to see - that is, possible for me to see - my life as if from the point of view of a future biographer. I have written about "biographization" before (in one of the blogs I got published on), and so will not rehearse it again. (Indeed, my wish not to rehearse it again may amount to another instance of biographization; for if I am to receive - if only in my mind - the kind of recognition instanced by a future biography, then that must mean there are grounds, in the form of a body of writing, for that future biography. And if there exists such a

corpus (and there does, albeit unpublished; see previous list), then in view of its possible future publication, I don't want to repeat myself here.)

Now, while my particular variety of magical thinking might be over the top - and I can well see that it is, even while I cannot seem to refrain from indulging in it - I believe that the general phenomenon of personal exceptionalism is quite common. Who among us does not hope to be found exceptional in at least some respect? Who does not envision, at one time or another, the rules being bent for the sake of themselves, because of that special nimbus of selfhood that they are seen to wear? Who does not secretly wish to be made an exception of? Who does not dream of startling their little world by coming from behind, the dark horse of a heretofore hidden destiny? Indeed, it even seems to me that the imagination itself is a kind of dark horse, unexpectedly and overturningly, at the last moment, triumphant. We all want to rewrite the game in our favor. It's not just a question of laziness - though it is also definitely that, in my case - this wish to be "always already", as the deconstructors say, the victor, without any additional effort on our part having to be made. It's also a question of hope, and faith - maybe more hope than faith. We will be discovered to be more

than we are - and to have been, all along - always already -- more than we were. Our sum greater than its parts; and the parts themselves worth more than we ever knew.

Curiously, my knowledge that this line of thinking is nothing but magical somehow does not render it any the less beguiling to me. I won't say that I allow myself to indulge very often in this kind of fantasizing; and when I do, I try to nip it in the bud - to just "stop it", as Waymarsh scolded the more suggestible Strether in The Ambassadors. But the magical thinking persists, and though it is easily enough corrected, it is also stubbornly recurrent, treacherously latent, and quick to re-emerge whenever I see those emails in my inbox. Furthermore, I believe that this magical thinking - and also the wish not to have to fully confront it - are the main reasons I usually don't even open the writing emails. Mind you, I also don't open the vast majority of any of my emails, which is why I have accumulated, at the time of this writing, 22,240 unread messages. I know I should delete them, but the fact of the matter is, I'm superstitious. I feel it would be a bad thing to delete them. It would set a bad precedent. It would be adding insult to injury. I mean, it's already bad enough that I haven't read them. But to delete them unread? What sort of person does that?

Besides, if I were to delete all of the unopened writing solicitations, there would be no way I ever could act on them; and I like to keep open the possibility of someday acting on them. Foreclosing the possibility of someday acting on them would make me feel even more delinquent than I already do.

And there's something else going on, too. To delete the unopened writing solicitations would be to acknowledge to myself that I do not intend to follow up on any of these opportunities. And that would be to admit that I have lost all hope of being published. That I am no longer in the game. That I have dropped out. That I am no longer a player - if I ever was. That I have succumbed to ...
Writer's Despair.

But you see, the thing of it is, I haven't succumbed - not quite. (Unless the magical thinking I continue to entertain is only another form of despair. Which maybe it is. That would be very depressing, if it was. Of course, the whole thing is already very depressing. I mean, come on. A 64-year-old writer who hasn't published anything new in over 10 years, except for a couple of blog entries, and a handful of online book reviews for a site run by a good friend of mine. Really? And I still call myself a writer?)

And yet it is true that despite all this, I haven't quite given in to Writer's Despair. I continue to write, and I even feel pretty good about what I've been writing. I don't think it's all for naught. I really don't know if anything I write will ever get published again, but right now I honestly don't care. (Not that much, anyway.) I feel I have something to say, and I want to say it.

But something is bothering me, obviously, and I think what it is is that I know my motives aren't entirely pure. Not so much my motives for writing as what I expect, or hope, to come of that writing. The results of that writing. Because I do expect there to be a result, other than just the writing itself. But maybe "result" is the wrong word; maybe it's more of a reward I am hoping for.

Julie, my wife, finds it humorously strange that I hope for rewards for some of my small achievements, and that I tend to undertake them on that basis. A reward for exercising; a reward for writing at least two pages in a day (because writing, for me, is its own reward only up to a point - after which I tend to need a beer, and/or some marijuana, to seal the deal); a reward for putting in a full day at work (although I work only part-time now, as an adjunct writing instructor at a community college). But the particular reward I am speaking of here is, unlike the

ones just listed, a reward for a "negative action", as it were - a reward for something that didn't happen, that failed to occur. A reward for having yet another essay rejected; a reward for not making even the long list in an essay contest; a reward for having a query letter to an agent declined, through a form letter. A reward, in short, for not making the grade. For failing. (Though maybe, strictly speaking, what I am awarding myself is more a consolation prize than a reward.)

In any case, it seems to me that this desire for a reward/consolation prize is yet another example of my exceptionalism. For what exactly is it that I want a reward/consolation prize for? And what is it that I need consoling for? Well, the reward, it seems to me, is simply for being who I am - someone whose true value has not (yet) been sufficiently recognized and compensated. And what I need consoling for is along the same lines: for not having been sufficiently rewarded. Rewarded for what? See above. So it is all, in the end, just an insane tautology.

But though I suspect, as I indicated earlier, a degree of universality in my insane tautology - that I am not the only person who thinks this way -- I should be careful to speak only for myself here. My particular craziness is my own; it's my way of rewarding myself for my various

disappointments, rejections, and fallings-short in connection with my writing. For falling short of my own hopes, if not expectations. Compensation. My magical thinking is my compensation. Emerson wrote an eponymous essay on the subject. His position, granted, was very different from mine. Emerson believed there was a binary balance in God's universe; all powers and values had their opposite counterparts. He was a metaphysical thinker. For him, the ultimate reality was a spiritual one - what he called "The Oversoul": a numinous, pervasive and beneficent presence, of whose nature we all partake. Granted, Emerson's spiritual beliefs were much more pronounced and developed than mine; though the characteristic Emersonian optimism is perhaps not unlike my own more wishful, less ambitious variety, and I can certainly identify with his belief in compensation. For every loss, a gain somewhere, somehow. Nothing is wasted; there is no incapacity anywhere that is not filled elsewhere - but always in the here and now. In "Compensation", Emerson is at pains to reject the idea of either redemption or punishment in the afterlife, which is a conceit he has no use for. The fruits of our actions, sweet or bitter, lie right here on earth. Emerson's idea of compensation relates more to the concept of balance than of payment; the latter, I suspect,

would have been too materialistic for his particular brand of metaphysics.

My idea of compensation is much cruder, and more selfish. And I am certainly no metaphysician. But the idea of waste - of loss without compensation - is as uncongenial to me as it was to the Sage of Concord. I like to think that nothing is wasted (Henry James' wish "to be someone on whom nothing is lost" seems to me admirable, and worthy of emulation); though such a belief may be naïve. But I believe it anyway, because the pain of loss can be instructive, if we are in the right frame of mind to receive the lesson. And also because I think that failure - which is the kind of loss that concerns me right now, in the wake of my unsuccessful literary efforts - has a spiritual dimension that has not been sufficiently attended to. Not getting what we want, or what we feel we have earned, or deserve, has a humbling corrective effect, separate from the instructional content. Emerson's forerunner Wordsworth calls this "correcting our desires".

There is a passage in Wordsworth's Prelude where the narrator remembers waiting by a stone wall on top of a hill near the woods on a misty, stormy day for a pair of "palfreys", or saddle-horses, to come take him home from boarding school for Christmas vacation. He was 13 at the

time, and was greatly looking forward to coming home. But a few days after he arrived, his father died. In his later recollection of the day he waited for the horses, he says that God "corrected his desires". This passage is a famous crux in the poem. Much ink has been spilled in search of what exactly Wordsworth meant by this strange phrase, and the passage in general, known as the "spots of time". But whatever he meant, Wordsworth is at pains to emphasize that his memory of the scene that day, and its stormy weather and woodland setting, is indelible, and would later become a source of poetic inspiration and nourishment to him:

And afterwards, the wind and sleety rain,
 And all the business of the elements,
 The single sheep, and the one blasted tree,
 And the bleak music of that old stone wall,
 The noise of wood and water, and the mist...
 All these were spectacles and sounds to which
 I often would repair, and thence would drink
 As at a fountain. And I do not doubt
 That in this later time, when storm and rain
 Beat on my roof at midnight, or by day
 When I am in the woods, unknown to me
 The workings of my spirit thence are brought.
 (The Prelude [1805], 11.375-389)

Wordsworth's larger purpose in The Prelude was to provide an account of his poetic development. Implicit in that account is a sense of the poet's own exceptionalism - the idea that he was marked out, from an early age, for a unique achievement that could be traced, retroactively, to

its early roots in his experience in nature, coupled with a particularly receptive sensibility that - like Emerson's - had metaphysical characteristics. My own brand of exceptionalism is much more prosaic and mundane, and not at all metaphysical. But it too has a memory attached to it - though not one marked by any feeling of poetic prefigurement or dedication, but rather of moral shame.

I was 17 or 18 at the time. I had gone to see a movie in Westwood, and there was a long line, so I cut in. Inconspicuously, I thought, or hoped; for once, my wish was not to stand out. And for minute or two, it seemed to have worked. The guy in back of me said nothing, and I almost came to believe my casual act had gone unnoticed. Then he spoke up.

"How do you rate?" he asked me.

"Excuse me?" There was a slight note of petulance in my voice.

"I said, How do you rate?"

"I think I rate pretty well, actually. How do you rate?"

He ignored my question, and went on, "I mean, how do you rate so you get to cut in front of me?"

"Look, this line is absurdly long," I explained. "You don't actually expect me to stand at the end of it, do you?"

He gave an incredulous snort. "Get real! I did. So did everybody else here. Which is why I ask: How do you rate?"

I remember at the time feeling a little confused by this question, and also irritated that he was being so persistent, rather than just accepting my place in the line. There was also some embarrassment and shame mixed in - more embarrassment than shame, I think; embarrassment that I had been caught - but not nearly as much as there should have been. Those were to come - especially the shame - when I thought, later that day, and then over the next 46 or 47 years -- about what I'd done, and what I could have been thinking. At the time, what I felt - or what I was most conscious of feeling - was irritation and petulance, as well as foolishness, because my "plan" had so obviously and ignominiously failed. I left the line in a huff, but I did not go to the end of it. That would have been too obvious an acceptance of defeat. Instead, I went home - as if someone had done me wrong, rather than the other way around, and I needed the comfort of home to recover from the offense. I suppose I recognized,

somewhere deep down, that I had done wrong, but I was not in a state of mind at the time to let that awareness come to the surface. I was feeling the full force of my exceptionalism, and so it was very hard for me to back down. What if I did not rate higher than anyone else? What then? The back of the line for me? No way! Better not to play the game at all.

The shame of this incident has outlived its importance. My assholatriy is still breathtaking when I think about it - hardly unique, but still breathtaking - and small as the incident was, I do not believe I will ever quite be able to live it down. What really gets me now is how unthinking and instinctual it was - not only the act of line-cutting itself, but the attitude I assumed once I'd perpetrated it. The petulance, the annoyance, the regal condescension of false superiority. The Prince of Poland could have done me no better in that regard. (Said personage being somewhat more than a figure of speech for me, ever since I discovered, a few years ago, a piece of music by Vivaldi entitled "Concert for the Prince of Poland". The riffs emerging from this discovery were unavoidable: "Who do you think you are - the Prince of Poland?"; "Well aren't you just the Prince of Poland?") And I find myself experiencing, more than occasionally,

when I rehearse this scene in memory, a strong desire to hit the rewind button and apologize to that guy in line. The impossibility of this wish does not preclude its persistent recurrence; nor does the wish itself cease to be a kind of corrective to me in my daily life -- a corrective much less momentous than, but along the same lines as, what Wordsworth meant when he wrote, in that aforementioned crux in The Prelude, that his father's death seemed to him to be a "correction of his desires". I think he was referring to the shocking disparity between his innocently looking forward to Christmas vacation, and then experiencing his father's death. In light of the latter, the former then seemed to him a horrible and presumptuous mistake that deserved "correction". No doubt it's an overstatement to say that I try to conduct myself, in my everyday life, in such a way as to continue (but never quite be able) to correct that mistake I made almost a half-century ago. But it's not entirely wrong, either. The fact that I am, in at least some ways, that same guy ("that guy") who once cut in a movie line is never entirely absent from my mind. The child, indeed, is father of the man.