

"It's Not OK, Boomer"

Reflections on Privilege, Being Irrelevant,
and Writing for No One

for A.W.

"You know, Billy, we blew it."

-- Easy Rider (1969)

(Written by Peter Fonda, Dennis Hopper
& Terry Southern)

Many years ago, when I was in graduate school at USC and our son Zack was a toddler, I used to take him to play at a small neighborhood park in Pacific Palisades, where I grew up. At the time, my parents were still alive, and still living in the Palisades, but Diane and Zack and I were living in much-less-pretty East Hollywood, near the corner of Normandie and Sunset. One day at the park, while Zack was playing on the grass, I got to talking with a guy around my age, late-30s - maybe a little younger -- who was there for a picnic with his girlfriend. (At least I assumed she was his girlfriend, since she looked considerably younger - mid-20s, I would say.) He was outfitted in a French cycling shirt and shorts -- a real go-getter. And sure enough, not long after we'd started chatting, he let it be known he worked in real estate, and lived in the Palisades. He asked me what I did, and where I lived, and I told him, mentioning that I'd grown up in the Palisades, and my

parents still lived there. He asked me if I owned or rented. I told him we rented.

"Yeah, it's gotten really crazy on the West Side," he said. "I'm really glad I bought when I did. No way could I afford a house here now."

"Tell me about it," I said, perhaps affecting more regret than I actually felt. Diane and I liked our ethnically-diverse neighborhood, which was largely Armenian and Hispanic, though there'd been a more recent influx of Thai and Vietnamese immigrants as well. And as the realtor went on about matters of interest to him - rising property values on the West Side, and the seller's market (this was the early 90s) -- my reflexive agreement began to seem somewhat disingenuous to me. What knew I, after all, of such worldly matters? I was a high-minded graduate student, studying the British Romantics and their literary interrelations.

As we talked, I began to be aware of being sized up and categorized by my interlocutor as something of a cautionary tale - a sense that soon became explicit when he declared:

"Yeah, I was lucky to get in when I did - just under the wire." He paused for a moment's reflection. "I mean, I wouldn't want to have happen to me what happened to you."

"Really?" I replied. "What happened to me?"

The strange-sounding, not-quite-innocent question hung in the air for a beat, and then he grew flustered, and mumbled something I couldn't entirely make out, though I did catch the phrase "...got priced out of the market."

With nothing more to be said on either end of the conversation, I went to check up on Zack, and soon after, the realtor and his girlfriend packed up their stuff and left the park.

It pleased me to see this guy hoist on his own petard, and I have retold the story a number of times, to much amusement. I repeat it here, though, for a different reason - not to look serenely victorious in the face of another guy's jerkitude, but because now, these many years later, my question has acquired a different resonance -- not that of an apt and well-deserved put-down, but of a genuine quandary: What did happen to me? And I think my answer now would be very different from what the realtor blurted out. Now, I think I would say, "You got irrelevant." But instead of packing up and leaving, I'm going to stay and - as we academics say -- unpack my answer.

How so, irrelevant? Well, I can think of a number of ways. I got old. I got more conservative - not

politically (at 65, I'm still a registered Democrat, and always will be, though of a merely liberal rather than progressive stamp, which I guess would count as conservative in some people's eyes), but rather culturally. I listen to mostly classical music now, and read books by mostly dead white males. (I mean that most of the writers I read tend to be dead white males, not that they are only partly alive. Zombies aren't my thing. Another generational marker, I suppose.) And I guess I've gotten more male, and more white, too. Of course, I have always been male and white; what I mean is, I just never realized it before - at least not in the way I am coming to realize it now.

And just how is that? Not exactly as a liability; that would be to take a conservative, even reactionary stance that would run counter to everything I believe in as a steadfast liberal. Rather, I realize that in being white and male, and straight, and privileged (I grew up in the Palisades, after all, even if I did get priced out of the market), I find myself part of a group that many literary-journal editors these days - and their readers, for that matter - aren't much interested in hearing from. It's the "OK, Boomer" syndrome - but one that includes the categories of race and gender as well. So culturally

superannuated am I, in fact (with a nod here to the endearing Charles Lamb, another one of the defunct crew I like to read), that it makes me a little uncomfortable to use the terms "race and gender" unironically. They are not terms I was brought up with, and they sound a little disingenuous on my tongue. (Yet another strike against me - this time a linguistic one.) I feel I have no right to this kind of language; it's the diction of the young, the progressive, the diverse, the -- OK, I'll just say it: the morally more enlightened, and therefore superior.

I am only being partly ironic here. The irony comes from age and experience - though not in the sense that these facts give me access to any greater knowledge or wisdom. They just give me a different perspective, which sometimes gets me in trouble with my son, now 32, and a lawyer. He tends to be impatient with my irony, and I think I understand why. He sees it as a defense - the defensiveness of a privileged older man (bordering on just plain old), who feels his ideals, his liberal but not quite progressive ideals, have become slightly tarnished with age. On balance, though, I would rather be scolded and corrected by the young than dismissive of them. If their moral enlightenment and superiority strike me sometimes as a little self-righteous, I recognize also it is the same

self-righteousness I once wore. I grew out of it, and Zack will, too.

What bothers me is not the finer moral instincts of the young, or the sense that they may be right in matters of race, gender, etc. It's the suggestion - coming not only from Zack, but from my second wife, Julie, as well (Diane died in 2004 of cancer, at age 54; she was almost five years older than me; Julie is two years younger - a youthful 63) - that certain topics, like the aforementioned, are off limits for certain people (like me) to talk about. I resist this idea, for a number of reasons. It hampers my freedom. It dismisses my qualifications, such as they are. (Even though I recognize that those qualifications - products of my privilege - are seen as symptoms of the very problem I represent.) It preempts me. It denies me a chance to explain myself, on the grounds that this explanation would be not only irrelevant, but slightly offensive as well. It muzzles me; and, like any dog - even one that's had its day -- I resist the muzzle.

I recognize that this resistance is partly just another aspect of my privilege as an older, straight, white male. I have always been accorded a place at the table; indeed, it has always been my table. At my ultra-

privileged prep school, the Phillips Exeter Academy, we all sat around oval oaken seminar tables called "Harkness Tables", which were part of the "Harkness System" -- the result of an opulent 1930 endowment by the philanthropist (and oil tycoon) Edward Harkness, which stipulated that there be, at least ideally, no more than 12 students in a class, all of them sitting around a Harkness Table. The endowment also entailed the hiring of enough faculty to reach this goal. Around the Harkness Table, we few - we happy few! - were encouraged to express ourselves, to add thoughtfully to the ongoing discussion. There was no hiding at the Harkness Table. We all had a voice, and it was inconceivable that we would ever be debarred from using it.

Reader, I know this essay reeks of privilege. But to me, in all honesty, its smell is similar to what one experiences sitting on the toilet, where one recognizes that one's own product, which would stink to anyone else, has a scent that is perhaps not quite so bad. Now, my trace of gratification at the stink of my privilege is certainly not anything to boast of; though not to acknowledge it would only make me guilty of further disingenuousness. I am ashamed of my privilege; yet certain of its products I am rather proud of. For example:

my classical education (BA in Classics from Berkeley, preceded by a Classical Diploma from Exeter - one of only a handful in my class); my tastes in art, music and literature; even my prose style. Yes, they all stink to high heaven of privilege; yet I continue to entertain the hope that the aroma may not be displeasing to the gods. (Or at least not all of them.)

Which gods are those? The literary gods. The gods who hold sway over the editors of the literary journals - and their staff readers -- who continue to reject my submissions. And why do they continue to do this? Because of their reek, no doubt. (The submissions', not the editors', or their readers'.) So why don't I get rid of it? The Toilet Effect! Besides, to try to do so would be -- once again -- disingenuous. It would be to try to change who I am. I am, willy-nilly, a creature of privilege, who has had his chance, and blew it. Which is to say, I failed to take advantage of all the privileges I had. For example, I didn't get into Harvard from Exeter - and then I didn't get in again, from Berkeley. (I applied as a transfer student my freshman year.) I published my first novel at age 26, but it bombed, and there was no second novel. (Several attempts, but no second novel.) I went to a second-rate graduate school (at least it was at

the time I went to it), and then got a job at a fourth-rate private college on Long Island. (Literally fourth-rate; it was ranked consistently in the fourth tier - the bottom one - by US News and World Report.) I taught there for 19 years, until the school went bankrupt (unsurprisingly) and had to close. Now I am a part-time adjunct instructor at a community college just south of Seattle.

I mention all of this not to garner sympathy (though more likely the reader's response will be one of contempt and dismissal, perhaps with a bit of Schadenfreude mixed in), but only to establish the facts behind my abiding sense of failure, of having blown it. And this sense of failure, in turn, occasions a sense of double-guilt: the guilt of being privileged, and the guilt of knowing that I blew my privilege. Granted, this double-guilt is also self-contradictory, in that it involves two fundamentally different, even opposed, kinds of guilt. And it is also true that this second kind of guilt - the guilt of failure - is more self-perceived than real. My achievements, such as they are, are certainly not failures in any objective sense. But we are not really talking about objectivity here -- we are talking about subjective feelings, and so my sense of failure trumps the reality. I have not produced nearly enough to justify my privilege. It seems to me I

have produced very little, in fact -- certainly less than was hoped for.

But I hear an objection: "OK, Boomer. But nobody wants to hear about your shit. Save it for your private journal. Not your blog, because you don't even have a blog. Some of your coevals do - but you are so superannuated that you don't. Print is still the only form of publication that is real to you. So save it for your private, handwritten journal - never to be published, never to be printed. Never to be validated, or even acknowledged. You had your chance - your many chances - your too many chances - and you blew it. Your time is over, Boomer - and your kind is over, too. Make way, and please be quiet."

I recognize that this opinion, while uncharitable (at the very least), is not unjustified. I have, as my old interlocutor might have said, aged out of the market. I am writing this essay knowing it will probably be dismissed out of hand by the young editors' readers to whose journals I will be submitting it - if I ever will be submitting it.

So who, then, am I it writing for? Well, it's beginning to look like it's for no one other than myself; which is to say, basically, for no one. And what does that mean, to be writing for no one? And isn't this claim more

than a little disingenuous as well? Do I really believe I am writing for no one? Well, no, not completely. I have hopes that someday - more likely after my death than before, but not very likely even then - I will have readers. It is a frail and distant hope, but a hope nonetheless. A hope a little more substantial, perhaps, than throwing a penny into a fountain. Or maybe not. Maybe they are basically the same. Almost nothing - but not quite. Gestures. But gestures merit some attention, too. They are not exactly nothing. Gestures are a kind of degraded or inchoate action. An action that stops short - way short - of commitment. But still. Gestures are indicative of a wish (closer to a velleity, perhaps), or a hope. The hope that my writing may, after all is said and written, prove to be for someone other than myself. Call my hope, then, the penny-in-the-fountain kind. A disposition of the soul, tending toward the forestallment of despair. A gesture that keeps me from despairing. That keeps me writing -- writing in the face of despair. (My writing is also a way of avoiding despair - the despair brought on by my efforts to be published!) In the face of my better knowledge that current market conditions (as my old nemesis would say) are trending against me and my kind - not only now, but into the foreseeable future. Maybe my

writing amounts to a kind of wager that there may be those in the future - the harvesters of the pennies in the fountain, so to speak - who may find something for themselves in what I have to say. And those future harvesters are a kind of counterbalance to the realtor guy.

Yes, that realtor guy is still with me, and probably always will be. But these days, it is not the specter of the realtor guy that haunts me. It is the specter of one closer to me - if not geographically (he lives in Vermont), then certainly intellectually. It is my old Classics teacher at Exeter, whom I have mentioned before. I will call him Mr. Cotton.

After a hiatus of 48 years, Mr. Cotton and I have gotten back in touch. A couple of years ago, I organized a reunion of some of my Exeter dormmates. The reunion was held at the New Hampshire home of the former head faculty resident of the dorm, whom I'll call Mr. Gualtieri. Mr. Cotton, who had also been a faculty resident of the dorm, and is still a friend of Mr. Gualtieri's, came down from Vermont to join us. I had been in touch with him over email before the event to sort out logistics, and learned that he had self-published a couple of books -- essays and poetry. I bought his books, and brought one of them to the reunion for him to sign. Another mere gesture, originating

more in sentimentality than admiration, since the books proved tough sledding: they were labored and pedantic. I read as much as I could - not that much; but I knew even as I put them aside that I would ask Mr. Cotton to sign one of them, for old time's sake. But what really did that mean? It meant I wanted him to see I had bought them; that I cared; that I was a loyal old student. These things were all true; and yet once again, in my secret heart of hearts - my sanctum sanctorum -- I was being disingenuous. For the books, and also the blog that Mr. Cotton had sent me the link to, were not so good -- as I say, labored and pedantic -- and it was also not at all clear who his intended audience was, if any. (Which was also rather ironic, since one of his fields of expertise is, or was, classical rhetoric.) But no, that is not quite true either. For it was painfully clear that his audience, intended or not, was really only himself. As I skimmed through the books, and the blog, I heard Mr. Cotton's voice once again, gruff and gravelly and somewhat arch, emanating from the head of the Harkness Table. He had always been a character, and he was a character still - but no longer such an appealing one, at least on the page. The charming eccentricities had hardened into traditionalist dogmas. (Or dogmata, as he might have said back in the day, eyebrow

archly raised.) He was pontificating - probably as he always had; but now I was 64, not 16, and it had a very different ring. And I felt sorry for him. That, I see now, was really why I wanted him to sign his book - because I felt sorry for him: for having to self-publish it; for the pontificating; and for all the time and effort that seemed wasted - for no one.

My worst fear, literarily speaking, is to be writing in the way it seems to me that Mr. Cotton is writing - in a vacuum, unaware of who, if any, his audience might be.

(Or, worse still, untroubled by the question itself.) But is that, my worst fear, really all that different from the rejections I am continuing to get, day after day, from the online literary journals I am submitting my essays to? For all I know, maybe they see me as another Mr. Cotton, spouting into the void. Poor Mr. Cotton! Poor humanity! Are we not, both of us, in our different ways, Bartlebyvian scribes? Our time is past. True, Mr. Cotton is not a boomer. He is at least ten years older than me, which would put his birth sometime in the early 40's, maybe even the late 30's. We are of different generations. Yet who is to say that he hasn't thrown a penny into the same fountain? Two books, and a blog - that's his penny.

And mine? My penny is this essay. Or all of my essays, for that matter. Lots of pennies in the fountain. ("OK, Boomer. Good luck with that. Knock yourself out.") My pennies may be old and corroded - but they are still legal tender for some harvester who may come along someday. And that harvester may even be you, editor's reader. Unlikely, I know - but stranger things have happened. Hope springs eternal in the fountain of irrelevance. Mr. Cotton and I will doubtless be gone by then, but our pennies will remain for the harvester.

That, at least, is the hope.