

Joßche: An Introduction

Call me Joßche. Not my real name, but close enough. A Germanicization of my real name. I could say Germanization, but I choose to say Germanicization instead, for reasons that will become clear enough over the course of this...whatever it is. Whatever it turns out to be. It could turn out to be nothing. Wouldn't that be a surprise! Hahaha. (I refuse to write LOL.) LOL's for young people. And I am not young anymore. Not hardly, as John Wayne used to say. (From a TV commercial for the movie True Grit - the original True Grit, back in 1969. I was in ninth grade.) I am 65. And white. And male. And straight. And boy, is my time over.

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Wait. Before you put this thing down, I want to clarify something. I am not a Republican. Much less a Trumpian. Much, much less a white supremacist, or any other kind of Nazi. I am - are you ready for this radical revelation? - a registered Democrat! (And always have been.) Yes! I know, that's kind of like saying I am in favor of education, and getting drugs off the streets, and cleaning

up (and cooling off) the environment. Very middle-of-the road. Very bland. Well, but you see, I like blandness. I'm actually interested in it. The power of blandness. The being of blandness, if you will. Die Seinenverbindlichkeit. I grew up in it. Pacific Palisades, CA. You can't get much blander than that. In fact, someday I want to write something called The Power of Blandness. Of course, I want to write a lot of things, including this ... whatever. But the point is, I am not a Republican, much less any of those other things. I am a registered Democrat. Whoopee. Not even a progressive. Just a liberal. So bland. So ineffectual. So useless. (Though my father marched in Selma in '65. Does that count?) And as if that weren't already bad enough, I now live in Seattle -- progressive, politically-correct Seattle. (Joßche isn't happy about this, and it sometimes causes him to act out, as you'll see. But I understand this, and even, in my contrarian way, support it.) We are a dying breed. (By "we", I mean straight white male liberals - though I cannot include Joßche is that latter category. He is a conservative German Catholic. Even worse, I know. But that's what he is.) Dying, but not dead yet. Still kicking. And still writing. Alas. So much the sorrier you, Reader. Whoever you are. (If ever

you are!) And whoever I am. Well, until I figure it out, you can call me Joßche. Welcome to my world.

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But so just who is this Joßche? An alter-ego, shadow-self, or just a character I have devised to pass things off on when I don't want to take responsibility? If I were a novelist, I would develop him properly as a character. Let him really take off. Let 'im rip. As an essayist, though, I work a much narrower, more constrained beat. No fictionalizing. Though the essay, as a form, is still very capacious, which is maybe the main thing that attracts me about it. A hold-all for all sorts of ideas, experiences, anecdotes, asides. In fact, you might say that the essay - at least the personal kind that I write - is one big aside. And I am fond of asides. The authorial asides are one of the things I like most about Byron's Don Juan. I wrote about it in my dissertation - along with Childe Harold, and The Prelude. (I like those "large loose baggy monsters". The phrase is Henry James', in reference to some of the nineteenth-century Russian novelists.) And I love all the authorial asides in Don Juan, and the rhymes -- those supremely gratifying rhymes, especially the clincher

couplets at the end of every stanza. Byron once remarked, in a letter (to his publisher Murray, I think; I could have checked this, but - fool that I was! - I sold the multi-volume set of Byron's letters and journals that my father gave me for Christmas one year - sold it when I moved from Long Island to Seattle a few years ago to join Julie. Fool, not only to have sold it for what amounted to mere pennies on the volume, but also to have sold such a gift - and from my father, no less!) As I was saying, Byron remarked that he had no plan or structure for the poem, but that he did have "materials" - though he never said exactly what these materials were. But I think I know what he meant: bits and pieces from his own life - places he'd been, people he knew, the news of the day, as well as all the desultory rhymes and aperçus that he saw he could fit into the traveling suitcase of his endless poem. Though maybe my imagination is wrong in that regard, because that wouldn't have been Byron's style, to so deliberately and premeditatedly assemble things for his poem; it would have gone against his compositional nonchalance, not to mention his aristocratic insouciance. (They went together, didn't they?) One contemporary reviewer observed, regarding Byron's occasional grammatical errors, something to the effect that "His Lordship wields his pen with the careless

ease of a gentleman." Anyway, that remark about writing with no particular plan or structure in mind has always appealed to me, and I guess I've taken it as a kind of poetic license for my own "large loose baggy" writing as well. No comparison with His Lordship intended - I draw only inspiration and encouragement from his poem. (Byron is certainly a master - but not mine. He doesn't dig deep enough to master me. But boy, is Don Juan fun to read!) And one of the things I find so inspiring and encouraging about it is how Byron doesn't worry too much about plot and structure. It's all about the voice, and the play of the mind. The infinite jest of the thing. (Which is a novel I confess I haven't read. I knew I should have, but I haven't. I've read his biography, though - and saw the movie, too. Does that count? I tend to do that - read biographies of writers I haven't read, or read only a little of. Is that cheating? I think it is. It's also inexcusably superficial. I plead guilty on both counts. The only thing I've read by Wallace is the essay on the lobster, which I loved. Do I not read more Wallace because I fear he's beaten me to the punch? Very likely.)

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But the subject was plot and structure. Hahaha! I myself, obviously, have serious problems with these things - one of the reasons, no doubt, I failed as a novelist. The unconstrained form of the essay is more congenial to me. I realize of course that the novel is an even more capacious vessel than the essay; but it requires some sort of story - unless you are an "experimental" writer, which I'm really not -- and story is not my strong suit. Which is odd, considering I worked for years in Hollywood as a Story Analyst. You would think that after synopsisizing hundreds and hundreds of movie scripts - maybe even a thousand -- I would have gotten story structure down. But maybe my difficulty with story is a reaction to all that crap I read. (I read some really good stuff, too; but most of it was crap.) As if "story" can be separated from any other part of writing! And yet right now, I am drawn to reading fiction. (Just not Wallace's, apparently.) It "nourishes my mind", to quote Wordsworth (one of my masters) on his reading while he was taking a break from writing The Prelude (one of my foundational texts). Could it be that I am inching towards a kind of hybrid form myself - fact and fiction - and that Joßche is part of that process? He himself is a hybrid form: fictional character, autobiographical projection, shadow self (for Joßche is

rather dark: my personal Sonderweg, you might say),
whipping boy and mascot. The problem of Joßche. Die
Joßchenfrage.

Of course in all of this it would help to know German,
which I don't. My German is fictional and whimsical - much
like Joßche himself. In fact, my ignorance of German is
probably one of the reasons for my obsession with it. The
mystique of a strange language, like calculus - or Latin
and Greek, for that matter, when I first encountered them.
Their strangeness connoted a world I wanted entrance to.
But once I entered into it, once I actually started
studying those languages, the mystique of strangeness
quickly wore off - only to be replaced by another mystique:
the mystique of eccentricity. Now that I had entrée into
the strangeness, it was no longer strange. I became a
habitué - a habitué of the strangeness, you could say, and
as such, an eccentric character. I was now "a person
studying the dead tongues", and this self-conception was
especially appealing. In a way, it was Joßche who was
studying the dead tongues, not me. But then that conceit
is clearly an anachronism, because Joßche did not yet exist
when I was a teenager. Joßche is a recent figment. But
the prototype of Joßche, I think, came about when I was a
teenager at Exeter, smoking pipes, wearing bow ties, and

studying Latin and Greek. (Just your average Exeter student.) God, I must have been insufferable. Yes, you were. And still are. Quiet, Fritz. If my teenage self was the prototype for you, it's no wonder where you came upon your rebarbative qualities.

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So you see, Joßche and I are not the same person. Even though we go by almost the same name. So who is writing this? Me. The other guy. The guy who said you should call him Joßche, even though that isn't him, or his real name. His real name is my name, and I'm the guy, not Joßche, who is writing this. Most of it, anyway. Though sometimes Joßche will be weighing in, too. Kind of confusing, I know. But don't worry about it. Joßche will be drifting in and out of this -- story? Can I call it that? The story of my life and opinions, maybe - my Shandean ramble -- and I will be letting him. Or will I be making him? Both. He is a figment of my imagination, yes, but that doesn't mean I have total control over him. Because I don't. In the way that writers - and all of us, really - don't have total control over our imaginations. And some people have no control. We call them the insane.

Or used to. Now we call them the "mentally-health-challenged", or some such. No, Joßche, we don't. I have never actually heard anyone say that. I mean, I suppose it's possible, but I've never heard that exact term before. It's not even grammatical. If you didn't have that hyphen after "mentally", I guess it would be OK -- but as written, it's not. And thinking it is is just a figment of your imagination, just as you're a figment of mine. Speak for yourself.

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That was an example of Joßche speaking, that last sentence. And the one a few sentences before, beginning "Now we call them..." And what about the sentence just before that, "Or used to"? No, that was me. Even though it blended perfectly into the "Now we call them..." sentence. But that's how Joßche works. He's tricky. He can blend in and out of the conversation very skillfully. It will not always be so easy to tell where I end and he begins - or vice versa. (Hence the identity confusion.) Not that it really matters. Because who's going to be reading this, anyway? If it's like my essays, probably nobody. But I exaggerate. I certainly hope I have a readership for my essays someday. In fact, I just wrote an essay about not

having readers for my essays, and what that is like. What it's like to write for no one. (The ontology of the echo-chamber, you could say.) Which, by the way, I don't believe that anyone actually does. I think every writer has at least an imagined audience. It's kind of impossible not to. I mean, the process of writing is such a royal pain in the ass, why on earth would anyone actually put themselves through it if they didn't secretly believe, or at least hope, there was going to be some sort of reward at the end of it? Julie, my wife - my second wife; my first wife, Diane, died in 2004, at the age of 54; metastatic breast cancer - Julie says I always need a reward after doing something I don't really want to do, which I guess is true. A hold-over - one of many - from my privileged childhood.

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I grew up by the Pacific Ocean, in Pacific Palisades, CA. (The CA stands for candy-ass.) Because Pacific Palisades is the candy-ass capital of the world, in my opinion. Though don't let my epithet fool you - I am deeply attached to the place where I grew up, despite its profound candy-assedness. Oddly enough, though, it was also the home of Henry Miller, in the last part of his life (he was

definitely not a candy-ass) -- and, before that, Thomas Mann (who maybe was). Ein Kandisarsch. Mann lived there during and after World War II, when he was writing Doctor Faustus. Which is so weird, because Mann is another one of my masters. (I am a man of many masters.) It's strange to think of me riding my skateboard down the same streets where Thomas Mann used to walk with his dog, in his white suit, straw hat and bow tie. (That's the image I have of him, anyway, taken from the photo on the front of the dust jacket of Essays of Three Decades.) Of course, he was there in the 40s, before I was born -- let alone riding a skateboard, which didn't happen until 1963. And at the time I was riding a skateboard, I hadn't even heard of Thomas Mann. Though the weirdness, and the incongruity, of growing up in the same suburb where Thomas Mann used to live was probably what caused me, many years later, when I was teaching The Magic Mountain (I taught it several times; another foundational text), to want to write a novel about a kid - that is to say, a version of myself - who Thomas Mann secretly had the hots for. A sort of 1940s, Southern California version of Death in Venice, you could say. (Maybe I could have called it Death in Venice, CA. A companion to Geoff Dyer's novel Jeff in Venice, Death in Varanasi - which I haven't read either. But I love the

first part of the title. Does that count?) And does my idea for the Thomas Mann novel sound really bad? Well, I said I was a failed novelist. And this one didn't even begin to get off the ground. I'd only gotten a few pages into it when I realized I'd hit my limits as a storyteller. Yet and still, I had plans. Thomas Mann was going to become buddies with the kid's parents, too, in order to insinuate himself into this American family. The father was a screenwriter - like my dad - and the mother was a free-spirited Bohemian type (sort of like my mother, too). And then there was good old Thomas Mann, writing Doctor Faustus and walking around the neighborhood with his dog, and his cigar, and his large family. (Though come to think of it, the kids - Erika, Golo, poor Klaus (later a suicide, at 43), Elisabeth, Michael and Monika -- would have been grown up by then, wouldn't they?) Plus there was also that whole group of German expatriates living in L.A. during the war, that Thomas Mann was also part of. I was going to get into that, too. (I told you, I had plans.) And instead of a skateboard - which didn't exist back then, obviously - the kid would be riding a bike, and sometimes maybe roller skates. (The old-school kind, with metal wheels.) I guess I had the idea that the American roller skates would have made an impact on Thomas Mann - especially worn by an

American boy. Maybe he would have tried them on himself. That would have made a funny scene - Thomas Mann on roller skates, trying to impress the kid. Make way, Tadzio - Jeff Gerber has arrived. (That was the name of the kid - son of Sanford and Bessie Gerber. The Gerbers, you see, were my alternate fictional family. The family of several failed novels. And yet he persisted!)

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I just remembered something about my own dad and roller skates - or rather, roller blades. A few days after my mom died of a rare blood disease - this was back in 1995, when I was teaching at Holy Cross (my first job, as a sabbatical replacement) - my dad bought a pair of roller blades. His effort to stave off death, I guess, and not go gently, and show he still wasn't too old to do what he'd loved doing as a kid on the streets of New York. (Except, of course, he was too old.) He had Ada and Violeta, the two Salvadoran ladies who'd been taking care of Mom on her deathbed, on either arm, holding him up, as he slipped and slid every which way, trying to figure out how to work the roller blades. It was gruesome. Lucky he didn't break his hip or something. I can still see him in the driveway of

the old house in the Palisades, being held up by Ada and Violeta, so he didn't crack open his skull and make an orphan of me. Zack, who was seven at the time, thought it was great fun. But I was not amused. It reminded me of the times when I was Zack's age, maybe a little older, and my dad would play the cut-up at my parents' parties, and I would be embarrassed for him. I used to wish both of my parents would be more like traditional parents. I wanted my dad to be more serious, and take me to sporting events, which he hardly ever did, and my mom to bake cookies and Rice Krispies Treats - which she never did - and to listen to more normal music for a grown-up, and not the Rolling Stones, which were her favorite group, which really embarrassed me. A little later, when I was a teenager and in my pipe-smoking and Greek and Latin and bow-tie period, my friends used to say I was so lucky that my parents were "cool", and not like their parents. But I didn't feel lucky - I just felt embarrassed for them, and for myself, for being their son. But I knew my friends wouldn't understand this, so I kept it to myself. Much, much later, after Mom had died - and actually only two years before Diane and my dad were to die, within a month of each other; 2004 was a very bad year - I wrote an (unpublished) novel called The Bohemian Period, in which I went over a lot of

this stuff, and then, to get away from his hip mom, who's really bugging him, the kid runs away and up Santa Monica Canyon to a cave with the slightly older nephew of the Gerbers' black housekeeper, Arlene. (Yep, that's right - same family as in the aborted Thomas Mann novel, just a later incarnation: 60s instead of 40s. And the name of the Gerbers' fictional housekeeper was a rather pathetically transparent variation on the name of our actual housekeeper, Aline.) But that's another story. Everything's another story, it seems. Like I said - failed novelist. Maybe that failure comes from having grown up in the Palisades, too. I mean, how can you come from a place like Pacific Palisades and become a novelist? Novelists come from places where life is a struggle, not where life is a bland, candy-ass piece of cake. Birthday cake. I have a thing about birthday cake. We'll get to that too, eventually.

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I mentioned before that I wanted to write something called The Power of Blandness. Not a bad title, actually. An oxymoron. Funny I should already have a title for something I haven't even written yet, and will probably never write. (Julie says I have a thing about titles, too,

and I guess she's right.) In fact, I haven't even written the thing - this thing - that's supposed to come before it. And what is this thing, anyway? A confession? In the guise of a novel? Or a novel in the guise of a confession? No, that one's already taken. By Roth, yet another one of my masters. Roth was describing the reception of Portnoy. He said that people took it as a confession in the guise of a novel, whereas it was really the other way around. Nothing bland about Roth. He grew up in Newark, NJ. The real deal. His father sold insurance. Solid middle-class. Maybe lower-middle? High lower-middle? Whatever. But no blandness. Lots of Yiddish, and born in the depths of the depression, Roth was (1933). He grew up in reality. No candy-ass son of a screenwriter in the lily-white Palisades.

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Funny, there's a Palisades in New Jersey, too. Maybe Pacific Palisades is named after it. Worlds apart, though. Couldn't be more different, Jersey and Pacific Palisades. While Philip Roth's Newark was burning in the summer of '67, I was 13, and with my parents in a fancy outdoor restaurant, staring down an interracial couple. Not my

finest moment. We had gone out to dinner with a couple of my parents' friends at a fashionable restaurant called Herb McCarthy's (long since defunct). We were sitting at a table outside, and across the way was an interracial family: black father, white mother and their children. And I was staring at them - the father in particular. I knew at the time that it was not polite to stare, and I also knew something more important: that it was wrong, very wrong, for me to be staring at this particular family. I knew - or at least at 13 I sensed, I had an undeveloped, instinctive feeling -- that this interracial family was part of what my father had gone to Selma to march for: freedom, equality, and the brotherhood of man. And that there were people who hated this family, and would kill them if they got the chance. Lynch them. Bomb them. Burn them. Beat them to a pulp and then bury them in a gravel pit, as they'd done to those three civil rights workers in Mississippi a few years earlier. Maybe I was thinking of these things as I was staring at them. But honestly, I'm not exactly sure what I was thinking. Maybe I was just absentmindedly dreaming, and not completely aware of what I was doing, which was being rude. But here I am giving myself the benefit of the doubt, and maybe also being disingenuous. Because although I may not have been

completely aware of what I was doing, of my rudeness, I was partly aware of it. And yet I kept doing it - I deliberately kept on doing it. I kept staring at them. It became a kind of game. A game concocted out of boredom - but not a benign one. A game sort of like the one I sometimes played where I would decapitate ants with the end of my fingernail. Something I told myself was harmless, but that I knew wasn't.

But why? Why was I playing this game? Was I just trying to piss off my parents? But they weren't paying attention; they were talking with their friends. Was I trying to get back at them for ignoring me? For dragging me out to dinner at this fancy place, when what I wanted to do was to stay home and listen to my new records, The Jimi Hendrix Experience ("Are You Experienced") and Cream ("Fresh Cream"). (And how could I be a racist if I liked Jimi Hendrix?) Maybe it was just curiosity - idle curiosity. Idle, but not benign. Like the ants. But no, I wasn't just curious - it was something more than that. Because it wasn't like I'd never seen an interracial family before. Growing up, I'd been to several parties with Harry Belafonte and his family - his second wife Julie, and their son David. My father had written a movie, "Odds Against Tomorrow", directed by his friend Robert Wise, that starred

Harry Belafonte, and Belafonte and his family used to come to parties at Bob Wise's beach house. David Belafonte was about my age. Julie, his mother, had dark skin, but my mother told me that was because she dyed it; she was actually white. Jewish, in fact. So David was sort of like me - half-Jewish. (Actually, he was more Jewish than me, because his mother was Jewish, and mine wasn't.)

(Of course, one could point out here that to adduce Harry Belafonte in this way - in the way of "acclimating" oneself to interracialism - is the worst kind of tokenism. And I would agree. So perhaps I, and my parents, and Bob Wise -- may they all rest in peace -- should hang on the hook of tokenism for a while, too. If it is possible for them to hang while resting in peace.)

But what was perhaps most interesting about all of this at Herb McCarthy's was that I was pretending to be more curious about the interracial family than I really was. I was pretending to be curious so that I could have my curiosity be a cover for something else. But for what? For the game I was playing, which was to piss off not my parents, but the father - the black father. I was being deliberately rude to him and his family, to see what kind of reaction I would get. To see what, if anything, he would do. Because if he did something, that would show

that I had power - some kind of power. The power to get a reaction out of a perfect stranger, who had done me no harm. The power to make a stranger mad, for no reason at all. The power - yes - of a white person over a black person. The power of a child - for if I wasn't exactly a child in age anymore, I was still a child in mentality - over a grown-up. The power of a white child over a black grown-up. That was it. It was all about power, racial power. Black power? Of course not. White power. The power of the bad guys. The power of the racists. The power, ultimately, of the slave-owners. Of the Confederacy. The power of evil. My evil. Me as the Bad Seed. (Or maybe just me as the future Joßche? I resent that remark. I thought you might - that's why I made it. Fuck you.)

It was, in any case, a lot to accomplish for a child of 13, just out to dinner with his parents. And it worked. At some point during our dinner, the father got up and came over to our table. The experiment blew up - as I had known it would. I wanted it to blow up. It was designed to blow up. I wanted to destroy something, as with the ants. I wanted to have that power, and to show I had it. The father came over to our table and said to my father something like, "I think you should know that your son has

been very rude. He's been staring at me and my family the entire time we've been sitting here. As if we don't have a right to be here. Your son should know that this is a free country, and if he doesn't know it already, he should learn it. He should know better. He is old enough to know better. And he should be ashamed of himself."

And I was. I was red in the face, which felt hot and large, and my ears were ringing. So what did I do? I pretended not to know what he was talking about. I continued my performance - this time, in the role of innocent. My performance of racism had gotten me into trouble, as I had known it would, so now I played the part of the innocent child. And my parents fell for it. My father automatically apologized to the man. I'd been half-hoping he'd say something like, "Hey listen, buddy - don't get after me. You've got the wrong guy. I marched in Selma." But of course he didn't say that. (Apparently, my father was not under the control of my juvenile fantasies.) He apologized for me, as I was pretending surprise and incredulity - butter wouldn't have melted in my mouth. But after the man left, my parents agreed that he must be an angry person, with a chip on his shoulder. And I let them believe that.

Did they believe it, though? And did they really believe my protestations of innocence? Or did they just pretend to? Were they really, secretly, as ashamed of my behavior as I was? No, I don't think so. I don't think they really knew what I had been doing. Because if they had known, they would have made a much bigger deal out of it afterwards than they did. The fact that they didn't must have been because they were either clueless - which they weren't - or they were just deliberately refusing to deal with it, pretending I hadn't been staring at all, and putting it out of their minds. At any rate, I never mentioned anything to my mother about the game I had been playing. I, who always told her everything, never told her this. I never told her what I'd really been up to. I never told her about the performance, or the experiment, or

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Almost fifty-three years ago, that was, and I'm still not over it. So last summer, Julie and I joined a whiteness-awareness discussion group. The discussion leader was a middle-aged woman I'll call Suzette. She had a withered arm, from polio, when she was a little girl. Joßche noticed it immediately. So did you! Yeah, but you noticed

it first. It was just slightly withered - but withered enough for Joßche. She set off something in him. I restrained him - but I almost didn't. What was it about Suzette that enraged him? Was it her earnestness? Not exactly. More like her political correctness. (Though they went very well together.) She started off the group by acknowledging the Indi- sorry, the Native American land we were on, the land of the Duwamish people. Now why was that so annoying? Because it seemed so reflexive, so obligatory? But surely it's a good thing to be aware of atrocities and genocide? These things really were done to human beings, by human beings, and other human beings - and eventually, even yours truly - especially yours truly -- in the old candy-ass Palisades - benefited from them. And what matters my annoyance in the light of such suffering? How dare I be annoyed? But I was. Not at being reminded of history, though, and all its horrors. I guess it was just the reflexive, obligatory quality of Suzette's reminder - the sense of paying lip-service to political correctness - that annoyed me. Well, but sometimes - all too often - the political correctors are right. Even the registered moderate Democrat in you has to acknowledge that. Oh, to hell with the registered moderate Democrat - how about the feeling human being? Doesn't the feeling

human being have to acknowledge the correctness of the political correctors? Yes - but then the feeling human being encounters certain obstacles within himself. Obstacles such as Joßche. Sad, but true. And more properly, perhaps, the obstacle of the Joßche Factor. Die Joßchenfaktor. And what is the difference between Joßche and the Joßche Factor? Is there any difference? Perhaps it's time to dispense with the fiction of Joßche as a separate entity? No! I need to be separate from you. I realize that - but what you need doesn't really matter. You don't get to call the shots here. Remember, you are a figment of my imagination, not the other way around. I wouldn't be so sure, if I were you. But you are me! But OK, let's just say, for the moment, for argument's sake, that you are separate from me - at least partly separate - and that it is my choice, not yours, to keep you separate. Why then? Why do I want to keep Joßche separate? So I can fob things off on him? But wouldn't it be more accurate to say that I need what he represents? And what is that? I suppose another name for it would be the "Imp of the Perverse." Like the Poe story. (Who is not, definitely not, one of my masters. Too adolescent for my tastes.) Joßche is my Imp. A figment, yes - but one who feels so real. A part of me. My opposing self. The term is Lionel

Trilling's. The title of his fourth book. Trilling most definitely is one of my masters - my critical master par excellence. A rather severe moralist, he was - one of the things that makes him so untimely - Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen! The untimely meditator. A throwback -- and therefore all the more appealing.

But the subject was Suzette, not Lionel Trilling (much less Nietzsche). How did I get onto him? Oh yeah - The Opposing Self. How Joßche is my opposing self, and Suzette and her political correctness pissed him off. Well, what did we expect when I joined a whiteness awareness group in Seattle? It was almost as if I joined it to prove something to myself. Prove what? That I'm not a bigot? (Or that I am?) But didn't I already know that? (That I'm not a bigot - or that I am?) I guess not. I mean, yeah, I knew I wasn't a Trumpian bigot, in the sense that I knew I wasn't like the people at the rallies. All those complacent, gleeful, untroubled white faces - untroubledly white. And what about all the hate and anger, and the acting out? Sure, all of that. But it's the complacency, and the glee, and the untroubledness, especially - the untroubled whiteness - that make the most impact on me. Of course they are troubled, too - all that anger and hatred against "the liberals". Even more hate and anger against

"the liberals", I think, than against black and brown people. (There was a photo today in the paper - i.e., the online edition of The New York Times - of a guy at a Trump rally wearing a jacket that said, "Make Liberals Cry Again". Joßche had to laugh at that one, in spite of myself.) Because, according to them, it's "the liberals", the white liberals, you see, who are the betrayers - the privileged betrayers of the white race. But the hate and anger aren't what makes the greatest impression when I see their faces. It's the complacency, the untroubled certainty. "The best lack all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity." Boy, did Yeats get that one right. Gives me a chill, to think of what the world was on the brink of then, when he wrote that, and then to think of what we might be on the brink of now... Might be? Who am I kidding? So many cataclysms (literally: "an extensive flood; deluge" - from the Greek kataklyzo - to wash over, inundate), for so many millions. The Duwamish, it turns out, were only the tip of the (melting) iceberg. So I guess I should ease up on old Suzette. We both should. Speak for yourself.

(Best just to ignore his little periodic eruptions -- his eructations; like his hero Nietzsche, he suffers from dyspepsia.)

I think that what bothered me more than anything else about Suzette - But I thought you were going to ease up on her! Yes, I am. Sit tight, Fritz -- the thing that bugged me most was her humorlessness, and her lack of irony. As if she should have been more like me - humorous and ironic. How narcissistic can you get! I mean, it's not like I joined the whiteness awareness group to meet more people like me. So why did you join? Well, I said before that I wanted to prove something to myself about bigotry - my bigotry. That I wasn't bigoted - and maybe also that I was. But "prove" isn't quite the right word. I wanted to face the bigotry -- if that's what it was -- and deal with it, and figure out what it was all about. How a nice Jewish boy from the Palisades (but maybe that's part of the problem right there - the lily-white Palisades), with liberal parents, could be worried that he might be a racist in some ways. Could sometimes have - that is, discover in himself - certain attitudes and thoughts and emotions that were out of character with who he had been raised to be. But just what attitudes and thoughts and emotions are we talking about here? That black people are different from white people? Of course they are! With their history in this country, how could they not be? Yes, but to be too conscious of those differences - those physical and

cultural differences - is not good, is it? It must say something about you that is not what you want to hear and know. And what is that? That you are not "pure of heart"? What does that even mean? And was that ever a serious goal of yours - to be pure of heart? Kierkegaard said, "Purity of heart is to will one thing." If that is true, then I am so not pure of heart. Because I think all sorts of things, contradictory things, at the same time, all the time. Joßche - the Joßche Factor, the Joßche Function, the Joßche Effect - is only one example of this.

No, that's not actually what Kierkegaard said. Read what you just wrote. He said, "Purity of heart is to will one thing" [Joßche's emphasis]. Thinking of all sorts of things isn't at all the same thing as willing one thing. One of your problems is that you don't will anything.

Ouch. He's right. I mean, you're right. I mean - I'm right? Whatever. But that's a huge subject, and I'm not even going to try to get into it at the moment. No, of course not. Just sweep it under the rug. Out of sight, out of mind. That's just not true, and you know it. You know me better than that. If anything, I sweep stuff back out from under the rug. Yet and still, you are not exactly wrong, and we'll get to that in good time -- the matter of

my "weak will". Just not right now. Right now we're on the matter of Suzette.

I think another thing that pissed me off about Suzette, besides the political correctness and the humorlessness and lack of irony, was her plainness. (I'm ashamed and sorry to admit this, and it also makes me feel sorry for her - not to mention look even worse than I already do -- but it's true.) She was a plain-looking, middle-aged woman. She wasn't attractive. And she knew it. And it made her defensive. She made a sarcastic reference, in her opening remarks at our first meeting, to how being "pretty" was one of the things - like being white, and male, and straight (sound familiar?), and a parent -- that give you an automatic, unspoken but very real power and legitimacy in our society, and that some people - many people, actually -- were subtly penalized for not being. Suzette wrote a list of these things on her large, butcher-paper writing tablet that she carried with her (in her good arm) for that first meeting, and "pretty" was one of them. And I noticed (and Joßche noticed; Joßche especially noticed) the contrast between Suzette and another woman in the group, whom I'll call Natalie, who was very pretty, and was married to an African American. (One of the reasons she'd joined the group, she said, was to get

a different perspective on her husband's experience and problems in white Seattle.) Julie and I agreed that Natalie should have been the group leader, not Suzette - and not because she was pretty, and Suzette wasn't, but because she just seemed like a natural leader, and in fact was some sort of group leader or director at T-Mobile, where she worked. Anyway, Suzette was ill-suited for the job, but as soon as I recognized this, I also knew that I would have been, too. Joßche, too. He definitely would have been ill suited for it. Neither of us is the leader type - I because of my constitutional discomfort in leadership roles, in the few times in my life where I have mistakenly taken on such roles (I think it has to do with my innate disorganization in everything that doesn't have to do with writing and teaching), and Joßche because of his destructive anarchic tendencies. I resent that remark. Fine - but it's true. His urge to tear things down - not unlike his compatriot Nietzsche, for whom he has a great affinity. Much more than I do. I have trouble reading Nietzsche. I keep trying to, and keep quitting after only about ten pages or so. I find him not only difficult, but depressing. The loneliness, the high Alpine loneliness of the lakes and mountains he loved. I'm an ocean person

myself. Grew up by it, as I said, and always feel better when I'm near it.

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I mentioned that it shames me to admit I resented Suzette for not being good-looking. Actually resented it, as if it were a personal wrong done to me. And that wasn't even the first time this had happened, either. There was a woman I became friends with on the lot at Warner Bros., when I was working as a script-reader, who was very homely. I once remarked to her, in passing - and in irritation, I'm sorry to say - that she wasn't going to win any beauty contests. And she later called me on it. And I apologized profusely. But never enough, it seemed to me. In one way, it reminded me of the Herb McCarthy's incident (mutatis mutandis, of course; because in the HMI, I didn't apologize or even admit anything), in that it revealed to me one of the mysteries of my being. Or maybe it wasn't such a mystery after all. Just another sign that I'm a bigot, and sometimes a shit.

& & &

Yeah, there were all sorts of unsavory things going on with me in that whiteness-awareness group. Things connected not

only with my whiteness, but with my maleness as well - as just illustrated. (I was the only man in the group. Maybe that had something to do with it. But still.) And I wonder. Was I maybe doing penance for these things by joining the whiteness-awareness group in the first place? I think maybe I was. Doing penance for the ungenerous thoughts about black and brown people, primarily. But also for the woman at Warner Bros. But it was even more than that. I was also doing penance for my privilege - for having grown up the son of a screenwriter in candy-ass Pacific Palisades. For having gone to private schools all my life, until Berkeley - where I wasted my freshman year (at least it sometimes seems that way, when I look back on it) trying to transfer to Harvard, where my father had gone, and which had rejected me the year before. (And was to reject me again that year.) Penance, too, for having gone to Exeter (like my father), where I took Latin and Greek, and got a prize for those things - the Haig-Ramage Classical Scholarship (400 smackers - a lot of money at the time, in 1971) -- and graduated with a Classical Diploma, and felt oh so superior for my classical pedigree. (I also majored in Classics at Berkeley.) Penance for all that stuff. So it seemed only fair and just that I should have to suffer through Suzette and the whiteness-awareness

group, and the book we read, Robin Di Angelo's What Does It Mean to Be White? Developing White Racial Literacy. (I had read her White Fragility earlier, with equally mixed feelings. Was that penance too? No doubt. Talk about political correctness! Though I have to admit I basically agreed with just about everything she said in both books. It was just her sociologist's way of saying it that bugged me. No humor, no irony. Sound familiar?)

But it wasn't only the need to do penance that brought me to these things. I was also curious. And curious, in part, about my lack of curiosity - my lack of curiosity about things black. Even African-American literature? Maybe especially African-American literature. Big on the Classics, and the Jews (my Jewish masters include Roth, Bellow, Proust, Kafka, and Anita Brookner. Anita Brookner? Yes. My only woman master. Nice going, Chester. I know, but it's true. If I'm not exemplary, at least I'm honest. And Anita Brookner is - or was; she died in 2016 - only tangentially Jewish, anyway. I mean, she never wrote about Jews per se. She was too English to write about them, maybe) -- but bad on the blacks, I am, and the women. Jesus, that sounds really bad, I know. Well, it is. I know it is - but you're even worse! You're a conservative German Catholic, for Christ's sake! But the subject isn't

me. Ah...I sometimes wonder. Anyway, I mentioned this in group - the black part, not the women part, since all the others in the group were women - and Suzette gave me an "assignment", which was to compile a list of African-American writers I wanted to read. And of course, I didn't do the assignment. Not only because it was Suzette who gave it to me, but also - more importantly, I think, and more badly - because I didn't want to do it. I mean, why should I read African-American writers when I could be reading my crew (Roth, etc.)? Well, how about because I am ignorant about African-American literature, and I don't like being ignorant about anything?

Actually, it's not really true that I'm completely ignorant about African-American literature. I've read slave narratives - well, at least Douglass and Jacobs - and various anthologized pieces for the American lit. surveys I've taught (Washington, DuBois, Hughes, Baldwin, Walker, Morrison - hey, two women! Two black women! Double credit!), and Ellison, Wright, and Coates. I really liked Coates. But so fucking what! The truth is, I'm just not that curious about African-American literature on the whole. Zack gave me the new Coates novel for Christmas, but I know I probably won't read it, because Julie read it and was disappointed. It makes me feel bad to admit all

this - though not really for the reasons it should, including that I should feel like I'm missing out on something. I feel bad primarily because it makes me feel sorry for my son for giving me a book I probably won't read. That really gets to me. Feeling sorry for people is a big thing with me. And I know it's bad to feel sorry for people. It's condescending, sentimental, useless and inept, to name just a few reasons. But I can't help it. I have always been that way. I think it is probably somehow related to feeling embarrassed for people (like my parents), and I'm sure I will explore this question further - I'm sure you will! Das ist gewiss! - but not now. Now we're still on poor Suzette (see, I feel sorry for her too!), and the whiteness-awareness group. And my penance, and lack of curiosity.

On that note, I mentioned something else to the group that I think is relevant here. When I was growing up, in you-know-where, we had a black gardener from Mississippi. Willie. Willie Dillard. And one time - I guess it must have been the summer after graduating from Exeter - my friend Mike Ward came to stay for a few days. And one day, when Willie was working, Mike started talking to him. I guess they talked for about 15 minutes or so. Maybe even longer. Anyway, it was 15 minutes longer than I'd ever

talked to Willie in my life, who at that point must have been working for us for 12 years or so. And Mike, who is a musician - blues bass player, actually; he's a big deal now, and has gotten awards - Mike found out that Willie played guitar. Who knew? Certainly not yours truly. But Mike found this out by actually talking to the guy. Who, by the way, was missing one of his fingers, which you could tell even when he was wearing gardening gloves, because one of the fingers was floppy. How did that happen? I have no idea. You would have actually had to talk to him to find that out. I should ask Mike; he probably knows.

Mike knows a lot of things. I admire him greatly. He is, in a way, my moral compass. One of them, anyway. Especially in the matter of blackness. His relationship to blackness (he is white) is one of the things I most admire about him. He seems to feel it in his bones - and has as long as I've known him, since tenth grade at Exeter. We were roommates our sophomore and senior years, and even then, blues was basically his life. He was always playing the records of the old Delta blues guitarists - Mississippi Fred McDowell, Mississippi John Hurt, the Reverend Gary Davis, Bukka White - and the great blues harp players: Little Walter, Junior Wells, Sonny Boy Williamson II (a.k.a. Rice Miller; the original Sonny Boy Williamson, for some

reason, wasn't as good as the guy who took his name; which is weird; you would think it would be the opposite, where the original would be better than the imitation; but not in this case, apparently). Senior year, Mike began a correspondence with Eubie Blake, then brought him up to Exeter to give a concert at the president's house. That was a big deal. He also did an American History term paper on Fats Waller, and included a full discography. He introduced me to music I probably never would have known otherwise. With Mike, there was no affectation of connoisseurship -- as there was never any affectation of any sort with him; there was, to the contrary, a kind of ingenuousness I called his "innocence", which would clearly embarrass him, and which he would claim not to understand: "If I'm innocent, then you're guilty!" he would thunder, in mock anger. He just really, really loved that music, and it showed in his shining, soulful eyes whenever he played it.

How did this happen to a Jewish boy from the old factory town of Lewiston, ME? His father, who owned a jewelry store and various other businesses in Lewiston, played piano, and had a large collection of old jazz records that Mike had grown up with. But that hardly could fully explain what seemed a natural, almost inborn affinity

for black bluesmen. If I were a believer, I would cite his past life - or lives - in the Mississippi Delta. But Mike would have none of such stuff; and besides, I prefer the incongruous mystery of the thing. As mysterious as him finding out more about Willie Dillard (the moniker of a Delta bluesman if there ever was one; all that's missing is the "Blind") in fifteen minutes than I ever managed to know in twelve years.

Anyway, when I told the Willie story to the group, and also the restaurant story, from when I was 13, they decided it was a power thing, and not really a racist thing. But I'm not so sure. Neither am I. Shut up, this is serious. Di Angelo, in the book we were reading, says there's a difference between being prejudiced and being racist. Prejudice is individual and personal, and racism is systemic. OK, I get that; but the distinction still seems kind of moot to me. Because even if you call me just "prejudiced", it still seems like racism to me - if only a mild form of racism. I mean, a guy like Mike is neither prejudiced nor racist. Not a prejudiced bone in his body. Except against hypocrites and phonies. He can smell them a mile away, and has absolutely no tolerance for them. He won't even pretend to like them. I actually believe he is constitutionally incapable of pretending to like someone he

doesn't like. Which is the exact opposite of me. I have absolutely no problem - well, practically no problem; nothing I can't overcome, anyway - pretending to like people that, if I were to be completely honest with myself, I would have to admit, in my heart of hearts, I don't like. Why is that? I think it has to do with not wanting to hurt people's feelings. Even people I don't like. Maybe especially people I don't like. I don't want to hurt the feelings of people I don't like, and I also want them to like me. Are we clear on that? To me, this seems like the worst kind of hypocrisy, and I'm surprised that Mike, who has such a good nose for hypocrisy, even likes me. I would think I would be exactly the kind of person he would most hate - a hypocritical, dishonest pretender. Is it possible he doesn't know this about me? But how could you room with somebody for two years at boarding school and not know that about them? I really have no answer to that, unless I am such a genius hypocrite that I can fool even Mike Ward.

If it seems like I'm being too hard on myself - well, a number of people have told me that. I can see how they would say that, but to me, it just seems like I'm being honest. I know that's an oxymoron - to be honest about being dishonest - but it's true. I think it's also maybe true that I say things about myself that I would never say

about anybody else; but that just goes to show that I'm a dishonest person towards anybody but myself. (It seems the only person I can't fool is Joßche.) Also, that I'm afraid of people not liking me if I were to say what I really thought, and also of hurting the feelings of people I don't really like, but still want to like me, or at least not hate me. So fucked up. How did I get to be this way?

I think it has to do with something I mentioned earlier - my "weak will". It's not so much that I'm a lying, hypocritical pretender, as that I have a fundamentally weak will. I suffer from a constitutionally weak will, and when I look back on it, I see that I always have. So what does it mean to have a weak will? Do I lack discipline and self-control? About certain things, yes. If there's something I want to eat (like pasta or ice cream) or drink (like beer) or smoke (like pot; I know I should probably call it "weed", but I can't - it just sounds wrong in my mouth, like I'm trying to be hip or something), I find it very hard to stop thinking about it until I've satisfied the urge. The thought of the thing I want just keeps eating away at me, so to speak, until I've laid it to rest by giving in to it. After I've satisfied the feeling, and my mouth is full of the taste - or my head of the beer buzz, or the pot high - it's so easy to imagine

not having given in to it. It's so easy to picture myself continuing as I was, on the straight and narrow, before I gave in to the urge. But before I've actually given in to it, the pull is just too strong to resist. I mean, I can picture myself resisting the urge, and standing firm; but the picture I have conjured in my mind, of me standing firm, just doesn't seem real. At least not as real as the urge itself. That's about as close as I can come to describing the phenomenon.

Close, but no cigar; because that's not quite what I mean by my "weak will", which is different from just a lack of discipline, self-control, or resolve - though these things are subsumed by my weak will. I think it goes back to what I was saying before, about my desire to be liked, to please - and even more, not to displease. It's like I have trouble standing firm in my belief or position. I'll give you an example.

Last fall, at the community college where I teach composition, I had two students - boyfriend and girlfriend - who would not settle for any grade less than a 4.0 (95% and above). Not even a 93 (3.8) or 94 (3.9). Nothing but a 95 or higher counted for them. The girl was a slightly better writer than her boyfriend, and clearly an A student - but was he? I don't think so. If he hadn't kept on

resubmitting his papers to me (my fault, because I allow multiple revisions and resubmissions of any piece of writing done in the class, for full credit; this too may be a sign of my weak will), would I have ended up giving him a final grade of 95? I don't think so. It was his will and indomitable persistence that did it. His will was just stronger than mine.

But maybe that isn't the best example. Actually, I don't think it is. I think a better example would be my son, Zack. I know that sounds screwy, to say my son is a good example of my weak will - but I mean it by contrast. My will is weak compared to his. Or rather, the strength of his will brings out how comparatively weak mine is. And maybe not only comparatively, but absolutely. Because when he digs his heels in, you can forget it. At least I can. I know when I'm outgunned. He pulls up something from deep inside himself that I know I just don't have. Call it willfulness, or orneriness, or stubbornness. Or the power of opposition. Apparently there's such a thing as ODD - Oppositional-Defiant Disorder. Maybe he has that - or used to have it, back in the day. Things are much better between us now. But they got very bad, around the time that Diane first got sick. Or when she first got diagnosed, rather - because when she got diagnosed she wasn't even sick yet. I

mean, obviously, she was sick, because if she wasn't, she wouldn't have gotten diagnosed. But she didn't feel sick, is what I meant. She just felt this lump in her breast, and went to the doctor, and they did a biopsy, and it came back positive for cancer. I don't even want to think about it. Because for months before that - maybe it was even a year before - she had been feeling something in her left breast. It was her left breast, wasn't it? Shit, I can't believe I don't know this for sure. I mean, how could you not know for sure which of your wife's breasts got cut off, the left or the right - especially when she ended up dying of it? I'm pretty sure it was the left one - but to be perfectly honest, it could have been the right. I'm not absolutely positive it wasn't.

And not only do I not know for sure, but when she was feeling the lump, for months, I was telling her it was nothing. Half the time, I didn't even want to feel it. Can you believe that? But it's true. I didn't want to feel it because it creeped me out to think there could be something growing there. It creeped me out, and also I didn't want there to be something there. And I also realized what would happen if there were to be something there. Our whole lives would be changed. Turned upside-down, if there were something there. Which of course there turned out to be.

She was right to feel something, and I was wrong not to. And if I hadn't been too creeped out to seriously take a feel before I finally did - because I finally did. I took a serious feel, and felt something, and then I told her enough is enough, you've got to go to the doctor, and so she did. And the rest is history, as they say. (Really bad history.) But what I started to say was, if I hadn't been creeped out, and taken a serious feel when she first started feeling something, maybe she'd be alive today, and Zack wouldn't have had to go through what he went through, and even more importantly, Diane wouldn't have had to go through what she went through. Or not all of it, anyway. And maybe she wouldn't have died, if only they'd gotten it earlier. If only I hadn't been so creeped out. If only. Would've, could've, should've. I know. But it's true. Point being...

Well, there're actually lots of points here. Where we started was with Zack's strong will, and my weak will. And when Diane got sick, she didn't want to be the heavy anymore, and so that fell to me, and I just wasn't any good at it, and Zack walked all over me. Which was not really his fault, because he was only 13 when she was first diagnosed, and what was he supposed to do? His mother was diagnosed with cancer, and then she was sick and bald from

the chemotherapy and radiation, and then she was better for a couple of years, when she was in remission, and then she got sick again, really sick, and then she had her ovaries taken out, but it was too late, and then she was terminal, and then she was dying. And what was he supposed to do then? How was he supposed to act then? Not that she was ever really the heavy, even before that. She was just always a little bit more of a heavy than Mr. Cream Puff here, in terms of setting limits and having boundaries. But that's a whole other story. Point being... What was the point? Oh yeah - my weak will. Which wasn't just with setting limits and boundaries with Zack, but also in the way I handled Diane's breast lump. Because if I'd had a stronger will there, I would've felt the lump when she first felt it, maybe a year before I finally did feel it, and then I would've insisted - as I eventually did, but too late - that she go to the doctor right then and there. Which maybe would have saved her. Instead of dilly-dallying and shilly-shallying, until it was too late. Or turned out to be too late.

Good going, Josh. And that wasn't even Joßche saying that, but me. Joßche is actually being curiously silent right now. Well, I believe in not kicking a man when he's down. I appreciate that, Joßche. I really do. No problem.

See, sometimes he's actually not a bad guy. But spare me the back-handed compliments.

I mentioned that Diane was sick and bald when she was having the chemotherapy and radiation. And I think - no, I know - this was very hard on Zack in a way that I maybe didn't even register at the time. Or not as much as I should have, anyway, because I was just so focused on her getting better and going into remission. Which she did, for three years - until the cancer came back, with a vengeance, and spread to her abdomen. All over her abdomen, the surgeon said, like "grains of millet" -- his description of what they found when they went in to take her ovaries out. That was when Zack asked us - me and his uncle, Diane's brother Robbie, there in the hospital, right after the surgeon had spoken to us - "You mean she could die?" The innocence of his question really got to me. Broke my heart, when I thought about it later on. As if the idea had never occurred to him before. Which maybe it hadn't. Not consciously, anyway. (He'd only just turned 12 when she was first diagnosed.) And who can blame him?

Anyway, when she was bald, Zack came up with this thing called "Zack's Head Spa", where he'd rub her bald head with Noxema, which the doctor had recommended to keep the skin smooth, and from drying out. He printed up coupons

that he'd made on the computer, good for a free head massage. He also wanted to start a website called "mommysbald.com", with advice and "resources" for kids whose mothers were going through cancer treatment. We thought it was an amazing idea, but it never got off the ground. I still think it's an amazing idea -- the sort of thing that should at least go into a novel. (If only I were the person to write it.) I know it takes more than will to write a novel. But the older I get, the more I am convinced that will, persistence and determination count for more than talent. You can go farther with just a little bit of talent, and a lot of those other things, than vice versa. And I am proof of that.

Depressing. Cancer can really ruin your whole day! But actually, it's not so much even the cancer that's so depressing. What's really depressing is what I just did - my ability to turn the discussion around from Diane's cancer, and Zack's way of dealing with it, to my own dumb problems with writing, and my weak will. Me me me, my my my. I mean, who wants to hear about that shit, when you have things like Zack's Head Spa and mommysbald.com to think about? That's the stuff that counts - that he did that, that he could come up with those ideas, and that Diane got to be around to see it. She always said he'd be

fine - even at the height of his problems - and she was right. She knew. During that whole horrible time of seventh and eighth grade - which is the worst time of all for anyone, if you ask me; at least it was for me; middle school was the absolute worst - and then on into ninth and tenth and eleventh grades. Those five years when we were going through the cancer, and Zack was missing so much school - just not going, because he "didn't feel well", or had a stomachache, or a really bad headache (which he is prone to -- not migraines, exactly, just really bad headaches). He was on his computer the whole time, it seemed like, and never did his homework. "Zack," I'd say, "if you only did your homework, you'd be getting straight As." And he would reply, "Why should I bother, when I can not do it and still get Cs?" That was a question I couldn't answer. I just had no answer to that. I mean, where do you even begin? Mr. Exeter Latin and Greek couldn't even begin to fathom how his son, who is smarter than me, could think that way. But there was Diane, who never lost faith in him, never stopped believing, even with all she was going through. Always kept her mother's faith. "He's going to be all right," she would say. "He's going to be just fine." And she was right. He is just fine. Better than fine, actually. He's great. He's with a law firm in L.A., and is

doing great. (Aren't I the Jewish father?) Living in Hollywood with his girlfriend, who works as an animator at Disney. He raises plants in their apartment, all kinds of plants, and seems to have a knack for it. I think he's inherited his grandmother's -- my mother's -- green thumb. (She raised orchids.) He's also building a workbench from scratch on the balcony of the apartment. And he wants to be an appellate judge. He's working for a firm that does mostly real estate, which is fine for now. He likes being part of the team, and is turning out to be a team player. The erstwhile stubborn, willful, contrary Zack - a team player? Who woulda thunk it? But he is. He writes the occasional appellate brief for his firm, and likes doing that. He likes lawyering in general. Which I was not at all sure he would, going into it. He seemed to enjoy law school; but I thought, for some reason, that once he got into the actual practice of law, his feelings would change. But so far they haven't - and maybe they won't. So Diane was right, on all counts. What did I know? But she did. She used to say, when she nailed something concerning child-care, "They don't call me 'Mommie' for nothing."

Zack's turnaround started the fall after the summer she died -- his senior year of high school. He made the Dean's List for the first time ever, and stayed on it for

the rest of the year. I had been expecting him to go into even more of a tailspin that year, but quite the opposite happened. He got it together. It was as though he were suddenly internalizing all of his mother's wishes for him. Mine too, of course - but I don't think I really figured in that scenario. It was his mother he was internalizing, as well it should be. He did that for many years after she was gone - and now he has externalized her. He's got a full-length portrait of her hanging in his apartment, done when she was 16 or so. (About the age he was when she died.) He went to a lot of trouble to get that painting. It was done by a friend of hers, who was also a friend of Robbie's. Zack tracked him down on Facebook (though without Robbie's help, because by that time Robbie had died too, at age 66, from the long-term effects of cocaine abuse), and arranged to buy the portrait and have it shipped from New York to L.A. That's how he is - a can-do guy. He gets things done. He's a doer. So not like his father. I mean, I get writing done (sometimes), and papers corrected and graded (always), and classes taught, and students tutored (ditto). But in the larger world outside of school, not so effectual. Certainly not like my son. And that, too, seems as it should be. I often think he takes after his grandfather - my father - more than me. He has his grandfather's scrappy

spirit, and his grandfather's fearlessness. (Funny how that goes, with the skipping of generations -- like with his grandmother's green thumb.) I don't see all that much of Diane in him either, except around the face -- the nose and mouth. He doesn't have her softness, though - or my weakness. Very much his own person - and always was, from an early age. Fiercely independent, and a little combative. And sometimes more than a little. Even in the crib, he hated to be confined in his swaddling clothes. He wanted to be out and about. Mom - my mom - said that in the nursery of the hospital, when she was looking at him through the viewing window, he was the only baby lifting his head up. Had to see for himself. Couldn't keep him down. And it's been like that ever since.

Zack's childhood I consider to be the heart of what I call The Major Period, and I still think of it a lot. Not as much as I did during The Minor Period (which is what I call the eleven years between when Diane died and when I met Julie), when it took on the quality of a - what? Call it a bower of sweet contemplation. A place of memory I could repair to whenever I wanted, and think about Zack as a kid, and Diane, and the house on Winona Blvd., in East Hollywood, where we lived for all those years - the five years before Zack was born, and then for almost seven years

after that, until we moved back east. A time when my parents were still alive - before Mom got sick, before Gog (that's what I always called my father, and then Zack took it up, too) was a widower, as I was to be during The Minor Period, until I met Julie. The Major Period was a really, really good time in my life - in all of our lives. And I didn't even know it at the time. But you never do. You never know you are in your Major Period while it is happening. Only once it's gone do you recognize it for what it was. There is that quote from Proust: "The only true paradises are the ones we have lost." So true. Because at the time of The Major Period, after Zack was born, and up until - when? Up to the time Diane was first diagnosed, when Zack had just turned 12, and started 7th Grade -- that's when things changed. I didn't know things were great until they weren't anymore.

It was still The Major Period - everything from when I met Diane, in January of 1981, to when she died, in June of 2004 - that whole block of 23½ years was The Major Period. But not the heart of it. The heart of it was the time between when Zack was born - Oct. 12, 1987 - and when Diane was diagnosed, in late October of 1999. Just about 12 years exactly was the heart of The Major Period. And I didn't even know it then, because as I said, you never do. You

don't - and can't -- know it when you're in the middle of it. That is one of the laws of what I call "biographization". The biographer might know what period of your life you're in, but you don't. You can't ever know you're in a period when you're in it. Which is kind of weird, because in biographization, the biographer is you. So how could part of you know something, and another part not? Then again, this happens all the time. We can know something, deep down, that we haven't consciously realized or even thought about, and we can also make ourselves believe something we know isn't true. Sartre called this "bad faith", or self-deception, and that is another part of biographization: to be aware of yourself in a way that involves a certain amount of self-deception. To be both you and not-you at the same time. Seeing yourself "from the outside".

But is that really self-deception, or just self-consciousness? Because self-consciousness, in a way, is the opposite of self-deception, in that it involves a kind of self-knowledge, or at least self-awareness, that is excluded from self-deception. Though not necessarily. I mean, you can be self-conscious in one sense - the sense of being too aware, uncomfortably aware, of how you might be appearing to others -- and still be self-deceived. You can

want to see yourself in one way so badly - you can want to be the hero of your own story so badly - that this wish projects itself onto what you actually see. The Rose-Colored-Glasses Syndrome. We all know about that.

But that's not exactly what I mean by "biographization". Biographization includes seeing yourself as the hero of your own story, but it is more than that. As the name suggests, it is seeing yourself through the eyes of an imagined future biographer. And that future biographer is both you and not-you. Mostly you - the everyday, subjective, ego-driven you, but with an "objective" aspect - an objectivity within the subjectivity, if that makes any sense - that is the not-you, because it is able to envision, and devoutly wish for, a kind of objectivity that is not usually accessible to, or exercised by, the everyday you. That's why I call it "biographization". Because the biographer, in the practice of her art, is at least trying to be somewhat objective - as objective as possible - within the given limits of any writer's inevitable subjectivity. Objectivity is the goal, the never-to-be-reached goal, in a kind of asymptotic Zeno's paradox. Striving for objectivity, and never quite getting there.

It is this double-mindedness that is at the heart of my idea of "biographization". You want - I think we all want, in varying degrees - to be the hero of our own story; but in biographizing ourselves, we imagine ourselves, and our lives, in the more distanced, judicious, "objective" terms that are customary (indeed essential) in the writing of biography. Our "biographized" self-image is elevated - which is to say, shorn as much as possible of its fuzzy overcoat of vanity, "bad faith", and wishful thinking - by the tools and methods and ultimate goal of the biographical and critical scholar: a dedication to pursuing "the truth", such as it is capable of being known by a necessarily limited human intelligence.

I mentioned above that you can't recognize a period of your life - say, The Major Period (and everyone has a Major Period) - when you are actually living it. It is only after you've gone through it, when - as Proust said about lost paradises -- it has become an object (and subject) of memory, that it becomes truly apprehensible. It is a given of historiography that the events of the past require distance in order to be understood; and this is as true of the personal past as it is of the historical past. The sense of our lives - the feeling, atmosphere, significance and irreducible quiddity of our lives - is not accessible

to us in the present, but only through memory, as Proust has shown. The "biographizer", though - the person who "biographizes", who fantasizes about their life as though it were material to be "processed" by a future biographer (indeed, as though the life they were living were already undergoing such an editorial and hermeneutic process) - cannot be satisfied by a simple act of faith. It is not enough for the biographizer to imagine that some biographer in the future - somewhere, somehow - will receive the record of their life, in whatever forms that record is to be gotten, and set it down in a way for others to apprehend. The biographizer (who is me, though I don't believe I am the only person who thinks this way) is also aware of the biographical "material" of their lives as it is happening: aware of it as material in its raw form, before biographical "processing". The biographizer, in this sense, cannot wait for their future biographer; they - the biographizer - must start the "processing" now, if only by seeing their own life, as it is happening now, as material for future processing.

The impulse to biographize - to see one's life in the way I have been describing - is also, as I've suggested above, a democratic one. Why should the objects - which is to say, the subjects - of biography be only the famous, the

historical, the celebrated, the infamous, or the otherwise noteworthy? Why couldn't, say, our gardener Willie - in whom Mike Ward took such an interest, and I so notably didn't, until it was too late, until Mike had already "claimed" him, until he was gone; or at least until I felt so guilty for my probably racist incuriosity about and indifference to him that the whole question of Willie's biography, of Willie's life - Die Willifrage -- became tainted for me by my own shame - why couldn't Willie Dillard be the subject of a biography? How, for instance, did he lose his finger? What was the story behind and around that? How did he learn to play guitar? Did he learn before or after he lost the finger? Did he have a teacher? A model? Or did he just pick it up on his own? Who were his parents? Siblings? When did he move from Mississippi to L.A., and why? And why - to broach another side of these questions - if I feel they are important, and I do, why don't I try to write Willie's biography myself? Why don't I become the future biographer that maybe, just maybe, Willie may have imagined for himself, if only briefly, in his own way? Why don't I try to be the chronicler of Willie's works and days? Ta erga kai hai hēmerai tou Willie Dillard. (And what would Suzette Easterman think about that? I'll show her! Old withered-arm Suzette.) (That was Joßche talking

just there. Right. Whatever you say, Chief.) Or if not quite that - if the materials out of which Willie's life might be reconstructed (the people he knew; the public and private records of his life: possessions, photos, cards, letters, etc.: the Willie Material - Das Willimaterial) have now gone missing (though on second thought, certainly all of them haven't; I just have no idea where to find them, nor do I even have a serious desire to try) - why not attempt to imagine that life, or parts of that life, in a novel? And aren't novels themselves - at least heavily biographical and/or autobiographical novels - a form of "biographization"? Aren't novels and novelists the closest we can come, reasonably (and I use this last word ironically, since I realize how crazy all this must sound), to my whimsical notion of biographization and biographizers? But if they are, then I'm certainly not the man for the job, failed novelist -- mere essayist; hypertrophied personal essayist - that I am.

Remember, though, the whimsy of my notion - indeed, its very notionalness. The idea of biographization is not a programme or proposal. It is just a fantasy - though one, as I've said, that I believe most of us have entertained, in one form or another, at some point in our lives. And fantasies can be powerful, even formative. (For instance,

they formed me. And Joßche. Speak for yourself.) In a sense, fantasies had a hand in forming all of us - starting with the fantasy of self-creation. And isn't it strange that these fantasies came out of the everyday facts of our everyday lives - reading, talking, playing, movies, TV, music?

In my case, the idea of periods in a person's life - Major, Minor, pre-Major, post-Minor - came partly out of photos of Zack as an infant, toddler, and child. More specifically, from the whimsical urge to classify the hundreds of photos Diane took of Zack from the ages of newborn to around six. I devised a way of categorizing these photos, based on Zack's age and facial features. This taxonomic scheme broke roughly into four "periods": minor Minor (infancy); major Minor (babyhood); minor Major (toddlerhood); and major Major (childhood). I really got into it. Diane and I would have long discussions, which could grow quite detailed, and sometimes heated, about the niceties of classification. Transitional periods were especially fraught. For instance, was the photo of Zack with MeMe Bear (his first, but not dearest, stuffed animal, and spelled that way so as not to be confused in name with his grandmother Mimi, Diane's mother; the dearest would have to be Voo, a stuffed dog, who was stolen from a hotel

room in Milan during Zack's Fulbright Fellowship year; yes, Zack kept a stuffed dog with him all through college; but that's another story) - was the photo of Zack with MeMe Bear from the major Minor or minor Major Period? (As I recall, that was the trickiest transition -- major Minor to minor Major.) Diane tended to see these distinctions as merely academic; but I bridled at that. The work I was doing in graduate school - which spanned all four periods - that was "merely academic"; but the classification of the periods was more important than that. It involved the way in which a system that had originally been merely photographic had evolved into a schema that had become biographical, based not only on visuals, but actual events: the birthday-cake-all-over-the-face birthday party (one year old - still minor Minor, but on the cusp of being major Minor), as opposed to the robot birthday party (five or six, can't be sure - but indisputably major Major).

And if Zack's childhood could have such a classificatory scheme, why couldn't other children's as well? But why limit periodization just to children? Hasn't this system already been applied, for some time (albeit in a different context), to writers and artists and musicians? Picasso's Blue and Pink Periods are canonical. The American composer Morton Feldman once put out a record entitled "The

Early Years". And I have written elsewhere of the curious (and possibly life-changing) thrill-cum-revelation I experienced in Westwood Books (long since defunct) in the fall of 1978, when I happened upon an edition of Henry James' short stories entitled "Tales from the Major Phase". Oh my God! To be able to be said to have had a "Major Phase"! How gratifying is that? What a consummation devoutly to be wished!

(And speaking of Henry James, the titles of the individual volumes of Leon Edel's magisterial five-volume biography (and how I love the word "magisterial"! What authority of achievement it contains! The ample corpus of literature has been surveyed, and this work has been pronounced irreproachably masterful. Ah!): "The Untried Years"; "The Conquest of London"; "The Middle Years"; "The Treacherous Years"; and finally (speaking of consummations devoutly to be wished), "The Master" - these titles had a huge impact on me; Edel's biography figured majorly in my development of the idea of "periodization". Though First Prize for biographical consummation still has to go to the last volume of Joseph Frank's five-volume biography of Dostoyevsky: "The Mantle of the Prophet". This is beyond consummation; this is practically an apotheosis.)

But why, I further came to ask myself, limit the idea of periodization to children, writers, artists and musicians? Why couldn't Willie have a Major Period too? It seemed to me - and still does - that everyone is entitled to a Major Period (as well as a Minor Phase, and Early Years). Of course, in the commonly-understood sense we all have our "early years"; but the designation of "Early Years", in my system of classification, has a different ring, meaning, and implication. In biographization, the denomination "Early Years" suggests other years of productive maturity yet to come. If someone has a Minor Phase, it can only be in light of there already being a Major Period, coming either before or after the Minor Phase. For example, my Major Period happened to come before my Minor Period; before the Major Period came the pre-Major Period - the 26½ years of my life before I met Diane. However, my Minor Period was followed not, as one might expect (or not!), by the post-Minor Period, but by the Julistic Period - the period in which I met, married, and am coming to know Julie. (The study of Julie, by the way, is known as Julistics - just as the field of German Studies is also known as Germanistics. The "-istics" suffix is somehow deeply pleasing to me, betokening as it does a

scientific approach that I find both dubious and intriguing.)

And finally - to begin to lay this long excursus to rest, at least for the moment - what if we all became, or at least tried to become, each other's biographizers, if only in imagination? What if we all felt responsible for telling the story of another person's life, as it was actually lived? Its works and days? What would that do to the way we looked at the lives of others? And how would it change the way we looked at and understood our own? To believe that everyone's life was at least capable of biographization might even, in a way, change the world. Or am I just being insane?

You are just being insane. Verrückt. Sehr verrückt. Shutup, Joßche. But speaking just for myself (if I can ever do that around here, with this guy breathing his beer-, sauerkraut- and sausage-reeking breath down my neck), The Life of Willie Dillard (German translation: Das Willidillardsleben) would be a book I would be interested in reading. The thing is, there is something in me - a big something in me - that would rather read about Willie's life than actually talk to him about it. Talking to him would make me feel self-conscious, and in "bad faith", because I would know there was a hidden agenda behind my

interest. I am no Mike Ward. My motives are not pure. Nevertheless, if I were to talk to Willie about his life (which is of course impossible, as he must be dead by now - unless he is over 100, which I very much doubt; though I suppose it is possible), the knowledge that there were biographizing motives behind my impulse would cause me to see his life differently. His life would then be the subject of a notional biography, and so would receive a kind of "validation" it would probably not otherwise possess. It would have "biographical validity". It would have the heft of biographical authority behind it. It would in that sense be "authorized". The status and effects of the authorial function would elevate it (as a high tide raises all boats), and this would also please me greatly.

Now I am aware that this kind of thinking may also appear rather hateful - as if Willie's life needed "validation" or "authorization" by me -- or, for that matter, by any notional future biographer. But I am not really suggesting it needs validation; only that once it has received it - once Willie's life has received the imprimatur (literally: "let it be printed") of biographization, that life must appear differently in my eyes - and possibly in the eyes of others, too, to whom I might broach the idea of The Life of Willie Dillard. Of

course, since those others would not be personally acquainted with Willie, the idea of The Life of Willie Dillard would probably appear ridiculous and insane to them, too. Understood. But wait a minute. What if the idea of a biography of their gardener, or their car mechanic, or their accountant, or their counter person at the local bagel shop, were proposed to them? What then? Then, I would venture, they might be more receptive to the idea of biographization - and even perhaps allow as the idea of such a thing had once occurred to them, too.

Another possible objection to the idea of biographization as I have laid it out here is that there is - as touched on above -- a distinctly elitist, privileged and condescending air to the notion. All of the subjects of biographization that I have just put forth might be classified as being in the "service" category. They are providing some kind of hired service to the beneficiary, who is also their biographizer. They are, in a word, social "inferiors", upon whom the biographizer has deigned to confer, in turn, the benefit of his own services. Yet that conferral could also just possibly (and paradoxically) have the effect of mitigating the class disparity. The biographizer, after all, is providing a service to her subject. True, there is a whiff of noblesse oblige to all

of this that I do not like. In fact, it kind of stinks. Then again, that distasteful odor should be measured against what I still maintain is the fundamentally democratic quality of biographization, which seeks to broaden the field of biography from the famous, the celebrated, the historical and otherwise distinguished to the obscure, misprized and neglected. The impulse behind biographization is not dissimilar to the moment in my favorite movie, "My Dinner with André", where Wally - experiencing his own afflatus of democratic feeling - rejects André's focus on extraordinary, exceptional experience and insists that if you were to come to know the true reality of daily life in the cigar shop on the corner, it would blow your mind. At that moment in the movie, Wally is very much the democrat, and André the aristocrat, and I identify with Wally; though - getting back to The Life of Willie Dillard -- my position as the son of the white family that hired Willie Dillard to work in their garden makes me uncomfortable, and in a way undercuts, or at least problematizes, my democratic claims.

There's a lot that makes you uncomfortable, isn't there? Damn right, Fritz - and you're at the top of the list. So why don't you biographize me? Who says I'm not? What do you think this is? What do you think I'm doing

here? No comment. Let the record show that Joßche has no comment.

As I was saying, before I was so rudely interrupted - and by the way, if it is true, what I just said, that whatever this is is also a biographization of Joßche - and it may be; I actually hadn't thought of that before, but it may be - if that is true, then it serves as an exception to the "democratic" theory of biographization. Because you see, Joßche is a Junker. A Prussian aristocrat. And a Catholic Junker at that. There aren't many of those - the Junkers were by and large Protestants - but Joßche is Catholic, and so exceptional in that way as well. Personally, I'd much rather read a biographization of Willie than Joßche. But another thing about it is that in the realm of biographization, you don't always get to choose your subjects. As the saying goes, sometimes they choose you. And it looks like I got chosen.

How did I originally get onto this long biographization riff, anyway? Oh yeah - Zack's childhood, and its periodization. But there was something else I wanted to say about his childhood: how different it was from mine, growing up in the Palisades. The lilywhite Palisades. Zack grew up in L.A. too - but in East Hollywood, which is not exactly the Palisades. True, we

came to the Palisades a lot to visit my parents, who at the time were still living in the house I grew up in. And we would sometimes spend the night there. My old bedroom became Zack's room. So there was a continuity there, definitely. But it was not really home for him. A home away from home, yes - but not his real home.

His real home was in a very different part of the city, about 45 minutes (and a world) away. East Hollywood, when we lived there, was an interesting mix of Armenian, Hispanic and Thai immigrants, with Korea Town a few miles south, down Vermont Ave., and Glendale (yet another lilywhite world) just a hop, skip and a jump east over Los Feliz Blvd. There were gangs operating out of a couple of buildings on our block (which was between Hollywood and Sunset), and prostitutes plying their trade off those same boulevards. (Our street, Winona, was between the two, one block west of Normandie.) Obviously, it wasn't a great neighborhood, but we loved our apartment, at the top of a modified two-story bungalow. I still have dreams about that house. We lived there during some of the heart of The Major Period, so it is especially dear to me. Zack went to preschool and kindergarten at HLF-JCC - the Hollywood-Los Feliz Jewish Community Center - and first grade at the Open School, a magnet elementary school off La Cienega, just

north of the Santa Monica Freeway. After that, when we moved back east, he went mostly to public schools in Massachusetts and Long Island - including four years at South Huntington High. The Quaker school where he went to fifth and sixth grade on Long Island was in a largely black neighborhood - Westbury (but not Old Westbury) - and so there were a lot of black kids there. Point being, this wasn't the lilywhite education I had (until I got to Exeter in tenth grade). As I see it, Zack's early education was color-blind - though he certainly doesn't see it that way, and totally rejects that description when he hears it from me. It's a point of conscience with him that no one is "color blind", and the phrase itself is offensive to him. (And Robin Di Angelo would agree.) Apparently, "color-blindness" is a self-congratulatory (and "bad faith") category invented by white people to protect and confirm their racial wishfulness and illusions. So all right, I get it, and stand duly corrected. You chicken-shit. Oh shut up. I guess it's a generational thing. Zack has nothing to prove to himself, or others - but I do. I need to prove that the 13-year-old boy at Herb McCarthy's, in the summer of '67 - the "Summer of Love"! Ha! -- playing his strange and slightly evil game, was a gross aberration. That the kid who did not speak more than ten words to Willie Dillard

in ten years (at least) was an aberration, too. And I haven't even mentioned Aline yet.

Aline Jackson was our maid for 30 years. (I was always told by my mother to call her our "housekeeper", but I think it's time to scrap that euphemism.) She grew up on a small, hardscrabble dirt farm in East Texas, outside Houston, in the 40s and 50s. She moved to L.A. I'm not exactly sure when (her biographizer hasn't weighed in yet), and came to work for us in '64 or '65. Which would mean she was working for us when the Herb McCarthy Debacle occurred. (Which I actually hadn't really thought about before.) Was she also working for us during the Watts Riots of '65? I believe she was. I seem to remember Mom emphasizing that Aline was safe during the riots, because she lived in Compton, not Watts - a distinction that is still lost on me, but seemed important at the time, if only because it seemed important to Mom: our housekeeper who lived in Compton. I had no idea then where Compton was - indeed, I had no real idea where Watts was, either - except that it was nowhere near the Palisades.

Aline worked for us on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Fridays. On Thursdays she worked for Mrs. Ross, who always held a fixed yet vague place in my imagination as the person who "interrupted" Aline's week with us, and must

therefore hold a certain importance to be able to do that. The fact that I was never to lay eyes on Mrs. Ross only served to increase her status and significance in my mind - that, and the fact that Aline had started working for her before she'd started working for us, and that her once-a-week slot in Aline's schedule was not to be pre-empted by anything having to do with us.

For some years - from '64 or '65 to at least '72 - Aline and Willie overlapped, and Mom liked to tell the story of what Willie once said to Aline when she was arriving for work one day. As Aline was walking down the driveway, past where Willie was working in the garden, he stopped her and said (probably with his trademark, high-pitched, cackling laugh; I can still hear it; and the fact that I now recognize in it the traces of a certain Jim Crow complaisance, backed by the desire not to offend, and appear harmless, which he'd probably brought with him from Mississippi, only makes it all the more resonant and indelible in my mind's ear) - Willie said to her, "You sure do smell good. You been gettin' into Miss Anne's perfume?" Mom explained to me who "Miss Anne" was: the lady of the plantation. In the event, Aline was deeply offended by Willie's remark, on several counts (as I see it now): by the allusion to slavery's dead hand, which suggested that

they were still in some ways living in that world, at least as far as Willie was concerned; but even more by the suggestion that she was stealing, and that she couldn't afford to buy her own perfume. The thought that Willie might see himself and Aline as not all that different from slaves on the plantation was close enough to the truth, as my imagination figured it, to really get to me then, and stick with me still. After all, didn't they do our dirty work? Didn't Willie at least sometimes pick up our dogs' dried turds from the back yard? Wasn't it undeniable that Aline cleaned my toilet? (I saw irrefutable evidence of this in the blue-colored toilet-bowl cleaner that was sometimes still in the bowl when I returned home from school.) And didn't she wash the sheets that were nightly soaked with my urine until (shame of shames) the end of 7th grade, when I finally stopped wetting the bed? So sad and so deplorable, on all counts; and so true.

My "passive" guilt as far as Aline was concerned was bad enough; added to it was the "active" guilt of my behavior to her, which was worse than my guilt about Willie because with Aline, my sins were those of commission, and not just omission. (Here I feel my Catholic side, from my mother, kicking in.) A few shameful incidents stand out.

The Fart

I once audibly passed gas in Aline's presence, and she said, in her high, gentle voice, but with a frown, which she did not often wear, "Josh. That's very rude." I blushed, but I think I also laughed, and I am pretty sure I did not apologize. After all, what was the big deal? She cleaned my toilet, didn't she? And what was a mere fart compared to that? (Though I often also tried to ignore the fact of her cleaning my toilet, and so the bad faith of the "fart rationalization" is all the more vivid to me now.) I would like to think this incident happened when I was still in elementary school, or junior high at the latest; but I'm afraid that is far from the truth. I believe I was either going to Exeter or in college when it happened. What could I have been thinking? The easiest (and most transparently disingenuous) interpretation would be that I considered Aline "a member of the family", and so did not feel the need to behave any differently around her than I would around my parents. And there might even be a grain of truth in that rationalization; but I don't believe it, and can't accept it. The likelier explanation is the more hateful and damning one: Aline was just our black maid. Case closed. I may have been careful to refer to her as our "housekeeper"

around others, but as far as my behavior around her went, she was just our black maid. I was fond of her, and even, in my own way, loved her; and I sensed - or at least I wanted to believe - she reciprocated those feelings. But she was still - and always - our black maid. To pretend to myself that my thinking ran substantially otherwise, would be simply to add an unnecessary element of more bad faith to an already-fully-sufficient casual racism. I farted in her presence because she was, for all my intents and purposes, not even there.

The Story of the Black Chef

This incident, unlike the fart, I can precisely date: it was early in the fall of Ninth Grade - 1968. So a little more than a year after the Herb McCarthy's Debacle and the Newark Riots. I had spent the weekend at my friend Charlie's family's cabin in Wrightwood, in the San Gabriel Mountains. Charlie's parents were from Virginia. One of their guests at the cabin that weekend - I believe he was a relative, perhaps an older cousin of Charlie's - told a tall tale, a scary "campfire story", featuring a psychotic black chef on the loose, terrorizing the good (i.e. white) folks of the community. Especially scary - which is to say,

meant to be especially scary - was the narration of the way the black chef's white chef's uniform, his white teeth, and the whites of his psychotically-bulging eyes shone in the moonlight as he ran amuck, brandishing a butcher's knife.

Now as it happened, my parents were having a dinner party the evening I got back from the cabin. It was a Sunday, and Aline had come to work to help with the dinner party. And for some unfathomable reason (though perhaps not all that unfathomable; see the end of the previous section), I saw fit to repeat the tale of the chef to the company that night. At the time, Aline was in the kitchen, which directly adjoined the dining room. There was a Dutch door leading from the dining room to the kitchen, but it was always open, and there was also a wide communicating space built into the wall between the stove in the kitchen and the sideboard in the dining room. During the dinner parties at which she was working, Aline always sat on a stool in the kitchen to eat her dinner. As soon as I began my story, before I'd even begun to describe the chef, my mother sensed danger, and tried to cut me off at the pass; but I was undeterred, and proceeded to describe everything in the unremitting, minstrel-show detail in which it had been narrated up at the cabin, down to the grisly finish.

The story, of course, was met with mortified silence. It was clear that Aline, in the kitchen, could hear everything. I'm sure that Mom apologized profusely to her on my behalf later that evening; and I'm just as sure that I didn't. As with the Herb McCarthy's Debacle, I pretended I had done nothing wrong; though even halfway through the story, which I sort of didn't want to continue, but somehow couldn't stop, my face was hot with shame. There is a line from Proust that describes one aspect of the situation perfectly: "I had gone too far along the road that led to the realization of this desire to be able to turn back." But just exactly what that desire was I had no clear idea - and still don't.

"Chester"

My mother had often spoken of an old English movie from the 1940s called "Dead of Night", consisting of a series of connected horror vignettes, one of which concerned a ventriloquist's dummy that took on a life of its own. Shopping for a Christmas present for her one year (again, I was not nearly as young at the time as I would like to claim; this was either when I was in college or even after, when I was living in New York and visiting my parents for the holidays), I found a ventriloquist's dummy that seemed

just the thing: capable of producing exactly the right combination of fear and campiness that would recall for her the movie she'd so loved to be terrified by long ago. And to top it off, the dummy was black. What luck! To placate whatever inner doubts I may have had about it, I told myself that Aline would laugh along at this present too; for surely she would appreciate its outrageous grotesquery. But Mom didn't quite see it that way. The doll, who I'd decided would be named "Chester" even before I gave it to her, went directly from sitting under the tree on Christmas Eve to sitting at the very back of Mom's closet on Christmas Day, before Aline could have a chance to see it. And Chester never emerged from the closet. But of course, that didn't mean that Aline didn't see him. She did. I showed him to her, probably subconsciously hoping to preempt whatever disaster was in the making by bringing her in on the joke. And what was her reaction? As I recall, she didn't know how to react. After all, we were her employers. She relied on us for 4/5 of her income. What was she going to do - call me out for being a racist, and quit? No doubt if it had come to that, I would have also, like my mother in the chef incident, apologized profusely, and begged her to stay - we all would have begged her, including my father, who, you will recall, had marched in Selma around

the same time Aline had come to work for us. (So he was good, right?) But it never came to that, and her silence spoke volumes. With the result that I still carry all this shit around with me, and always will. Which is, I suppose, exactly as it should be.

Play that funky music white boy
Play that funky music right
Play that funky music white boy
Lay down that boogie and play that funky music
till you die.

The Picture, and the Coke-bottle Doll

Aline was very heavy, and quite short; and the contrast between her girth and the soft delicacy of her voice (and also the shyness of her manner) had the paradoxical effect of making her words, and the impression they made, all the stronger. But her weight, which only increased over the years, led to serious diabetes, and subsequent vision problems. In later years, her eyesight got so bad that even with glasses on, she needed a magnifying glass to read the paper. One evening, when she was reading an article about a show at the art museum, she asked me a question I have never forgotten.

"Josh," she said in her soft, shy voice, "what the difference between a photo and a picture?"

"What do you mean, Aline?"

She showed me the article she was reading, which had a photo of a painting. "Is that a photo or a picture?"

I realized that by "picture" she meant painting. "Oh, I see. It's a photo of a painting - a photo of a picture."

"So what the difference?"

I thought that because of her poor vision she was having trouble seeing the photo clearly; but it was soon evident that wasn't the problem at all. It turned out she'd never seen an actual painting. At first I didn't believe this could be true, so I pointed out that LACMA had lots of paintings in it - as all art museums did. But she'd never been to LACMA, or any art museum; in fact, she'd never been to a museum at all. The more we talked, the softer her voice became, until it was barely above a whisper.

"Well then," I concluded heartily, "we should go to the museum sometime." She nodded; but we never did.

As I've mentioned, Aline had grown up on a dirt farm some miles outside Houston; and she once told Diane a story I have never forgotten, either - and neither did Diane. I guess it wasn't even technically a story - just a fact. But a resonant one, and it sticks with me too in connection with the story about Chester. It can be told in a few words. When she was growing up on the dirt farm, Aline's

parents didn't have enough money to buy her a doll. (And how much, I wonder, did I spend on Chester, without even thinking about it? And he never even made it out of the closet.) But Aline, in the resourceful way of children, found a solution to that problem. She got a length of rope, and tied it to a Coke bottle, and there she had her Coke-bottle doll, which she would drag with her everywhere, through the dirt. That image never left my mind. I wonder if Mom knew the story. If so, she never mentioned it, which is kind of odd, because it's the sort of thing that would have left an impression on her - as indeed it would on anyone; but especially on Mom, who was the compassionating type. Mom and Aline were very close, and shared a lot of stories together - which is why I find it hard to believe Aline wouldn't have shared that one with her. And their closeness in life was replicated in death, with a certain bittersweetness - more bitter than sweet, I'm afraid - that has never left me, either.

In September of 1993, Mom was diagnosed with a rare and incurable blood disease called amyloidosis. Some cases of amyloidosis have been linked to Malathion, a potent insecticide that Mom used to spray on the orchids she raised. At first, the amyloidosis manifested as bruises on her arms and legs that didn't go away; the bruises were

what brought her to the doctor in the first place. For a while, the amyloidosis was treated with chemotherapy - but this only made her sicker and weaker, and brought on neuropathy in her legs. (My father called the oncologist who'd wrongly prescribed the chemotherapy "The Duchess of Death".) By Christmas of 1994, Mom was bedridden.

It was about this time that Aline stopped coming to work, with no explanation. Mom was bitter about that, especially considering how close they'd been for 30 years; though I figured on Aline's part it was a combination of a well-earned retirement and not knowing how to deal with Mom's terminal illness. And by that time, Aline - who'd been suffering from diabetes for years - was not at all well herself. Had she had a heart attack? Was she having kidney problems? Did she have a stroke? And did I even call her to find out how she was doing? Clearly, it was a failure all around. Mom's mental state had also declined since she'd become bedridden. She spoke little now, and seemed to have retreated into herself, which was uncharacteristic for someone who'd always been an empath, and wore her heart on her sleeve. In the aftermath of Mom's death, Diane thought there might have been some Alzheimer's involved as well, since amyloid proteins in the brain are heavily implicated in Alzheimer's, and in amyloidosis, what

eventually kills you is the buildup of amyloid in all the major organs. But there was no autopsy, and so we never found out whether she had Alzheimer's at the end. My point is that for the last six months or so of her life, Mom became very withdrawn and uncommunicative, and almost a different person. She barely mentioned Aline, and didn't seem to know what had become of her.

We found out the second week of June, 1995, when we got a call from a friend of hers to say that Aline had died. By that time, Mom was also dying, and Diane, Zack and I had flown back from Massachusetts, where I was then teaching, to be with her. Aline's friend - whose name I have forgotten, so I'll call her Katie - asked me to come help pick out a coffin, and Diane came with me. A few days later, the three of us - Diane, Gog and I - went to Aline's funeral, where I gave a short eulogy at the gravesite. Zack stayed home with my parents' close friend Beth, who - along with the two caregivers I mentioned earlier, Violeta and Ada - was watching Mom while we were gone. After the funeral, we were having something to eat at Katie's house when Diane suddenly had a bad feeling, and phoned home. She got Ada, who said that Mom was having trouble breathing. We rushed home immediately - but it was too late. Mom's eyes were slightly open, but she was gone. I'll never forget the

look on her face when we came into the bedroom, and I saw her still propped up on the pillows in bed, her eyes dull and lifeless.

I still berate myself for not being with Mom when she died. Diane felt she "chose" that time, when we were all gone from the house (except for Zack, who was in the bedroom with her and Beth, reading The Very Hungry Caterpillar, where the caterpillar turns into a butterfly at the end); and Julie, to whom I've told the story, thinks so too. I've also always wondered whether Mom, in her empathic way, somehow intuited that Aline was dead, and so she could go now, too. I say "intuited" because we had decided, after we heard from Katie that Aline had died, not to tell Mom, out of fear that it would hasten her own death to know this - or at least cast her into an end-of-life dejection that would have brought her additional pain. But now I think it was a mistake not to tell her. She deserved to know the truth; and Aline deserved to have her know it, too. But maybe, despite our efforts, she figured it out on her own -- and then took action.

& & &

So what would Suzette Easterman, the leader of our whiteness awareness group last summer, have to say about all of this? You mean old withered-arm? What would old withered-arm say? Joßche, that's not nice. But you called her that yourself -- I'm just repeating what you said. I did not call her that. Did so. I most certainly did not. I said she had a withered arm - I did not call her "old withered-arm". There's a big difference. Oh yeah, big difference. Whatever you say. Look Fritz, cut the sarcasm. If you want to totally distort the context of my remarks, that's your business, but you should keep it to yourself, and not pretend to be representing me or my views. But I am you and your views, aren't I? Just another side of them that you don't want to be responsible for. You want to have your cake and eat it, too. But I call foul. You created me, and now you want to totally undercut and disavow your creation. No dice, Dr. Frankenstein. You are responsible for me. You are the villain here. I am just your mouthpiece. Your ventriloquist's dummy, if you will. Your Chester. You speak through me. Don't shoot the messenger.

Clever. He's very clever, I'll admit. And he has a point. (Though to call me Viktor Frankenstein is a bit much - even for someone who's taught Frankenstein regularly. And it's a great teaching text. I liked to tell my students

it's a great novel, but not a particularly good one, because of all the story holes. But that's a whole other thing.) So what would Suzette say? I think she would say - and I would say too, which is probably why I bring her up - that Willie and Aline were servants. Our servants. Whatever I felt about them -- whatever I want to believe I felt about them, and about Aline in particular - they were menials in our employ. Willie picked up our dogs' poop. Aline cleaned our toilets, and my urine-soaked sheets. She did our dirty work. She was our servant. So my relationship with her, my feelings towards her, must be filtered through that hard and inescapable fact. The person of color I knew best in my life was the person who cleaned my toilet and urinous sheets. Which I guess says a lot more about me than it does about Aline. But it ignores my relationship with Allen Page, which I think is part of the larger story here.

Allen and I worked together in the Story Dept. at Warner Bros. in the early and mid-80s - up to July of 1986, when I left Warner's to go to graduate school in the fall. Allen stayed on, for many years - and for all I know, he may still be there, though I highly doubt it. When I last saw him, at a dinner given by our old colleague at Warner's, Donna Lambson, about five years ago, Allen was getting ready to retire, and by now has probably done so.

He was - is - about ten years older than me (though he always looked younger), which would put him in his mid-70s. I really should look him up, next time I'm in L.A. to see Zack. It wouldn't be hard. Donna would have his number. I probably have it somewhere, too. I'd like to see him again and find out what he's up to. Knowing Allen, it would probably be something pretty out there. Past-lives therapy, spiritual healing, alternative medicine - Allen was into all of those things. I didn't - couldn't - follow him there, but I found all that stuff interesting nonetheless, if only because it meant so much to Allen, and I love hearing people talk about the things they love.

We would go to lunch from time to time off the lot, and have far-ranging discussions about books, movies, and the people we worked with on the Warner Bros. lot - mostly the other readers, or "story analysts", which was the official term -- as well as the aforementioned topics, which Allen knew a lot more about than I did, but which I was curious to hear more about from him. Not so much because I was interested in them per se, but because, as I say, I was interested in Allen, and in knowing what had attracted him to these things. Allen had grown up in New Orleans, and had attended a Catholic seminary in his adolescent years, as preparation for a vocation in the

priesthood - before he decided that life wasn't for him, and went in a different direction. But spirituality continued to be what he was all about. I found our conversations enriching, and a good antidote to what was all too often the mind-numbing job of reading, synopsising and commenting on the scripts we had to "cover" for the studio execs, to whom they were submitted by agents and producers.

There was another subject we didn't talk about much during our lunches together, though it would occasionally come up in conversation. Allen was gay. He kept his personal life pretty much to himself, however, and never spoke about his romantic relationships - if indeed he had any, during the time I knew him at Warner Bros. One of the things - I think maybe the principal thing -- that had eventually turned him from his imagined vocation was the vow of celibacy, which he couldn't and didn't want to take. Though I never heard about any of the men in his life - nor would it have occurred to me to ask. It would have occurred to me even less to think I was one of them. So when he came over to our house one weekend afternoon with a gift for me (was it a belated birthday present? It might have been, but I really cannot recall), which turned out to be a black-and-white photo of a male nude that he had taken, I was

caught by surprise. He said that if it made me uncomfortable he would take it back; but I wasn't about to let him do that, so I (somewhat disingenuously) denied any discomfort, and complimented him on his artistry. (The compliment, at least, was not disingenuous. Though I never hung the photograph, and have no idea what happened to it.) At the dinner at Donna's, many years later, Allen took me aside and told me that present had been a love-token, which I'd suspected at the time, but had affected to ignore. Yeah, right. Hey. Back off, Fritz. But you're the one who just brought up your own disingenuousness. Why do you think you did that? And your point is? Never mind. Hey, I resent your snide insinuations. And I resent your disingenuousness. Meaning what, exactly? What are you insinuating now - that I somehow encouraged Allen in some way? Thou saidst it. Stop playing games, Joßche. Just stop it.

Reader, you see how he is. He's a homophobe. That's what all this is about. It's him who's uncomfortable, not me. Liar! You just admitted Allen's gift made you uncomfortable! Yes, but not because I'm a homophobe, like you. You're just projecting now. No, you are! No way! You're projecting everything here, and you pretty much said so at the beginning of this whatchamacallit. You said I'm a

projection of you - a "figment" of your imagination. Yeah, but a figment's not the same as a projection, Joßche. Don't play word games with me. Besides, it's your dream. Remember? It's your dream.

Cute, Joßche. That was good, that was very good. I told you he was clever. What Joßche is referring to is an exchange I had many years ago in college, freshman year, with a friend in the dorm. Tod Weir, his name was. Tod and I had a running "gay" joke, where we would do horribly politically-incorrect caricatures of gay voices and gestures, and pretend to be gay ourselves. Utterly sophomoric shit - and we weren't even sophomores yet! Anyway, one night I had a dream where Tod was trying to climb into bed with me. The dream was troubling, and the next time I saw Tod, I told him I was concerned about his behavior, and thought we should cool it with the "gay" stuff for a while. As a basis for my concern, I adduced the dream I'd just had, where he'd tried to get into bed with me. Tod smiled, and then replied:

"There's only one thing, Josh."

"How's that, Tod?"

"It was your dream."

Oops. Hadn't thought about that part. There's a lot of parts you haven't thought about, apparently.

I'll ignore that. Where was I? Oh yeah, Allen - of course. His gift to me. That took guts, I see now. Though I didn't see it at the time. All I saw was my embarrassment - at the photo, yes, but also my embarrassment for him. For his having exposed his feelings like that. Well, good for him. But I didn't think so at the time. All I thought about was how embarrassing it was for both of us.

But maybe I'm getting it wrong, to talk about Allen's embarrassment. Maybe that's just more projection on my part, as Joßche would say - projection of my own embarrassment onto Allen, who showed guts and simple honesty. Nothing to do with embarrassment. And more disingenuousness on my part, maybe, to claim that it never occurred to me, even before the gift, to think Allen might be attracted to me. And I knew it, too - knew there was a tendency for gay guys to be attracted to me. It wouldn't have been the first time a gay guy was attracted to me. Did I play any part in that attraction? And did I, however unconsciously, reciprocate it? There was that guy from Brooklyn that I knew in Padua, during Schoolyear Abroad. Jack Drescher. Still remember his name. I was a junior in college; Jack was a few years older. A med student at the University of Padua. There were a few of them there that year - as there were every year: Americans who hadn't

gotten into med school in the U.S., and who'd gone abroad to study and then reapply. At a party one night, Jack approached me. He said he'd been "getting eye contact" from me, and when I appeared puzzled - well, I was puzzled - he suggested there might be something I didn't know about myself. Freaked me out. And made me wonder, of course. That was what really freaked me out, I think - that I was made to wonder. Rather manipulative of Jack, too - to use that method to try to seduce me. But did he have a point? Had I been flirting with him? No, I don't think so. I think I was just checking him out, out of curiosity. Not sexual curiosity, though; more like...anthropological curiosity, if that doesn't sound too bloodless and mean (which it does). I was curious to see a gay guy "in action", so to speak. No, I don't like the way that sounds either, but for different reasons. And I don't like what it says about my attitude. Clinical. Condescending. Uncharitable. And.. Say it, Josh. OK. Mean. Homophobic and mean. Just what I accused Joßche of being. A reaction to my own homoeroticism. Shit. Is that true? I think it probably is. No, it definitely is. Oh shut up.

I have had a tendency, my whole life, to have close male friendships. Never anything sexual - but strong emotional attachments. Started in preschool, with John

Burke, who had learned judo from his dad (who'd been a Marine), and was an early reader. He was very into the ocean, and got me into it, too. He started off bullying me, and doing various judo moves on me, but then we became friends, and he introduced me to ocean stuff. I think I still have one of those pocket-sized, mini-Golden Books from that time somewhere. My First Book of the Sea, or some such. Then there was Tom Gordon, in first grade. Crew-cut. All-American boy. Left Bonner to go to Brentwood Military Academy. Doug Kelly, when we lived in London for nine months, when I was seven and eight. Closest thing I ever had to a brother. And I betrayed him. The summer of 1967, the summer of the Herb McCarthy's Debacle, The Summer of Love - ha! - and I betrayed him. (But that's another story, for another time.) Then Alan Lehman, in fifth and sixth grade. Jeff Naideau, eighth grade. Mike Ward and Greg Todd, at Exeter. I was roommates with both of them. Never anything doing - never wanted anything doing, would have been horrified - but we were very close. And then Howard, in college. Perhaps the definitive friendship of my life. He still calls me on my birthday, and I him, on his. I would like more (don't like the way that sounds, either), but that's how it is with us now. Howard said once, about our friendship, "We are for the ages." Never will forget

that. I once, freshman year, kissed him on the lips, just for a second, to see what it felt like. It felt weird. Not good at all. Illegal. But somehow necessary - if only to confirm that it wouldn't feel good. And it didn't. Thank God. I know I shouldn't say that, because so what if I were gay? Nothing wrong with that. But I'm not. Yeah, right. Hey. If anyone's in the closet, it's the homophobe. Right. Keep talking. Ignore. That's really the best way to deal with him. Just ignore. I mean, here I am, trying to be totally honest, and he's taking advantage of that to mock me. Homophobic sadist, like all his ilk. So just ignore. What's that supposed to mean, "all his ilk"? Is that an anti-German insinuation or something? If so, I deeply resent it. You know nothing about the Germans. You don't even know the language! Your German is entirely fraudulent! How dare you talk about "my ilk"!

Take it easy, Fritz. Simmer down. I have nothing against the Fatherland. In fact, it's the Fatherland that has something against me and my ilk. I think you know what I'm talking about. Now where was I? Oh yeah, Jack Drescher. So Jack must have picked up on something at that party - though not sexual, and a lot subtler and more complicated than he thought. (Or so you think!) Ignore. My non-sexual homoeroticism, if that makes any sense. And maybe the same

could be said for Allen. The attraction went both ways. Not sexual on my part, but definitely emotional. Psychological, too. My attraction to the "gay psyche", if you can speak of such a thing, which you probably can't, these days.

(There's so much you can't speak of, for fear of getting busted by the Correctness Police.) But I will anyway. Go for it. The gentle, sensitive, "feminine" parts that are in every man, but buried deep in most heterosexual men. But I'm not the burying type. My friend Nick (another intense Exeter friendship, come to think of it), who is the burying type, once remarked, on the subject of our respective neuroses: "I bury mine; you plant yours, to see what will grow." I thought that very well said, and true. So I'm planting all this shit now, and we'll see what grows, if anything.

So yeah, Allen's was one of a long - life-long - succession of intense male friendships that I seem to need in my life. In his case, it was complicated by his sexual preference, but would probably have been complicated anyway, even without that. It's funny, though. I brought him up here as an example of "my one black friend", but I really didn't think of him that way at the time. I didn't think of him as being black at all. And not because I am trying to be "color-blind". I know I'm not color-blind -

though in a different way, I think, than Zack knows it. The difference is that blackness - people being black - has been an "issue" in my life in a way it hasn't been for Zack. (I think I mentioned this before - about Zack not having had the "lilywhite" early schooling that I had.) But with Allen, blackness wasn't an issue for me. I just did not think very much, if at all, about him being black. And why was that? Was it because he was gay? Did his being gay "cancel out" his being black, in my mind? And if so, how messed up is that? As if there were room in my mind for only one "Other" slot at a time? That if someone I know - someone I am friends with - is both black and gay, I don't know how to characterize them to myself, and I cannot deal with a "double-minority" characterization - or, even worse, God forbid, a lack of categorization at all? And so, according to this messed-up way of thinking, Allen became "gay" rather than "black", because I somehow couldn't deal with him being both at the same time? How pathetic is that?

And where does it come from, anyway, this need to categorize? And apparently it's not only a need - it's a pleasure. It actually pleases me to invent artificial, gratuitous categories and then play with them. I'm not talking about the categories of "black" and "white" now - though it would be disingenuous (once again; I'm big on

disingenuousness, as you might have noticed) to deny that I have those categories, because I do. I don't like to think of them as conscious categories, because I don't think they are; I think they are worse than that. I think they are unconscious categories. And that they are unconscious shames me as much, or even more, than if they were conscious. Because I pride myself on my consciousness, to tell the truth, and I don't like to be unconscious of anything. To be perfectly honest, I aspire to be a Master of Consciousness. Good luck with that, you unconsciously gay homophobe. Ignore. I take as my touchstone Henry James' remark to the effect that he sought to be "one on whom nothing is lost". That seems to me a consummation devoutly to be wished. And I think HJ did pretty well in that regard. (He sure did. Talk about unconsciously gay!) Stint thy clappe! Despite the fact that the experience of reading him, as some literary wag once observed, is like watching a hippopotamus trying to pick up a pea. That was good. But I think they were speaking of the style of the later HJ. The HJ of the magisterially baroque sentences. Which I kind of admire in spite of myself, and will even confess to sometimes trying to copy, in my own way. (Though I do believe, as Diane would say, that life is too short for The Golden Bowl. That book, like opera and Dickens, is

something I would like to like more than I actually do like. File that under "consummations not exactly to be wished".) And what I admire about HJ's late style is the unremitting (and sometimes interminable!) desire to get it exactly right. The quest to be psychologically, emotionally and morally precise - or as precise as it is reasonably possible to be in the humanistic realm. Which, it seems to me is what The Taxonomic Imagination is all about.

The Taxonomic Imagination

I think it all goes back to Latin for me - Latin, and getting stoned for the first time. I will explain how these two things went together. As soon as I started taking Latin in ninth grade I knew it was for me. All those declensions and conjugations - especially the declensions. I knew about conjugations already, from French, but declensions were new to me, and I went for them like Alfredo sauce on green fettuccine. The shock of recognition. No - the gratification, the deep gratification of recognition. Such order in the world - that there were such order and certainty I found deeply gratifying and reassuring. And gratifying, I think, because reassuring. "God's in his heaven, and all's right with the world." The linguistic

precision of it all was as close as I, as an admirer of math and science who was never much good at science, and always abysmal at math, would ever get to the uncompromising exactitude of those disciplines. In the study of classical languages, the muscles and tendons of the brain flex so refreshingly; one feels a certain stretching and strengthening of the neuronal pathways; and - let's admit it - one feels special. One is learning Latin. One is among the elect. A dead tongue - the study of which can only be seen as excellent, difficult and rare. That's Spinoza: "omnia praeclara tam difficilia quam rara sunt." "All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare." (Note the nifty tam...quam clause of comparison.) Sing it, Benedict. Benedicite, Benedict. I know, I know - it should be benedice, not benedicite. The singular imperative, not the plural. And that's all part of the game, too - getting it right. Even with a dead language that no one speaks anymore. Precisely and especially for that reason - for the utter ideal impracticality of the thing -- it's important to get it right. And when one gets it right, one feels...the self-congratulatory flush of election. You are one of the few who know these things. Something rare and excellent. Oh yes. The self-gratification of studying Latin was boundless - as

boundless as it was masturbatory. (And the two together were almost more than I could bear in ninth grade. Masturbo, ergo sum. Did I masturbate while doing my declensions? How could I not have?) It was very important to me, for some reason, that there existed all these forms and orders in Latin, all those different inflections: declensions, conjugations, indicative, subjunctive, imperative, optative, infinitive. All those grammatical moods. And let us not forget the supine: Mirabile dictu! Horribile visu! A world of forms, proliferant and gratulant ("All gratulant, if rightly understood" - Wordsworth), seemingly gratuitous (because of the deadness of it all) - and for that very reason, because of their gratuitousness, all the more to be respected and observed. Studying Latin, excelling at Latin, made me feel smart. And I so needed to feel smart. Because I so worried that I wasn't - especially when I got to Exeter, where there were so many smart people - and so many smarter than I. And what to do about that? Take Greek, of course, in addition to Latin. Pile on those excellent, difficult and rare dead tongues! (And then in college, Sanskrit too!) I had so much to prove.

But where does getting stoned come into all of this? Well, in ninth grade, before I got to Exeter, when I was still in the thrall of Latin I, I smoked pot a few times

with my friends Jeff and Rob. I didn't like it then, because I got self-conscious and paranoid, and feared I might be losing my mind. But as long as I could remember my Latin declensions and conjugations, I would know I wasn't really losing my mind. So remembering the proper forms - being able to remember and correctly generate the proper forms - was a great comfort to me in my frightened stonedness. Coniugo, ergo sum. Declino, ergo non stultus sum. I decline and conjugate, therefore I am not stupid.

It was out of the study of Latin, I believe, that there came my penchant - unscientific and romantic as it is -- for taxonomy. Knowing the slots of things. Knowing what slots things go into. And once again, the seeming gratuitousness of the slots made them all the more appealing. Nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, ablative, vocative - and in Sanskrit, you also have instrumental and locative. Sanskrit has eight cases, and three numbers - including the dual, which is fairly common in epic (and also comes with its unique verbal forms). Rama and Lakshman went to the forest. (Greek also has the dual number, though it is quite rare, and occurs mostly in Homer.) And for those of a more scientific bent, there is the "Taxonomic Hierarchy": Domain, Kingdom, Phylum, Class, Order, Family, Genus, Species. But one does not want to

become too rigidly attached to categories; one wants more just to know they are there. To know that they exist - if only as figments of the Taxonomic Imagination. The kind of mind that is stimulated, excited even, by the existence of these categories. My penchant for titles, say: The Major Period, The Minor Phase, The Early Years - this nomenclatural tendency is another expression of The Taxonomic Imagination. The Taxonomic Imagination desires the consolation and security of categories. It is almost as though life itself were like being stoned. The free-form multifariousness of life can cause one to fear for one's mind, one's sanity, which then gives rise to the craving for slots into which the mind can retreat for reassurance and protection. I have written elsewhere on the desire for mental burrows and bowers. This desire is abiding in me, and manifold. It occurs also in the contemplation of clouds - all the different classes of clouds; in the levels of the atmosphere: troposphere (the human atmosphere), stratosphere, mesosphere (which contains noctilucent clouds, which are visible when the sun is below the horizon), thermosphere (in which the International Space Station orbits), and exosphere (which merges into the solar wind. Ah, the solar wind. Who can fail to be entranced by the solar wind?). And let us not forget the layers of the

ocean (for which I give the common names here, because they are so evocative and poetic): the Sunlight Zone; the Twilight Zone; the Midnight Zone; the Abyss - in which lies the Abyssal Plain (ah, the Abyssal Plain; the terrestrial companion of the solar wind; who knows what lurks on the Abyssal Plain?); and the Trenches, also known as the Hadalpelagic Zone: the hell of the deep. Of course one can take the love of categorization too far ("taxonomophilia"? "taxonomomania"?), to where it becomes constricting. But The Taxonomic Imagination, at least in its ideal manifestation, is (or should be) a spur to the imagination, not a bridle - as was said (conversely) somewhere of Byron's imagination -- something to the tune of, "His genius has ever required a bridle, not a spur." As I say, and as the example of Lord Byron suggests, the impulse behind The Taxonomic Imagination is proliferant, not restrictive. The existence of multiple categories for things should be a source of wonder, not of constraint. Miranda's exclamation in The Tempest is an instance of the feeling I am after: "O brave new world, that has such people in it!" To which her father Prospero replies, with a fondly paternal slight weariness, "'Tis new to thee."

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