A Stretch of River: Selections from the Series, and Other Writings
by
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Preface

This collection gathers up seventeen pieces and six haiku from "A Stretch of River," an occasional series of posts from my blog, Blog Meridian (http://blogmeridian.blogspot.com), along with other selections that have also appeared there. For this collection, these pieces have undergone some light editing. In a couple of places, I have added footnotes to account for topical references and replaced links to other posts and articles in the originals; I have also smoothed out some introductions and conclusions and reworked a couple of titles. Finally, the pieces appear here more or less in reverse order of composition, but I have played around with their order in the interest of giving the sections a sense of containedness. In being as selective as I have, I have tried to keep as low as possible your level of regret for having bought this. I hope I have succeeded.

A few words about the "Stretch of River" posts. From 2005-2011, I lived in an apartment complex in downtown Wichita hard by the banks of the Little Arkansas; twice a day, I would walk my dog Scruffy along a half-mile stretch of the river, walk across the Murdock Street bridge to Riverside Park, walk through the park to the Nims Street bridge, walk across it, and then head back to my place. Most days, as you might imagine, not a whole lot happened on those walks; every once in a while, though, I would see something or think about something or other while out and about. Those notions served as the catalysts for the pieces and poems you see here. In them, you'll see some recurring interests of mine: Emerson and Thoreau; the forms Nature takes in a typical urban setting; Wallace Stevens; trying to figure out my dog; a propensity toward parody; and some stabs at metaphysics. The other pieces, meanwhile, pursue those interests and add to them with posts on film, music, and art. I am no one's idea of a rigorous thinker, but I do like ideas, and the ones I write about in these pieces stimulate me and, on my better days, aid me in seeing certain things a little more clearly than I might otherwise.

But, why this collection? And why Lulu? Over the years, my wife and several faithful readers have been generous in their favors shown toward the Stretch of River series and other pieces, to the point of suggesting that I try to publish them. Obviously, I agree with them to some extent, or else you would not be reading these words. Still, I'm not vain enough to believe that these pieces would find a home with a traditional publisher (though, if enough of you buy this . . .). Self-publishing, however, gives me a way to get them out there to whatever audience there might be for them, at no cost to me and little cost to that audience.

Whoever you are, your leap of faith in buying this little book is most flattering. Thank you. I hope you enjoy some of these pieces.

Wichita, Kansas
Saturday, May 19, 2012

Dedication

In the eight years of Blog Meridian's existence, it has been most fortunate in attracting, and even managing to keep, several faithful, smart and encouraging readers. The nature of the blogosphere being what it is, I have met only a couple of these folks in person, yet I have come to feel as close to them as I do to friends and family in real life. It is their encouragement that, for better or for worse, has led me to foist these writings on a self-selecting but otherwise unsuspecting public. Even more patient and encouraging than they regarding my blogging (and, well, regarding me as a person) has been my wife, known to my readers as "the Mrs." She's the best darned Mrs. a man could have. In her, as in many other things in my life, I am incredibly fortunate and blessed.

For purposes of this particular page, though, to my mind one person in particular, more than anyone else, best represents why Blog Meridian has lasted as long as it has. "Winston Rand" of the blog Nobody Asked, who died suddenly in 2008, just sort of showed up in the Comments section a couple of years prior and never left until just before he died. He was among the earliest proponents of the idea of gathering up the Stretch of River posts and publishing them independently. I never met him, but he made me and his other friends on the 'Nets feel appreciated—indeed, as though we'd grown up knowing him. Like me, he grew up in a rural area that considered itself Southern; he and I shared, among other things, a love of Cormac McCarthy and, in general, a love of writing with a strong sense of place; and, when Vince Young found his way to the Tennessee Titans, I joined him in rooting enthusiastically for them. For me, he came to embody the blogosphere at its very best. He was indeed, as his wife "Roomie" asked us to remember him, a pretty good guy.

A Stretch of River:
Selections from the Series

“Writers”
(February 10, 2006)

The other afternoon on the park side of the river, I happened to see a woman in her car with a spiralbound blank book propped against the steering wheel, pencil poised above the unlined paper. For some reason, it caused me to remark to myself that I've seen quite a few people there who are there, it seems, for the express purpose of writing.

People with notebooks. People with powerbooks. And, of course, this is just a fluke of timing, but I seem always to walk past them when they are staring at the page/screen, thinking about what they've written or are about to write.

I agree with them that the park is a good place to write: these people have a view from there as appealing in its blankness as the paper/screen in front of them. Indeed: looking across the river from the park, the opposite bank has some good-sized trees and some underbrush and some rather nondescript apartments, at least one of which is occupied by someone with a blog who, as he regularly walks over to the park with his dog and discreetly peers at what people are writing as they sit in their cars, staring across the water, thinks that this place is a good place to write ABOUT.

"I am a"
(October 31, 2008)

I know I said yesterday that I'd be away from here, but while Scruffy and I walked about this early morning in a light fog and I reflected on that misty, hazy thing called Identity and thinking about Leopold Bloom in *Ulysses*, who could not supply even a single word to complete the phrase you see in this post's title, I decided that I could not rest without expressing my deep envy of Rashid Khalidi and the fame/notoriety (you may choose) he has gained during the week.[1]

Oh, to have a name that reveals to all one's essence, one's beliefs and prejudices and convictions without those people's feeling compelled to ask that person to confirm or deny! Does that not simplify matters for him now, as both a professional (no more vitae to submit!) and a human being? Oh, to have a signifier so firmly linked to the signified that is my person that I, like Khalidi appears to be, could also be a walking, living, breathing refutation of that silly Saussurean notion that that signifier/signified relation is arbitrary!

I am serious about this.

It's for that reason, as well as the fact that the Democratic Party's nominee for President has now made it safe for people with funny-sounding names to run for political office, that I feel compelled, in anticipation of my possible future run for an elected position, to begin explaining to my potential future electorate just who I am. Yes, "begin": for what person's life is ever completely written before his/her death? (Except for Khalidi, of course, that lucky guy!) As you'll see, it's a good thing I'm getting a head start on things.

Everything that follows is true, and that is to my distinct disadvantage—hence the afore-mentioned envy.

To begin: I have a Norwegian last name, but ethnically I am mostly German. But that's the easy part . . . ::cue ominous docudrama-style cellos:: . . . or *appears* to be. I have no conscious memory of being anything other than a Lutheran; yet my birth was first recorded in a Baptist church registry (it precedes by two days the date the facts of my birth that were submitted by my parents to the State of Texas . . . and, you know, both those documents *say* I was born on April 25, 1962 in Austin, Texas, but who really knows? After all, the birth certificate that I have—state seal and everything—was issued to me in . . . 1981). Anyway . . . the family story is that the pastor of the church was initially resistant to enter my name in the registry because my first and middle name had, to his mind, an unfortunate denominational association[2]. Mom told me once that before he entered my name he actually suggested some other middle names for me that she said were "awful." But, she stuck to her guns: after all, I had gone unnamed for a couple of

[1] The relationship between Khalidi, a scholar and well-known commentator on Israeli-Palestinian relations, and Barack Obama became a campaign issue in the week leading up to the 2008 election. (Khalidi and Obama were colleagues at the University of Chicago.) Obama's opponents claimed that, due to Khalidi's strong advocacy on behalf of a Palestinian state, their relationship suggested that a President Obama would not maintain a pro-Israel foreign policy; for his part, Obama felt compelled to assert his loyalty to Israel.

[2] John Wesley (1703-1791), along with his brother Charles, was one of the founders of the Methodist Church.

days (she and Daddy had a girl's name all picked out but hadn't yet settled on a boy's name, and my arrival caught them flat-footed—I proved to be chromosomally uncooperative).

Well, thanks, Mom. You've made a mess of my religious affiliation for me and my future political biography: Who is this guy *really*? Is he liturgically-oriented? High church? Or does he latently prefer his pastors in a coat and tie rather than albs and stoles? Immersion or sprinkling? And wait till the Missouri Synod and Wisconsin Synod folks find out he's ELCA: they'll have a field day with that Communion-every-Sunday and full-communion-with-the-Episcopalians-and-UCC stuff.

And the name bit: Norwegian surname but mostly German ethnically? Yup: My ancestors came to Texas from Norway in the 1840s; they had sons; about the only other Lutheran women to marry in Austin were Germans; and they (on what became my side of the family) kept producing sons, who found German girls to marry, who gave birth to more sons . . . you detect a pattern by now, I suspect. It's a mixed blessing that I've broken that pattern, having fathered two girls . . . with French first names.

(Hmm, my future opponents' robo-call scriptwriters muse: Norwegian surname . . . a bit of Quisling in him, perhaps, or is there perhaps some pagan (!) Viking yet lurking in him like some vicious mole of nature? Ethnic German . . . bet he loves Wagner. Heh, heh. So, he'd either sell out his own people or run roughshod over the mongrel races of the world. And the Lutherans didn't exactly cover themselves in glory when the Nazis came to power, Bonhoeffer notwithstanding . . . and that Luther guy was an anti-Semite, too, wasn't he? He's a walking, talking La Brea Tar Pit of ensnaring contradictions and nasty associations. Too bad that kids are off limits—otherwise, we'd have a field day with the fact that this guy gave them *French* names, of all things.)

Depending on one's viewpoint, my political future is looking either ever more hopeful or ever more audacious.

Well. That pretty much covers the circumstances of the hazy record of my birth, my ethnicity, and my religion(s). Never mind what I've said to people, what I've written, here and elsewhere (which, come to think of it, might provide still further complications, what with my academic interests in narratives of interracial relationships). I think I've amply demonstrated, by implication, why I so envy Khalidi. One look at my name, and immediately the questions arise. One look at his name, though, and many, many, many people, without knowing anything else about him, know everything they want to about him.

"Frost on the grass, stars in the sky"
(October 28, 2008)

> [I]f a man would be alone, let him look at the stars. The rays that come from those heavenly worlds, will separate between him and what he touches. One might think the atmosphere was made transparent with this design, to give man, in the heavenly bodies, the perpetual presence of the sublime. Seen in the streets of the cities, how great they are! If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God which had been shown! But every night come out these envoys of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile.
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> —Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature"

I confess to being a bad Transcendentalist this morning as Scruffy and I walked through the park. For a little while, at least.

Yesterday was chilly, yes, but this morning . . . where had our pleasantly-cool fall mornings gone? Just before sunrise is the coldest part of the morning, as you know; and this morning—well below freezing, a heavy frost on the ground and vapor rising off the river—found me underdressed and that dawning awareness coming upon me slowly and, when it did arrive, found me on the other side of the river—pointless by that time to return for something heavier. So, yeah: Thoreau in *Walden* one day briefly disparages the rain that causes him to postpone his fishing trip but then thinks that the rain, being good for the grass, was also good for him; I'm afraid I was not nearly so gracious regarding the frost on the grass's possibly being good for my rapidly-numbing fingers. Add to this Scruffy's—as it seemed to me—deliberately seeking out and smelling Every. Little. Odoriferous. Spot, no matter how far off our route it might lay, and . . . sorry, Henry and Ralph. I just wanted to get home and get warm.

At one point, though, as I cursed my luck this morning for having far-too-casually decided four years ago that owning a dog would be okay and not taking into account that he'd require walking at least twice a day no matter the weather, not to mention our own obligations of whatever sort—thus feeling I was now laboring under a mistake (thanks for that phrase, Henry)—I happened to glance up at the sky and see the constellation Orion. One blessing of living in Wichita is that, even in the middle of the city, light-pollution is not so bad and the air is clear enough that many stars are not only easily visible, there have been times in the past when they twinkle so brilliantly that they seem almost audible. This morning was not quite one of those mornings; but, despite my standing under a lamppost at this moment, Orion was easily visible. Just for a moment, I stopped cursing my luck; my mind flashed back to our guide to Teotihuacan two weeks ago telling us that the relative placement of its two main pyramids may have served as a gigantic solar calendar.

I'm no fool: it's safe to assume that the vast, vast majority of the laborers who built Teotihuacan had, shall we say, little choice in the matter. At one level, it's easy to agree with Thoreau when he says in *Walden*, "As for the Pyramids, there is nothing to wonder at in them so much as the fact that so many men could be found degraded enough to spend their lives constructing a tomb for some ambitious booby, whom it would have been wiser and manlier to have drowned in the Nile, and then given his body to the dogs. I might possibly invent some excuse for them and him, but I have no time for it." But at another level—that of the societal—the mapping of a city (a human-created environment, after all) in accordance with a map of the cosmos rather than one reflecting the confluence of local topography and the whims of succeeding generations of residents—a denial of the contingent in favor of the Always There—there's an undeniable grandeur and vision to that that I think Thoreau might also agree with:

> Men esteem truth remote, in the outskirts of the system, behind the farthest star, before Adam and after the last man. In eternity there is indeed something true and sublime. But all these times and places and occasions are now and here. God himself culminates in the present moment, and will never be more divine in the lapse of all the ages. And we are enabled to apprehend at all what is sublime and noble only by the perpetual instilling and drenching of the reality that surrounds us. The universe constantly and obediently answers to our conceptions; whether we travel fast or slow, the track is laid for us. Let us spend our lives in conceiving then.

A marvelous word, *conceiving*, in this context, both its meanings of "understanding" and "to cause to begin life" working equally well here.

There's not a heck of a lot of transcendence in Scruffy's always needing to be walked. Not this particular morning, at least. But the stars are *always* there, the sky spinning about but always returning to the same place eventually: *that* is their wonder. One can not only map a city according to that, one can take that idea and begin to map a life . . . or re-chart one already mapped.

"In which the Meridian and Scruffy witness something that might as well have occurred on a planet in a galaxy far, far away"
(September 30, 2008)

Picture, if you will, an early-fall afternoon, the sun slanting goldenly, gloriously through the just-turning leaves of the walnuts and cottonwoods of the northeast corner of Riverside Park. Picture, further, an open space in those trees measuring, oh, a hundred yards in length by 50 or so yards wide, bounded on three sides by the trees and on the fourth by a road which follows the bend in the Little Arkansas. Between that road and the river there's a sidewalk, and it's along that way that Scruffy and I walk as part of our stroll around the perimeter of the park in the afternoons.

On just such an early-fall afternoon in that open space, Scruffy and I see something that makes us stop and watch for a while. It is a man and his two golden retrievers. The retrievers are not on leashes. They lope about happily in the open space. Their coats gleam just as goldenly as the light that shines on them. The man has with him a toy that resembles a cylindrically-shaped, very well-fed squirrel. He throws it a fair distance (it must be weighted) and one dog fetches it and brings it to him while the other watches in that happy/dumb look bred into all golden retrievers.

The retrievers, their tongues lolling, seem to lope in slow motion, they move so fluidly, the light moving across their coats like liquid.

The light sort of lands with a dull thud on Scruffy.

They are not on leashes.

Scruffy is on a leash; I hold its loop in a death-grip. Scruffy looks at them and at me and at them and at me, wistfully, as if to say, "*They* are not on leashes."

The retrievers return to their owner when he calls them. "Calls them"—not "shouts at them" or "runs after them" or "bribes them with liver treats" or "turns and walks back home, hoping that they'll feel abandoned and follow him home out of fear."

(Now the reader has some insight into why Scruffy is on a leash.)

They do not dawdle or cower when called: they lope that easy lope of theirs up to their owner, their tails wagging.

"You see that magical space, that enchanted glade over there, Scruffy?" I say. "That there is Planet Obedient Dog."

Now it is my turn to look wistfully over there.

"Scruffy as Ishmael"
(January 16, 2008)

> *"Call him Scruffy—I do. On several occasions this winter--never mind how many; I've lost count—having no money whatsoever in his purse, and nothing particular (aside from his leash) to interest him in staying on the banks of the Little Arkansas, he thinks on occasion he will suddenly lunge forth when there is ice on the river and visit our small watery-but-frozen part of the world."*—from a (very very) false start by Herman Melville.

Now: Scruffy being some sort of terrier mix, you'd think water would be something of an antithesis to his nature. But the elements don't stand in opposition to each other—and, after all, ice is water's version of earth, sort of, if you squint just right and haven't had your coffee yet.

Or maybe one doesn't have to squint too hard after all. Have a look at some more of Melville's (very very) false start on his great whaling book, when the author was uncertain whether to make the narrator the very thing he himself would wind up hunting:

> **Etymology**
> (*Supplied by a middle-aged Instructor in English*)
>
> "While you take in hand to school others, and to teach them how "Scruffy" is to be called in our tongue, leaving out, through ignorance, the letter C pronounced hard, which almost alone maketh up the signification of the word, you deliver that which is not true."—Middle-aged Instructor in English.
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> **scruff·y** (skrufʹē) *adj*. (scruff·i·er, scruff·i·est) 1. Shabby; untidy. 2. *Chiefly British* Scaly; scabby. [From obsolete scruff, "scurf," variant of scurf; see **scurf**.]
>
> *****
>
> **scurf** /skɜrf/ –noun 1. the scales or small shreds of epidermis that are continually exfoliated from the skin. 2. any scaly matter or incrustation on a surface. [Origin: bef. 1000; ME, OE < ON *skurfa* scurf, crust]

"Any scaly matter or incrustation on a surface," eh? Like ice, perhaps? Scruffy's abrupt strains on the leash are analogous to what Ishmael sees in the "story of Narcissus, who because he could not grasp the tormenting, mild image he saw in the fountain, plunged into it and was drowned. . . . It is the image of the ungraspable phantom of life . . ." Scruffy sees himself (figuratively speaking, of course) in the ice? Crust you are, and to crust you shall return?

The saner among you will think about all this much like Starbuck does as he confronts Ahab on

the quarter-deck of the *Pequod*: you too will think Scruffy "a dumb brute" and thus see this as silliness at best. You'd be entitled, too. All I know is this: This dog is obsessed with river-ice in a way he is not when the water is ice-free. As much time as I spend with this animal, as well as I know him, he remains, in many ways—and perhaps ultimately—as inscrutable as the White Whale.

It's weird, is all I'm saying.

Nay, more than merely weird: it tasks me. It is a mask to strike beyond.

"Updating the wildlife census, and some thoughts on this blog's epigraph"
(May 21, 2007)

Almost a year ago (how time flies in the blogosphere), I posted a list of the larger fauna I've seen along my bend of the Little Arkansas. I've seen some animals since then that compel me to revisit that list, and then announce the arrival of a new (to this area) species that, while exciting in its own right, also causes me to think about some Larger Issues.

First, the freshening up of the list: some time after I posted that list, I confirmed that the large water mammal I mentioned in the post was/is indeed a beaver. To the list of birds I can now add red-winged blackbirds, a male of which I saw a couple of weeks ago.

But now for the bigger news. I had first seen it yesterday morning but thought it a fluke; but this morning, too, in the park at sunrise, standing alone, proud, brazen and unafraid under a tree near the river in full view of the apartments on the other side, the dawn's rays revealing it in all its glittering glory, I saw an empty shopping cart.

It's always the way, isn't it, that the very times you see something beautiful or extraordinary tend also to be those times you happen to be without a camera; such, alas for my reader(s), is my and your plight this morning (and every morning, seeing as I don't own a digital camera). But we are not entirely without resources: I don't own a copy, but thanks to the glories of the Internets I have been able to consult that award-winning taxonomical work, *The Stray Shopping Carts of Eastern North America: A Guide to Field Identification* by Julian Montague. Well, okay: actually, I've been consulting his website.[3] Whatever.

Read the following and tell me we could not use a few good Montagues up there in Washington:

> Until now, the major obstacle that has prevented people from thinking critically about stray shopping carts has been that we have not had any formalized language to differentiate one shopping cart from another.
>
> In order to encourage a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, I have worked for the past six years to develop a system of identification for stray shopping carts.

None of this unsophisticated black/white, us/them kind of thinking. "Nuanced and comprehensive": that's the ticket.

Here's a quick sketching out of Montague's taxonomy's organizing principle. He prefers not to dwell on descriptions of the carts' physical attributes but, instead, on their physical location and condition relative to their provenance. Thus his division of carts into "Class A: False Strays"

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[3] Yes: Julian Montague is an actual person, as you'll see later in this piece, and this book is an actual book. Montague's website is http://www.strayshoppingcart.com/. The "award" won was the 2007 Diagram Oddest Title of the Year (http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2007/apr/13/news.awardsandprizes), handily beating the equally-oddly-titled *How Green Were the Nazis*?

and “Class B: True Strays.” You know you want to go there, as the kids say these days, so I'll not tell you here what I know you'll see there. Instead, I'll cut to the chase and say that, within Montague's current system, the cart I saw most closely corresponds to either B/16 (Edge Marginalization) or B/21 (Naturalization).

Except that neither seems to be appropriate.

Given its solitude and the fact that, from a distance (I didn't want to approach out of fear of startling it) it appeared to be completely empty, I don't think what I saw was a stray. I think it was a feral shopping cart. It's gone wild.

Just read again my description of the cart above and see if it doesn't eerily echo this, the penultimate paragraph of Jack London's wonderful novel, *The Call of the Wild*:

> It is a great, gloriously glittering shopping cart, like, and yet unlike, all other shopping carts. He rolls in alone from the neighborhood and comes down into an open space among the trees in the park. Here a stream of refuse flows from torn plastic shopping bags and sinks into the ground, with long grasses growing through it and flies swarming it and hiding it from the sun; and here he muses for a time on those shopping bags, wheels squeaking once, long and mournfully, ere he departs.

(So I, um, photoshopped it a bit. Big wup.)

I am so excited about the possibility that through my sighting I may actually have created the need for a Class C designation—or at the very least a serious rethinking of the Class B categories—that I have actually written Mr. Montague to seek his counsel in this matter. If and when this 21st-century Linnaeus deigns to answer me, I'll be certain to post his reply here. But. You know how scientists are. They want to be right, but they also want to be first. So, even though I'll be the first to admit that good old Blog Meridian isn't exactly a juried journal, I felt it crucial to my reader(s) (not to mention my own not-inconsiderable ego) to find some outlet for making known my sighting before all those wannabe Roger Tory Peterson-types of the shopping-cart-watching world try to gain credit. Here: I'll even name the sucker: Meridian's Feral Cart. It's Google-able now, or soon will be: as good as carved in stone, and the temptation is strong to make it Wikipedia-able. My own little case study of truthiness. And if it turns out later that I'm wrong, that, in Mr. Montague's considered opinion it is in fact merely a True Stray, well, that's what retractions are for.

One complicating factor in all this: in the title of his book Montague specifies that this is a taxonomy for *eastern* North America. If the book—er, the website—has a weakness, it's that Montague doesn't talk about ranges; thus, I can't be sure if Kansas qualifies as "eastern North America." On his site I did see a picture of a stray cart taken in Hawaii, which doesn't strike me as being especially "eastern" . . . or "North American," for that matter. More "Pacific" or "Oceania," if you ask me. But I recognize that, only six years on, Montague's taxonomy is a work in progress. Linnaeus worked on his for around 40 years.

Behind Montague's work is an underlying serious metaphysical notion, of course: the very

human need to make sense of experience via some sort of ordering schema—like telling stories about them—in order to know (that is, begin to inhabit) the world)—Heidegger's concept of *dasein*. Taxonomies require a sort of language; indeed, their very ordering principles are themselves a sort of grammar. Not quite narratives themselves, they are more like settings within which narratives (evolution, for example) can occur. More pertinent for this post, though, is that these maps and languages don't merely describe the world, they are what make it manifest, give it a shape and dimensions that we can begin to convey to another. In the beginning is the Word. As Montague suggests above, you have to have words, a system, before you can begin to think about and talk about things.

Poets have known this longer than scientists have; one of them, Wallace Stevens, took up as his one great theme the intersection of the observable world and the human desire/need to impose an intellectual order on that world, and the accompanying problem that we can never truly know, with absolute certainty, where the one ends and the other begins—that is, whether our language actually *describes* what is there or in some sense *creates* what is there. His grand poem, "The Idea of Order at Key West," has nary a shopping cart in sight. Yet as the woman through her song sings this sunset and the beach at Key West into existence, we can also recognize, not entirely sarcastically, Julian Montague in this, the latter half of the poem:

> It was her voice that made
> The sky acutest at its vanishing.
> She measured to the hour its solitude.
> She was the single artificer of the world
> In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
> Whatever self it had, became the self
> That was her song, for she was the maker. Then we,
> As we beheld her striding there alone,
> Knew that there never was a world for her
> Except the one she sang and, singing, made.
>
> Ramon Fernandez, tell me, if you know,
> Why, when the singing ended and we turned
> Toward the town, tell why the glassy lights,
> The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,
> As the night descended, tilting in the air,
> Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,
> Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,
> Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.
>
> Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,
> The maker's rage to order words of the sea,
> Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
> And of ourselves and of our origins,
> In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.

I can't blame you if you've never scrolled down to the bottom of this blog, so I'll spare you the

trouble and tell you that you'll find there the first five words of the first line of the final stanza. A poet wrote those words, but we all live them anytime, literally, we look at and think about the world. *Does* order exist in the world independent of our perceiving it, or is our rage for order such that we invent it, seeing the world via a lens of our making? Oddly enough, thinking about shopping carts is a good starting place for engaging with this question.

UPDATE:
Literally just as I was about to push the "Publish Post" button, I decided to check my e-mail, and wouldn't you know . . .

> *Thank you for your interest,*
>
> *It sounds like your cart could be B/15 Gap Marginalization. A park is not a "gap space" under the present definition, but the cart might have been placed there in a B/15 kind of way. B/1 Open True includes carts in parks in its definition. It is a safe choice since all True Stray carts are by definition also B/1.*
>
> *Cheers,*
>
> *Julian*

Having heard from this great man, I am far richer now than I once was. I hope you can say the same. Oh: and I retract all that "feral" stuff above . . . though, I think on that cart, out there running proud and alone, and I do feel its wildness in my bones . . .

"Here comes a frame-house down, on the west side"[4]
(April 20, 2007)

Well, okay. No house came floating down our stretch of the Little Arkansas this past week, much less one with a dead man inside it. But from Saturday to Wednesday the river slowly rose, due to the rain and snow we've had in town and in the river's watershed to the north and west of Wichita, to about a foot and a half higher than usual. Though that doesn't sound like much, the rise led to two things: 1) The river flowed much faster than it usually does; 2) Just as Huck notes in *Huckleberry Finn*, when the river rises, all sorts of things came floating down it that one usually doesn't see in this or, I suspect, in most any river. So for those few days Scruffy and I vicariously made like Huck and Jim on our walks (the analogues being, in case you're wondering, pretty fluid, and this out of necessity since, as Jim has Huck acknowledge elsewhere in the novel, a cat is not a man).

This made for occasionally interesting, curious viewing those few days. But little romance arose from the accretion of debris. It was, to borrow Frost's phrase from another context, "a diminished thing."[5]

Without a doubt, the strangest thing we saw in the river was on Saturday morning: a sofa cushion floating majestically down its center, sitting so high on the surface that it appeared to have been inflated. After that came, on succeeding days, the inventory of a small sporting goods store: a basketball, a football, and a soccer ball. All were cheap, and all had seen better days. There was a fair amount of driftwood to see, too, some of it surprisingly large. The rest was the usual sort of garbage (literally) that one would expect to see floating on a river in flood that flows through an urban area: liquor bottles; beer and soda-water cans; pieces of styrofoam chests . . . you get the idea.

Perhaps I am jaded: I know, if I account for Huck's adolescent-boy's filter on his narrator's lens, that he's just looking at river trash, too. I must also account for the fact that his river is the Mighty Mississip' while mine is the Little Arkansas. Or is this an example of a failure of the imagination?—that if I squinted in just the right way I could see magic or fancy in that debris. But no. The imagination can invent only so much; as Wallace Stevens notes, making a poetic career out of doing so, it has its starting place in reality (whatever *that* was). It cannot invent *ex nihilo*.

Well: Huck's having seen the house means that I can, too: its extravagance is something I can attest to as well, if only vicariously. A whole house—and Scruffy and I had seen a cushion from one of its sofas. A diminished thing, yes. But something. Enough.

[4] The phrase is from Chapter IX of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.
[5] From Frost's poem "The Oven Bird."

"An unstopped stopwatch"
(April 1, 2007)

On this morning's walk, over on the park side of the river, I found someone's watch laying in a pull-over area for cars. It's one of those watches that sometimes gets called a chronograph because of its multitudinous ways of, well, graphing Time. The strap and buckle are intact; it looks exactly as though the person to whom it belongs had just gotten tired of it and taken it off and left it there in the road.

It's not expensive, but, boy, does it ever have buttons on it. It has a calculator. It has an alarm. It has a calendar. It has other functions as well, but the printing on the watch's surface is worn off and so I can't tell what else it does.

And as I write this, its stopwatch function is measuring . . . something, something that as of my writing this, if I'm reading it right, began 13 hours, 6 minutes and 25 seconds ago and, for all I know, may still be going on.

I have no plans to stop it. The watch may be in my possession, but it is not mine to stop.

So how can we describe what's being measured here? I'm not a trained metaphysician, by any means, but I'm up for a bit of speculating.

I'm told that quantum mechanics theorists say Time is an entity that exists in the universe independent of humans' perceiving it, and it seems to me that this stopwatch I'm looking at is somewhat illustrative of that idea. It's performing the task of measuring some movement that began some time ago and/but which might as well be occurring in a parallel universe.

Yet parallel universes are purely speculative spaces; we can only theorize their existence. We cannot know them directly. This particular space, though, we do know the existence of through the watch. It becomes the time, therefore, of a heterotopic space in Foucault's sense of the term, one whose existence we can know solely by the existence of this watch measuring a time peculiar to that space. We can say nothing about the space itself or its inhabitant(s). As far as I'm concerned, these numbers mean nothing, because I don't know their referent. They are signifiers of an absent, unseen, unknown signified, a dynamic set of hieroglyphs. The space is known-of but unknowable.

It also made me think of something very unexpected: my father's birthday.

That was March 21st. He is 69—or would be if he were still alive. That is the subjunctive mood, expressing an event that cannot ever be true in this world. But that too is another sort of chronograph, is it not, that keeping track of the birthdates and subsequent years of those long dead. Why do that except to keep them, if not alive, at least present in some way? So long as someone remembers the dead, they continue to have birthdays.

Now: even though the referent, my father, is no longer here, his space we *do* know of, seeing as we (well, I) are/am still alive and still remember him. I am his watch, for now.

More literally, though, I am now the keeper of a timepiece that is not mine and that continues to measure the "life" of some event I know not what. It is strange to look at this thing on my desk. Somehow, it is this literal manifestation of time rather than the figurative one(s) that is the more unnerving to ponder, as though we prefer our time nice and abstract, not really giving it much thought when it's the communal time of time zones, arrivals and departures. If it's a common time, the burden is easier: everyone acknowledges this time's sovereignty over us. But the time being measured by this watch is most definitely an uncommon one, bearing no link with common time. It, like the universe, like God, like the whatever-it-is-that wills our bodies to keep on living, is ultimately unknowable in the most basic, the most essential of ways.

"Scruffy's past"
(December 29, 2006)

It happened again this morning on our walk.

Most of the time, Scruffy pays little attention to passing traffic, no matter the size of the vehicle or the noise it makes. But for some reason, he becomes quite exercised whenever white trucks with loud rattling noises pass by us: he rears up on his hind legs and happily—not angrily—strains against his leash, watching the truck pass and wanting to follow it. His behavior is so specific, happening as infrequently as it does, that I can be as precise as I am in describing it.

I've had some pleasure in the past in creating a legendary past for our dog, but Scruffy's *actual* past, his life before the Mrs. saw his picture on that website and we drove an hour to the Humane Society's facility in Emporia, Kansas, to meet him, is all but a mystery to us. The farthest back we can trace it is to his actual stay at the pound: the attendant told us that he had been there for a few months and had stayed alive as long as he had because people kept showing interest in him but would later decide against adopting him. He had been found as a stray on the side of the road, but that is all we know.

So when, as happened today, a rattle-y white truck passes and Scruffy behaves as he does, I can't help but wonder. Did his previous owner own such a truck? Perhaps the Emporia pound's truck was such a vehicle, and while at the pound Scruffy would be thrilled by its arrival, since that would mean more dogs coming, and Scruffy, as I've noted in the past, loves meeting other dogs. But Scruffy cannot tell; he can only show, and then only incompletely—which is to say, less completely than we can.

The Past is not a fixed and static thing but a constantly-shifting, edited recollection of it, not all of it shared equivalently with—or, for that matter, collectively agreed-upon or understood in the same way by—all people. Scruffy, I assume, doesn't muse, Proust-like, over the what-ifs and might-have-beens of his past; he doesn't bury the unpleasant stuff. It's all there, close to the surface, ready to be revealed when some stimulus—like Proust's madeleine, come to think of it—triggers it. But what Scruffy reveals in such moments to Mrs. M. and me is not his past but the mystery of his past, its ultimate unknowability.

"Geography songs"
(December 19, 2006)

I have been thinking about the notion of place, especially as it pertains to the blogosphere. It's a weird idea. I mean, once I get past this blog's dumb joke of a title[6] and consider it (the title) seriously, I'm a bit stumped when I ask myself where/what exactly this "Meridian" I speak of is located/locating. There's also the notion that this blog has no physical existence to speak of; it's "held," I guess, in one of Blogger.com's servers, but it'll be "held" only so long as Blogger pays the electricity bill or the server doesn't crash or Blogger doesn't decide it (my blog) is an affront to humanity.

What complicates my thinking, at least, about this is that I don't think we're all that good, still, at thinking about the notion of place in the physical world, let alone the blogospheric one.

An easy example of what I mean is this ongoing "Stretch of River" posts. I don't know what you assume about their origins, but those of you who have read them know that the conceit, at least, is that they have as their starting point my twice-daily walks with my dog Scruffy along both sides of a half-mile stretch of the Little Arkansas River in downtown Wichita which passes close to where I live. This is a physical place. Sometimes I write about the place and things and people I see there. But sometimes not. In those latter instances, the physical space becomes less something to be described and more like a blank slate—or, more appropriately for this particular medium, an empty text box with a blinking cursor in it. I don't think I do the materiality of that space any injustice when that happens any more than Thoreau does when he turns his soundings of Walden Pond into an elaborate, book-length analogy of his self-soundings for "the essential facts of life" along Walden Pond's shore. (And that, by the way, is the point where any similarity between Thoreau and me ends.) Even so, what "happens" to the river in such moments is that it becomes subsumed by an agenda that has used it as a starting place but ultimately has nothing to do with it. I look into its waters and I see Me; I don't see it. Even Thoreau has to ask of the pond as he gazes into it, at least on occasion, "Walden, is it you?"

You'd think that cities that are almost 300 years old would have had all this sense-of-place stuff worked out, but perhaps age complicates matters. Consider the case of Galveston, one of my favorite places, and its recent hiring of a consulting firm to seek out advice for how to polish its image.[7] Galveston, you see, has the misfortune of being located at a spot on the Gulf of Mexico where the currents carry natural and not-so-natural flotsam and jetsam of all sorts onto the island, thus making its seawater and beaches the dirtiest in the state. As for hurricanes, it doesn't often get hit by them, but the ones that do visit tend to be powerful and destructive. Needless to say, according to the consulting firm, people don't go to Galveston for its refined-sugar sands. If you listen closely to the words of Jimmy Webb's "geography song" "Galveston," you'll see that they

[6] "Blog Meridian" is a pun on Cormac McCarthy's novel *Blood Meridian*.
[7] My source for the information and quotes that follow was a CNN.com article that was posted on 18 December 2006 and which is no longer archived.

have Glen Campbell sing about the beach where we used to run without getting us to, you know, actually *see* it; we're more worried about those seagulls flying in the sun (pooping hazards, they are).

Well, then: let's see how the firm's recommendations are playing among the locals:

> Promoters are eager to exploit the town's magnificent architecture and often tragic history to lure tourists, but they are far less keen about other North Star recommendations.
>
> The firm had recommended taking part "in a big way" in the national "Talk Like A Pirate Day" on September 19, an idea at which locals and tourists alike scoffed.

Jean Lafitte used to hang out there, true, and pirates are trendy these days; but, as fun as September 19th is, that sort of frivolity just isn't "Galveston." Whatever its identity problems might be, it at least knows what it is *not*. What it is, is the sort of place where, even if you're just driving down from Houston to relax for the day and eat some good seafood (the demographic of an astounding 70% of Galveston's visitors), you'll end up learning something . . . and more often than not, what you end up learning is that it has, historically-speaking, sucked to be Galveston. The island's first known European visitor, Cabeza de Vaca, neither arrived nor stayed there by choice and so had his own reasons for naming it *La Isla del Malhado* ("Isle of Ill-Fortune"), but it'd be hard to argue with its continuing aptness. But how appealing would be a truth-in-advertising tourism slogan like, "Galveston: Just like Cabeza de Vaca, you'll have a hell of a time!"?

Well: enough of that. On now to what really started my thinking this morning as Scruffy and I walked along the river.

Not too long ago, I discovered and immediately linked to a relatively new blog, A Lake County Point of View.[8] The proprietor of that POV, an ex-patriate Texan named Hank, is possessed of an intellectual curiosity that simply will not rest until it gets to the figurative as well as literal roots of things. This means, more often than not, a considerable investment of time on his reader's part: Hank is no hurry because he knows that the things of which he writes have taken centuries to reach the state that they're presently in; moreover, it's clear, he himself has invested considerable time in seeking out what he shares with his readers. So neither should you be in a hurry as you read him. But reading him repays in ways that I can only dream about via my poor efforts here.

As his blog makes clear, Hank's attention is drawn in particular to things of and in the earth: gardening, dogs, horses, birds, and wood, especially old, worked wood. Sailing is about the most-advanced technology he writes about at length. Whether or not he's conscious of it, he's using a decidedly postmodern technology to repair something the modern era began doing and postmodernism finished: the broken connection between human beings and the physical world. Like every other native Texan of a certain age that I know (he and I, if I had to guess, are within about 10 years of each other), Hank intuitively understands that "land" is something bigger and

[8] Unfortunately, this blog no longer exists.

grander, something more essential to identity, than "property" can ever be.

Here is what this remarkable man has to say about place, as least as regards his blog's title:

> There are twelve Lake Counties in the United States. They are all over. I'm sure they are all different. I'm sure each is unique in attitude and personality. But I'd bet they all share a few commonalities too. I live in one of them and it doesn't matter which. It is Lake County. You know what it is. And that's where I am.

You may not know where he lives, but you know exactly where he's coming from.

Imagine my initial dismay, then, when I visited Hank's blog yesterday morning and found a post called "Leaving Lake County." As it turned out, he meant the place . . . but the blog is so obviously, to his mind, an outgrowth of that place that he wonders:

> I hope it will not be too fraudulent to continue the Lake County nomenclature. I mean, who really cares? Right?

Good question. I myself have wondered what will happen to my blog's "Stretch of River" posts when I eventually move away from here. Will the string end, or will the inarguable fact that Scruffy requires walking lead me to find another Stretch of something?

Anyway. The number and nature of the comments in Hank's post compelled him to write a response which consists, mostly, of amazingly generous tributes to those who responded to the previous post, along with some footnotes and footnotes-within-footnotes well worth getting lost in. Close to the end, though, he says something both funny and revealing:

> I was actually thinking of toning this blog down a bit... writing less.
>
> But words like [those of my readers] make me want to actually work more diligently at this... like maybe... uh... I'll start... uh... doing something... uh... different... somehow. Like maybe, I'll shave before I post. Something like that.
>
> Or maybe I could work at learning more stuff... which would be, well, *harder* than just shaving or something. I'll do it. Somehow. (Hank's ellipses and italics)

Galveston has an undeniable is-ness to it that resists the projections of those who would want to make it Trendy and Hip and Now; but Hank realizes (unless I'm misreading him) that something of his blog's essence is constituted by what his readers respond to. A blog and its readership are less a place than a community and as such are shaped by its visitors and commenters—if, of course, the blogger takes positive note of them. I know that in the case of good old Blog Meridian, it is at its best when not self-indulgent but is in some way responsive to what readers say they like without, on the other hand, pandering to them.

And now you know the chief reason why there are, thus far, only 28 Stretch of River posts: sometimes, there is just no there there.

"Travels with Scruffy; or, My dog will call your dog"
(November 9, 2006)

The other day on *Morning Edition*, NPR broadcast another in their ongoing series of book chats between Steve Inskeep and Seattle librarian and inspiration for the Librarian Action-Figure, Nancy Pearl. This particular installment was about books which feature dogs and led off with John Steinbeck's famous travelogue, *Travels with Charley*. Pearl recounted that Steinbeck, some years after the fame and accolades that rightfully came his way with the publication of *The Grapes of Wrath*, felt that he had lost touch with his nation and its people and so set off on a cross-country journey accompanied by his standard poodle, Charley.

(Aside: I respectfully submit that Steinbeck's oft-noted decline as a writer, post-*Grapes* and *East of Eden*, either was caused by or was contributed to by his acquisition of a poodle. I am so certain of this that I'm pretty sure I could prove this empirically.)

(Aside to the aside: I have to confess to an admittedly-irrational loathing of poodles.)

Anyway. At one point in the interview, one or the other of the participants noted that Steinbeck was able to engage the people he met in conversation because of Charley. "Hey--nice dog you got there."--that sort of thing. As I heard that, I was reminded yet again of something that I've thought about from time to time on my walks along the Little Arkansas and have thought about posting on: that I know more about my neighbors' dogs than I know about my neighbors, and that's because of Scruffy.

I've written in the past about my dog's distinctiveness, most notably (my opinion) here. But I've not often noted here other people's dogs because I'd like to be able to say something as well about the lives of the people themselves. But what do I know of them, after all? They live in the area. Their dogs have needs, too. I know which dogs like other dogs, which don't--important to know, given Scruffy's immoderate friendliness toward other dogs. That's pretty much it. The most I know about one regular I see is his first name, the street he lives on, and that he walks his schnauzer in the mornings and his son walks him in the afternoons. I don't know any more than that about anyone else whose dogs I've met--even those people with dogs who lived in the same building we Meridians used to live in.

I tell myself that I'm not gathering material for novels or questioning whether blogging fame and fortune have caused me to feel disconnected from my fellow citizens, that if it weren't for Scruffy I wouldn't say any more than "Hello" to the people I pass and so shouldn't I feel grateful for what I *do* know about them. Not being gregarious by nature yet believing in and acknowledging the essential value of all people whether or not I personally like them, I should thank Scruffy with two, not one, post-walk treats at least every once in a while for compelling me to interact with them.

But it could also be that the other dog owners we meet see it as I sometimes also think about this: that our dogs' meeting is a sort of substitute handshake between us. It's something of the reverse of the old days of duelling--the how-do-you-do moment, our dogs serving as our seconds. Seeking to avenge an insulted honor isn't why we meet, of course, though I know I feel dishonored if Scruffy doesn't behave as I would like for him to. But through the dogs we humans can say we have met someone without investing too much exposure of self.

Most of the time it suffices, this virtual meeting of others through our dogs. It accomplishes what is needed or wanted: a pleasant acknowledgement of the other, a brief surface-y engagement with another person's life that makes him or her feel visible to another without too much baring of his or her soul--or our own, for that matter. But surely, if we let this happen too much, we run the risk of presenting ourselves as faceless corporations do, our dogs like those corporations' Customer Service Representatives, so that, if we should ever meet and we don't have our dogs, we'd feel a bit vulnerable. Our dogs' instincts not there to serve as the entree into human interaction, we are called upon to rely on our own, a bit stiff from infrequent use.

"Resisting Thoreau"
(September 29, 2006)

This blog's long-time reader(s) know(s) of my deep affection for Thoreau--and, my occasional Thoreauvian affectations via paraphrase wherever, it seems, I can work stuff by him into a post, no matter the subject. So it should come as no surprise to you/y'all that I teach "Civil Disobedience" as part of my Comp I class and an excerpt from *Walden* as part of Comp II.

By now I've become used to the mental eyerolls some of my students give me when Thoreau rears his head: "He's that guy that lived by himself in the woods." "He spent a night in jail for not paying his taxes." Yup. They know that much, at least. They also offer the, um, observation ("complaint" is such a harsh-sounding term, so I'll not characterize it as such here) that he's difficult to read. That's true as well: Thoreau is not a cookie-cutter kind of writer.

I often suspect, though--especially when we talk about the *Walden* excerpt--that in this that's-so-5-minutes-ago culture of ours, that the grounds for the eyerolls is the question of Thoreau's relevance. That's a valid one, of course. And so it was that as Scruffy and I took our morning walk in a darkness that seemed especially oppressive within the context of last night's events, I found myself thinking through both "Civil Disobedience"'s particular historical moment and its core arguments to see if I could find some reason to drop the Concord Curmudgeon from the syllabus with the goal of making my class's assigned readings more relevant, more so-10-minutes-ago than like, ancient history. So: though this exercise comes too late for this semester's Comp I classes, I hope that, should they happen to visit this post, they can take some comfort in knowing that they and the legions who preceded them have prompted this little examination.

We all know that the central event that sparked the writing of this essay was Thoreau's arrest for not paying his poll tax. What's less well known, though, is that his essay was originally titled "Resistance to Civil Government," the title being a rebuttal of the title of William Paley's famous essay, "The Duty of Submission to Civil Government." Well, I think: Paley is an equally-moldy guy; who pays attention to HIM anymore? And if no one pays attention to HIM, then that would eliminate a reason for paying attention to Thoreau, wouldn't it?

I quote Thoreau quoting Paley:

> [S]o long as the interest of the whole society requires it, that is, so long as the established government cannot be resisted or changed without public inconveniency, it is the will of God . . . that the established government be obeyed,--and no longer. This principle being admitted, the justice of every particular case of resistance is reduced to a computation of the quantity of the danger and grievance on the one side, and the probability of and expense of redressing it on the other.

Hmm. Given recent events in the House and Senate--you know: some Republican senators negotiating a compromise on the recent detainee bill with President Bush that ends up letting him do whatever in his wisdom he sees fit to decide with regard to determining who is a terrorist and, meanwhile, Democratic senators in their equivalent wisdom doing nothing to impede its passage beyond offering fine speeches last night (cutting and running of another sort, Thoreau would say, that old cynic)--it seems that a whole lot of computation (read: counting of potential votes this November) was going on. And there's also that linkage of obedience and "the will of God."

But wait: Thoreau responds to Paley. Can he trump Paley's sudden political relevancy?

> But Paley appears never to have contemplated those cases to which the rule of expediency does not apply, in which a people, as well as an individual, must do justice, cost what it may. If I have unjustly wrested a plank from a drowning man, I must restore it to him though I drown myself. This, according to Paley, would be inconvenient. But he that would save his life, in such a case, shall lose it. This people must cease to hold slaves, and to make war on Mexico, though it cost them their existence as a people.

I don't know, Henry: pretty sneaky of you to be quoting Jesus when some Christians have declared themselves to be in support of this bill that passed the Senate last night. But then again, something I've observed over and over again among adherents of certain strains of Christianity that also ally themselves with the current administration is that they are quite adept at quoting from, say, Leviticus and Paul's letters and Revelation but appear to be less handy with quotes from the Gospels to buttress their arguments. I don't know. Being Lutheran and all high-church and all myself, we're so hopelessly rooted in tradition and ritual that perhaps word hasn't reached us yet that What Jesus Would Do is apparently (or conveniently) irrelevant when some Christians seek to have the law and courts codify their particular version of what the American social contract should look like. But that's a matter for another post.

So, okay: Seeing as politics these days seems to be practiced by members of both parties so as to cause as little inconvenience as possible to their chances for reelection this November or to their future political ambitions, it seems that we can resist and therefore reject Thoreau on those grounds alone and should be reading Paley instead--"See, Class, this is how government REALLY works!"--and still have a text in the syllabus that is both, like, old AND hip and now. But, responsible instructor that I am, telling my students that it's best to offer as many reasons as possible in support of an opinion, I need to find a few more before we can rip Thoreau out of our anthologies.

It just so happens that I've found my next one in the very last sentence of that passage I just quoted: "This people must cease to hold slaves, and to make war on Mexico, though it cost them their existence as a people." Slaves?? War with Mexico?? What sort of world is that?

Let's find out: As these entries in Wikipedia's article on the Mexican-American War make clear, its beginnings can easily be read (and have been often, on both sides of the border) as having been directly provoked by U.S. military actions in disputed territory rather than the Polk Administration's argument that U.S. troops had been attacked on U.S. soil. Moreover, though the

war declaration passed unanimously in Congress, there was far from unanimous agreement regarding its particulars or its actual motives for being fought, either within the Congress or among citizens. Abolitionists were of the opinion that, Polk being pro-slavery, his true motive was to seize for slaveholders the territory between Texas and what would become California that was south of the line established by the Missouri Compromise as being the northernmost boundary for future slave-holding states. Thoreau was certainly of that opinion:

> [W]hen a sixth of the population of a nation which has undertaken to be the refuge of liberty are slaves, and a whole country is unjustly overrun and conquered by a foreign army, and subjected to military law, I think it is not too soon for honest men to rebel and revolutionize. What makes this duty the more urgent is the fact that the country so overrun is not our own, but ours is the invading army.

Hmm, I think again. No slaves these days, so no relevancy there. But what nations has this country invaded lately, and under what announced and actual pretexts? I should say here that it's my underinformed opinion (and not by MY choice, I might add) that those announced pretexts have proven to be so various--because they have had the annoying/unfortunate fate (you may choose, depending on your politics) of turning out to have been demonstrably untrue--that I have long ago lost the power to imagine what the actual pretext(s) might have been or whether they too have since changed. How I think many (I would hope "most") of my fellow citizens, upon hearing what our nation's *actual* rationale was for invading Iraq in March of 2003, would join me in bitterly asking those responsible for ginning up that rationale, in our best Dr. Phil-like manner, "And how's that been working for you?"

And I think some more . . . I'm Not A Lawyer (INAL), but it seems to me that the denial of habeas corpus to detainees and the President's new power to declare as non-combatants any U.S. citizen found, in his (or is that "His"?) determination, to have been guilty of providing, apparently, any sort of aid to terrorists (hard to say exactly what would/would not constitute "aid"--these new powers and their limits are a wee bit vague, the consensus seems to be, and besides: it's the President's call, according to the bill, not Congress's and not the courts') and thus making them subject to the terms of the new powers in this detainee bill seems not all that far distant from the sort of powers implicit in the various Fugitive Slave laws and Alien and Sedition Acts. Or am I, a happily heterosexual, practicing-Christian male who, in appearance, physically and ethnically pretty darned closely corresponds to the Aryan ideal, just being a wee bit paranoid or, for that matter, too overly concerned about completely innocent people picked up and sent to various unsavory places on the most circumstantial of pretexts and with no means given them to prove their innocence? Well, frankly, I'm not so sure (though this timeline comforts me, seeing as the man in question isn't from my country, merely some guy innocent of any crime or complicity with terrorists and so someone whom my nation, apparently, feels no obligation to even publicly apologize to, seeing as the Canadians have taken care of THAT).

No--I haven't forgotten: we're talking here about Thoreau's essay's continuing relevance, or lack thereof, for whatever Generation of students happens to be darkening my classroom's doorway. And I have to say, in reading over that last paragraph, that that could be used by some wiseacre student as an argument in *favor* of relevancy. So let's get away from cases, shall we, and have a

look at a larger philosophical underpinning of Thoreau's hopelessly-out-of-date essay (there--it felt good to cast some doubt on its relevancy even before I've actually decided the matter).

Many of my students, a bit of Ayn Rand under their belts, already know or heartily agree with Thoreau's most famous statement here, "That government is best which governs not at all." They read that, and they're ready to stop reading and go throw some rocks through some windows. But Thoreau goes on: "and when men are prepared for it, that will be the kind of government which they shall have." He goes on for a bit to explain that (short answer: He doesn't seem to think too highly of "men," which makes the women in my classes feel smug and important--and seeing as I'm all for encouraging women to feel empowered, I admit that Thoreau has some value there). But it doesn't get any better for his cause when he starts talking about the bedrock principle of democracy, rule by the majority:

> After all, the practical reason why, when the power is at once in the hands of the people, a majority are permitted, and for a long period continue, to rule is not because they are most likely to be in the right [. . .] but because they are physically the strongest. But a government in which the majority rule in all cases cannot be based on justice, even as far as men understand it. Can there not be a government in which majorities do not virtually decide right and wrong, but conscience? [. . . .] Must the citizen ever for a moment, or in the least degree, resign his conscience to the legislator? Why has every man a conscience, then? I think that we should be men first, and subjects afterward. It is not desirable to cultivate a respect for the law, as for the right[. . . .] Law never made men a whit more just; and, by means of their respect for it, even the well-disposed are daily made the agents of injustice.

Then comes some more typically-Thoreauvian yammering about men-as-machines and suchlike talk, and then this, which, in view of the now-changed legal landscape of our nation, might be the strongest reason of all for not teaching this essay:

> How does it become a man to behave toward this American government today? I answer, that he cannot without disgrace be associated with it. I cannot for an instant recognize that political organization as *my* government which is the *slave's* government also.
>
> (emphases are Thoreau's)

There you go: yet more no-longer-relevant talk about slaves. But here's something even more dangerous: even if one were tempted to argue that certain similarities exist between Thoreau's particular historical moment and our own--as, I acknowledge above, one might be able to argue, though it'd require some heavy-duty squinting in certain maliciously-intended and/or cynical ways--that bit about not recognizing that organization as my government seems, um, seditious. If we tried to make connections between Thoreau's time and our own, it even could be read to imply that the terrorists have already won, seeing as they hate our government and seek to sow dissent among us about the rightness of our cause. Especially seeing as it presents the idea of the potential injustice of rule by the majority.

Not only is Thoreau out of date, he's dangerous besides. Two very good reasons for relegating "Resistance to Civil Government" to the Dustbin of History. And while we're at it: seeing as at the conclusion of his essay Thoreau writes, "The authority of government[. . .]is still an impure one: to be strictly just, it must have the sanction and consent of the governed," we'd do well to have a close look at certain other texts as well.

We won't miss Thoreau, I don't think, what with his silly rootedness in a past that bears no resemblance to our own times, which themselves didn't exist, we're told, before September 11, 2001. And speaking of our own times, in yesterday's White House Briefing (free sub. required), Dan Froomkin offers up this bit by President Bush, which would seem to suggest that the particulars of what will become The Past don't much matter when one is talking about the Bigger Picture:

> For the record, Bush was talking to Wolf Blitzer on CNN last Wednesday about all the carnage in Iraq when he said: "I like to tell people when the final history is written on Iraq, it will look like just a comma because there is -- my point is, there's a strong will for democracy."

Ann Telnaes's cartoon would seem to argue for a certain permanence to those commas, though, even as we read through them to find out when and how all this will end.

“Cottonwoods in bloom(sday)”
(June 16, 2006)

(with apologies to James Joyce on his day)

 Nervous, thin Scruffy Meridian descended the stairwell, wearing his monkeyemblazoned collar to which a leash was attached. His sleepy-eyed human held the leash's other end and drifted behind him like an ungirdled dressinggown sustained gently on the mild morning air. Scruffy thrust his nose into the air and thought:

--*Cave canem*.

Spasmodically he lunged forward and stood on the sidewalk. He looked back at Blog Meridian, then peed gravely thrice on the downstairs neighbor's potted plants, the privacy fence, and a small cottonwood sapling. Then he and Mr. Meridian mounted the small berm on the summit of which was the paved trail they walked on twice daily and began their counterclockwise walk round their stretch of river.

In his mind, Scruffy Meridian addressed his human:

--The mockery of it! Your absurd name, a word that didn't exist 5 years ago combined with ancient Romans sun-worshipping. And a bad pun on that McCarthy novel you're always going on about.

His tongue lolled out his mouth in a friendly way and he went to sniff a damplooking tuft of grass near the trail. Mr. Meridian followed him wearily and stood waiting for him to finish sniffing.

Scruffy Meridian's gay thoughts tried to keep up with his body, panting.

--My name is absurd too: Scruffy Meridian, two dactyls. But it has a Hellenic ring, hasn't it?

Tripping and sunny like dogs chasing rabbits. We must go to the park. Can we go? Huh? Can we can we?

As if reading his thoughts, Mr. Meridian sighed resignedly.

--We're going, we're going. Calm down.

As they walked the sundappled path, Mr. Meridian noted the cottonwood blossoms drifting in the air and how they seemed especially heavy this year. You'd think it was flurries. June, not January. But look where they've collected like snowdrifts. Like sixty-foot-tall dandelions, they are. Erect fathers? mothers? of thousands. How many seeds, how many. So many will never know soil, never spawn? Beseed? Flower? Never took botany. Be fecund? Eh--good enough for a blog post.

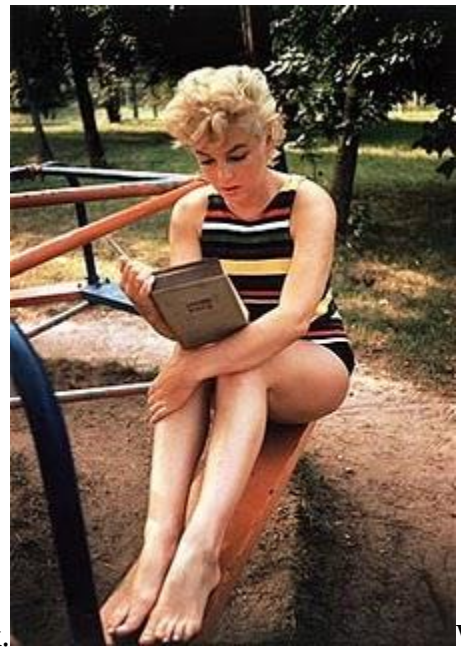
They reached the Murdoch Street bridge that crosses over the River Little Arkansas. That canaryyellow Focus that always passed by at this time and with whose driver Mr. Meridian always exchanged smiles and waves passed by at this time, and Mr. Meridian and the driver exchanged smiles and waves. The breeze was freshening, the air still cool with just a hint of dampness from the jadegreen water that reminded Mr. Meridian of that little passage in *Ulysses* where that Mulligan guy gasses on about the scrotumtightening snotgreen sea as a great sweet mother.

When they came even with the far bank of the river, Mr. Meridian looked down its length along the exposed mud and shallows.

A white heron stood before him in the shallows, alone and still, gazing into the water with one eye, looking for minnows. It seemed like one whom magic had changed into the likeness of a strange and beautiful girl. Its literally skin-and-bone legs disappeared abruptly into its white body like a woman with really knobby knees who had boldly kilted up her skirts about her waist. Its breast was like a woman's bosom, warm and full, full and warm . . .

--Damn, Mr. Meridian thought. Wrong novel. Always did like that figures in distant pools line, though.

Scruffy and Mr. Meridian had by this time left the bridge and were walking through Riverside Park, their route paralleling can a curving path be said to parallel a curving river? Parallel lines never meet. These curves are concentric don't meet either. Curves aren't lines because not in the same plane. Right? No matter. My thoughts will now curve happily toward the curvy Mrs. Meridian who by this time is no doubt stirring about in the apartment drinking the coffee I poured for her before beginning my walk and eagerly awaiting my return from my 20-minute not

20-year walk.  Will she read *Ulysses*? She (and Marilyn Monroe) the last page or so and here and there. Everyone reads that last page or so. She says she should, really should yes she really should, the whole thing. Says that about *Moby-Dick*, too. Fickle literary loyalties. Mustn't think on that. Something else. All that sugar . . . how can she? Like mine black, occasionally milk, sugar, a little cinnamon. Learned that in Mexico. Long ago, far away. But that coffee brings it back like madeleines. Tortillas. Diesel fumes, too.

Scruffy and Mr. Meridian approached the Nims Street bridge. Even as Mr. Meridian was thinking all these things he had just thought, he took at the same time an informal census of the waterfowl, always most plentiful at sunrise. Herons, egrets, both white. Do egrets have regrets? Canada geese who've never been to Canada. But kind of like the music. Mallards, lots and lots. How many broods hatched this spring summer? 4? 5? Lost count. Some already now as big as their mothers. Even saw the woodduck's brood first time yesterday. Why so shy, mallards almost as assertive as geese? Look it up sometime.

Scruffy and Mr. Meridian crossed the bridge, reached a patch of green that Mr. Meridian gaily referred to as the Pooping Fields because of the task that Scruffy more often than not performed there twice daily, and then turned toward home. He smiled. He thought about *Ulysses* some more, how it had taken Joyce 7 years to write a book about a single day, Thursday, June 16, 1904 . . . the very day he met and fell in love with long-suffering yet circumspect Nora. Love. Word known to all men. Takes just about a day to read the thing straight through. Quicker to think than to read. Labor of love to read it, too. One never reads *Ulysses* only rereads. Someone said that.

They arrived at their building. Scruffy bounded up the stairs, Mr. Meridian hurrying to keep up and fishing for his housekey in the deep commodious pocket of his walking shorts at the same time. Sure glad I didn't forget it like Bloom did his. No climbing into these windows. Keep out Error of every sort. He struggled a bit to unlock the door because Scruffy was jumping up and down in front of it, his head bumping Mr. Meridian's hand, but unlock it he finally did and he turned the knob to let them in and bent down to remove the leash from Scruffy's collar.

Scruffy eagerly gazed at Mr. Meridian who was now standing in the kitchen in close proximity to the liver treats. And then I asked him with my eyes for a Bil-Jac asked him again yes and then he asked me would I bring him my Kong yes to say yes my Scruffilupagus and then he knelt down to hug me and I licked his face and made him smell me all doggy-perfume yes and he was wiping his face like mad and yes I said yes I will get my Kong Yes.

"Wildness"
(April 21, 2006)

As I bet you can tell from this image, a picture on an old postcard, our stretch of the Little Arkansas river usually doesn't have a smell. This morning, though, it has that (to me) wonderful smell the rivers and creeks of my Texas childhood had that reminds me a bit of tarragon with the sharp edge of something like basil or perhaps rosemary--I can't decide which. It's the smell of spring, so strong that even we olfactorially-challenged humans can smell it, the smell of pollen and new leaves and already-fallen early blooms.

It is also the smell of something I keep wanting to call "wildness."

Nature is at its wildest in the spring, even along this ostensibly urbanized stretch of river. Spring is all about procreation, of course, and that is the single most crucial act of perpetuation. So--there is wildness, a kind of fierceness, in the spring, even in the passive yet open invitations the flowers extend to the bees. The plants, the animals, are driven by impulses and urges whose ends don't benefit them as individuals but help to ensure a future for the species of which they are a part. The mallards have been paired off, males with females, for over a month now, and just a couple of days ago I saw the first brood of ducklings. But not all the males have found mates; for the past month, those males have tried to mate with the females, only to be driven off by the females' mates. So now, the "single" males congregate off by themselves in a little indentation of the riverbank like the awkward kids at the high school dance who show up because that's what they're supposed to do but whom no one will dance with. I initially see some humor in their situation, knowing that there's always next year, but with a little thinking I have to recognize that they probably can't know that. They see only this one season, and their failure. There is a poignancy in that, no?

But precisely because of this stretch of river's now-sharp, human-managed edges, we've lost much of our ancient ability to see all this on Nature's terms. We're too busy thawing out from the winter and wondering how it could have passed so quickly (especially this past, very mild winter). Even the used condom I saw in the park a few weeks ago, the morning after our first cool-but-not-cold night of the season, was, for me at least then, more the potential subject for a joke-y blog post ("What were you expecting--*Walden*?") than, as I think about it now, a human expression of this wildness.

Oddly enough, it's been Scruffy who has been calling my attention to all this.

Now, mind you, my dog isn't exactly the brightest star in the canine firmament, especially when it comes to learning lessons about wildness that should need teaching only once. But he DOES have a much better nose than I do, and for these past few weeks of mornings now all those scents--not just the ducks, but the recent increased activity of the robins, pigeons, mourning doves, squirrels, rabbits, skunks and possums that we have seen--have caused his behavior to be

even more ADHD-like than usual. Not content merely to snuffle along the path we take, he'll suddenly lunge underneath a bush to sniff at its base where some animal had taken refuge for part of the night. Perhaps they are just stronger now, what with the air being warmer and more humid these days; perhaps they are just more numerous. But, adolescent that he is, he responds giddily, straining against his collar so hard it begins to cause him to wheeze and yet he doesn't seem to notice it, deep in the throes of his own kind of puppy love.

And yet he's neutered.

While I'd be the last to argue that humans should be slaves to hormones and pheromones in the ways that plants and animals are, there are times when I see Scruffy's behavior and feel shut off from the very world whose air I breathe. The signals in the air, the breaths, the odors of other living things: The air actually *tells* him things; I can only know that I cannot know them, and that that is a now-irrecoverable loss that "the perfume from a dress," though pretty enough, can only gloss over.

"Diesel fumes as madeleine; or, Blurred borders"
(January 20, 2006)

It does not happen very often, but when it does, it's on our morning walk, when the air is the most humid, and it's always when crossing one of the bridges: Scruffy and I will come along a couple of minutes after a truck or bus has passed, I'll catch a whiff of its exhaust, still trapped in the damp air there, and I'm instantly reminded of the morning odor on Calle Mexico in Colonia Guadalupe[1], the neighborhood I lived in 20 years ago (?!?!) in Durango, the capital of the Mexican state of the same name (the city is located in the south-central part of the state). All that's missing from that smell, here, is the smell from the tortilleria that was around the corner from my house that would commingle with the diesel.

Good old Proust:

> But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection. (from "Overture," *Swann's Way*)

This from a man who had such terrible respiratory troubles that he had to live in a cork-lined, fumigated room for much of his adult life. A whiff of diesel fumes might have done him in, denying me the opportunity to quote him here as a way of conveying the power of just those fumes to reawaken in me memories of a place.

Anyway.

It happened again, in a different way, this past Saturday morning when I listened to this story on NPR about the popularity of "musica duranguense" in this country, especially in Chicago. Music that is closely identified with a place, we know, provides a sort of condensed social archeology of that place, and the NPR story does a marvelous job of doing the excavation for those norteamericanos who have never even heard of the state, much less the city. Durango, rarely a destination but always on the way to someplace else (usually Mazatlan), is one of Mexico's fly-over states.

I looked online for well over half an hour for a detailed map of the city before finding the one I linked to. Though the search was frustrating, it also seems appropriate that this place is (still) difficult to locate, even in the blogosphere. Something the NPR story asks the listener to think about is, in effect, "Where is Durango?" (or, for that matter, "Where is Chicago?") That is, how does one draw cultural boundaries?

When I moved to Durango in May of 1985, two weeks after I graduated from college, one thing that immediately struck me was how many Duranguenos told me they had been to Chicago or had relatives who lived in Chicago. Not "the Valley" (the Brownsville and McAllen area of South Texas) or San Antonio or Houston or Los Angeles or any place needing migrant farm workers, the usual destinations for Mexican immigrants legal and otherwise. Chicago. It was almost as though every other destination was a fall-back option. Back then, I didn't enquire further--there was still the business of finding a job and wandering the city (read: I was simultaneously terrified by and reveling in my newly-acquired freedom as a college grad). It was not until hearing the NPR story that that strong link between Durango and Chicago got explained for me: over 100 years ago, after the big railroad-building boom in Mexico just before the Revolution of 1910, workers from Durango travelled to the Midwest, specifically to the Chicago area, to build railroads there. The workers and their families and THEIR families maintained those links, built not by railroads but by the work of establishing new lives, between the two places. "Durango, Illinios," indeed. And, for that matter, "Chicago, Durango."

Mexican music, too, is a sort of madeleine, as I learned when I lived in Durango and which the NPR story notes. I quickly realized that, much more so than in this country, the kind of popular music one listened to was a kind of class marker. But such distinctions would magically fall away when someone played a *ranchera* or a *son*. Everyone, regardless of age or class, knows those songs and, especially after a few drinks, would sing them as loud as possible. But such moments are not about drunken performance; instead, such music is very much part and parcel of lived, daily experience. It is the equivalent of our folk music, which, relatively speaking, almost no one remembers. In Mexico, the old songs aren't heard much on the radio, but they are much closer to the surface, and when the singing commences, the chill that comes is not from the beauty of the singing (which, to be frank, was often more like bellowing) but from the beauty of being in the presence of the expression of collectively-held memory.

One memory of mine about that Mexican distinction between performance and self-expression, and then I'll close this post, because after all this writing I realize I'm no closer now to answering the questions about boundaries than I was when I first posed them:

It is midnight on a Wednesday at Movieland Disco, strangely-named but, nevertheless, then THE popular place to go dancing in Durango. Wednesday is "Noche Mexicana," which means that all

the music played was of Mexican or Latin American origin. A mariachi group has arrived, one larger than the one in this picture--the one that night had a couple more trumpet players and some violinists to boot. The singer has a mic; otherwise, it's an acoustic performance. I am enthralled by good mariachi bands,[2] and this is an especially good one, the singer being in very good voice and none of the other players needing mics for their instruments. This is Performance, I am thinking: the club has hired these players, they'll play a few songs, then the DJ will spin records again. But they are not even through the first verse of the first song when something happens: the singer's mic suddenly goes dead. The thought flashes through my mind that he'll realize what has happened, signal the band to stop playing, and they'll try to fix it then start up again. Isn't that what Performers do? But instead, he keeps singing and the band keeps playing. His voice actually seems to grow in strength. The audience (easily a couple hundred people) immediately begins to cheer him on as though he's a matador, and he sings over all THAT. He has the biggest, broadest grin on his face as he's doing so; he throws his arms wide, as if to embrace not just the audience but the entirety of the moment, up to and including the mic failure. For that is what not just the song but the *a priori* assumptions of mariachi require him to do: to embody Triumph over Adversity. It is pure bravado, which, far from being about Performance, is at the very core of what mariachi is about. To have stopped singing would have meant that he failed not only the song but mariachi itself.

Dear dirty, dusty, diesel-fumed Durango. May the memory of your smell continue to bear unflinchingly for me the vast structure of recollection.

“Ice and God”
(December 21, 2005)

As I have said before, I am (still) fascinated by this thing called Cold, still being somewhat new to the experience. And what has especially fascinated me for the past week is the surface inconstancy of the river's frozen surface.

When I first announced the river's freezing over, we then entered a partial-thaw-daytimes-freeze-overnight period that would create new patterns on the ice. I'm not referring to that, wondrous to watch though that was. No, what I'm referring to was what I observed beginning last weekend, when we got our first substantial snow of the winter.

I had assumed that, once the river froze and was covered with snow, that gap between the banks would assume a nearly-level, uniform appearance and would stay like that till the next thaw came along. But no. Much to my surprise, even with a week's worth of subfreezing temperatures, a combination of wind and not-yet-frozen water lapping onto and underneath the ice and melting it and then itself re-freezing creates, each day, different patterns of flow and pockmarks and subsurface cracking that gives this ostensibly frozen surface a profoundly liquid quality, as changeable, in its own way, as the unthawed river is. It's as though the ice's surface reminds us that, beneath, the river is not dormant or even in hiding or just biding its time. It is There, like God is.

It is something I would not have seen, much less thought about, if not for the daily walks, the daily looking and watching . . . and the writing about it that pushed these ideas to the surface.

"Migrations and slow time"
(September 22, 2005)

Today is the autumnal equinox. As I was reminding myself of that fact yesterday on my afternoon walk with the Scruffmeister, I thought about the monument to equinoxes and solstices in the park across the river: a ring of monolithic stones about 20 feet in diameter that functions as a working solar calendar. On the ground inside the ring are glass half-domes with the dates of the solstices and equinoxes so placed as to be illuminated by the sun's rays at noon when the light passes through a hole in one of the south-side monoliths at local noon (the sun's apogee) on the appropriate day. Meanwhile, two other stones, about 30 feet beyond the ring's south-eastern and -western quadrants, are positioned so that, when one sights along them toward the horizon, they mark the points of the respective sunrises and sunsets for each of those days. It is a smaller, funkier Stonehenge.

But the plaque there that explains how the site functions makes clear that its purpose is not to turn the good people of Wichita into sun-worshippers. It is, at least in part, a monument as well to the human patience required to discover and graph, over hundreds, perhaps thousands of years, the movements of the sun and Earth. And, of course, it is a testament to the human need and desire to find order in the cosmos as a first step in beginning to make sense of it and of our meaning as part of that cosmos.

So, those larger movements, a space dance of huge objects tens of millions of miles apart from each other that nevertheless offers evidence of that dance that people, over years and years and years of time, learned to see the evidence of in sun and shadow and fixed points on horizons. But yesterday I was also reminded of other dances, easier to see but, paradoxically, harder to explain. By the river, we passed a tree whose dense overarching branches created a dark, cool shade right next to the path, and in that shade were maybe a dozen or so monarch butterflies fluttering about. That small gathering reminded me of the spectacular pictures I've seen from Michoacan, in Mexico, of the monarchs' annual winter migration from Canada and this country to that place, in which hundreds of thousands of the butterflies can occupy a tree, their cumulative weight so heavy they can break branches off. And sure enough, this story from NPR today confirmed that the fall migration has just begun.

The park, today, is a small way station for something all the more grand for the fragility of its participants. And, though most days--even today, when I went by a little before sunset--the monoliths aren't visited much, their very presence provides a place that is both observation post and reminder of something akin to what the ancients called the music of the spheres. Orders, cycles, rhythms, all so much grander than we who nevertheless can bear witness to them if we only choose to.

> If the stars should appear one night in a thousand years, how would men believe and adore; and preserve for many generations the remembrance of the city of God

which had been shown! But every night come out these preachers of beauty, and light the universe with their admonishing smile.--Emerson, "Nature"

“A Stretch of River”
Haiku

“Two silhouettes”
(September 14, 2006)

A crane, neck outstretched;
Seated, cross-legged man, head bent down--
Both hunting something.

“Renewable Resource”
(December 12, 2008)

Collecting empties,
He will get money for them
And buy some full ones.

“Morning haiku”
(May 17, 2008)

Flying, the heron's
feet punctuate the water:
An ellipsis trail.

“Seen through the front of the new neighborhood liquor store”
(February 16, 2008)

Bottles of Night Train,
MD 20/20 line
the far wall, like milk.

“Roosting crows”
(January 16, 2007)

Black January
Leaves for the county jail's trees: like
A dark spring's portent.

“Haiku”
(November 19, 2006)

The train's horn sounds, fades
and fades, until you're hearing
your mem'ry of it.

Other Pieces

“Nothing that is not there, and the nothing that is: A ramble through the ‘natural world’”
(January 2, 2008)

Pooh and Piglet, "tracking something." Also titled, "How the Meridian comes to write some of his blog posts." (Originally found here)

By way of beginning, here's an excerpt from the chapter from which this illustration comes:

> One fine winter's day when Piglet was brushing away the snow in front of his house, he happened to look up, and there was Winnie-the-Pooh. Pooh was walking round and round in a circle, thinking of something else, and when Piglet called to him, he just went on walking.
>
> "Hallo!" said Piglet, "what are you doing?"
>
> "Hunting," said Pooh.
>
> "Hunting what?"
>
> "Tracking something," said Winnie-the-Pooh very mysteriously.
>
> "Tracking what?" said Piglet, coming closer.
>
> "That's just what I ask myself. I ask myself, What?"
>
> "What do you think you'll answer?"
>
> "I shall have to wait until I catch up with it," said Winnie-the-Pooh. "Now, look there." He pointed to the ground in front of him. "What do you see there?"
>
> "Tracks," said Piglet. "Paw-marks." He gave a little squeak of excitement. "Oh, Pooh! Do you think it's a -- a -- a Woozle?"
>
> "It may be," said Pooh. "Sometimes it is, and sometimes it isn't. You never can tell with paw-marks."

> With these few words he went on tracking, and Piglet, after watching him for a minute or two, ran after him. Winnie-the-Pooh had come to a sudden stop, and was bending over the tracks in a puzzled sort of way.
>
> "What's the matter?" asked Piglet.
>
> "It's a very funny thing," said Bear, "but there seem to be two animals now. This -- whatever-it-was -- has been joined by another -- whatever-it-is -- and the two of them are now proceeding in company. Would you mind coming with me, Piglet, in case they turn out to be Hostile Animals?"
>
> Piglet scratched his ear in a nice sort of way, and said that he had nothing to do until Friday, and would be delighted to come, in case it really was a Woozle.
>
> "You mean, in case it really is two Woozles," said Winnie-the-Pooh, and Piglet said that anyhow he had nothing to do until Friday. So off they went together.

(Just for the record: I bear no resemblance whatsoever to these two, as I have nothing to do until January 14.)

"Tracking" reveals its double meaning in this little scene: Pooh and Piglet track (follow) the Woozle, and they at the same time track (mark) the snow. What they regard and fear as a future unknown is really retrospection, a surveying of the past of their own ma(r)king. We recognize this because we are observing their world--we are outside their matrix (to borrow a term); they, of course, cannot, because they are giving shape to very world they are seeking to make sense of--one, moreover, that they assume they are somehow not affecting by virtue of their presence. Indeed, it's not too much to say that their assumed position relative to their world is exactly that of our actual position relative to theirs.

But it doesn't do to be too smug here. Sometimes--maybe most all the time--it is really ourselves we are tracking in the world, and we just don't recognize it. The phrase "natural world" is a sort of tracking-by-negation (or perhaps "denial"): embedded in it is the assumption that humans are fundamentally "unnatural."

This "ramble," as this post's title calls it, is about "tracking," *very* broadly defined.

At my previous place of employ, it so happened that outside one of the buildings where I taught a lot of my classes there were three young oak trees which, by some freak of nature (they weren't put there by a human agency), just happened to form a precise line (or precise enough for my purposes)--and, moreover, the space between trees 1 and 2 was almost exactly that of the space between trees 2 and 3: about 7' in each case. These trees came in extremely handy at that point in the semester when it came time to teach Wallace Stevens. Stevens' big theme is that the "imagination" is that which allows us to speak of what we observe in the world. For Stevens, there is a material world, and there is what we say about that world, but because language (broadly defined) is the means by which we speak of it and besides (for Stevens) has its origin with humans, there is always a bit of uncertainty as to whether what we say about it is in fact

what is actually there independent of our perceiving it.

Enter those trees: As we'd go out and move among them I would ask my students, That we observe them as forming a line and being equidistant from their neighbors, are those observations the result of a set of ordering principles--in this case, those of Euclidean geometry--almost reflexively applied to what we're observing, or is that what is in fact true about them, independent of our making those observations? Sure: those observations "fit" what's in front of us; but how can we be certain that our observations are *in fact* what there was to observe? Maybe what we're "seeing" isn't an actual relationship involving those trees but only what our various languages allow us to express regarding them--even, perhaps, a subconscious product of our (human) *desire* to perceive an order regarding them: Stevens' "blessed rage for order . . . /The maker's rage to order . . . ("The Idea of Order at Key West"). But how to know, really know, what is really there? The stubborn, material, concrete there-ness of these trees and their positions relative to each other and, simultaneously, our collective realization that whatever we "said" about them--whether verbally or through mathematics or some other means--originated with us and not with the trees themselves, worked perfectly (to my mind) to introduce Stevens' themes, to begin to make sense, for example, of his poem "The Snow Man," his attempt to describe what is required of us to truly "see" the world (assuming that is even possible): to "[behold]/Nothing that is not there, and the nothing that is."

Stevens wasn't a scientist. His "day job," as he himself phrased it, was helping to run an insurance company. But, given his preoccupation with the theme of observation and how the frame(s) of language(s) at our disposal cannot help but shape observation, he'd be a poet I'd quickly recommend to any scientist who thinks seriously about the relationship between the observer and what s/he observes--specifically, the extent to which the observer is really observing himself/herself.

Below the fold: "the natural world," within a Stevensian context.

What got me to thinking about that phrase most recently was this post by my bloggy friend Pam of Tales from the Microbial Lab. Pam's thing is microbes--at least, she makes her living by studying them and writing grant proposals to put some of our tax dollars to work in studying them some more. But her other thing is poetry. And gardening. And her two dogs and a cat. And building a new house to LEED standards while living in an Airstream travel trailer. She mixes all that up into her gumbo of a blog and makes it well worth her readers' time to keep going back for more. Anyway, you'll want to read her whole post, but here's the passage that got me to thinking about the phrase "the natural world" as she reflects on both her attempt earlier in the day to save a bird from a hawk and the question of how pathogens found in humans were also showing up in the respiratory tracts of dolphins (the italics are hers):

> The questions have distracted me.
>
> *Why are you finding organisms in dolphins that are similar to those associated with humans?*
>
> *How did the bottlenose dolphins become infected with human pathogens?*

> *Is the antibiotic resistance of the dolphin microorganisms due to exposure to antibiotics from humans?*
>
> Questions, that in my conversation with several individuals today, kept getting me off-track. I knew differently, intuitively, but I nonetheless encouraged these conversations. So as I read some tonight, I was feeling awkward - and then I realized that I needed to shed these questions, dead-end questions, that everyone was asking, to shed the day's conversations, and come up with my own question and internal dialogue.
>
> So I thought about my response this morning, my rush to save the captured bird - as you all know, as I have trouble accepting, the hawk was just doing what a hawk does. I could have just as easily cheered the hawk on, been relieved that it had captured it's lunch - my perspective was just skewed and biased.
>
> It is much more likely that we humans have dolphin microorganisms associated with us.

Reading that prompted me to comment, in part,

> [P]erhaps the *a priori* assumption for some hypotheses shouldn't be, "How have people screwed things up?" (e.g., the assumption that these dolphin pathogens originated in humans) but something more along the lines of "Is this something that actually confirms our connection to the 'natural world'?" (and it just struck me that that phrase "natural world" presumes or implies that humans are somehow "unnatural").

"Natural world" is one of those phrases that for most people, I suspect, just sort of rolls on past, an unremarkable, taken-for-granted expression of something. But of what? What is implicit in its taken-for-grantedness? I answer my question above, of course, in my comment on Pam's post, but I'd like to do a little teasing out of things here, using Stevens (and Pooh and Piglet) as contexts.

"Natural" is an adjective or, more generally, a qualifier: a word that delineates, that measures; a descriptor. We know, in a way that feels instinctive, what "natural" means in this particular usage: something that is pure, uninterfered with by humans. Indeed, the phrase's very existence implies human beings' felt or assumed disconnectedness from the world (one of the defining characteristics of modernism and postmodernism). An alternate take on this is the phrase's implication that our corners of the world aren't natural . . . not even for us, the very people who design and inhabit those spaces. It begs the question of where the boundary that demarcates the "natural world" is located and how we would know it. Thus, I'd argue, the very adjective "natural" makes the "natural world" *un*natural: an artificial space, an abstraction.

My only real point in saying the above is that, at the level of observation--and not just scientific observation, either--adjectives such as "natural" aren't helpful. It creates situations such as the

one Pam describes above: it causes the implicit assumption that humans are alien beings (shades of Scientology) or contaminants. Or, alternately, it creates situations such as those that Pooh and Piglet find themselves in: it causes the implicit assumption that the very world they move about in is a sort of petri dish that they observe from without.

How to get out of this bind? Well, get rid of the adjective. Adjectives are human judgments, human pronouncements--our tracks--and not, necessarily, words that actually describe what is/is not There. I hope no one misunderstands me to be saying something like, Well, then, there must not be any Nature, then, or Well, then, this must mean that we can do any old thing to any old part of the world, then, since we're no different, at base, from any other living thing here. Nope--just that adjectives are relative terms. They are human things. They aren't substantives, or verbs.

The world is the world, neither natural or un-, and there is what is done to/in it. Life is a web; all living things are enmeshed in it, all interacting with each other more or less directly, sometimes beneficially, sometimes not. One of those species in particular is adept at adapting to and/or modifying itself and/or its environment to suit its needs and wants, often to the detriment of other species and maybe, in the long term, to itself; but it's also shown itself in the past to be adept at recognizing detrimental behavior and, occasionally, changing for the better.

Yada, yada, yada, you say. Well, then, perhaps it would be a Good Thing to observe the world--and *live* in it--like it's "Yada, yada, yada."

UPDATE (January 9): Via 3 Quarks Daily comes some (Western) cultural context on this theme:

> To understand physical reality seems to demand not only the renunciation of an anthropocentric or geocentric world view, but also a radical elimination of all anthropomorphic elements and principles, as they arise either from the world given to the five human senses or from the categories inherent in the human mind. The question assumes that man is the highest being we know of, an assumption which we have inherited from the Romans, whose *humanitas* was so alien to the Greeks' frame of mind that they had not even a word for it. (The reason for the absence of the word *humanitas* from Greek language and thought was that the Greeks, in contrast to the Romans, never thought that man is the highest being there is. Aristotle calls this belief *atopos*, "absurd.")[2] This view of man is even more alien to the scientist, to whom man is no more than a special case of organic life and to whom man's habitat—the earth, together with earthbound laws—is no more than a special borderline case of absolute, universal laws, that is, laws that rule the immensity of the universe. Surely the scientist cannot permit himself to ask: What consequences will the result of my investigations have for the stature (or, for that matter, for the future) of man? It has been the glory of modern science that it has been able to emancipate itself completely from all such anthropocentric, that is, truly humanistic, concerns.

"Bingham's lion: Toward an American aesthetics"
(April 28, 2008)

George Caleb Bingham, *Fur Traders Descending the Missouri*, 1845

In an earlier post, I initiated a discussion whose eventual goal is to articulate whatever it is that informs an American aesthetic (assuming there is an aesthetic that is identifiably American). It had as its starting point a (to my mind) thought-provoking passage from this post by Gawain at his most-excellent arts and culture blog, Heaven Tree:

> My third observation is that all the eclectics I have ever known have all been Americans. I have never heard a Chinese, a Japanese, or a European argue for the equality of pop and classical (or interchangeability of Andrew Lloyd Webber and Claudio Monteverdi). What is it about Americans which makes it possible for them to believe such things? Indeed, to experience them? **Is their ideological commitment to imagined equality of everything so strong as to make them blind to obvious emotional stimuli? Or do they have congenitally different brains? I don't know. I really do not know.** It is one of those ways in which my American friends (of whom many I love dearly) will remain to me inscrutable ciphers. A human mystery.
>
> Wittgenstein once said: If a lion could speak, we would not understand him.
>
> Well, yes. (Emphasis added)

By way of response to this passage, I said that there was some truth here but that it needed teasing out. This is the beginning of that, in which, below the fold, I'll make an argument that American aesthetics more properly rests on the principle of pastiche than of eclecticism.

As I have thought about this passage and how to respond, it struck me that the aesthetic egalitarianism Gawain attributes to Americans in the above passage is a bit off-target. Americans have historically had the cultural attitude of not "What is the best that has been thought and said?" but "What is at hand?"--it is something of a *plein air* approach to aesthetics, as Emerson argues we should have:

> Banks and tariffs, the newspaper and caucus, Methodism and Unitarianism, are flat and dull to dull people, but rest on the same foundations of wonder as the town of Troy and the temple of Delphi, and are swiftly passing away. Our log-rolling, our stumps and their politics, our fisheries, our Negroes and Indians, our boats and our repudiations, the wrath of rogues and the pusillanimity of honest men, the northern trade, the southern planting, the western clearing, Oregon and Texas, are yet unsung. Yet America is a poem in our eye; its ample geography dazzles the imagination, and it will not wait long for meters. . . . [W]hen we adhere to the ideal of the poet, we have our difficulties even with Milton and Homer. Milton is too literary, and Homer too literal and historical. ("The Poet")

In the same essay Emerson says he "look[s] in vain for the poet whom [he] describes[s]," though he had at hand the examples of Irving, Cooper, Longfellow and Bryant--all of whom made use of just the materials Emerson lists in their poems and narratives. Perhaps Emerson felt their art was still too beholden to European models. Whatever the case, Emerson also had available to him the by-then 300-year-old example of Latin American Baroque art and architecture, a "What is at hand?" aesthetic sensibility if there ever was one, as Miguel Rojas Mix's article "The Angel with the Arquebus: Baroque Art in Latin America" makes clear.

Here is that article's concluding paragraph:

> Baroque art in Latin America is not a mere transposition of Spanish or Portuguese art. It is a hybrid art. And it embraces more than two cultures, for along with the Spanish tradition it received the Arab heritage in the form of the mudejar style. It is said that the Indian contribution is shown in a preference for a range of pure colours and in the use of abstraction in the portrayal of figures. But the Black influence can also be seen, both in the dark complexion of angels and Virgins and in the syncretism of African gods with the traditional Christian saints. A marvellously enriched style emerged from all these influences, the style of an art that was fundamental to a new world. Such is the art we know as 'Latin American Baroque'.

What's described here is not eclecticism but pastiche. As I understand the term, eclecticism is an appreciation for diverse cultural expressions but also a recognition of their integrity. That's not the same thing as saying all art forms are created equal. Pastiche, on the other hand, is the realm of syncretism, of miscegenation, of hybridity. It's the creative dynamic of a space that can

produce a Natty Bumpo; a novel that is simultaneously a sea-faring tale, a work of naturalism, and metaphysical quest; a space in which the Virgin can appear as a mestiza; a place with stone-carved Christs on crosses girded with loincloths decorated with indigenous symbols.

These days, the tendency is to talk of pastiche as a feature of postmodernism, as a sign of our cultural distrust in past genres to signify what they used to. In this sense, then, pastiche is actually a destructive force. In the case of American aesthetics, though, pastiche is profoundly, radically creative. It is (or at least once was) driven by the sense that something new was being made in this hemisphere; the old forms, European or indigenous or African, would not serve.

Bingham's painting captures this sense well, I think. The men, garbed in a fusion of Western and indigenous garb, regard us warily. They are heading downstream--toward a town--to sell their furs. Compared to the Plains and Rockies, might Civilization be riskier still for them? The cat and his reflection in the water miraculously balance the composition--and in more ways than one. Sitting placidly in the bow of the canoe as he does, he seems like a bit of Civilization taken into the wilderness by these men. Look closer, though, and we see he's tethered. Is he a flight risk? A danger, perhaps, to the men he accompanies?

On the water's almost-blank surface, almost any narrative might be written.

“A Kansas troglodyte ponders the death of the movies”
(January 3, 2007)

There have been times in the past when I've told people that I live in Kansas and I can see in their eyes or hear in their words a subtext the landscape of which (not to mention the people who populate it) bears a close physical and cultural resemblance to that which you see in the above image. Combine the sepia landscape of the opening scenes of *The Wizard of Oz* and this state's very public debates about what should be taught in its high school science classrooms, and the opening sequences from *2001: A Space Odyssey* are what you get in the imagination of many, though those barren wastes you see also echo with imperfectly-rendered imitations of Margaret Hamilton hoarsely-screeching, "I'll get you, my pretty . . . and your little dog, too!" There is no help for this, of course, apart from good old Education; until or unless that happens, though, "Kansas" is a pop-culture creation that Kansans, no matter whether they subscribe to that creation's truth, have no choice but to live in. Still, I will make a modest beginning in that educating process by informing my audience that we have very few outhouses left in the state these days.

While reading 3 Quarks Daily today, I stumbled across an intriguing essay called "Selected Minor Works: Where Movies Came From" (note the past tense) by Justin Erik Halidór Smith. Smith is a regular contributor to 3 Quarks Daily, but I don't recall having read any of his work there before. At any rate, the piece's larger thesis is implicit in the past tense of his essay's title: that film may have been the 20th century's predominant art form, but "if we agree with [Stanley] Cavell that a movie is a sequence of automated world projections, then movies are no longer being made." The whole piece is pithy and worth your time, but it's the following passage that I wanted to share with you:

> Dreams are not weird movies, even if we recognize the conventions of dreamlikeness in weird movies. Weird movies, for one thing, are watched. The dreamer, in contrast, could not be more in the world dreamt. It is the dreamer’s world. It is not a show.
>
> However problematic the term, cinematic ‘realism’ shows us, moreover, that movies can exhibit different degrees of dreamlikeness, and thus surely that there is something wrong with the generalized movie-dream analogy. In dream sequences, we see bright colors and mist, and, as was explicitly noted by a dwarf in *Living in Oblivion*, we often see dwarves. When the dream sequence is over, the freaks disappear, the lighting returns to normal, and in some early color films,

> most notably *The Wizard of Oz*, we return to black-and-white, the cinematic signifier of 'reality'. My dreams are neither like the dream sequences in movies, nor are they like the movies that contain the dream sequences. Neither Kansas nor Oz, nor limited to dwarves in the repertoire of curious sights they offer up.

It was not long after I met the woman who is now my wife that she and I had a fairly heated argument about the merits of *The Wizard of Oz*. At the time she, a native Kansan, said she hated it because of how its "realistic" scenes depicted Kansas: "No wonder Dorothy wanted to run away!" She had also grown weary of all the *Oz*-associated jokes (see above), and I, being from a state with several ten-gallon hats *and* Cadillacs with longhorns on the hoods full of its own pop-culture assumptions, can empathize. Texas' mythos, though, is such that it really *is* "bigger" than all that. No brag--jes' fact. Kansas, I'm sorry to say, does not capture people's imagination in the same way: People see the landscapes in *Giant*--bleaker by far than the Kansas landscapes of *The Wizard of Oz*--and they're awed by them. They don't want to run from them. Of course, the plot of each film shapes the audience's perception of its landscape. On my own trip to Dodge City back in June, I didn't think of the landscape out that way as bleak at all. But neither can one hide out there, not even figuratively. If the city is a site of what Jacob Moreno has called "surplus reality," a space in which one is exposed to and can try on different psychic guises for oneself, I'd have to say that out in western Kansas, there ain't a whole lot of surplus anything out there. As emawkc wrote in response to a comment I'd left on his own post about western Kansas, "I think SWKansas is more about **being**, than doing and seeing." (my emphasis)

Below the fold: Smith's argument about what film was, what (in his opinion), it's rapidly becoming, and an attempt to explain why there's a picture of a (cinematic) caveman at the beginning of this post.

Smith agrees with Cavell that the narrative space of film is the same as that of myth, in which characters appear as types but not as individuals, but almost no sooner does he say that than he says this:

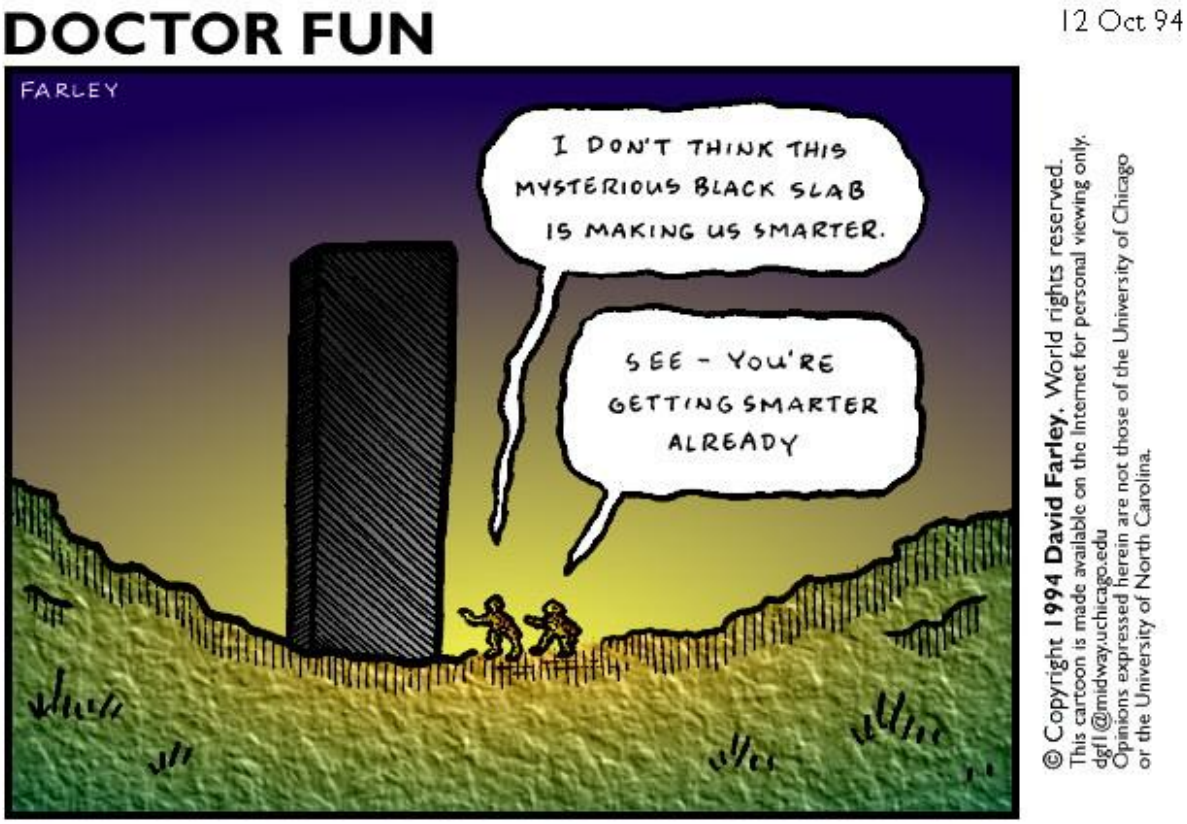
> The increasing cartoonishness of movies--both the increasing reliance on computer graphics, as well as the decreasing interest in anything resembling human beings depicted in anything resembling human situations (see, e.g., Pierce Brosnan-era James Bond for a particularly extreme example of the collapse of the film/cartoon boundary)—may be cause for concern. Mythology, and its engagement with recognizably human concerns about life and death, is, it would seem, quickly being replaced by sequences of pleasing colors and amusing sounds.

These are sweepingly-broad statements, of course, but compelling to think about--especially when, as Smith claims, we at present have no other art form that performs the work of myth-telling. Novels, by the way, don't, as Russian Formalist Mikhail Bakhtin tells us.

So: we're left with cartoons or whatever "reality" is. Myth, which Nietzsche said, in "The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music," the horizon must be ringed by in order to unify a culture, may not be dead, but with no cultural medium with which to convey it, it might as well be. It's intriguing that Smith does not see religion as taking up that particular baton. Religion has

traditionally been the keeper of a culture's myths, and I get the feeling that, no matter Smith's faith or absence or lack thereof, he would have no quarrel with that. Perhaps implicit in religion's absence is Smith's claim or assumption that religion is no longer culturally relevant--that, indeed, the cinema supplanted religion to become the new Church and religion was left to its own devices. If one of results of that was ID, I'd have to say that cultural exile is not healthy for the church.

As the recent debates here in Kansas over whether or not to teach Intelligent Design make clear, ID's choosing not to name God as the Designer for all life make the debate one about competing, diametrically-opposed descriptions of material reality, one rooted in directly-observed and -testable experience, the other a sort of mutation of the platonic forms that simultaneously claims and denies a supernatural origin for the planet and what lives on it. Which, of course, is nuts--the simultaneous claiming-and-denying, I mean--and not just from a scientific standpoint, either.



Another scene Stanley Kubrick deleted from "2001"

Enter the second essay by Smith I read today, the provocatively-titled "The Hairless Apes of Kansas," which originally appeared last year in *Counterpunch*. What is striking about this piece is that, once it covers the fairly familiar ground of last year's news and arguments about ID, it heads, in its conclusion, in what I found to be a surprising and provocative direction. Apologies in advance for the long quote:

> [A]fter more than 200 years of steady evidential consilience in favor of the theory

> of evolution, the supernaturalists still prefer to hold their ground, rather than seriously consider the theory in the light alone of which so much about the way the world is now starts to make sense. Why? What really hangs on this?
>
> I personally can think of few things I enjoy less than camping, and indeed I stray as seldom as possible from the scattered urban centers I think of as home. So it is not from what might be ridiculed as a 'granola' standpoint when I complain that **creationism, in its roots, is motivated by a hatred of nature, a desire to not be part of it, to have some special link to a transcendent order in virtue of which this earthly sojourn may be downplayed as a mere detour on the soul's path.**
>
> This hatred is responsible for no small amount of suffering. Animals suffer, since, as mere earthly bundles of drives and aversions, lacking savable souls, they embody everything we resent about our current predicament. It is no surprise that we take our resentment out on them, and so no surprise that the so-called culture of life, which takes human beings as sacred in virtue of their unique supernatural liaison, is nonetheless happy to tolerate the atrocity of factory farming. And people suffer, for as long as thisworldly experience is dismissed as irrelevant to the sort of creatures we really are, thisworldly virtues like justice remain that much easier to neglect.
>
> **The irony, of course, is that it would be difficult to find more convincing evidence that men are in fact apes than in the fang-baring and chest-pounding territorial battles being played out in school districts throughout America**, in which rational argument serves only as a ritualized ornamentation of what is transparently just another instance of the survival of the fittest already familiar to us in countless examples from the animal kingdom. Fitness here is measured in abstractions the other species of apes have not yet managed to comprehend, like the superior performance of one's view in a Zogby poll of Kansan parents, but this in no way diminishes the usefulness of thinking about the struggle in Darwinian terms.
>
> **The lost pre-Darwinian conception of man that we should really be mourning is not as image of God, but, in the old nomenclature of the Aristotelians, as rational animal.** The pagan Greeks could acknowledge our kinship with the animals while still making maximum use of the specific differentium of humanity, namely, reason. The currently prevailing strain of Christianity in the US, in contrast, seeks to remove us from the animal kingdom altogether, but in the process has gone a long way towards removing us from the kingdom of rational beings as well. (emphases mine)

We do not have to look at "the currently prevailing strain of Christianity in the US" to find examples of this hatred of nature leading to a reducing of the capacity for reason. We have the example of the Puritans, with their extreme suspicion of those who spent time in the woods alone, their characterizing the Indians as children of the Devil, the bizarre logic of their tests to determine whether someone was a witch, etc. But what is most fascinating to me is Smith's

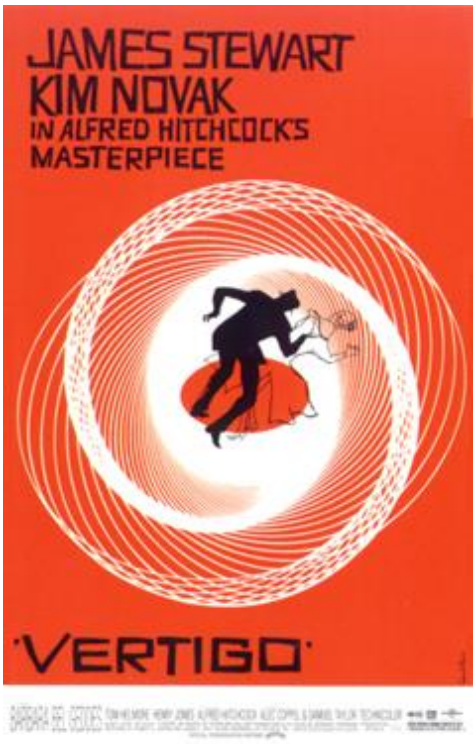
starting point in his argument: that ID is rooted in a hatred of nature. Smith rightly notes that that hatred drives the desire to be seen as transcending our own nature. But what's odd to me is that that hatred, too, seems to run counter to what ID wishes to argue: that God is revealed through the irreducible complexity found in the handiwork of His creation. Christianity assumes that that creation, having originated with God, is good. The fact of our material nature is something assumed throughout the Bible; the promised resurrection of the body on the last day is indeed contingent on that material nature. It strikes me, sitting here, that--if Smith is right--to hate nature, to hate one's own materiality, one's own transience, is to hate one's own Maker . . . or, at the very least, to doubt His promises to us.

Hazel Motes, the protagonist of Flannery O'Connor's first novel, *Wise Blood*, attempts to draw converts to what he calls a Church without Christ. Throughout much of the novel, Motes imagines that Jesus is stalking him; try as he might, Motes cannot escape him. ID is similarly absurd: it seeks to argue, via empirical methods, that life has a supernatural origin and yet, at the same time, argue that we can't give a name to that origin. It denies a need to meet the basic premises of both reality and myth so as to even begin to talk about it in what we'd hope would be a meaningful way, and so ends up being a cartoon of both, a sequence of pleasing colors and amusing sounds . . . though "pleasing" and "amusing" are not adjectives I'd use in the case of this particular cartoon.

So what remains? No more movies--which means no more conveyance of myth. Discussions of reality's nature driven not by truth but by agenda. But there *is* the beautiful, ever-changing play of light and shadow on the land, the cycling of the seasons, the need to survive, the need to give and receive love. Myth, after all, doesn't deny the material nature of existence; indeed, its origin--its gene pool--lies in the things of this world.

I've talked your ear off long enough. Time to go chill with my homies.

"A(n over?) reading of about 2 seconds total of *Vertigo*"
(April 16, 2006)



First of all: a belated Happy Passover and Happy Easter to my readers. I hope your holidays were happy and safe and blessed.

Long-time readers of this blog know that I have a thing about *Vertigo*. It is such a strange film: the plot isn't terribly complicated, but as the mysterious Madeline tells us regarding her mystery, "There is no way to explain it." That's probably true, and I should be happy with that. But while I can't fully explain Madeline (or Scottie, either, for that matter), I can at least take a stab at describing and speculating about four quick shots in *Vertigo*, widely separated in time that would never be missed if they weren't in the film but nevertheless ARE there and thus must matter in this otherwise carefully-shot film.

Below the fold you'll find some tedious speculation about, of all things, shots of cushions and pillows in Hitchcock's masterpiece.

For a long time, I have wondered about that moment in Scottie's apartment, after he has brought Madeline home from her swan dive into the bay, when he invites her to sit by the fire. He picks up a couple of pillows and drops them on the floor, and we actually have a shot of the pillows landing on the carpet. Why show that? What purpose does that serve? It just never made sense to

me . . . until last week, when I was watching the film with one of my classes.

This time, my attention was drawn to the second big scene in the film, in Midge's apartment, where we get some lighthearted banter (and important exposition) between Midge and Scottie. At the climax of that scene, where Scottie tests his theory that he can overcome his vertigo by climbing a step-stool, the camera gives us a tight shot of his foot stepping on the cushions of the stool. "Ah-ha," I thought: stepping on the cushions will lead to an episode of Scottie's vertigo; inviting Madeline to sit on the pillows serves as a prelude to Scottie's ever-growing emotional vertigo where she is concerned. Cushions serve ironic functions in these scenes: they are meant to soften landings, but they signal coming landings that are anything but soft.

This casts a more meaningful light on a brief moment in Midge's apartment in the scene following Scottie's and Madeline's kiss along the shoreline. Midge has been painting a parody of *Portrait of Carlotta*, as we'll soon see; at any rate, when she hears Scottie approaching, she quickly hides her copy of the museum's guidebook . . . under a pillow on the top cushion of her step-stool. Madeline's apparent obsession with/possession by the ghost of Carlotta leads to Scottie's obsession with Madeline--and, as viewers know, Scottie's vertigo plays a crucial role in his pursuit of Madeline.

The final scene involving cushions and pillows takes place in Scottie's apartment again; this time, though, the visitor is Judy Barton, a young woman who bears a striking physical resemblance to the now-dead Madeline. Judy so wants Scottie to love her that she has just agreed to wear the same kinds of clothes Madeline used to wear and will even change her hair color to match Madeline's. Scottie invites her to sit by the fire with him, and he tosses a couple of pillows on the floor, just as he had done in the earlier scene with Madeline. In this scene, though, the camera doesn't show the pillows landing on the floor. That could be because, while that earlier scene was one that leads to Scottie becoming more and more enthralled by Madeline, in this scene the enthralling is complete--HE is possessed by the memory of Madeline and has just wooed Judy into playing that role for him.

Of course, these moments I've just described may just be coincidences, happy accidents; or, you're thinking, Hmm: a whole blog post on two seconds of film--now go get some sleep. Well, yes to both. But I think it's a measure of this film's attention to detail elsewhere that something like the shots of pillows and cushions have the potential to cause the viewer to ponder, to wonder.

“Richard Serra and the Irreproducible”
(January 31, 2010)

I

[UPDATE: The title for this post, I should have noted, has its origin in a comment by Jim: "Ok. Yes, Serra looks cool photographed. But I think there’s something very thought-out & challenging to how we — ok, I — tend to experience art these days in the way that he creates experiences that by virtue of their construction *cannot be reproduced*." [his italics]

Richard Serra, *The Matter of Time* (Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao). Image found here.

Follow the link just above, and you'll see that Jim Sligh of This Analog Life "scanned [this image] from a postcard a visiting friend bought for [him] in the giftshop." What you see is a copy of a scan of a photograph, itself reproduced who knows how many times and in how many places. If you read Jim's post, you'll see that he has linked to other, really good photos of Serra's work but in the same breath tells you that looking at pictures is "the dumbest way to experience Serra ever." He is right. This picture itself tells you this implicitly: "You *have* to be 'here' (which is really 'there')."

Well, I'm not. Bilbao is out of reach just now for various temporal and material reasons. But as I told Jim in a comment on his post, I keep returning to his post to keep looking at this picture, that I find it compelling in a way I find very little sculpture, of any sort (an idea I hadn't realized I thought, and one which caught me by surprise), and I keep trying to figure out why that is. This post is an attempt to do that.

It will probably fail; that's why the rest of it is below the fold.

As long-time readers of this blog know, I post fairly frequently on art, but the vast majority of those posts deal with paintings and drawings. They almost never mention sculpture, and then only in passing. I'd never really thought--at all--about why that is before a couple of days ago,

when I first saw the post on Serra at Jim's blog and said, Wait a minute . . .

I like sculpture well enough. When my Humanities students and I meet in Kansas City at the Nelson-Atkins, as we will again this May, I make it a point to show them the full-size bronze cast of Rodin's *The Thinker* on the south side of the museum. We walk around the plinth it sits on, looking up as we do (the top of the plinth is about head-height; the sculpture itself sits on that and is itself around 7' or so from its base to its highest point); we talk about things such as the figure's distended, gnarled toes and Rodin's attempt to make the bronze look as though it had been carved rather than poured. It's cool to see this famous sculpture. But that's about it, as far as my engagement with that or just about any other sculpture is concerned. I get the idea that sculpture's there-ness, its occupying of space, makes its viewer have to deal with it in some way, if only to avoid it or walk around it. But then that makes our interaction with sculpture sound like the piece is like one of those people we have to interact with out of politeness--if we must. Which is to say, there's no genuine interaction except at the level of What's Expected of Us. It remains in its space, posing no ultimate challenge to mine. Even pieces as undeniably beautiful as Michelangelo's *Pieta* or Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Teresa*, if this make sense, confront me without moving me. Or, put another way: Even though I very much enjoy looking at them, I don't feel the need to *keep* looking at them. Paintings, on the other hand, I will return to again and again, the Nelson's Rembrandt, for example: they don't engage my physical space, but they engage my imagination as very few sculptures do.

There are exceptions, of course. I've never seen Rodin's *Burghers of Calais* (scroll to the bottom of the page for a brief discussion of the sculpture) in person, but I get the feeling that I would want to walk around and around it and want to come back to it again. The reason: It photographs terribly. It has no "good side," which is to say that no one side presents itself to the viewer as *the* side to be seen. It--that is, the experience of seeing it in person--is irreproducible because it is so designed that it requires us to move around it. (*The Thinker*, by comparison, is a depiction of a very large naked guy sitting on a rock. He is shown in three dimensions and so has a back side to him, but that back side is, of course, the least interesting of his sides. So, take a picture of him from the front or in profile and, apart from its massiveness and the subtleties of texture you've reproduced a surprising amount of the reason to see it. This is not meant to be dismissive of a justly-famous sculpture; it's simply

so.)

Though I've not seen the *Burghers* in person, I have seen a sculpture that I think owes much to Rodin's work, the sculpted soldiers at the Korean War Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. This one photographs poorly as well, but I can attest that seeing it in person is a very moving experience. You can't actually walk among the sculptures, but you can get so close to them that their size (each figure is well over 7' tall) creates the sense that you are. Moreover, their very different expressions and attitudes give the space a sense of tension and urgency that very few war memorials do that I've ever visited. These men are not on parade but on patrol. *We* are in *their* way.

Is the nearby Vietnam Memorial also sculptural in its treatment and shaping of the space the visitor occupies? The way that the visitor begins at ground level, the wall of names just a few inches tall; then, as the years progress and the wall of names gets taller, taller as the path gradually declines, till the visitor reaches the angle and the wall--one's reflection and the names on it--is all one can see? I had of course seen pictures of the Memorial and pictures of people weeping at it. I assumed that those people were grieving friends and family they had lost; I assumed that I would not be so moved if I ever visited it. And then I visited it. I lost no family or friends in that war; I was a child then, even now vividly recalling the nightly reports of dead and injured but otherwise unmoved by the war; yet that day I visited, the only thing I could think as I reached that place was, I am in a tomb. How can one not keep from getting teary-eyed there? I would like to know the secret, because I find myself really reluctant to visit it again, even though I want to.

It's an emotionally-dangerous space.

Also in Washington is a space made to feel physically-dangerous by a sculpture: the atrium of the East Wing of the National Gallery of Art, over which hangs Alexander Calder's enormous *Mobile #3*. The first time I saw it, I was standing in a queue to be admitted to a big Art Nouveau exhibit in that wing; since the queue was a couple hundred people long, I had a nice long time to contemplate Calder's work. It *looks* light and delicate . . . and then you look more closely at the shaft and hook from which it hangs--it looks like something from a construction site--and it suddenly loses a lot of its gossamer-like quality. But not all of it, of course. It's beautiful to look at, in the same way that an airplane in flight is beautiful to look at. But the physics of each, the forces required to keep each in the air, are very real, very much *also* part of what we're looking at--indeed, those forces are required to be present so that these things keep on being beautiful. And *that* makes us more attentive to our space, our place in that space.

This is also Serra's territory as a sculptor: the creating of a silent dialogue among the viewer, his materials and the forms they take, and not the defiance of physics (the way so much constructed metal sculpture can feel) but the implicit reminder to the viewer who moves among these pieces, via the fact that they don't come toppling on him, that despite the way things seem in the world, here the very oldest laws of the world are at work. By way of illustrating, here are two short passages on Serra's work that I want to put in proximity with each other:

> At the dawn of the 21st century, an era of cyberspace, reproduction and the

> Internet, no one is doing more to make work that stands for the ancient and mysterious power of the real. --from a *Time* review of a documentary on the making of *Matter of Time*, found here via Jim's post.
>
> "[T]he main character of Serra's work [is] its scariness. You are never allowed to forget the weight of Serra's metal. The possibility of being crushed by it is part of its sculptural effect. It addresses the body through anxiety, and this is a thoroughly legitimate though long-repressed function of sculpture at its most archaic level." --Robert Hughes, *American Visions: The Epic History of Art in America*, p. 568

It is hard to articulate all this because you can't reproduce via pictures, and barely through words, what's at work here. I suppose that that's the reason I find myself returning to the picture at the top of this post--it is like reading a poem whose meaning eludes one (Wallace Stevens says in his poem "Man Carrying Thing" that "the poem must resist intelligence/Almost successfully"). The sculptor made these forms, yes; but they signify something other than themselves. Or, more accurately, they can fully signify only with our physical, irreproducible presence there.

I don't mean to imply a religious or spiritual significance for these pieces, but I keep returning in my mind to Stonehenge and other monumental ancient solar calendars as a way to begin thinking about Serra's work. Without human agency, the movements of the sun and moon and stars would have no transcendant meaning. Those movements would be no less real, but they would not signify what the ancients said they signified. Serra doesn't build sun calendars; but, like the sun, his works obey the laws of physics even as they push those laws very, very hard. As the shapes of his pieces compel the viewer to move around and into them, their sides leaning this way and that and their tops opening wide or converging, light and sound changing as the viewer moves about, those laws become more present in our experience: they alter so as to be noticed, and the viewer changes as well. Something even more primitive than "ancient" occurs--indeed, you can't get any more ancient, or irreproducible, than "real."

II: The aesthetics of fear
(June 13, 2010)

 **Richard Serra's *Torqued Ellipse IV* (1998), MOMA Sculpture Garden, New York, taken by Alexandra P. Spaulding. I like this picture because the viewer gets some sense of the scale Serra works on, as well as the weight of those sheets of steel (note the thickness of the edge). Here, by the way, is a shot that places this sculpture in its spatial context.**

(My initial post on Serra is here.)

In no particular order, what follows are some bits and pieces that, with a little teasing out and squinting just so, might help push some ideas in that January post a little bit closer to, at least, field goal range.

**From John Berger's "A White Bird," which I discussed here back in February:
Art does not imitate nature, it imitates a creation, something to propose an alternative world, sometimes simply to amplify, to confirm, to make social the brief hope offered by nature. Art is an organized response to what nature allows us to glimpse occasionally. Art sets out to transform the potential recognition into an unceasing one. It proclaims man in the hope of receiving a surer reply . . . the transcendental face of art is always a form of prayer.

**In a comment on the first Serra post, Jim of This Analog Life noted that Serra's work summons adjectives like "monumental" and "memorial"-- and then asked, what's being memorialized?

**Somewhere, I read that Serra had once said that Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* is "pictorial."

**Serra again, this time referring to the site-specific nature of his own work: "If you move it, you destroy it."

**Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature": "Why should we not also enjoy an original relation with the universe? . . . . Enbosomed for a season in nature, whose floods of life stream around and through us, and invite us by the powers they supply, to action proportioned to nature, why should we grope around the dry bones of the past, or put the living generation into masquerade out of its faded wardrobe? The sun shines to-day also."

**Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction":
"Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in

time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be. This unique existence of the work of art determined the history to which it was subject throughout the time of its existence. This includes the changes which it may have suffered in physical condition over the years as well as the various changes in its ownership. (*Illuminations* 210)

In the comments for that first Serra post, I (half-)jokingly said my next post on this subject would contain "contributions from Emerson and *This Is Spinal Tap*." This is because I got to thinking of a place like Stonehenge within the context of the ideas of monuments and irreproducibility, and how the notion of irreproducibility would seem somehow to run counter to the idea of art as something that *is* reproducible--though not (as Benjamin argues and this scene illustrates) without some sort of loss. So, the gathering of the above bits is an attempt to ground that remark.

I know that Benjamin does not have Stonehenge in mind in his essay, but I think that it serves as a pretty expansive example of what he's addressing in the passage above. Stonehenge (I'm referring here to the site as originally built, not its current state) is not merely the stones but their placement--and not just in relation to the other stones but precisely where each stone is placed--and, moreover, on *that* hill, and not some other, neighboring hill. Stonehenge's physical location is included in the work called Stonehenge. But, given one of Stonehenge's apparent functions as an observatory built to mark and celebrate the beginnings of the seasons, it is not about itself alone, nor is it mimetic, a gesture in the direction of some other, immediately-recognizable object. Rather, it's a space in which we're asked to take seriously our relation to the cosmos in the moment in which we find ourselves at that place, not later at the pub or while we're posting pics of the place on Facebook. If Stonehenge is having its proper effect on us, we shouldn't be looking only at it. Otherwise, we're not seeing it.

I hope I'm not bastardizing Berger's meaning too much when I say this: Stonehenge is, like art more generally, "an organized response to what nature allows us to glimpse occasionally"--in Stonehenge's particular case, finding comfort and meaning in the ability to see beyond the Here and Now of our particular moment and be able to see rhythms and patterns in the sky beyond the sun's daily reappearance or, even, its yearly appearances in certain parts of the sky but be able to say, with as much certainty as possible, This will *always* be. Hence Stonehenge's irreproducibility: Stonehenge is not merely an arrangement of objects but an invitation that it can't extend except via our physical presence there to ponder an implicit metaphysical claim about the most essential questions of human existence. You have to be there.

[Aside: I wonder how a work like Walter De Maria's *The Lightning Field* fits into this discussion, especially given that its curators state that, despite its name, "A full experience of *The Lightning Field* does not depend upon the occurrence of lightning[.]" Whereas Stonehenge's existence and design are predicated upon the predictability (and affirmation of the importance) of a natural phenomenon, *The Lightning Field*'s purpose is more like an invitation to consider and be open to nature's arbitrariness. Maybe. I have to think about this more, and elsewhere.]

I'm getting to Serra. Really.

The vast majority of art--even overtly-religious art--no longer extends such invitations to its

viewers, nor has it for a really long time. (Maybe that's always been the case?) (This is true, these days, even of entire buildings built for expressly religious purposes: all one has to do is consider the office building-like quality of so many contemporary churches to see that this is so.) It engages us intellectually and perhaps even emotionally but not at the level of physical sensation, the idea that we're in its space and we must address *its* contribution to the intellectual and emotional dialogue between us and it as we look at it. This isn't due to the devaluing of the original in our age of mechanical reproduction but, rather, that its makers, for whatever reason, simply aren't interested in doing so. Or maybe I'm wrong about that (and I'd like to be) but that it's the rare piece of art that can make us forget we're seeing it in a museum or gallery or a classroom--that is, in an artificial space. To be sure, I have that flatness of experience far more often with sculpture than with paintings, as I noted in the first Serra post--paradoxically, most sculpture to me feels so self-contained, so much, ultimately, about itself, that despite its three-dimensional quality my chief preoccupation is how to get around the piece without bumping into it or other people. Again, I'm speaking for myself. Whatever the case, that flatness of response is a sad thing. I don't want to move around art. I want it to move me.

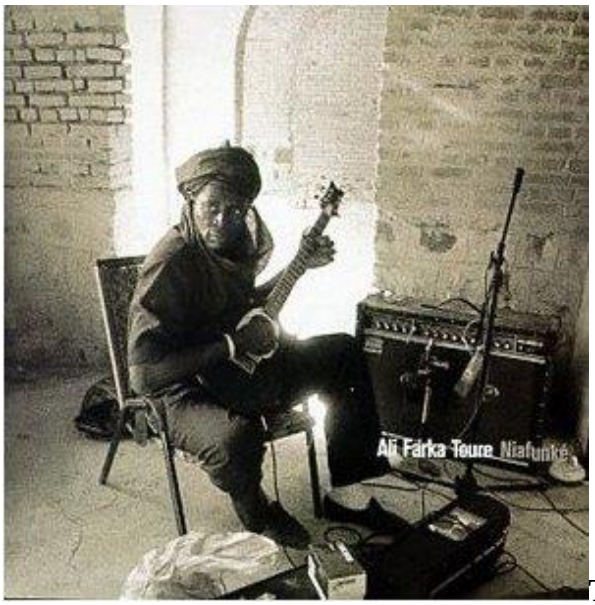
Perhaps, just perhaps, the monumental and memorializing quality of Serra's work arises from his attempt to hearken back recreate something of that "you have to be there" feeling in the audience, the feeling of tension one feels in the presence of genuinely great art that one can sense even when looking at pictures of it but which can't be fully replicated via pictures. But Serra's audience is far different from that of the builders and keepers of Stonehenge. Most of the self-identifying devout among us are thoroughly secularized, even in our religious lives; we have difficulty, I suspect, in fully grasping that structures designed for religious ceremony, not so long ago, were explicitly designed to elicit and shape a response in the visitor . . . and, in the case of ancient sites of worship such as Stonehenge, those structures likewise are constructed in accordance with natural phenomena that its builders wanted to draw attention to and offer implicit comment on. But. God may have created the cosmos, but Western religious expression is not predicated on seeing Him made manifest in its rhythms and patterns. How, then, to create a palpable emotional tension, verging on the physical, between the work and the viewer that can lead to a response verging on at least the existential, if not the spiritual?

Well, just look at Serra's pieces: You build something that looks like it might kill you if you get too close to it or if the wind blows--or, hey, if the earth moves--even as its very design requires that you get close to it. Judging from Jim's experiences with *The Matter of Time* at the Guggenheim in Bilbao, the fact that these pieces are in galleries and thus (we assume/hope) are deemed safe to be around doesn't mean that we *believe* that, no matter whether we *know* it (at the intellectual level). As Robert Hughes says of Serra's work, "It addresses the body through anxiety, and this is a thoroughly legitimate though long-repressed function of sculpture at its most archaic level." Serra's forms may be non-representational in the traditional sense of that term, but in another sense they evoke apprehension, if not fear . . . and not as abstraction but as an all-too-present, *felt* experience. Indeed, maybe part of Serra's point as well is that fear *should be* more present in our lives than it in fact is. And how can that idea be reproduced except by being in the presence of something that causes the viewer not just to muse on that idea but to genuinely feel it?

Serra's work is thus both contemporary in its forms and ancient in its concerns. But--assuming all

this I've been speculating on here is even remotely true--is there in Serra's work also an accompanying catharsis of that fear? Not having seen any Serras in person, I can't say; I hope that someone will be able to speak to that question.

"*Niafunké*: An appreciation"
(July 27, 2010)



The cover for *Niafunké*.

I haven't posted on music on this blog in some time. However, I recently wrote a review for this album over at Amazon, and I thought I'd share it with my reader(s) here.

Let's be honest: Records that give pleasure to the listener are, relatively speaking, a dime a dozen. We hear them on the oldies stations; our collections are filled with such music. Far rarer is music for which the listener feels genuine, profound gratitude to its maker for having made it and for his/her own great, good fortune for having heard of it before s/he died. *Niafunké* is most definitely on my list of such music.

I don't believe I had even heard of Ali Farka Touré before a friend played *Niafunké* for me almost ten years ago. A couple of songs in, and I actually felt something like shame that I had not known about this man and his music long before: it was--and is--that good, that gripping and compelling.

The first four songs give the listener an idea of this album's musical range: "Ali's Here," a rave-up that prepared me, without knowing it, for Tinariwen; "Allah Uya," a song whose melody and rhythm, despite its religious subject matter, can't help but evoke slow movement across the desert and which, I'd learn much later, borrows a little guitar lick from *Red & Green*'s "Timbindy"; "Mali Dje," a slow-tempo plea to Touré's nation's peoples to work together for their common survival (and thus an indirect introduction to Mali's history of inter-ethnic (and sometimes intra-ethnic) violence); and "Saukare," my introduction to the *njarka*, the Malian violin--a screechy-sounding instrument that is, admittedly, an acquired taste (it has grown on me,

but I admit it took a while). These songs also serve as a partial introduction to Malian music more generally; all that's missing is southern Mali's Nigerian- and Senegalese-influenced music (as embodied by Habib Koité and Oumou Sangare), a kora piece (the kora is the Malian harp) by Toumani Diabaté, and something from *Sya*, Issa Babayogo's masterful melding of traditional instruments and musical forms with Western techno.

But for me the real revelation on *Niafunké* is "Howkouna," a song whose melody feels, to this Western listener anyway, as though it's beginning in the middle of a line (*Savane*'s "Erdi Yer Bounda" has that same quality); then the *njarka*'s repeated riff kicks in; and then that extraordinary second part of the song where the sung melody line just goes and goes past the point that it feels like it "should" stop, slowly down the scale, occasionally turning back up the scale before heading back down again, like water seeking out a downhill route. You know it's structured because the chorus knows the words and will sing them back, call-response style, but it feels, if not improvised, then certainly organic. Even today, after many subsequent listens, that second part still catches me anticipating its end and being surprised when it keeps going.

There are also the circumstances of this record's being made that enhance its aura for me: Touré had not recorded in five years and was disappointed in his more recent records; he rarely performed; he had devoted himself to improving the lives of his fellow citizens of Niafunké by becoming its mayor and purchasing irrigation equipment for its farmers. The basic tracks were recorded in an abandoned mud building on the outskirts of town, after Touré was done tending his fields for the day. It's clear that Touré wanted to make this record; it's equally clear, though, that there were other things to do while he made it, more pressing than guitar-playing . . . and who would argue that? And yet: Look at what resulted--a record whose subjects are those other, more pressing things, along with the urgency of embracing them. This is political and spiritual music in the most essential senses of those terms--which is to say, it is communal.

Of course, when I first listened to *Niafunké*, I was just as ignorant of the Malian artists named above; it is because of *Niafunké* that I know what I do of them, and that is the other reason I am so grateful for this record. I wanted to hear more, so I looked for samplers; the same friend who introduced me to *Niafunké* also played me Issa Bagayogo's *Sya*; one thing led to another, as these things do, and now I have some inkling of Mali's (and by extension, western Africa's) musical richness. Before hearing *Niafunké*, that richness was one of those examples of things that we don't know that we don't know (which, of course, we can recognize only in retrospect); after hearing *Niafunké*, I had to remind myself that ignorance is not a sin (except when it's willful) but, as I noted above, I couldn't help feeling a bit ashamed for not having head it before.

Can you tell I like this album? I like lots of music, and lots of different kinds of music; there are few records, though, that I will recommend without reservation to anyone with a varied musical palette, or willing to cultivate one . . . or even to the not-so-willing. You've often heard it said that *Kind of Blue* is that album you recommend to someone who says he hates jazz. For me, *Niafunké* is the *Kind of Blue* of Malian music.

"*The Fallen Idol* as antidote to the Cute Kid film"
(March 29, 2009)

 **A typical, visually-complex scene from *The Fallen Idol*; our hero, Baines (Ralph Richardson, at the foot of the stairs looking in our direction) nervously awaits the revelation of the contents of the telegram in the police detective's hand--which he already knows will reveal him to have been lying to the detectives about his wife's whereabouts. Yeah--the plot's kinda complicated, too. Image originally found here.**

The Fallen Idol (1948; dir. Carol Reed. Starring Ralph Richardson, Bobby Henrey, Michèle Morgan, Sonia Dresdel, Denis O'Dea, Jack Hawkins)

(Disclaimer: some of what follows is inspired by "Through a Child's Eyes, Darkly," Geoffrey O'Brien's essay for The Criterion Collection's edition of the film. As is usually the case, I have my colleague Larry the Movie Guy to thank for lending this to me.)

A quick synopsis right off the bat might be helpful: The film is set mostly in the amazingly-large embassy and residence of a French-speaking ambassador to Great Britain in the years just after WWII and concerns Baines (Richardson), the head servant, who has become emotionally estranged from his wife (Dresdel) and, at the same time, romantically involved with Julie (Morgan), a secretary in the embassy. Mrs. Baines (we never learn her first name, just as we never learn her husband's name) suspicions Baines' interest in another woman (she doesn't yet know it's Julie) and pretends to leave the city to visit a relative; she even sends the above-mentioned telegram to announce her safe arrival there. Instead, she hides in the house in hopes of catching Baines with the other woman. In an attempt to peer into the room where she suspects Julie is hiding, Mrs. Baines climbs onto and slips from a ledge above the house's receiving hall and is killed instantly. Baines is suspected of being directly responsible for her death; it does not help things that he has not been honest about his relationship with either Mrs. Baines or Julie.

I have so far left out of this telling what makes this film so powerful and very much worth your time to seek out. It is the same thing which makes the still "typical": its perspective. In this particular shot, the camera is in the position of the character through whose perspective almost the entire film is shot--and who is responsible for the telegram's reappearance: a young boy named Phillipe (or Phile for short), played by Bobby Henrey, who literally had no prior acting experience before doing this film yet gives one of the best child-actor performances you're ever likely to see. Phile is the ambassador's son; because of his parents' long absences from the residence, he has come to adore Baines but, because he arrives on the scene immediately after Mrs. Baines' fall, suspects Baines of having murdered her, runs away from home, is found by the police and taken back home, and lies to the detectives investigating Mrs. Baines' death in order to try to protect him. We know the truth of the matter, but because we do the dramatic tension arises from not knowing whether Phile's lies (because he is such a bad liar) may actually lead to Baines's arrest and conviction. Though Phile doesn't know the particulars of the accident, he knows other things that, on their own, would be exculpatory if he were simply to tell the truth about them. But the adults in his life have taught him well, through both direct encouragement and example: reticence and the keeping of secrets are a kind of currency in this world, and through including him in these exchanges, Phile gains privileges from adults but also an implicit power over them: Phile most often observes others from above, from inner and outer balconies; still another way in which the image above, being from Phile's perspective on the stairwell, is typical is that it locates Phile as the highest-located person in the scene, suggesting that he, through the knowledge he possesses, is, just now, the most powerful person in the scene.

This sounds like a recipe for Phile's becoming the Child-as-Tormenter, and a lesser film might indeed have headed in that direction. But just as Phile only partly comprehends why the adults are behaving as they do, neither does he entirely understand, much less apply, the power he has over them. He doesn't want anyone to be hurt, especially through his own doing--not even Mrs. Baines, even though he makes it clear that he doesn't like her. But neither is Phile always Cute; instead, as O'Brien writes in his piece, he (and Henrey, who plays him) "is somehow just a kid." What follows is worth quoting at length:

> No actor, he has all the genuine awkwardness and inappropriateness of childhood: he talks too loud and at the wrong moment; he inserts himself in places where he shouldn't be; he fails to take hints and winces when he begins to to get a sense of what he has been failing to understand. . . . What saves his performance-that-isn't-a-performance from being as irritating to the audience as it is at times to the characters in the film is . . . [that the] whole cinematic apparatus is enlisted to convey what Phile sees and what spaces he moves through, in the process creating as close an impression of a child's perception as any film has managed. ("Through a Child's Eyes, Darkly" 7)

The Fallen Idol, in other words, is not the usual sort of film featuring a child as its center. Some further words about Cute-Kid films as adult wish-fulfillment are below the fold.

Ever since at least Shirley Temple, movie-goers have been treated, for good or ill, to the spectacle of the "Cute" Kid-as-Protagonist. "Cute," of course, is a relative judgment, hence the quotation marks. But while such films are very common, a quick survey of my memory of the ones I've seen tells me that what is considerably less common are films whose point of view is actually that of the Cute Kid. That is, in the vast majority of Cute Kid films, the Kid charms the

adults and us in the audience, but there's the nagging feeling that all we really know about the Cute Kid is that s/he is, well, cute. S/He is thus oddly disengaged from his/her surroundings; if anyone in such films experiences some sort of emotional change or growth, it's the adults: the Cute Kid's cuteness, by contrast, is redemptive for the grown-ups in his/her life: it becomes a weird sort of wisdom as the adults, by the film's end, learn how to play nice with each other by virtue of having been charmed by the Cute Kid.

Well, hogwash. Without going into particulars here, and not that I claim my childhood was in any way typical (though my childhood was far from a tormented one), I can remember many an occasion when, my considerable cuteness notwithstanding, the adults in my life, after having been around me, didn't shape up like they do in the movies--and, I daresay, that's pretty typical of most of your memories of childhood as well, no matter how happy yours may have been. Cute Kid films, some short, honest musing on our childhood reveals, are more about adults' fantasies that maybe kids could save us from our baser tendencies, seeing as grown-ups can't quite seem to manage the job. It's the far rarer film that shows its audience the world of adults from the Cute Kid's perspective: as a world filled with, yes, occasional, happy indulgence of the Kid in combination with half-truths and outright lies told to to the Kid . . . and, indeed, sometimes those indulgences end up serving not the Kid's desires alone but help facilitate the above-mentioned half-truths and outright lies. Meanwhile, once the Cute Kid (and we) reach the end of the narrative, no one is sitting down with the Kid and explaining, "You see, it's like this . . . " Even though we grownups can figure out pretty easily what the adults in the film are up to and why, there still remains the palpable sense of mystery, as though there's *still* something that escapes our comprehension--and that's because the film's point of view is that of the Cute Kid, who, due to his dim comprehension of what's transpired, can't be the sort of guide through this world that can complete our understanding of it. Such films reveal the uncomfortable truth of childhood that children, heavily dependent on adults for nurturing and protection, must learn to deal with their growing realization that adults are not dependent on them for anything at all--that kids have no choice but to rely on grownups, but adults--yes, even parents--are free to choose (or not) to acquiesce to satisfy that reliance. Kids are lucky--and luckier than they know--when grown-ups make that choice.

Though I'm sure there are others, *The Fallen Idol* is the only film I know of that is this rarer sort of Cute Kid film. Literature is a bit more honest in this regard, though only relatively so: think in particular of the long tradition in English literature of the emotionally-neglected-children-in-boarding-school genre. American literature is more interested in depicting idealized versions of childhood, though our best-known Cute-Kid novel, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, has plenty of darkness between the glib lines and so is a glorious exception to that tendency. Perhaps the single best example I know, though, is Faulkner's short story, "That Evening Sun," a story told from the point of view of the very young Quentin Compson (of *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*) whose tension, by its end, you can cut with a knife--part of that tension resulting from the story's refusal to assure us that someone *won't* be cut with a knife in the very near future. If you haven't yet, read it. And do try to see *The Fallen Idol*, too.

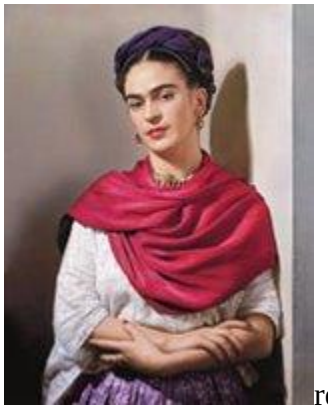
"Photographs of Frida Kahlo by Nickolas Muray"
(December 14, 2008)

Nickolas Muray, *Frida painting The Two Fridas, Coyoacán* (1939). Photograph. Click to enlarge. Image found here.

It is most appropriate that a print of this photograph is part of the exhibit of photos of Kahlo currently mounted at the WAM: Current visitors will be treated to a diversity of exhibits that, given the museum's fairly small space, feels almost schizophrenic. Soon to end (but this was my first time to see it) is a collection of images in various media chosen to accompany selected passages from Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, Wichita's "Big Read" selection for this year. There's what amounts to a retrospective exhibit of works in various media by Wichita artist Nicholas Trabue, though the exhibit's chief focus is on works in the style you can see here: a "juxtaposition of . . . organic nudes with sacred geometry [that] alludes to an evocative relationship between the two." And there are two exhibits that were my reason for going yesterday: a large collection of contemporary, hand-woven textiles that show off a dazzling range of traditional designs and palettes, collected in southern Mexico and Guatemala by Jerry Martin, director of the museum of anthropology at Wichita State; and the portraits of Frida Kahlo (both alone and, on occasion, with other people) taken by Nickolas Muray (the accompanying text (not exactly a catalogue) is *I Will Never Forget You: Frida Kahlo and Nickolas Muray*).

It is a strange experience, seeing these photographs. As anyone who has spent any time looking at Kahlo's work knows, she herself was the subject (or, as *The Two Fridas* makes clear, subjects) of most of her paintings, and these portraits by Muray, a well-respected photographer in his own right (here is the (brief) Wikipedia article), make no effort to break the frame, as it were, of the

symbiotic relationship between Kahlo's paintings and the woman who painted them. There are no pictures here of, say, Kahlo scrubbing floors or going shopping; one does show her wearing pants, though. It was Muray's goal to make photographs of Kahlo that in their own way evoked the paintings and, in my untrained opinion, he succeeded. In fact, one could effectively retitle the picture above as *The Three Fridas*--and for more reasons than the immediately obvious.



As it turns out, Muray, who is responsible for this, the most-reproduced photograph of Kahlo (this image and the one below found here), was also one of Kahlo's lovers. Their affair began about the time that she and Diego Rivera divorced and lasted for ten more years, when it became painfully clear to Muray that, though Kahlo loved him she would not marry him and, moreover, was indeed serious about reconciling with Rivera. Once the viewer of *Frida painting The Two Fridas* knows this and also knows that Kahlo made the painting as a way of expressing her emotions after divorcing Rivera, this photograph becomes exceedingly complex: Frida, at once maker and model, lover and beloved, becomes the subject in/of two media, her attention turned toward Muray in his dual roles as both photographer and lover and, at the same time, toward the making of the painting and the invisible subject that prompted its making. It is a little like Velásquez's *Las Meninas* turned inside-out.

This may be an overreading of these pictures, but it does seem at times as though

Muray (seen here with Kahlo in this 1939 picture) wanted to make pictures that didn't just serve as evocations of the paintings but as extensions of them--that, moreover, included him (or, more precisely, their love for each other) as their implicit subject. What it must have cost Muray, then, to take that picture (which I can't seem to find online) of Kahlo genuinely, warmly embracing and kissing Rivera. [Aside: I don't know enough about Kahlo to know whether Muray was ever the subject of her work, but she did send him a print (included in the exhibit) of her painting *What the Water Gave Me* as, according to the

accompanying card, a warning to him of the complex of experiences and emotions she contained within herself.]

It is neither disrespect nor disappointment to say of this exhibit that I learned more about Muray than I did about Kahlo. Indeed, this was my introduction to Muray (fun fact: he was one of the first prominent American photographers to begin working seriously with color photography in the late '30s; not quite half the pictures in the exhibit are in color). I wasn't sure what to expect; I had assumed there would be some pictures that were less portrait-like, and I sure hadn't expected to learn that Muray and Kahlo were lovers and the dimension that fact adds to the experience of looking at these pictures. One could say by way of response, Well, Kahlo made her life the subject of her paintings--just look at them. True. But that, too, was a choice. She looked into a mirror when she painted her self-portraits; but even if she could not control what the mirror gave back to her, she still had complete control over what she said she saw--and, thus, what appeared on the canvas. It was *that* woman, the woman behind the projected persona, I thought I might see a glimpse or two of. I guess for that, the next time I go to Mexico City I will have to go here.

I am sorry to say that I can find no decent pictures of the exhibited textiles online; and in any case, these pieces are better seen in person: their textures add immensely to the experience of seeing them, as does the bewildering variety of patterns produced by these diverse indigenous populations living within a relatively small geographic space. Go and see.

“The Metaphysics of the Clothes Care Center”
(May 30, 2006)

I: Reading the sign

Neither of us Meridians especially enjoys doing the laundry, but I dislike it less than she does. So, once a week, give or take (I usually give), I spend a couple of hours in our apartment complex's Clothes Care Center. We've lived here about 9 months, but it was only yesterday, after (finally) finishing *The Mezzanine* and with some time to kill before the dryers stopped, that I looked around at the space of the Center itself, to see what I could see.

As is usually the case when I innocently think of something with which to kill "some" time, all this you're about to read (assuming you dare click) started with the name itself.

The phrase "Clothes Care Center" is emblazoned on a pale green sign by the pool-side entrance to the Center (more about the Center's topography in Part II), a line drawing of a wire clothes hanger helpfully appearing just above the words themselves as if to reduce if not eliminate confusion as to the Center's purpose. As best I recall, no such sign appears by the Center's other entrance, which gives onto the complex's main parking lot. The fact that the sign appears/doesn't appear where it does is itself, I'm just now realizing, worthy of a separate post, and it will certainly receive closer attention in Part II. But let that go for the moment, because it is because of the sign that you have this post to read in the first place.

"Clothes Care Center." Such an odd phrase, I thought. Not "Laundromat," not "Washateria," not "Laundry Room." "Laundry" and "wash" connote chores, drudgery; however, since each and every apartment complex markets itself as a Place to Get Away from It All, it simply will not do for this complex to name its laundry facility something not in keeping with the teleology of Sanctuary. Thus, "care," with its connotations of fastidious, even affectionate attention to something rather than labor. Indeed, the phrase carries with it the strong sense that someone else will be doing the Clothes Caring, doesn't it? Alas: that hanger on the sign that I spoke of is empty. It is a void waiting to be filled . . . and a quick glance around will show all present to be filling their own respective voids.

As I pondered the sign further, it occurred to me that it could be read as containing in it a subtextual rebuke to some of the Center's visitants. Consider: some of the complex's residents appear to be the sort of people who think of doing laundry not as a necessary evil but as Evil, period, and appear to be so disgusted with the task that they are, shall we say, a bit cavalier with their laundry in their zeal to just get it the hell over with. White clothes with darks, washing darks in hot, etc., etc. Might we not imagine, then, someone pointing out such a faux pas to another, who then responds,

"Who cares, man?"

The first one leads him over to the sign. Compels him to look.

"Du-u-ude. *Clothes* care. They care *here*.

* * * *

Well, perhaps. But for all the sweetness of that image, we must, here and now, mention an unpleasant fact, made more unpleasant by our eventual need to return to this unpleasantness once we have established certain facts and engaged in certain speculations as to the Center's nature and meaning. However much the name "Clothes Care Center" may evoke images of soft lighting caressing mauve walls, clientele who seem to glide by as they pass, and hushed, perhaps even hidden-from-view washers and dryers, there is no ignoring the strong impression that, while the Center Cares for your Clothes, no one seems to be Caring much about the Center. It is the unweeded garden of laundromats, possessed merely by such rank and gross things as laundromats are wont to be possessed merely by. Its one aesthetic virtue is that I have yet to see rats or mice there.

You may be scoffing at my *Hamlet* borrowing above for describing a laundry room. But believe me when I tell you that once I moved from considering the sign to considering the room the sign indicates, I saw that the Clothes Care Center's design practically screams to the visitant: Come here to contemplate the mystery of the Cycle.

All you have to do is open your eyes.

II: In the world? Of the world?

At the end of Part I, I implied that I would begin this post by describing the internal arrangement of the Clothes Care Center and THEN describing the neglect it has suffered, along with some speculation as to why that has occurred. But I think it better today to begin the other way around. For that is, after all, the way I myself, an initial unbeliever in--nay, truly one not even cognizant of--the Center's underlying symbology first, and for a long time, thought of the Center: as a ruins devoid and unworthy of any attention deeper than the thickness of the dryer sheets that litter its floor.

I think that the neglect of the Clothes Care Center has its origins in two places: a) the fate that also usually befalls the sanctuaries of state religions; b) the outer asymmetry of the Center itself. a) is easy enough to understand: except among those fervent believers in Clothes Care, the complex-decided necessity of having such a place and subsequent tendency on the part of most of us to take for granted such places leads inevitably to a general slovenliness of attention even to maintenance matters. b), though, deserves some closer attention, not only because, as I will show in my next post, that asymmetry contrasts with the Center's inner symmetry, but also because the resulting friction or tension or what have you is akin to Paul's "stumbling block": to

fully appreciate the Center, we have to acknowledge that it requires certain things of us that mean the putting aside of certain other things.

In Part I, I mentioned that the sign "Clothes Care Center" appears by the poolside entrance to the Center but not by the parking lot entrance. Subsequent research shows that not to be true; it simply happens that more often than not, the door to that entrance is propped open (owing to the Center's oppressive heat from the dryers), thus all but hiding the sign from view. Nevertheless, one crucial asymmetry remains: the wall that limns the parking lot side of the Center is solid, with no windows other than one by the door, which itself is a dark-tinted glass. The poolside wall, though, is a floor-to-ceiling window that, though also tinted, easily reveals the interior of the Center to the pool's users.

And here we come to the friction/tension earlier noted: I also mentioned in Part I that, due to "the teleology of Sanctuary" that my and every other apartment complex I have ever heard of has adopted, the Center is named what it is named, as opposed to something like "Laundry Room," which unpleasantly evokes images of labor. Hence, I suppose, the opaque parking-lot wall. Who wants to see, upon arriving from a grueling day at the desk or at Hooters, yet another reminder of the work that no doubt awaits them at home, gathering in the closet hamper? But consider the even more confrontational GLASS wall on the Center's pool side. Surely the pool, as THE physical embodiment of the rhetoric of Leisure at my and at any apartment complex, exists in utter and irresolvable conflict with the Center, whose rhetoric, despite its afore-parsed pretty name, is that of Work. The tension, the reciprocal resentment of the visitants of both spaces, is palpable despite--precisely because of--the glass barrier defining the two spaces.

But in this the designer of the Center is to be applauded rather than wondered at. S/he has chosen not to hide the Center under an architectural bushel but to have it actively engage the world beyond it--and, most tellingly, at that part of the world most opposite it. It is the embodiment of the concept of the Clothes Care Center-militant. But it also reminds those inside the Center that all is not work, that equally important to the whole person is rest and leisure.

Our living in/engagement with the world, like a washer, can get off balance. That glass wall, an architectural asymmetry with regard to the walls of the Center, paradoxically serves to remind us of the need for balance via its permitting the pool's visitants to see into the Center and vice versa. Of course, we sometimes don't like or resent being reminded of that need--hence the neglect I spoke of earlier.

Next time: how a change of perspective revealed to me that the Center is a veritable Nazca Plains of line and symmetry . . . and a space for pondering the Mystery of the Cycle.

III: Time’s topography

The routine of Clothes Care would seem to suggest that a laundry room's layout would most likely be some iteration of the ancient notion of the Eternal Return, and in a small way, which I'll come to later, that is the case with the Center. But I will be arguing here that its layout, even the very nature of its machines, serves as a mute but profound meditation not just on Time but how

we invest in and spend it.

The Clothes Care Center is a single rectangular room measuring approximately 20' wide and 50' long. It has two entrances, as mentioned before, one at either of its narrow ends.

The first time one enters the Center, all appears chaotic: the rows of washers appear haphazardly arranged, contrasting with all the stacked-unit dryers built into one of the long walls. But the two enormous folding tables, placed back to back and dividing the room width-wise into two equal halves, serve to orient the disoriented. Standing by the tables, one instantly sees that the two rows of washers, far from being arbitrarily placed, are in fact at 45° angles relative to the walls; moreover, they are oriented so that the ends nearer the dryers incline toward the dryer-end of the folding tables. Thus, the placement of the washers and the tables suggest an arrow . . . pointing at the dryers!

~~And that reflection in the dryer doors that you think is you . . . actually, it's Mary Magda --~~ Sorry--wrong tale.

If you're not getting goosebumps yet, though, you're not likely to from here on out: I'm afraid I don't have any surprises waiting in DaVinci frescoes to spring on you. I figure it's better to foreshadow the very real likelihood of your eventually being let down so that when it does happen, well, you've already been warned.

It seems pretty clear that the arrangement of the washers and tables indicates that the Center's dryers are the Center's focal point, so we should give them a little attention. These are stacked units built into one wall in three groups consisting of four units (that is, eight dryers/group), for a total of 24 dryers. Seeing as a quarter buys 10 minutes of drying time, the user has a fair amount of control over how much time s/he can buy.

The two sets of washers, meanwhile, are in rows of six placed back to back, for a total of 12 in each set and--possible goosebump alert--24(!) washers in all. Though the washers have various temperature settings, the user has only two wash cycle options: Regular (33 minutes) and Super (36 minutes). The prices for these are fixed, of course.

Yes: 24 washers, 24 dryers, yet grouped and arranged differently so as to go unnoticed by all but the more contemplative among us. Add to that the fact that the Center is open 24 hours a day . . . But this outer, admittedly simplistic nod to the solar day's length holds deeper significances. 24 washers divided into two rows of 12 each; 24 dryers divided into three groups of eight--the strong suggestion is that we can divide and spend the solar day in multiple ways, yet the total allotment of hours per day remins the same for all of us. That sounds trite as well, admittedly, until we consider the literary example of Christopher Marlowe's Doctor Faustus: he sells his soul to Mephistopheles in exchange for 24 years in which he can order Mephistopheles to do (just about) anything he commands. Putting aside the question of whether Faustus should have entered into such a bargain in the first place, it's more than a little sad, not to mention instructive, to see this man with such immense power at his disposal content himself with supernatural high school pranks like putting antlers on a man's head and turning straw into horses that will turn back into straw as soon as they get wet. Kind of like the person sitting in a room filled with books, not all

of which he has read, and with the intellectual resources of the Internet at his disposal who instead whiles away his time writing blog posts about laundry rooms as meditations on Time and hopes to sucker other people into reading them.

Anyway.

So: there is the consideration of how one's life is spent as we ponder the 24 washers and 24 dryers. But even though we get only 24 hours in a day, those of you reading this have gotten considerably more than one day and, God willing, will get a few more of them. Our respective allotments of those days aren't infinite, of course; we have no choice in that. Similarly, many times circumstances present themselves in which we have little choice: simple either/ors. But about a great many things, though, we do have considerable say and, in the abstract, an enormous range of say as to the time we invest in those things. Those matter define who we are to ourselves and to others, we tend to think, and here again the Center's topography comments on this.

I had mentioned before that the washers present the visitant with only two wash-cycle lengths, whereas the dryers permit him/her the option of paying for multiple 10-minute increments. I think it's telling that the washers and folding tables are arranged to form an arrow pointing at the dryers: I think it's our sense of things that in the normal course of living (apart from moments of crisis) it's the accretion of choices freely made from a range of options that amalgamate into something called "us." I think it equally significant that, until I actually counted them, I thought the Center had more dryers than washers. That accretion seeming to have more significance for us is, in the end, illusory. It is more likely that the Center's topography suggests that that accretion's significance is balanced by the choices we make when we have, or sense we have, fewer options, even if we tend to be more focused on those matters over which we have more say.

At the center of the Center, as mentioned, are the back-to-back folding tables. Folding and hanging, it goes without saying, are the endgame of Clothes care, the narrow neck at the center of the hourglass. With washing and drying, we guess-and-gosh our way through the process: This feels like a Super load; that load should take 50 minutes to dry. At the folding table we assess the results of guess-and-gosh: we tally; we come across the results of oversights that now, in retrospect, our work nearly done, we wish we could rectify but now can do nothing but curse our luck or shrug our shoulders; we pledge to amend our Caring next time. Even though the table serves as the shaft of the arrow that points toward the dryers, it is in fact the axis of the space of the Center. It is the site of recognition of sins of (c)omission and the site of communion with that for which we've come to the Center in the first place.

The table is the embodiment of the Center's--and Time's--yin and yang. It is the terminus and so embodies Time's linear quality. Yet while standing there folding, one cannot help but think, "Next week, give or take--probably take--I'll be here again," and be reminded of the coming resumption of the Cycle.