

1

—That's it. I pretend to pretend to "know."

—The indefinite indication of an unlimited irony.

—Yes, indeed. The "open storm thud." Or was it a muted post horn ? I met a witch, and she had a gleam in her eye. End of transmission.

—A white little, tight little transvisionary stew.

2

—The foolosopher sculpts himself by sculpting his foolosophy. By what he leaves out as much as by what he stuffs in.

—Narcissistic, right ?

—Yes and no. Is *great* art narcissistic ? Don't get me wrong. Most will fail, but the hope is for great art, for a persona that resonates.

—So don't mistake the persona for the sculptor ?

—Exactly. So really you have a flesh-and-blood human simultaneously sculpting message and messenger. Though some fall into their creation.

—But not you ?

—Well, let's clarify some more. What is mask and what is face ? The artist lives largely by and in and through his or her art. Like Zizek's hilarious "I am a monster" spiel. Perhaps the most honest thing he

ever done, and I think he's generally honest.

—So if I ask you how you rate yourself as a philosopher, that rating will be part of the creation of your altar-ego philosopher mask, yes ?

—Very much.

—Then rate yourself.

—I am merely another belated scribe. A good scribe ? I like to pretend to believe in my own potential. I'd be lying if I claimed to have learned nothing.

—Belated as in anxiety of influence ?

—Yes. But one of the joys of being a scribe is the dream of a breakthrough. It might be a new central metaphor. It might be a shift in tonality.

—So you don't claim any breakthroughs ?

—No. I claim to have finally grasped some old beautiful thoughts. I claim the audacity or arrogance of having offered a new jargon. But even this new jargon is offered only as auxiliary.

—So you are an interpreter ?

—Sure. An unqualified, informal interpreter, commenter. A "scribe" keeps the candles lit. Keeps the collection of beautiful ideas in living memory. Homer names an oral tradition. Or a particular bard who finally wrote down a crowdsourced tale. We love our cult of the genius, but I think we basically have a tradition of ideas.

—But you'd like to leave a big stain, right ?

—Of course. I haven't applied myself to the practical world. You might say that I have lived in hope, making art throughout my life. That mostly people don't notice or understand. Perhaps because it isn't good. Though I think some of has been good. But I have catered to my own eccentric taste.

—Just checking. But all of this conversation about you is still philosophy ?

—Yes. Very much. Think of Nietzsche as Hamlet. The form is jazz, but the content is ethics-aesthetics.

—That, I suppose, is your tonal innovation.

—Not really mine. Why isn't Kerouac a philosopher ? Or Kundera ? A tonal innovation would really just be a transformation of the genre's boundaries. And what about Plato's dialogues and all that talk of the proper boylove ? The hiccups in *The Symposium*?

—So the fact that it's old and Greek and famous obscures the informality ?

—Right. It's rich people's sanctified and in that sense falsified informality. Like rich people's Emerson. Which is not to speak ill or resentfully of the rich. The point is to brush away the cobwebs, the mystification.

—But why ?

—Self-empowerment, basically. The re-vivification of life. Like early Heidegger. Philosophy, in one sense, is just life intensified. Life is already self-elucidating, a

movement toward the heat and the light of the flames.

—Tell me about your journey through philosophy.

—The first thing is identity, persona, ethics. Which is also maybe the last and enduring and constant thing. But for me (and I think for most) it's issue of who I should strive to be. What is good, noble, cool, beautiful, fascinating, and so on ?

—What did you decide on ? Well this issue of persona itself plays a role. In my early “forum days”, I was especially proud of my “hero myth” or “ego ideal” approach. To understand dialogue and human interaction, I thought, you need to understand who people are pretending to be, who they are striving to be, what they hold “sacred” in a generalized sense.

—Like Stirner ?

—Yes. I would even quote Stirner, well aware that he wasn't cool, that he was a meme, that he wasn't a great writer like Nietzsche. I could have quoted Freud or someone else, but it amused me to lean on Stirner. But it'd be wrong to think I was captured by Stirner or idolatrous. I was already in my “all is vanity” phase, and I erred on the side of arrogance and demystification rather than idolatry.

—Some need to learn independence. Others need to learn dependence.

—Exactly. Like many an “independent” thinker, I underestimated what others had to teach me. I still hold that the “anti-projection” or “anti-transcendence” at-

titude is necessary. But it is not sufficient. In itself, it is almost empty. But I need to spell out the cute part of my persona theory.

—Go ahead.

—So the “ego ideal” theory suggests that intellectuals are vain, that they are posing is proximity to the sacred. The question presents itself. Who is the person that presents the ego ideal theory, the vanity-proximity theory ?

—The person who faces their own vanity ?

—Exactly. So the “ego ideal” theorist is a “man of knowledge” who is not troubled by his own demystification of himself.

—A cynical figure.

—And a shamanic, psycho-analytical figure.

—A “psychologist” like Nietzsche.

—Yes. But I was genial and curious. Because that “ego ideal” theory was just one of my pet ideas, if admittedly important. I was also into pragmatism, Rorty and James. I was a pluralist and an ironist. As in I didn’t think there was one right persona. One right position. I thought in terms of equilibrium points. Of people shaped by their history and talents into a certain compatible pose. A zoo of personality. The successful were interesting. You wanted to talk to them. They could surprise you. The unsuccessful were predicable, merely low-quality copies of their idols.

—Harsh.

—Yes. But the ambition is great, like playing in the NBA. Maybe some artists don't care much, but I have always been quietly ambitious. And yet wise or realistic enough to have a sense of humor about this ambition. All is vanity. We all return to dust. So it doesn't really matter. And yet I understand this finite life partially as an opportunity to try at great art.

—So the all-is-vanity “nihilism” or “gallows humor” is creatively empty. An enabling condition. But the ambition requires construction.

—Yes. And you build it up not because you need the existential prop. The “all is vanity” attitude is sufficient. Gallows humor is existentially sufficient. As much as anything is or isn't. I can imagine a “gallows humor” ironist just piling up coins maybe, not bothering to try to be worth remembering. That may even be wiser. There's a foolishness in a life of art. I'm good at math and programming. I “could” have piled up coins, but I have never cared much about that. My dream life is good conversation with good coffee in good weather. I'd like to live in a little cabin in the woods. I don't care about the rich or the respectable. I am fixated on talk that cuts through the noises, on the intimacy of valuing and sharing that kind of talk. Which is not easy to find in such a practical world. And I'm an aging man with no retirement plan but a death at the proper time.

—When the music's over ?

—Yes. Though I'm entangled in a happy marriage.

So I don't pointlessly dwell on the dire details of my demise. I try to lose myself in the jazz, be in a state of rapture. Against the grain, against the sorrow that nibbles at solitude.

—How do you relate this apparent honesty with respectability ?

—In 2025, the tower is burning anyway. Respectability is almost just money these days. Academia ? Smart people but intelligence is not the primary credential. Plenty of disagreeable clever people who will never be welcome there. Our most prominent on-line sophists often lean on their credentials in order to break free from the institution that issued them.

—Peterson ?

—And many others. Fame is money is independence. Is *influence*. Take your charisma, if you have it, on-line. But that works only if you sell the mob a nice story. Tribal stuff like politics. Or spiritual stuff, like respectified religion.

—Respectified with help from STEM credentials ?

—And “heavy” influences that the mob won't read. The envelope is the letter. Peterson will expound on Nietzsche and Heidegger. Within an oral culture, for the mob, you can do this. The scripture functions as a solidity signifier. Now I think Peterson is a smart guy. Don't take him seriously on this or that issue maybe. But smarter than most of his haters. And I don't resent him. His role almost fell on him, and he only needed to lean into it. And he had reason

to want independence from the institutions that gave him those credentials. They are sold out, in my view. There is no there there. Nothing sacred. Rationality has no fixed abode, cannot be institutionalized or captured. Which is more and more obvious in this era.

—I feel you. The veneer on money worship is wearing thin.

—Yes. And I don't resent money worship. The black flower is necessarily marginal. That goes all the way back to my ego ideal theory. The frank narcissism of the psychoanalytic shaman. As opposed to the disavowed narcissism of the proximity performance.

—Are you as cynical now as then ?

—Yes and no. I “believe” in art. In “style” and even in “authenticity.” But all of this is complicated by a resident irony. So I can't see myself playing the sophist. Would I be able to do it ? In terms of skill, maybe. Not that I should be trusted on that judgment. No one who's never been popular should be trusted when they say they could fake it and become popular. But that issue aside, the problem is how hackneyed the popular message tends to be. You can only ring so many changes.

—But what about this performance ? Is it not ultimately something old ?

—Yes. It is old. But, in my defense, I see this performance as the indication of a universally available irony. It's for my little elitist mob of those who don't

like the big populist mobs, be they truly populist or the mob of the respectable and the educated, in their safe evasion.

—But don't you evade political issues ?

—I'm a boring, reasonable moderate on cultural issues. I think the working class should cut the identity politics and hatred for one another and work together for a bigger piece of the pie. Without hatred of the rich. Just civil, practical cooperation toward a shared goal.

—That is boring. Reasonable, but boring.

—And maybe utopian. Identity is numinous. People will live in squalor and resentment for it. Sort of like I've lived on the margins for my art.

—So identity is art ?

—Ah, but we are come full-circle. Yes. Persona is art. Bad art or good art. Art so hackneyed that it functions as background. Or art fresh enough to capture the foreground.

—To what end ?

—That's funny. You want Dawkins or what ? Genes or memes ? We can dig for explanations. But it's all fucking vanity. Hevel. Wide and empty is the sea.

—And yet you talk of the gleam in the eye.

—That too. All is X. What does that indicate but transcendence ? Already in Hegel, focused on by Findlay. Pure negativity. Our ability to grasp the

world as a whole, as if from above it, floating.

—I think of liberation. Lightness that turns out to be bearable after all.

—Yes. And nothing one would want to preach. The secret that keeps itself.

—“God is the death of everything finite and nothing else.”

—“Time is the fire in which we burn.” I think of Yeats. I think of a treasury of images. Of ideas, myths. An erotic or psychoanalytic platonism. A certain kind of skeptic (as found maybe in Stirner) is a stoic with a vivid imagination. An unserious but still seriously detached *playful* stoic. Or the transformation of the monk, via a tax on the householders, into what is implicitly the artist. The modern artist. Follow the money, right ? Even Schopenhauer played the flute, tumbled in the sheets with actresses. Composed his works like an artist.

—In that sense, Schopenhauer is a little incoherent.

—At times.

—And Nietzsche ?

—More honest at his best moments, but sometimes drunk on a vision of himself as prophet. Of course his drunken moments appeal to the fanboys. Not that I was completely immune myself in my crazy 20s. I didn't have sophisticated parents, so I learned things the hard way.

—Where are we now ?

—A grizzled detective, with a bourbon and a smoke.
Playing at wisdom, with a gleam in his eye, not really
believing in any wisdom beyond that fragile gleam.