

LETTER

I continue to study the forum boys. I'm inclined to claim that the philosophy game is centered on the construction of a persona. More explicitly, it's about the presentation of warranted beliefs. But the persona sculpting is implicit in "warrant." To sketch what a rational person ought to believe is to define at least the beliefs of such a (heroically) rational person.

Rationality plays the role of the sacred, though obviously in a special mode that may involve a rude and arrogant atheism. Stirner understood this well. The sacred is X , which is to say a variable or a *role*. What's curious about rationality is its tendency to unveil itself. The sacred has plenty of irrationalists forms. Such as whoever is fucking the guru is purer. Or whoever is the right-hand man. In short, proximity to this X is a manifestation of virtue. Or the definition of virtue. This "virtue" is of course also a role, a variable. One is tautologically sanctified by proximity to the sacred.

Rationality is the "holy ghost." It is (ideally) "inside you" as your essence. So we get a collision of self-proclaimed representatives of this universal rationality. I don't exclude myself. So what varies is not the identification of one's better self with a universal rationality but the more or less successful performance of this identity.

The problem is the public performance of mysticism. My claim is that it's in bad taste. It's a performative contradiction. An incoherent persona.

I can relate to bookish guys without another outlet putting time and energy into an online forum. I also “waste my time” this way. I like to think that I like to think that it’ll pay off maybe in a genuine if online friendship. In short, participation on such a forum is not inherently problematic.

You might think of me as a music critic, finding words for what initially just feels wrong.

If you have mystic insight, then maybe you don’t waste words on arguments that by definition won’t get the job done. This guy didn’t even do that. He just (in an awkward way) implied his mastery of mysticism, in the context of schooling someone who IMV is a more sophisticated and coherent personality.

Digression, but I often see on such forums relatively green and untutored types talking shit about a great philosophy who they don’t know much about. They parrot some “debunking” they picked up through gossip.

If there is a “true” mystic, then he (or she) won’t obscure the issue with exoteric rationalization. He or she (usually he) won’t noisily declare his shrewd silence. The problem is the play for recognition. This is what betrays the pose. The phony mystic needs attention, needs to humiliate or intimidate or seduce others.

Let’s be generous and allow for the enthusiastic mystic who (consciously) wants to share the gift with others. What was young Wittgenstein up to ? What was

Nietzsche up to, in his more joyful mode ?

Wittgenstein said he's settle for one person understanding him. He wasn't optimistic. I think I understand some of the key points of that young man's book, and I can understand his reluctance to hope. I can also understand why not much was achieved after all. The world partially clarified is still the world. A messy room was put in order. The strangeness at the center was foregrounded. But souls were not saved in the traditional way. A man laid down some philosophy as art. Life goes on with its problems. With its backgrounded futility.

The esoteric is esoteric is esoteric. Do I "believe in" the esoteric ? I'm not a closet mystic. But there are ideas in Joyce and Freud and Jung and other writers that I would not present as universally valid. I would talk about them with trusted friends.

The exoteric is public-facing. It is persona. It is official policy. It is public earnestness as opposed to private irony or private mysticism. To what category does what I say here belong ? I'd say it's a somewhat revealing choice of persona. Rorty hints at his own shadows and corners by the mere mention of private irony. I read him intensely, having discovered him by accident at the public library. I still think of him when I ponder this issue. He was very much on the stage, the public progressive professor.

My "dreamspeak graffiti" project is of course on the "private irony" side. I still wrestle with whether I should mainstream the material, blunt the edge enough

so that I can take credit for it. I imagine working the material into a short novel like *The Crying of Lot 49*. But apparently I keep getting sidetracked by writing imaginary letters like this.

The “problem” is that plot is secondary. The philosopher carves a heroic persona who does nothing but think well. The philosopher as protagonist is almost reducible to monologue. It is “more efficient” to carve the persona without narrative context.

Consider that Rorty was invoked above as a character. I’ve read a biography. His life wasn’t an action movie. He was a safe, respectable man, though appropriately vivid and controversial in the fishtank of theory. But there is indeed drama in this fishtank, if you are one of the fish.

Why is the scientific man a *good* man ? How is rationality ethical ? Simple. It involves the presupposition of a symmetrical peer-to-peer relationship. I don’t appeal for justification to what is not available to you. I don’t invoke an Inner Light. I don’t brag about being in Famous Philosopher’s class as an undergraduate.

Two “rational” people can each have their private irony, their esoteric reserve. But this is omitted from the public face. I do not because I should not lean on it for justification. To invoke the irrational in a rational conversation is to lose coherence as a persona. This loss of coherence is an unbeautiful thing.

One might think a relatively rational person is better able to make friends. On the other hand, tribal ir-

rationalism is the traditional glue of ally to ally. To strive toward rationality is to find the ordinary irrationalism unconvincing and even distasteful.

It's a weird version of identity. Of course this type of person tends to be blind to the irrationalism that likes to creep into their performance of the rational as Sacred. On YouTube, small-time celebrity philosophers *usually* mind their manners. On anonymous forums, bad manners are more common, probably because the stakes are lower. I say this as someone who was young and obnoxious this way myself once. Philosophers (self-anointed, I mean, and not academics) are often unworldly types who live in ideas. They haven't absorbed corporate norms. Then there's just the arrogance of the youth who has a much deeper understanding of Nietzsche than anyone around. But (problematically, incoherently) also the still-juvenile avatar-centric idolatry.

Why do I like Mach ? He didn't confuse himself with a prophet. He wrote for his peers — for anyone who would follow *the* logic rather than his logic. I love Mill for the same reason. Of course James was lovable too as a rich, complete personality. James did venture into spiritual topics, but he pulled it off. Of course Emerson and Whitman were “spiritual” but in the correct, symmetrical way.

Where is Schimpff in all of this ? What am I up to, finally ? I feel like a belated artist, in an age where there's not much left to say or do. Or almost no one to say it to. In Joyce's famous bio, I was

intrigued to see that his generation felt like this then. Of course Joyce turned his sordid age into art. Shit into chocolate. I scold myself, remembering this, for my discouragement. But I don't think Joyce was an optimist. He worked as a tutor, kept on his work in his free time, and finally won recognition and support. And got old and died, having scrawled his massive maze of puns.

Ginsberg writes that Kerouac was not saved by his transmissions. The getting-it-down, the genuine jazz, only means so much. A man gets old and lonely and sick. It was probably at least a small comfort sometimes to have left a stain. But all stains come out in the long run. A person sometimes writes *against* this fundamental absurdity, this bonfire of vanities, which is time itself as a god that swallows all. Is time a good god or a bad god ? A good dog or a bad dog ?

I won't pretend that I don't want the life of a recognized artist. One "should" be happy in any case. I usually am. What is the essence of this recognized artist life if not peers who are friends ? The ideal situation is friends who can't decide who is more talented, inspired, relevant. Friends who value one another. I had this back in my music days. We shared in the dream. Our band was *great*. That's how we felt. I confess that I find it hard to relate to an artist who doesn't want to be first-rate. For me it's never been therapeutic, a mere fucking around. The goal was and is to break through. First in terms of the content. Self-recognition through the recognition of genuine value in the content is primary. Then (and

somewhat entangled) the intense aesthetic friendship.

My “joke” is that the slacker artist is *more* ambitious than the worldly man. Less realistic in one sense, sure, but more realistic in another. What survives better in the fire of time ? The artist madly seeks an immortality, the crystallization of his own personality in something that paradoxically only succeeds via its impersonality. Great art as such is not about me. That’s the stone in the throat of the bird discussed by Sartre.

The part of me that recognizes great art is already there. That is the immortal, universal part. It is arguably superfluous to seek recognition as a transmitter. Only the transmission itself is relatively immortal.

Of course the *recognized* transmitter is loved, respected, admired. In this life, *as* a mortal, distinct personality.

The quickest way to gain recognition as a member of the talking class is to engage in the culture war. Make left wing or right wing videos. Humiliate your enemies. Bolster the identity of your consumers. Topical, yes. Shallow, yes. But your reward is in this life. Though you may be haunted by a sense of having prostituted your gifts. As far as I can make out, the people who do this are smart but not *that* smart. As in they may have chosen a task of the correct difficulty. Wet your finger and put it in the wind. Dress well and perfect the tone of your brand.

On the other side of things : I watched a Stanley Fish

talk on academic freedom that impressed me. There, I thought, was a man. Provocative but sincere. He wrote that he lucked in to his academic success. I believe him. It's hard to imagine someone of his authenticity making it today. Inside the system I mean. Of course things have been stirred up, the pendulum has swung, but I expect academia to tighten rather than expand. But who knows ?

YouTube, for instance, opens up the space. But this space is an attention market, and tribal drama sells. Even in philosophy, it's clear that mysticism and gee-whiz sci-fi sells. So I imagine writing a novel instead, but could I get it published ?

It slowly dawned in me in grad school that academia too was a game of social capital. It took me awhile to figure out what I didn't like about it. *Self-marketing is greasy*. I had found a more pretentious version of Facebook. This is of course just the same old world. I should have known better, but I put that aside for many years to ace my classes, one after another. Finally there was the dissertation. I was discouraged from working on things that actually fascinated me. I was too stubborn and unworldly to bullshit my way through. Others with less talent managed it. I still don't know if it was a mistake or not. No doubt that career has its sorry pointless routines. But such is life.

On the other hand, death is real. It only matters in a finite way. This path or that. All lead to one conclusion. I wasn't a young man in grad school. Long married, imbibor of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, etc. I respected the skill of my instructors, but I did not

project magic or wisdom on any of them. I did like some of them. But they were likable coworkers with a higher status. No deep connection. No genuine friendship. Some genuine friendship with other students. A woman that could have become central if I didn't already have one. But I did already have one. I took away a degree, pride at complete initial success, and a little melancholy at how it all worked out, me choosing to leave, perhaps surprising and disappointing others. I was a strong student, receiver of awards, scholarships, a fellowship. Not at some first-rate school, but it was a dose of "real world" recognition, as opposed to the me-and-my-band-mates kind. Had some credit in the straight world. I do use my MA in an under-employed sort of way. It wasn't all a waste, but I'm still on the crooked roads without improvement.