

# Memos From the Rue Morgue

*The pieces below were written separately, but I re-edited them and posted them as a batch, on 4/28/08, and in retrospect I feel like they are mostly of interest as a snapshot of my mind that spring.*

## Introduction

*"You know the phrase softly softly catchy monkey? ...I could catch a monkey - if I was starving I could. I'd make poison darts out of the poison off deadly frogs. One milligram of that poison can kill a monkey. Or a man. Prick yourself, you'll be dead within a day. Or longer. Different frogs, different times."*

-Gareth Keenan

I have just been down in Tribeca installing at TOAST again—I think this is the third or fourth time I've done that. Anyway, I believe that this time last year is when I first started to keep this blog, and since then it's more or less tracked my insomnia.

After the installation, I took the subway up to Columbia and tried to get into Butler library to look at their copy of *Das Weib in der Natur- und Völkerkunde*, which apparently is nearly impossible to find anymore because it was one of the first ethnographies to have plates of naked women, and thus many of the copies were stolen as lithographic pornography back in the 1800s. Anyway, I am three rounds on this goddamn book, and I lost again—Butler doesn't issue visitor passes after six PM. So I left in a foul mood, convinced that not only was I the worst dressed person in New York, but everyone in Harlem had a copy of *Das Weib* in their duffel bag and just wasn't going to let me see it.

My affect improved a lot after going out to dinner (at Trata Estiatorio!) and then taking the beautiful, beautiful, train ride back up the Hudson and the lake. I spent most of the ride organizing my hard drive, and among other things I dredged up some unfinished blog entries from “the morgue”: moments when my insomnia abated or other matters intervened in finishing stuff. So here they are.

## In Which Malcolm X Makes Both Teams

The following written perhaps last October [2007], in reference to the Intercollegiate Studies Institute's list of the [50 best and 50 worst books](#) of the 20th century....

What is so immediately bizarre about the ISI's 'worst books' list is that the 'reviews' consist of flippant one-liners. *Profiles in Courage* is dismissed in eight words: “Should have been called Profiles in Ghost Writing.” This is in strange contrast to the totalizing claims of the book lists, which cover everything from grammar to philosophy to theology to history to architecture. The book lists would seem to be designed to provide an index to a sophisticated, cosmopolitan Catholic conservative worldview. The furious and rather silly denunciations--Johnson and Hitchcock, for example, are attacked for wearing “funny glasses”--believe this, and give the impression that the ISI is pandering the

idea of sophistication to an audience of young readers.

I am thrown back on the same feeling that I had reading Robert Spencer: the ISI does not expect their constituents to take this bibliography seriously qua reading. Not only do they anticipate that the audience will ignore the 'worst' books, but they also anticipate that the audience will ignore the 'best' books, too. For instance, they refer to Foote's *The Civil War* as "the American *Iliad*," an absurd claim that not only presumes that one has not read Foote, but also presumes that one has not the slightest conception of American literary history.

In fact, in a weird continuity with earlier Catholic scholasticism, these book lists are not about reading at all. Rather, they are about tokenizing books, and sorting those tokens into the appropriate piles, as the old *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* and the *Imprimatur* did. We can still see something very like the canon censor's caution: Arendt is on the 'best books' list, but she is described as 'not without flaws': careful, kiddos. The aim of the ISI is to create a veneer of culture; to allow young Republicans to scoff at Russell and Huxley over some cocktails with their liberal peers who (most likely) have not read the texts in question, either. Reading becomes a pantomime, another version of "the lie agreed upon." I have not read Wilson's *New Freedom*, neither have you, but we can pretend to debate it, using the talking points provided for us by our respective ideological filters.

And what sad, stupid talking points they are.

## Dueling Vegans and Economic Ethics

It's December [2007], so I am released from a non-disclosure clause concerning my veganism for the last month. (I had traded diets with a friend, under contract). I've always considered veganism a species of eating disorder, and after a month of it, I still do. But I'm more interested in the economic aspect.

Veganism is, in its usual presentation, an extension of ethics and/or metaphysics into the realm of diet. Thus Felipe Fernandez-Armesto views it an analog of cannibalism. The point is not that your sworn enemy's leg is especially *nutritious*, or *tasty*. No: you eat the guy's leg to get revenge on him and dominate his immortal soul. Again, the abundance of faux-dairy products would suggest that many vegans are seeking something beyond gastronomic delights, and while there is no objective truth in nutrition, it seems unlikely that most vegans disdain veal cutlets on primarily nutritional grounds. There is something animistic in this kind of relationship to food, but also something that is strictly ethical.

Ethics extends through diet and enters economics in one particular arena, established specifically in our contract: freeganism. A non-vegan food product is freegan if it is found in the waste stream: after the ethical decisions concerning its production have already been made. At this point, the implied argument goes, the consumption decision is morally neutral, since the crime has already been committed. Indeed, it could be argued that there is an ethical responsibility to consume the freegan food, rather than waste it and draw down other resources and energies to feed oneself.

Freegan morality lives at the very heart not only of contemporary 'vegan culture,' but also the entire drop-out culture of dumpster-diving, squatting, shoplifting, DIY, and the like. It fascinates me. It is an intensely *thought-out* genus of consumer behavior, much more so than the straight-dressing bourgeois who roll their eyes at it probably imagine. Even now, somewhere, there are a brace of fecal-smelling punks sitting in a pile of festering trash, arguing over the ethical minutiae of dumpstering a jacket made in a sweatshop, since its visible brand logo will continue to semiotically support the corporation that produced it. And they will *not shut up for hours*. This is an interesting state of affairs, and one that most economists are simply unaware of.

At the same time, freegan logic is riddled with flaws and paradoxes, and most of these manifest

as a kind of unintentionality, despite all the thought that goes into. It is no accident that all the DIY punks more or less look the same, dress the same, eat the same food, listen to the same music, and have the same intestinal parasites. A pattern has been created—a very strong pattern—but it is not necessarily a pattern of liberated potential.

I see two problems with freegan logic:

***One: It (seems to) violate Kant's categorical imperative.***

Now, to hell with Kant, say I. But the categorical imperative is a warning light for hypocrisy, and it definitely flashes on here. There are not all that many dumpsters in the world; and most of them do not contain blocks of cheese in a reasonable state of edibility. If our maxim is 'eat dumpstered cheese' we have to admit that (1) not everyone can follow such advice; and (2) the people who can are apt to be affluent Americans with access to transportation and leisure time, or else nightmarishly impoverished children who live in the world's landfills, and in many cases pay a fee to sift through the (commodified) garbage.

***Two: It creates a standoff paradox.***

Vegans have, at least in theory, their own equivalent of the Mexican standoff. Two diners—both secretly vegan—are given a brownie containing eggs. Neither one can pick it up and eat it off the table—it's got eggs, and the other guy might eat it, so it isn't yet in the waste stream. But if neither one of them eats it, it goes in the trash. Either one, can, however, eat it *after* the other one has declined it. Presumably, after one of the two vegans has declined the brownie, the other can take it (as freegan) and then split it with the decliner.

In fact, this standoff can occur with just one single person. If a vegan purchases a brownie on the misapprehension that it doesn't have eggs, and then discovers that it does have eggs, they can either (1) eat it, or (2) throw it out. If they throw it out, however, it is in the waste stream, so they can eat it. So...a vegan can eat a brownie with eggs provided that they did not know it had eggs when they purchased it.

In fact, of course, many actual vegans as observed in the wild are more strict than this, and their concerns are nutritional and what I would call animistic as well as ethical-economic. But the reduction raises a question that is endemic to market ethics. The ethical vegan's potential utility increases as they have less and less information about what the hell they are buying. The situation is analogous to transactions involving stolen property or illegal labor. It is not criminal to purchase stolen property, provided one does not do so knowingly. And it is not illegal to employ workers who are working illegally, so long as you haven't actually checked. So why would you ever check? And if you do check, why would ask a lot of questions?

So...the riddle is, how do we envision a form of freeganity that creates an incentive for knowledge, rather than a disincentive?

***Comment #1, by a certain cousin of mine.***

I went to a vegan passover party where the matzah ball soup was delightful. However, they served these ostensibly vegan fruit tarts which were otherworldly. I suspect they had been bamboozled, as I have had vegan sweets before, and they have never been so sublime. They are not freegans living, as they do, in a less affluent neighborhood, they would have a tough time practicing freeganism, which I have concluded, based on little research, exists only as a small sub-type of human activity that resides in New York City, and among those who re-locate to other areas from New York City. They likely spend far more money than I do on food, as they pay for that vegan cream cheese, and mightily. One

day, perhaps, they will move to New York, and then to a South Carolina college town, and by then they will be dharma punks and freegans.

### **Comment #2, by a future professional pastry chef.**

I assure you, having grown up with a mother who was vegan and whom everyone who tasted her food would agree is an amazing cook, vegan sweets do not need to be unpleasant in the least. If done carefully & with a good set of recipes. What is in a fruit tart anyway? fruit and tart crust, and maybe some sugar & arrow root powder or cornstarch, or probably flour if the filling is cooked. The only dairy thing is butter, and if you substitute hydrogenated -VEGAN- shortening the crust actually has a consistency almost as good as lard crust! Of course the taste is affected, but a lot of professional bakers make that sacrifice willingly. If you use non-hydrogenated margarine the consistency goes down, but not by much if you freeze the margarine & dice it, and freeze the flour & the mixing bowl, hell, throw the salt and sugar in the freezer as well. Then, assuming you hadn't been bothering to actually freeze butter you won't even be able to tell, unless you have a fairly developed palate, but the margarine crust will still be damn good.

That said, I eat, and even buy local organic meat about once or twice a week, and definitely eat too much ice cream and cheese, I am not my mother, but I won't sneeze at a vegan dessert just because it's vegan.

I'm not attacking you, just educating you in an unintentionally violent way.

## **It Doesn't Matter About Your Genome**

*"It doesn't matter if you just bought a fresh Bentley!"*

-The Rock, oddly

In last Tuesday's *Science Times*, James Watson is quoted as saying "I was in someone's Bentley once—nice car...would I rather have my genome sequenced or a have a Bentley? Uh, toss up." You might think, given the precedent, that he's finally blown the ol' head gasket. In fact, he's referring to the comment made by Stoicescu, a Swiss entrepreneur whose publicity photo makes him look very much an android. Despite his abiological aesthetic, Stoicescu is one of the first people to purchase his own genome sequence, saying that he would prefer to spend his money on that than a Bentley, and that he plans to refer to his genome constantly, "like a stock portfolio."

Wow.

What does that mean, *like a stock portfolio*? The direct reference, which Watson also makes, is to the discovery of new correlations between genotype and phenotype, especially in the realm of diseases. But what, exactly, does one do with that data? Watson says that in the end he would prefer the genome to a fresh Bentley, because it could highlight heritable diseases. This is a little odd, of course, since Watson will be eighty in a few weeks.

And therein lies a little paradox for modern biotechnology. The very technologies that have allowed us to understand cytological mysteries—the very field that Watson has contributed to so hugely, before all of his unpleasant encounters with microphones—have in fact diminished the relevance of those mysteries. Watson need hardly be concerned about what genes he will pass on to his

offspring, because his offspring are in their thirties.

What can we say about our dear doctor Watson? In almost every field of human endeavour, there are people who stumble across a question or answer or intensity that serves, magically, to justify their being an asshole. It happens in economics, in art, in politics, in religion, in HVAC repair, and—obviously—in genetics. Over the last thirty years Watson has thrown lazy punches at blacks, women, gays, fat people, everyone he could—and then always ducked quickly behind the counter of Scientific Inquiry. He's not out to get anyone; in fact, *they're* out to get *him*, for questioning his sincerity.

The problem with most of Watson's genetically-grounded slurs, and with Stoicescu's idea of reading his genome like a ticker tape, is that DNA is static. It does not adapt itself to the constant ebb and flow of individual experience. It is not even really analogous to the “code” of an organism, it is more like the function library. The actual series of “function calls”—the way the code gets instantiated—is an emergent property of the cytological soup, and cuts radically across scales. An event as minor as a bee-sting can rapidly change what proteins are being created in a given cell, all using the same DNA. Those dynamics are not well captured in popular science, which almost invariably presents genes as a kind of ultra-personalized destiny, like the Delphic oracle saying “you are doomed to be killed by a man with blue socks, on a Tuesday...”

So I expect that Stoicescu will be disappointed, and I for one would have gone with the Bentley. In a more general sense, I think we'll be disappointed by the Genome Project itself—not yet, not for awhile—but at some point there will be diminishing returns to the chains of complexity we can trace upwards from genes themselves. Yes, if there is a syndrome that we can identify as being based on one point mutation—or even some supercomplex of alleles—that will be interesting to know about (though difficult to respond to). But emergent properties like dreaming about Freud or the propensity to misbutton your shirt are probably going to be much, much more complex. If intellect is a function of one protein chains, it is hard to explain two generations of AI researchers beating their heads against a wall.

All the same, it's stupendous, the idea of personal genomic knowledge. Pour some liquor. Beat the drum. Etc. No, no, really. There are only really two attitudes that we can take in the applied sciences. The first is best expressed by the phrase: “This time you've gone too far,” with appropriate hand-wringing, sclera-showing, and/or trembling-finger-pointing. The second position, and I think it is by far the nobler of the two, is epitomized in the line: “*Fools! Fools! They laughed at my galvanic collider but at midnight tonight, when the plasma dynamatron has reached Maximum French Roast velocity, we'll see who laughs louder. Bwa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! A ha ha ha ha ha ha! Ba ha...ha...aaarrgh...*”

There are obviously some drawbacks to this second position, but the first is simply inert. The “This time you've gone too far” guy was on the job back when lemurs were first trying to pick up sticks with their tails.

***Update: April 156 [sic], 2009***

The New England Journal of Medicine seems to be taking a similar position. In this latest retrospective on genetic factors for disease risk, the outlook is fairly pessimistic: the risk factors that are being identified simply don't add up to much.

### ***Further Commentary***

For reasons that I can only put down to the whims of bots, this has been one of the most “read” and “commented on” pieces that I've ever written. The comments involved credit repair, online gambling, tectonic conspiracy theories, porn, bit torrents, passionate charity appeals, video game cheat codes, something in Polish, and the following (links not included):

*The French gourmet cheese Bleu d'Auvergne has a wonderful aroma, a rich taste; the saltiness increases with the incidence of veining. The overall flavor is piquant but not overly sharp. Bleu d'Auvergne started life as an imitation of Roquefort, using cow's milk in place of sheep's milk. Legend has it that a peasant, around 1845, decided to inject his cheese with a blue mold that he found growing on his left-over bread (the motto being, waste not, want not). And thus, the gourmet cheese Bleu d'Auvergne was born. This French gourmet blue cheese comes from the region of Auvergne and the cheese is made from milk of Salers and Aubrac cows. The rind is very thin and so the cheese is usually wrapped in foil. The cheese is rich and creamy with a pale yellow color and scattered holes and well-defined greenish-blue veining. We cut and wrap this cheese in wedge of 8 ounces and 1 pound.*

When I maintained *The Quodlibetarian* blog, I remember feeling conflicted about whether or not erasing bot-spam was a free speech issue, especially in light of my interest in A.I. The question still interests me, but...damn.

## Haroldry

I have been living with Bloom a bit, both by dint of reformatting his book list for Zemita and referencing him in an essay I'm working on. I love him and hate him, which, given his writing on the "agony of influence," is probably apropos. Before his writings and his opinions, Bloom is quintessentially a great reader. Perhaps he is our greatest reader, but whatever the accolade, the point is that we don't have many readers at all. I am often struck, in listening to debates about the canon and the fate of the academy, that most of the voices we hear who either applaud or condemn new syllabi are grossly underqualified to hold their opinions, which ought to incorporate a knowledge not only of the syllabus but of the alternatives. Lest this sound completely elitist, I want to hasten to I mean "reading" and "text" in the most catholic sense. To say that Greek Tragedy is more (or less) interesting than Tijuana Bibles, you need to have a familiarity with both genres. Otherwise your opinion is simply uninteresting.

It is this universalism, I think, that is most paradoxical in Bloom's own writing. Because he is a universalist reader. Not only has he read more than you, in all likelihood he has read more than you in the genres of "low literature" that you find most interesting. And yet, ironically, Bloom's description of the "agony of influence" is relatively opaque in the high literature that he is interested in; it is much more visible in the genre fiction and paraliterary media that he dismisses so casually. If we look at Final Fantasy or Harry Potter, they are covered with genre cliches and direct references of the inside-joke variety that run back through *Dungeons and Dragons* to C.S. Lewis and Tolkein, to the Eddas and the Brothers Grimm and the Arthurian legends. The rivers of influence and reaction are etched canyon-deep. Even in an author like Bujold, where there is a rich complexity of 'outside' themes, it requires almost no effort to map lines of influence back into the heart of the genre.

By contrast, the reader who wants to draw a map from Dickinson or Borges or Pynchon back to Shakespeare and Dante has considerable work to do. I, for one, find that kind of work invigorating, and obviously Bloom finds it ecstatic. But what, exactly, is behind the urge to create such a genealogy where it is not so utterly clear as (H.G. Wells → Buck Rogers → Star Wars → Star Trek)?

Bloom's answer is twofold and interleaved to the point where I think we can say it is simply confused. He is an aesthete, a passionate aesthete, and for him literary beauty is genetic to the canon: he follows its phenotype as a 19th-century aristocrat might trace bloodlines. But unless we accept this identity, or tautology, we are going to be vexed by constant counter-examples. Toni Morrison, for

example, gets included in Bloom's reading list for *Song of Solomon*, not *Beloved*. Shaw's *Back to Methuselah* is in, but not *Arms and the Man*, or *Man and Superman*. It is hard not to get the impression that Bloom has been guided in his choices not solely by aesthetic power, but also by the “network density” of the canon as a web of influence. The royal bloodlines, as it were. Indeed, he says as much at several points.

What is hard to reconcile is the joint notion of aesthetic virtue and/or position in the network with Bloom's contempt for “period pieces” and para-literature. *Phaedrus* is a period piece, in the sense that it tightly conforms to the conventions of a long-dead genre. By the same token, *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* is deeply situated in the influence of the canon, as is *Blood on the Tracks*, or *Maus*, or *Watchmen*. These are musical works, and graphic novels, but so are the Psalms, Wagner, and Blake. And each of them also bends and deforms the surrounding genre like a gravity well.

I want to compare some of Hill's verse (*Lost One*) with an equivalent passage in Ezra Pound (*Pisan Cantos 74*). My chief interest here is not aesthetic, but genetic—how do these authors utilize the canon before them?

It's funny how money change a situation  
Miscommunication leads to complication  
My emancipation don't fit your equation  
I was on the humble, you - on every station  
Some wan' play young Lauryn like she dumb  
But remember not a game new under the sun  
Everything you did has already been done  
I know all the tricks from Bricks to Kingston  
My ting done made your kingdom wan' run  
Now understand L. Boogie's non violent  
But if a thing test me, run for mi gun  
Can't take a threat to mi newborn son  
L's been this way since creation  
A groupie call, you fall from temptation  
Now you wanna ball over separation  
Tarnish my image in your conversation  
Who you gon' scrimmage, like you the champion  
You might win some but you just lost one...  
Now, now how come your talk turn cold  
Gained the whole world for the price of your soul  
Tryin' to grab hold of what you can't control  
Now you're all floss, what a sight to behold  
Wisdom is better than silver and gold

Lordly men are to earth o'ergiven  
these the companions:  
Fordie that wrote of giants  
and William who dreamed of nobility  
and Jim the comedian singing:  
“Blarrney castle me darlin'  
you're nothing now but a StOWne”  
and Plarr talking of mathematics

or Jepson lover of jade  
Maurie who wrote historical novels  
and Newbolt who looked twice bathed  
are to earth o'ergiven  
And this day the sun was clouded  
—“You sit stiller” said Kokka  
“if whenever you move something jangles.”  
and the old Marchesa remembered a reception in Petersburg  
and Kokka thought there might be some society (good) left in  
Spain, wd. he care to frequent it, my god, no!

Both these passages are almost wholly referential, but there is huge distinction between them. Hill is immersed in her Biblical text, bringing in fairly subtle references to the 20th century (the Clash, Bob Marley, MLK—and thence a whole lineage running from Haile Selassie to Tolstoy.) Pound, in contrast, is trying to maintain a foot in Homer and a foot in Japan, while his opaque references to minor figures jangle like the war medals on some caricature of a general. Who the hell is Maurie? And why should the reader care? And if the reader need not care, then why does Pound insist on leaving his little bread-crumbs trails? What passes here for referentiality is in fact name-dropping, and the obscurity of the names only makes it weaker and more desperate.

If such a comparison is in some way unfair, it is hard for me to imagine how. Perhaps we can read in Pound a kind of Joycean rhythm, the cascade of portraits, the optic flow of the mind's eye. But in Joyce, those images flow through a particular channel, and define the channel. Pound simultaneously places us in the omniscient voice, and then litters omniscience with private references. We flash upon the seven “lordly men,” who are for all practical purposes ahistorical, and convey almost no historical value to the reader. But nor do they help delineate the narrator in any way. They are a sequence of black boxes, inside a black box.

*De gustibus non est disputandum*, and if Bloom prefers Shakespeare to Lauryn Hill, well and good. So do I, actually. But if he wants to argue that James Wilcox is organically 'closer' to Shakespeare than Lauryn Hill is, then we are debating something else entirely. In all events, it is a bit disingenuous to shuttle back and forth between these standards. *Purple Rain* is a brilliant reaction to inescapable literary influence—much more so, in fact, than *Nicholas Nickleby*. If we want to come up with an aesthetic criterion that discriminates in the opposite direction, the agony of influence is not it.

Perhaps Bloom's own agony for the canon is best viewed through his own context as a professor of humanities. Of course the motive force of a university to encourage reading is too small, and probably too late, to entrance most students in the kind of exploratory aesthetics Bloom is in love with. Bloom himself was an auto-didact, as all readers are. But schools persist in their unhappy illusion that literature is their own institutional salad bar, which they can arrange at will, and which they need to ensure people can afford.

***Comment by a desert-dwelling family therapist:***

I had this great idea for a genealogical mix tape: Start with any modern pop tune and trace it back to Robert Johnson or the Carter Family or Louis Armstrong. Modest Mouse, Pixies, Husker Du... The trouble is I don't have the time or the knowledge to pull it off right. But I'd sure like to listen to a good one.