

Chapter 20

Retrospective

Once installed in my new lab under the auspices of the Mathematics Department I was always at work there by 6 or 7 AM, often earlier. This was in marked contrast to the leisurely pace (slack might be the better word) I'd adopted in my basement lab in Agassiz. Breakfast might be little more than a muffin and coffee, lunch and dinner grabbed on the run. When I finished up, normally around 8 PM, it was with the sense of having accomplished all that could reasonably be expected of me in a single day.

Sometimes - this was generally the case in winter - to fill up the evening I walked the three blocks to the Student Union which stayed open till midnight. There, in a lobby tricked out by interior decorators to evoke the hunting lodge of some Robber Baron, I would sink into myself in one of the oversized torn

dark blue imitation leather easy chairs- sometimes for hours- musing on the strange turns fate had taken with my life. Idly scanning the circumambulant activity, frequently with a wry, knowing shake of the head, I muttered private comments under my breath on the thoughtless antics of youth.

As the sinking sun, bleaching the carbon-saturated horizon to dull cinders, inflamed the dense and many-layered panoply of putrid smog suffocating the City of Brotherly Love and the nipping twilight settled over the land, I luxuriated in the oceans of warmth wrapping about my weary limbs from the crackling wood fires in the open hearth .

Sometimes I would catch myself humming a few lines from Thomas Moore's "Oft In The Stilly Night"

*"...Oft in the Stilly Night
 Ere Slumber's chains have bound me
 Fond memory brings the light
 Of other days around me ..."*

*or quietly recite the melancholy lines of my favorite Shakespeare sonnet that ,
 like a ghostly sigh, haunted my tired thoughts:*

*"... That time of year thou mayst in me behold
 When yellow leaves, or none, or few do hang
 Upon the boughs which shake against the cold.."*

*In the prestidigitating shapes of shadows thrown against
 the walls I fancied visitations from numberless images of things long past, of
 youthful folly and adolescent zeal, of unrealistic hopes, of bold ambitions, of
 lost loves, of misunderstandings destined never to be resolved !*

*" ...The hopes, the fears of boyhood years
 The words of love once spoken
 The eyes that shone, now dimmed with tears
 The youthful hearts now broken ..."*

*Faces I'd imagined lost forever paraded anew before my
 internal eye or danced on the manic tips of flame, vivid as flesh and blood,
 only to vanish at the first touch: Frank Kriegle, Felicia Salvador , Marvin
 Bench who shot himself in 1962, Fred Elsasser, Jerome Fuzz, Marilyn,
 Jackie, Rosalyn, George the mad divinity student, Paul the transvestite, Dr.
 Narasimhan , the malevolent van Clees , Jane (whose last name I could no
 longer recall , which perhaps I'd never known) who'd made off with my
 virginity...*

...Bare, ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang...

17 years! Poised between rejoicing and sadness, my heart filling in equal proportions of contentment and disillusion, the sense that my moorings were slipping away from me was unaccompanied with any presentiment of anxiety or loss. I had to remind myself that the ordeal was not yet over, though already I felt the years leeching out of memory like a toxic sweat, like the dust of old bones sifting through the cracks in a sodden coffin. Much as the narrator in the Fall of the House of Usher, my soul prepared its flight from the crumbling old mansion, fearful to cast even a glance behind.

Could almost 2 decades, so replete with turmoil, lived at such a pitch of intensity that I doubted a lifetime would be sufficient to assimilate its ramifications, have amounted to no more than the flickering aureole of a grotesque hallucination? Would there be no vestige of their reality remaining beyond the certitude of their unreality? Once more I hummed:

*"... like one who stands within
Some banquet hall deserted
Whose lights are fled, and garlands dead
And all but I departed ..."*

... I could scarcely believe it possible that Cyrus Yaw-Yawn, now curator of a billionaire's private museum in Arizona, whose prattle I'd endured for over 3 years both before and after my nervous breakdown, could cast a more indistinct image in my memory than the goat in the dream inspired by sleeping through his lectures! Yet at the same time, perhaps for that very reason, I found myself more inclined to forgive them all, even to the extent of fervently wishing that Stannard, dv HM's dream matrix actually existed in one of Everest's "All-possible worlds". Now Jerome Fuzz possessed no more reality for me than his hypothesis of my innate criminality. Had my cruel acne been anything more than a cosmic jest? The practical joke of a

bored deity determined to rub my nose in the excrement of my own farcical destiny?

A surge of terror akin to panic, like an icy undertow, took possession of me as my reflections turned to plans, or lack thereof, for my immediate future. What was I going to make of my life once irrevocably cast adrift from the moorings of Zelosophic U.? To whom could I turn? To my former teachers? To my colleagues in the scientific world, most of whom had turned their backs on me? To high school friends or old acquaintances from the Agape Institute? Why not even the sad comrades of Marigold Meadows, those still living, or not yet beyond the reach of humankind...

All these people... crowding impetuously onto the canvas of memory, an inchoate babble as if they'd waited all these long years to make their voices heard. Could I have had so many encounters in the brief confines of one-sixth of a century? What dazzling variety, what a feast for meditation and speculation! Yet so engrossed had I become in my own research that I lost all sense of what it was to be a member of the human race. An entire world outside the narrow limits of my daily round, a world filled with ordinary beings, most of them living happily enough without college degrees or any sort of higher education, of odd shapes and sizes, dressed every which way, vigorously hating one another for every deviation in race, color and creed!

In my imagination I conjured up some visitor from another planet, what his culture might describe as a sort of entomologist, come to planet Earth to study humanity in its natural habitat. What would he consider the best venue for collecting samples and specimens?

Of course! I cried, thrown back in my easy chair by the shock of recognition: a football game! I stood up and stretched my limbs, circling the lobby. It must have been over a decade since I'd been jostled by a Saturday

afternoon football mob. What a spectacle that was : a giant stadium filled to the rafters with THOSE people! How vividly I recalled hacking my way through seas of barbarians, beings from that Other World, trampling over, despoiling our campus en route to their crude blood sport, their Roman Coliseum... thousands of ox-like, pennant-waving, popcorn chewing monsters hurling raucous shrieks in the joy of the kill!... And their deified heroes, their gladiators, friendly and childish and ignorant, whose parents had paid me well to tutor them in mathematics

I returned to my chair by the fireplace. Friendly faces passed me by, saluting me familiarly as if I were already an "old Prof", though I was not yet thirty.. All those "preppies", "clubbies", "Main Liners" , "jocks", "Ivy Leaguers" : vapid -faced cherubs of a world order doomed to perish, (as Felicia had explained to me more than once), in the Inferno of the inevitable Marxist revolution, beings wafted about like wisps of straw on the currents of stale air coursing through the hallowed vaults of the Student Union, like streaks of paint across the Emptiness of the World Manifold.

Almost twenty years had passed, yet nothing had changed about them, neither their triviality, nor their monnied callowness, nor their indolence, nor their crass sexuality. All exactly the same: yet how much younger they appeared!

... Yet all this , I sadly reflected, was merely to indulge my tendency to exclude most of the human race from my vision of the world. Humanity didn't stop at the gates of Zelosophic U. ! Furthermore, and this oversight could also be laid to my account, it could not be denied that every member of the so-named "academic community" was a human being!

(I don't lack a sense of humor, yet the mortification of being waylaid by a security guard as I left the Math-Physics building late one night, still

rankled . He'd obliged me to go with him to the Campus Security office to "verify my claim that I was a bona fide member of the academic community"!)

..Frank Kriegle, Alter Buba, Elijah Prout, Jessica Grogan, Athanasius Claw, Diggory Drybone, Stanislaus Weakbladder, Fred Elsasser, Srinivasa Narasimhan, Harry Malakoff, Clorinda Wales, "Mabuse". They may have been a little odd, but they were certainly human beings.

... Even I, alone in the basement of Agassiz Hall in my tiny lab alone with my garter snake, or in the conditioning wards of Marigold Meadows ...even I was human!

It was the old timeless questions: What am I? Where am I going? How shall I live?

However sincere my conviction that my current research would perhaps splash a miserable billion or so quanta of light across the darkness of mankind's ignorance , I knew full very that it would no difference when it came to answering the really important questions. How arrogant it was of me, Aleph McNaughton Cantor,(born January 18, 1935 (under a pale moon in a sky black with the smoke pouring from a dozen factories , (of a Russian-Jewish father and Scotch-Irish mother, (each of them as meaningless in the great order of things as myself)))) , to proclaim that certain privileged insights had been bestowed upon me with regard to our reasons for being here!

How could 17 years of hanging around a certain citadel of sophistry , either as carnival attraction or butt of ridicule, entitle anyone to tell the human race where to get off? ...

The truth was too appalling to contemplate . Like all the pitiful creatures held fast to this chunk of brick, I was being whirled around the sun on a brick fragment at 18 miles a second; and did I truly imagine myself the only being upon it with something to say! It amazed me to discover that I had, drowsing by winter fires in the lobby of Student Union, cogitating like an aged patriarch (who, in imagination, gathers his vanished friends about him to drink at the royal banquet), been afflicted with by a rare sensation of humility.... like the shock of sudden immersion in a bath of vinegar ...

" ...Oh time too swift, oh swiftness never ceasing.... "

A confused welter of memory, confabulating regrets, hopes, anxieties and disillusion assaulted me to vanquish my cherished notions that I was anyone special. Who was this person??! Who was this - Aleph Randal McNaughton Cantor! Cantor Aleph McNaughton Randal ! Randal McNaughton Cantor Aleph! Michael Ranter Caliph McAughten!

No experience had ever humbled me half so much as the discovery that I'd been working in my lab at Agassiz Hall for 5 years - a mere 3 blocks from the Math-Physics building - and yet virtually everyone there was unaware of my existence! How quick then would be my banishment from history at the final reckoning!

Indeed it was a mystery to me that I didn't just get up and leave. Why not? What was keeping me from heading down to the airport and catching the next plane to the West Coast? Merely to acquire a scrap of paper, some meaningless document written in bad school Latin, testifying that I'd wrested a doctorate from the hard bedrock of my Alma Mater? So that thenceforth and forever more I could by right entitle myself "doctor", a word that appears in every dictionary, and on which no university has ever taken out a copyright!

With the ceremony only a few months away, it was best to stick it out. Perhaps I was unique after all, though only an accidental uniqueness, no more distinguished in that uniqueness than ... than that stuffed moose head above the fireplace! Intrigued by this comic artifact I found myself subjecting it to a close scrutiny. I recoiled: from a branch of a the left antler there dangled a condom, relic of some college prank...

Everything had changed ... and nothing had changed. Was it possible that one could remain in the same place, year in and year out for decades, and still end up thoroughly lost? Black, sweltering thoughts, long suppressed but very much alive, gushed forth from the hidden resources of my Unconscious. Demons of desire, of unrequited love, the smarts and stings of numberless petty humiliations, swarming like wasps, memories more painful than the experiences that had produced them

Why had Felicia shown such little faith in me? .. And Mengenlehre, at the Mathematics Department cocktail party in 1957, just before he left Academia to go into politics ...why did he refer to me publicly as "our intellectual bum?" ... Why did Elijah Prout single me out as the object of his special hate? Why did my dorm-mates treat me like a kook? ..

And who did Bob Boolean think he was, holding me responsible for the decline of the Mathematics Department?

"To think", he told me, "You've been here all these years and never once thought of your duty to us!"

By what right did Dean Hardball lecture me that I was "wallowing in sloth and mediocrity?" Look at some of the things he wallows in!And Fred Elsasser: flunking me because I discovered he read comic books! Where in God's name did he think George Gamov dug up the scenario

of the Big Bang! You have to depend on others to define yourself, and there's no defense against someone who holds all the cards. A fraud always has a failure to dump on when he needs to hide his lies

Which is why people like Weakbladder .. and Narasimhan ... and, and Kriegle succeed, while people like myself always end up with nothing !

Frank Kriegle indeed ! The burning rage that possessed me once more after so many years threatened to undermine my equilibrium . Frantically I lit up a cigarette; the vice was a recent addition to my problems. If I could only corner Frank Kriegle one more time , just to mash his face in! Break his bones! Burn him at the stake! Hang him on the wall in the company of Mabuse's crucified dogs!

Yet .. how utterly silly! How useless all this bitterness and recrimination! How could any mature person (and I had to recognize that in spite of my best efforts I really was growing up) continue to harbor resentment against the malfortunate Frank Kriegle, that dysfunctional , pitiful psyche, as tragic as any I was destined to encounter in my sojourn on this blasted planet ! In point of fact I wished him luck, even in his ruined career ... although I saw no career before me either

And Felicia ... where was she now? ... Wolfing down bocadillos in a snack bar on the Calle de la Revolucion in the capital of some banana republic? .. Languishing in the Swiss Alps, cuddled in the arms of some world-renowned topologist? .. Sitting in the lobbies of European luxury hotels, picking up rich lovers?.... It scarcely mattered what she was doing: she was now and forever more out of my jurisdiction.

Silently I wept.

So overpowering was my unhappiness that only my utter contempt for the Greek Letter frat house types coming into the lobby prevented me from

giving utterance to my grief. Nothing, nothing, I sobbed, could ever recapture the power, the beauty and the suffering of that first passionate love...

Each year I'd awaited the arrival of September, telling myself that she had to be coming back ... Only now, allowing my misery full scope, did I dare to acknowledge to myself that she would never be returning. Perhaps she had left academic life altogether. Perhaps her brief experience with the United States had been so negative that she'd lost all interest in ever coming back to it, even for a visit...

Yet, in point of fact, who was Felicia? By which I meant "My Felicia". Who was "My Felicia"? Nothing more than a name. A name by which to conjure up a barren handful of scarcely remembered qualities and characteristics: her long jet black hair, her way of walking, the wrinkle in her brow which formed when she was thinking about mathematics ... the shape of her breasts, which had once touched off a catastrophe in my youthful brain ... all faded in time and place, all distorted, commingling with other memories and barely recognizable, like the impressions left by pressed flowers between the pages of a century-old book.

Since then her physical charms had been displaced through involvements with other women, among whom half a dozen would be dear to me for all the rest of my days, leaving indelible stains upon my heart, unalterably shaping my vision of humanity and the world.... Yet the quality of mind which I'd encountered in Felicia had never been found in anyone else

Still, I shouldn't kid myself: Felicia's interest for me was not in what she was, nor for anything she had done, but for what, in her absence, she had become.... the shiver of regret that gripped me walking past places where we had been together, where we'd discussed ideas or even held hands ... so many memories buried in the heart's topsoil, blossoming forth many years later as

insights , understanding, ambitions, dreams ... It was not going too far to say that all things good and bad, of the past 15 years had some connection with her ... My spiritual crises... My dissatisfaction with pure or abstract mathematics ... My present research in evolution ... the subsequent love affairs, Platonic or otherwise, in which I seemed always to be searching for the same woman through so many others and so many disappointments ... Whatever tenderness I felt for Zelosophic U. , whatever sweetness or lingering fondness I still imagined to be there could always be traced back to her..... The very name, Zelosophic, recalled Felicia, not the other way around.....

And when, in the coming year when , come what may, it was inevitable that I must bid farewell, perhaps forever, to my native city, drink my last glass of Philadelphia water and fill my lungs with my last gasp of Philadelphia air, quitting the grounds of Zelosophic U. , (rendered more ghastly each year by the erection of another Bauhaus cube, (so that the campus was coming to resemble a stretch of river front warehouses just before the dropping of the bombs)) ... Nothing, nothing at all would remain even of my Felicia, neither in body nor idea nor recollection nor association , nothing beyond the bitter conviction that Mankind is doomed to effect its stay on earth surrounded by inexorable injustice, an injustice rooted in the very conditions of its existence.....

